

“The Length of Our Vision”: Thoreau, Berry, and Sustainability

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## ABSTRACT

The past several years have seen increased awareness of environmental degradation, climate change, and energy concerns—and with good reason; addressing the problem of sustainability is vital if American culture is to both persist and thrive. Because this issue affects all aspects of our lives, it can easily seem overwhelming, encouraging the belief that solutions to these problems lie beyond the scope of individual action. This study seeks to identify legitimate personal responses one can make to issues of sustainability.

I approach this subject with an eye toward answering a simple series of questions: Where are we?; How did we get here?; Where are we going?; Is that where we want to go? I briefly investigate the history of the idea of progress, focusing especially on our culture’s fascination with and embrace of technological progress. Following this investigation, I examine two works that offer critiques of progress: Thoreau’s classic text, *Walden*, and Wendell Berry’s, *The Unsettling of America*. These texts are chosen for a few reasons. First, a clear tradition of critical inquiry can be traced from Thoreau to Berry. Second, the historical distance between these authors makes a comparison of their work particularly illuminating. Though they are citizens of the same country, speak the same language, and ask similar questions, each author writes in response to different worlds—Thoreau’s just beginning to embrace industrial capitalism and technological progress, and Berry’s very much the product of that embrace. Most importantly, however, both authors focus on individual action and responsibility.

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## Introduction

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau argues his fellow townsmen are trying to “solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself” (349). He also observes that if one is to be a successful capitalist, s/he must bring to bear an extraordinary amount of knowledge and energy: “It is a labor to task the faculties of a man,—such problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge” (339). These two statements are related, of course; it is precisely because the act of getting a living is pursued by an overly-complicated process that it demands of the individual such imposing knowledge and ability. It initially seems peculiar, however, that Thoreau fails to include wisdom in his discussion of those characteristics and abilities most needed by capitalists. But, on the other hand, perhaps it isn’t peculiar, for Thoreau understood far better than many of his contemporaries that capitalist ideology tends to conflate wisdom with expediency. That is, for a capitalist the wise decision becomes that which is made after “gauging of all kinds,” accounting for all conceivable costs both present and future, and this in no way distinguishes wisdom from expediency. But Thoreau would have recognized that even the most well-reasoned decision cannot account for all costs, and that wisdom begins when we understand and accept this as a fundamental limitation of our abilities. When he acknowledges that American capitalism—or, as he puts it, the “Celestial Empire”—“demands a universal knowledge,” implicit in that statement is the understanding that one cannot possess such knowledge. This is a point Wendell Berry makes repeatedly, arguing “that we are trustworthy only so far as we can see. The length of our vision is our moral boundary” (*Unsettling* 83-4).

Thoreau’s observations are just as pertinent today as they were in his own time (though “some would call [them] impertinent” (*Walden* 325)). We are currently facing an environmental

challenge that by all accounts must “task the faculties” of men and women. Sometimes it is called “global climate change,” sometimes “global warming,” and it is often understood primarily as an energy crisis—we lack abundant and available climate-neutral energy. Despite the fact that recognition of humans’ impact on our planet has increased dramatically in the past decade (spurred primarily by the occurrence of what are seen as alarmingly peculiar weather patterns), there has been little real action taken to bring our way of living in the world (here I primarily mean Americans) in line with what might be characterized as a sustainable way of living. This is the case even if we consider sustainable living in the sense that it is sustainable only “as far as we can see.”

To my mind, the primary reason environmental concerns have failed to prompt dramatic change in American culture is that very few of us are prepared to accept the insight of Thoreau and Berry—we aren’t ready to accept the limitations inherent in our status as finite beings living on a planet with finite resources. But is this all there is to it? Does our failure to adequately address our world’s environmental crisis simply boil down to our collective infantile inability to control our consumption so that our descendants might just possibly inherit a habitable planet? Personal responsibility should certainly play a significant role in any shared attempt to live in a sustainable manner, but it is important to recognize that the nature of the problem and the structure of our culture actively discourage individual action. Global warming concerns and sustainability issues are so intimidating that it is tempting to look for answers from the very same corporations that have precipitated the problem. This allows companies to spin their behavior through marketing campaigns, couching their products and actions in “green” language that promotes their apparently inherent environmental concern. A year or so ago, there was a television commercial for the Exxon Mobil Corporation that attempted to perform just this sort

of spin. It presented the company as peculiarly and advantageously situated to address energy and environmental problems, arguing that they will be solved with technology, and that technological progress is what Exxon Mobil is all about. A similar advertisement for the Monsanto Company appeared in the December 8, 2008 issue of *The New Yorker*, arguing that the world's food problems can be solved by "putting the latest science-based tools in farmers' hands, including advanced hybrid and biotech seeds." This sort of "green" advertising is dangerous. It falsely reassures consumers that (1) corporations have the same goals as individuals—we're all on the same team, and (2) that energy and environmental problems are too large for individuals to act upon. The overriding danger of this sort of advertising is that it tells us what we want to believe anyway: it's not our responsibility. However, recognizing the importance of personal responsibility and individual action, and finding ways to practice such responsibility and take such action are two different things. The structure of American capitalism has rendered us all much more dependent and vulnerable than we would like to believe.

To illustrate the extent of our dependency, I think it will be useful to briefly examine Ivan Illich's concept of a "radical monopoly." In his book, *Energy and Equity*, Illich argues that "[a]ny industry exercises [... a] deep-seated monopoly when it becomes the dominant means of satisfying needs that formerly occasioned a personal response" (45). In this particular instance, he primarily addresses the transportation industry. Although there are multiple individual ways to solve the problem of getting from one place to another—walking, running, bicycling, etc—we are now dependent on industry for our transportation. Even if we want to, most of us cannot even carry out the necessary actions of our lives by walking or bicycling. Our communities are organized around the speed and distance to which our cars can carry us, so most of us don't live within feasible walking distance of work, of school, or of the doctor's office. One can quickly

see that this sort of dependency also exists in other areas of our lives. We are dependent on grocery stores for our food, most of which has been imported from halfway across the country, if not further. We are dependent on a whole range of stores for our clothing, the vast majority of which is produced halfway around the world. Of those of us who are lucky enough to own property, many are dependent on a host of service industries to maintain that property—in fact, it can be argued that a primary motivation for getting an education is that it enables one to “get a living” (as Thoreau would say) and own property without enduring the inconvenience of physical labor, all the while compelling others to do so. Finally, we are dependent on a medical industry that has almost completely eclipsed individual and natural means of maintaining our health, all the while extorting great sums of money from its patients in exchange for care. In short, as Americans we exist within a framework of radical monopolies that encourage us, and in many cases compel us, to meet our needs by consuming; because so many of us have been born into and know only dependence on such monopolies, it is understandable that we would look to them for solutions to global warming and sustainability problems—that we would seek to address these problems primarily through further consumption.

Thus far, most of my thoughts and observations could have been written about American culture at any point in the last fifty years or so—in fact, Berry and Illich were making such observations in the 1970s. But presently we are experiencing an economic crisis that has shaken things up a bit. I use the word crisis hesitantly, because by all accounts the financial problems our nation now faces are the logical consequences of at least a decade of wholly irresponsible behavior. As Paul Krugman—who long predicted just this sort of crisis—points out, “For most of the last decade America was a nation of borrowers and spenders, not savers. The personal savings rate dropped from 9 percent in the 1980s to 5 percent in the 1990s, to just 0.6 percent

from 2005 to 2007, and household debt grew much faster than personal income” (para 4). Here again, we seem to have an issue that should be considered solely in terms of personal responsibility. But as Krugman points out,

until very recently Americans believed they were getting richer, because they received statements saying that their houses and stock portfolios were appreciating in value faster than their debts were increasing. And if the belief of many Americans that they could count on capital gains forever sounds naïve, it’s worth remembering just how many influential voices [...] promoted that belief, and ridiculed those who worried about low savings and high levels of debt. (para 5)

In short, over the past two decades, saving money and building supposed wealth became another form of consumption. That this oxymoronic idea grew to be so widespread should come as no surprise when we consider that retail businesses have for many years issued advertisements counseling consumers that “the more you spend, the more you save.”

For most Americans, the lesson of this economic crisis should be that consumption can only be a limited part of one’s life, and, to some extent, we are reprioritizing, making new judgments about necessities and superfluities. Reduced incomes and the threat of losing income have shattered the belief that (1) we can consume endlessly, and (2) that sustaining such consumption by means of a similarly endless accretion of debt can have no consequences. This debt is indeed a burden of which, for many of us, it becomes impossible to rid ourselves. The problem, however, is that any lessons learned during this economic slump regarding consumption and debt must compete with a strong push for job creation, and therein lies the rub. The general economic expansion of the past decade or so was driven by a national debt-financed shopping spree, but how can unemployment be reduced without falling into a similar economic trap, financing

another purchasing expansion through an investment bubble of some sort? How can we address our short-term needs without compromising our long-term needs? In this study, I argue we cannot adequately do either unless we reconsider both our short-term and long-term needs in light of something very much like Thoreau's and Berry's observations on the inherent limits of human existence. This is a tricky business, however, for any discussion of limits must find a way to address Americans' hesitancy to admit any eclipsing of what it means to live "the good life," including what are presently considered the necessary accoutrements for such a life. If we expand this thought to include sustainability concerns, we must acknowledge that any exploration of the ways in which we might satisfy our long-term environmental responsibilities while addressing our short- and long-term economic needs must come to terms with humans' natural tendency to resist any reduction in living standard.

It very quickly becomes obvious that economic and environmental issues are large and contentious ones, and any serious discussion of them runs the risk of becoming convoluted at best and incomprehensible at worst. To work against these subjects' inherent complexities, I've arranged the following discussion so as to address a series of simple questions: (1) where are we?; (2) how did we get here?; (3) where are we going?; and (4) is that where we want to go? As a way of examining where we are and how we got here, chapter one looks specifically at the idea of progress and its development through history. Our current conception of "the good life" owes much to a general acceptance of progress as inevitable and inherently good, but such an easy belief in the idea of progress is hardly the dominant attitude toward it historically. A brief examination of the concept, therefore, is necessary to understand both our current situation and the path(s) by which we arrived here (and perhaps where we *think* we're going). Chapters two and three consider Thoreau's *Walden* and Berry's *The Unsettling of America* respectively.

Cultural criticism always implicitly examines the four questions above, so, to the extent that Thoreau and Berry are engaging in such criticism, their texts are in effect answers to the same questions. This overlap is intentional; a tradition of critical inquiry can be traced from Thoreau to Berry, and a careful consideration and comparison of each author's text serves to make this line of inquiry more vivid. This is especially true if we consider the historical distance between these men. Though they are citizens of the same country, they use the same language, and they ask similar questions, each author writes in response to vastly different worlds, Thoreau's just beginning to wholeheartedly embrace industrial capitalism and the idea of progress, and Berry's very much the product of that embrace. Pairing these authors' texts, then, goes a long way itself to helping us understand where we are, how we got here, and whether or not we're going where we want (or *ought*) to go.

I began this study in order to think seriously about the idea of sustainability, to examine more closely the structure of our culture, take some measure of its durability or vulnerability, and see, if possible, what actions one person or small group of persons might take so as to increase its durability. A close consideration of Thoreau's and Berry's texts reveals a picture of our present environmental and cultural predicament that is both distressing and hopeful, distressing both because our culture's position is indeed precarious and because the institutional deck seems stacked against individual action, but hopeful because there *is* room for personal initiative, for a single person to work meaningfully in support of a sustainable culture. While this work is, of course, physical, it is equally conceptual; as Americans, we must redefine our conception of "the good life" so as to bring it in line with a sustainable way of living in the world. This is, as I see it, the only real way around the issue of sustainable living requiring a reduced living standard—

that is, in order to realize an environmentally and economically responsible shift in living standard, we must form new assumptions about what it is a desirable living standard looks like.

## **CHAPTER 1: Progress**

What is progress? What do we mean when we talk about progress? The word is used in a variety of ways, most commonly, perhaps, in the phrase “making progress.” One hears this phrase repeatedly; it is a common but limited usage of the word. We say we are “making progress” when we have a specific limited goal in mind—writing a paper, painting a room in a house, signing a business contract, passing a difficult piece of legislation. (Perhaps the last one is stretching it a bit.) This is not to say that “making progress” isn’t used under any other circumstances; it is common for people to talk about making progress toward something like racial equality or an end to poverty, ostensibly specific ends that many people may conceptualize in different and sometimes contradictory ways. The point, however, is that we often say we are “making progress” when we have a specific end in mind, a cultural event or physical artifact to which one can point as the culminating event or product of progress.

Within the context of my larger discussion, though, I am primarily concerned with progress as an idea. It may seem strange to talk about progress as an idea or theory, but most of us have an abstract concept of progress we’ve developed, whether consciously or unconsciously. For many, the idea of progress is an unconscious one because it is ubiquitous—it is woven into the fabric of our culture, resisting easy examination. But ask nearly any American what progress is, and s/he will assume you mean one thing: technological and scientific progress. Before we interrogate this current conception of progress further, however, it is necessary to examine the history of the idea in western culture. Christopher Lasch, in his book *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, explains that

[t]he idea of progress, according to a widely accepted interpretation, represents a secularized version of the Christian belief in providence. The ancient world, we are told, entertained a cyclical view of history, whereas Christianity gave it a clearly defined direction, from the fall of man to his ultimate redemption. (40)

However, such an interpretation—sometimes referred to as the “secularization thesis”—has fallen out of favor. Lasch is somewhat ambivalent about the origins of the progressive ideal, acknowledging that the idea of progress in our own time “gains a certain plausibility the more it loses the character of a secular religion, [and] the next step [...] might be to deny its religious origins altogether.” On the other hand, he points out that

neither the Hebraic nor the Christian attitude, although they rescued history from randomness, implied a belief in progressive improvement, let alone the crude celebrations of racial and national destiny so often associated with progressive ideologies in the modern world. (44-6)

Neil Postman, who borrows significantly from Lasch, echoes this thought when he argues our modern concept of progress was invented during the Enlightenment:

It has been argued that a concept of progress can be found in the Hebrew Bible [...] and in the Christian world-view as expressed in several places, especially by John in Revelation. But in neither of these traditions is there a notion of progress comparable to that which was developed during the Enlightenment. In the Christian cosmology, man was at his best in a state of innocence; that is, before the Fall. Eden can never be

reclaimed on Earth, and only through a transcendent miracle, not by historical processes, can salvation be achieved.

More specifically, Postman traces the connection between science and progress to Francis Bacon who was “the first to claim that the principal end of scientific work was to advance the ‘happiness of mankind’” (*Building* 26-7).

Both Lasch and Postman see a sweeping conception of progress emerge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Postman writes, “[by] the eighteenth century, the idea that history itself was moving inexorably toward a more peaceful, intelligent, and commodious life for mankind was widely held” (*Building* 28). Despite some critics, this view continued throughout the nineteenth century, spurred on by feverish technological advancement. And it is in the nineteenth century that we perhaps find an explanation for Lasch’s uncertainty regarding progress’s supposed Judeo-Christian origins. Nineteenth-century America saw an explosion of progressive community experiments commonly considered separatist attempts at Utopia, and the differences between these communities to some extent mirror the religious-secular split seen in the idea of progress. Some of the most well-known communities, such as the Shakers, were American incarnations of peculiar Christian sects that had for some time persisted in Europe despite significant persecution. Mark Holloway explains that

for nearly two thousand years men and women of the Christian heretical sects have attempted to live according to the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. Many of them, especially during the last three centuries, have set up small societies of a communistic nature, based upon the supposed practice of the Apostolic Church, as described in Acts iv. Seventeenth-century Europe was full of such sects. Persecution, however severe, did

nothing to diminish their fervour. And when America had been colonized, vast numbers of them emigrated in search of religious liberty. By the nineteenth century they were firmly established. (18)

That century saw a drastic increase of such communal settlements, and while some of them certainly resembled the Christian “heretical” nature of such groups indicated by Holloway, there was a definite segment of this idealistic bloom with secular leanings, more-closely reflecting the values—at once more secular but still spiritual or mystical—evident in New England transcendentalism. Emerson, the godfather of the transcendental movement, highlights this new progressive energy when he writes to Carlyle in 1840,

We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket. [...] One man renounces the use of animal food; and another of coin; and another of domestic hired service; and another of the State. (Carlyle 227)

Perhaps not fully reflected in the nature of the nineteenth century’s array of communal experiments is the generally optimistic feelings—even hopeful feelings—elicited by the scientific and technological advances of the time. As Postman explains, “there were those, especially in America, who thought that technological progress would foster moral progress” (*Building* 37). While such a notion may at first sound absurd, its reasonableness is evident when we consider the political and cultural shifts encouraged by the ripples of technological change:

The technocratic culture eroded the line that had made the intellectual interests of educated people inaccessible to the working class [...] It would be an inadmissible

simplification to claim that the Age of Enlightenment originated solely because of the emerging importance of technology [...] but it is quite clear that the great stress placed on individuality in the economic sphere had an irresistible resonance in the political sphere. In a technocracy, inherited royalty is both irrelevant and absurd. The new royalty was reserved for men [...] whose origins were low but whose intelligence and daring soared. [...] Technocracy gave us the idea of progress, and of necessity loosened our bonds with tradition—whether political or spiritual. Technocracy filled the air with the promise of new freedoms and new forms of social organization. (*Technopoly* 44-5)

While it is now fairly easy to see how the wholesale embrace of technological development is at best a Faustian bargain, 150 years ago this fact was not so plain. Even as late as 1906, in Upton Sinclair's famous muckraking work, *The Jungle*, we find an expectation of salvation through technology:

[T]ake Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*, and read about the new science of agriculture, which has been built up in the last ten years; by which, with made soils and intensive culture, a gardener can raise ten or twelve crops in a season, and two hundred tons of vegetables upon a single acre; by which the population of the whole globe could be supported on the soil now cultivated in the United States alone! [...] imagine the problems of providing the food supply of our nation once taken in hand systematically and rationally, by scientists! (336-7)

I'll more closely examine the ironies inherent in such a belief in the possibilities of scientific mechanized agriculture in another chapter. For now, it is enough to see that a rationalist faith in the power and promise of science and technology was alive and well even among so-called

radicals at the turn of the last century. However, such utopian expectations as those embodied in nineteenth-century community experiments, or espoused by socialist revolutionaries, came to a screeching halt in the first half of the 20th century. If the idea of progress as inevitable historical movement toward a future golden age wasn't squashed by World War I, “[u]topian visions of the future were definitively discredited by their association with the totalitarian movements that came to power in the [nineteen] thirties” (Lasch 41). But the idea of progress is resilient; despite the challenges outlined above, western culture, led by American culture, maintains a belief in progress, though it is stripped of its paragon pinnacle. As Lasch relates,

No one claims any more that progress is inevitable or that it will culminate in some state of final perfection. No one denies that moral improvement often fails to keep pace with material improvement. But the general rise in living standards is obviously desirable in itself. [...] The fact of technological progress simply cannot be denied. (43)

Moreover, our current conception of progress has finally become wholly divorced from its supposed Christian origins:

Once we recognize the profound differences between the Christian view of history, prophetic or millennial, and the modern conception of progress, we can understand what was so original about the latter: not the promise of a secular utopia that would bring history to a happy ending but the promise of steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all. [...] The modern conception of history is utopian only in its assumption that modern history has no foreseeable conclusion. We take our cue from science, at once the source of our material achievements and the model of cumulative, self-perpetuating

inquiry, which guarantees its continuation precisely by its willingness to submit every advance to the risk of supersession. (Lasch 47-8)

Lasch, then, posits a concept of progress somewhat similar to Thomas Kuhn's in his seminal book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—we are not progressing toward some desired end but away from a prior state. To some extent, however, we are playing a trick on ourselves, for “steady improvement with no foreseeable ending” inherently assumes something of a critical mass point. Though our culture won’t cease evolving, steady improvement must eventually lead to occurrences with which utopia is commonly associated: the end of poverty; world peace; etc. The title of Lasch’s text is truly apt then, for what else is heaven but a world in which improvements exceed our ability to imagine them?

While Postman implicitly agrees with Lasch (that for our modern concept of history, unending but steadily improving, “we take our cue from science”), he moves in a related but slightly different direction, arguing that our current conception of progress is overwhelmingly driven by technological improvement:

We have been left [...] with the idea that progress is neither natural nor embedded in the structure of history; that is to say, it is not nature’s business or history’s. It is our business. No one believes, or perhaps ever will again, that history itself is moving inexorably toward a golden age. [...] Yet] we have held on to the idea of progress [...] in a form that no eighteenth-century philosopher or early-nineteenth-century heir of the Enlightenment would have embraced—could possibly have embraced: the idea that technological innovation is *synonymous* with moral, social, and psychic progress.

(*Building* 41)

It's one thing to believe that technological progress will create an opportunity for moral progress, but it's quite another to conflate the two. Jaron Lanier, who coined the term "virtual reality" and is considered by most to be the father of such research, identifies in his brand new book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, just this sort of conflation in the idea of a Singularity. According to this idea, one day soon computers and robots will be self-copying and self-improving. This improvement will proceed at something like an exponential rate, but humans will think they retain control of the process until one day "the rate of robot improvement ramps up so quickly that superintelligent robots will suddenly rule the Earth" (24). Among technophiles, this concept has taken on something of a transcendent religious quality. As Lanier relates,

[i]n some versions of the story, [...] the internet itself comes alive and rallies all the net-connected machines into an army to control the affairs of the planet. Humans might then enjoy immortality within virtual reality, because the global brain would be so huge that it would be absolutely easy [...] for it to host all our consciousnesses for eternity. The coming Singularity is a popular belief in the society of technologists. Singularity books are as common in a computer science department as Rapture images are in an evangelical bookstore. (25)

It would appear, then, that Postman's observation is correct. If the resonance of technological progress can indeed be felt through loosened ties to political and spiritual traditions, it becomes increasingly difficult for such traditions to give our lives the meaning they once did. In such a situation, assimilating unverifiable moral progress into undeniable technological progress is essentially an act of psychic coping. As Sidney Pollard points out, "the only possible alternative to [a] belief in progress would be total despair" (203).

There is final piece to the puzzle of progress, and it is this piece that makes an examination of the idea of progress necessary to any serious discussion of sustainability. The more or less continuously favorable attitude toward technological progress over the past two centuries depends on an earlier cultural shift identified by Lasch: the rehabilitation of desire. He argues,

It was not the secularization of the Kingdom of God or even the new stress on processes intrinsic to historical development that chiefly distinguished progressive ideology from earlier views of history. Its original appeal and its continuing plausibility derived from the more specific assumption that insatiable appetites, formerly condemned as a source of social instability and personal unhappiness, could drive the economic machine—just as man's insatiable curiosity drove the scientific project—and thus ensure a never-ending expansion of productive forces. The moral rehabilitation of desire [...] generated a new sense of possibility[. ....] For eighteenth-century moralists like Bernard Mandeville, David Hume, and Adam Smith, it was the self-generating character of rising expectations, newly acquired needs and tastes, new standards of personal comfort [...] that broke the old cycle of social growth and decay and gave rise to a form of society capable of indefinite expansion. The decisive break with older ways of thinking came when human needs began to be seen not as natural but as historical, hence insatiable. As the supply of material comforts increased, standards of comfort increased as well, and the category of necessities came to include goods formerly regarded as luxuries. (52)

In order to fully appreciate Lasch's point about desire, we need to consider it in a broad sense. When he mentions "the self-generating character of rising expectations," he is pointing to a desire that goes beyond material goods, a desire for the general improvement of one's social

standing, economic standing, legal status, etc. In short, the rising expectations that matter have much more to do with personal and/or group empowerment than with the expectation of acquiring material possessions (although I don't think we can underestimate the power such possessions have to reinforce one's social standing, feelings of self-worth, and so forth). It becomes fairly easy to see, then, how the rehabilitation of desire has fostered a general acceptance and approval of the idea of progress. It is not difficult to understand, of course, why the idea of social and moral progress is so alluring, promising and in some cases delivering greater equity and justice to oppressed peoples. Technological progress has, to some extent, fostered such equity as well, which helps to explain why it has come to be conflated with moral progress. Postman argues that "those who have control over the workings of a particular technology accumulate power and inevitably form a kind of conspiracy against those who have no access to the specialized knowledge made available by the technology" (*Technopoly* 9). This may be true, to the extent that power, once accumulated, tends to breed conservatism, but as Postman himself points out elsewhere, technological progress inevitably produces power shifts--when a new technology is introduced, it often provides an opportunity for those excluded from older power blocs to gain access to a new sort of specialized knowledge, improving both their economic standing and, more often than not, their social status. As we can see, then, the desire inherent in the idea of progress is at least two-fold: a much lauded aspiration for personal improvement and social justice and equity; and a much maligned (in word if not deed) enthusiasm for material possessions. While the latter impulse can rightly be criticized for the excessive consumerism it encourages, the side effects of which are easily implicated in environmental degradation and economic inequality, we must not fail to recognize the former desire's rightness, nor its historical relationship with the idea of progress.

Critics of progress, two of whom are the main subjects of this study, are often criticized for failing to acknowledge its benefits. It is true that such criticism of progress can easily devolve into an oversimplified lamentation of contemporary problems coupled with a fuzzy nostalgia for past values and patterns of existence. Any study of the idea of progress must be nuanced, maintaining an equitable view of the ways in which progress's influence has been felt throughout history and continues to be experienced. One cannot honestly consider, for instance, the ways in which 1960's America is superior to present-day American without also acknowledging the tremendous problems one finds in that era, most notable among them the ubiquitous, systemic racial discrimination to which the civil rights movement was a response. All this is to say that the concept of progress cuts both ways. I have chosen to focus my study on the writing of Thoreau and Berry to a large extent because their critiques of progress, which I will examine in the following two chapters, understand it as a double-edged sword, expressing not a wholesale rejection of the concept but a marked ambivalence about the ways in which it works itself out in American culture. In *Walden*, Thoreau responds to the idea that "civilization is a real advance in the condition of man" by writing, "I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages" (347). This is, perhaps, the best way to consider the concept of progress; we must recognize it as a great development in the history of humankind, but we must also be wise enough to use it to our advantage. As we will see in the following chapters, however, it seems likely that we are not using the idea of progress, it is using us, and this backward arrangement carries severe cultural and environmental consequences.

## **CHAPTER 2: Thoreau's *Walden* and the Economics of Sustainability**

Commencing a study of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is, to be sure, a daunting task. Both Thoreau and his book are icons, and a tremendous amount of criticism has been generated in response to both author and text. In his essay, "Walden: Climbing the Canon," Robert Sattelmeyer traces the history of *Walden*, its reception and conflation with the person of Thoreau himself, and the tradition of critical engagement with the text up to the present. The tendency to merge readings of *Walden* with understandings of its author persists to this day: "the reception of the book [after] a hundred and fifty years [...] is still highly colored [...] by Thoreau's public stature as a voice of political, social, and economic dissent within the dominant culture," as well as his status as an environmental prophet of sorts (11). It is important to note, however, that for some time after his death, Thoreau didn't have the great reputation he enjoys today. Emerson's eulogy of Thoreau, according to Sattelmeyer, did much to damage his reputation as a serious writer: "Perhaps the most ambivalent eulogy in literary history, Emerson's praise of his long-time friend's character is balanced by an account of his faults and an insinuation that Thoreau's life was essentially a failure" (14).

Thoreau's rehabilitation as an author, as well as the status of *Walden*, have their beginning in their engagement by British critics. As Sattelmeyer writes, "[a]s was the case with the revival of Melville and the acknowledgment of Whitman's importance, British critics were the first to recognize the complexity and reach, the radical implications, and the literary merits, of *Walden*." It seems, however, that much of Thoreau's surge in popularity among both laymen and critics was due to the expiring of Houghton Mifflin's copyright on *Walden*: "at least eight new editions of *Walden* were published in 1910 alone, and within a few years lesson plans for teaching the book in high schools began to appear" (17). In the early part of the twentieth century, according

to Sattelmeyer, popular characterizations of Thoreau began to shift from that of nature writer to that of social critic. New criticism focused on Thoreau's arguments about humans' inner life, ever-present in *Walden*, but so-called "leftists" led the push to emphasize his cultural and social criticism. Bringing us up to Thoreau's present environmentalist status, Sattelmeyer writes that, "[f]ollowing Carson's *Silent Spring*, Thoreau was read more and more as an environmental writer, though this strain in his writing is less evident in *Walden* than elsewhere (24).

Thoreau's gradual emergence, in our cultural consciousness, as America's first great environmentalist somewhat parallels his own intellectual and literary development, and *Walden*'s status as a not-quite-environmental text arises from its placement at the beginning of this development. In his book, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism*, David Robinson explains Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond as a point of departure, a new personal, spiritual, intellectual, and vocational independence: in nearly "every respect Thoreau's two years at Walden were an enormously positive period of growth in which he began to achieve a measure of personal independence and to make himself into an accomplished literary artist" (78). Part of Thoreau's reason for going to the pond, Robinson argues, was his search for a vocation, an especially taxing concern for him after his brother, John's, death. This problem of vocation finds its way into *Walden* in a couple ways. First, he includes at the very beginning of his text "an aggressive critique of the life that most people around him led, exposing the thralldom of endless labor that depleted them of both perspective and energy, and the pointless and wasteful search for satisfaction and social status through the ownership and consumption of goods" (83). Secondly, Robinson argues, Thoreau exhibits considerable ambivalence in regard to farming, "aware of the farm's potential for self-reliant nobility, but also of its tendency toward a subtle form of enslavement" (93). Despite its pervasive "mockery of most forms of human toil,"

Robinson writes, "*Walden* is nevertheless a book that attempts to redeem the concept of work, using the open and thoughtful response to bodily necessity, the foundation of our economic identities, as a means of spiritual redemption. The harmony that Thoreau hears when he hoes the stone in the bean field is the confirming signal that work has transfigured itself into art of the highest kind" (99).

What begins as a preoccupation with the problem of vocation--and an understanding of nature as a way to escape that problem, or at least refigure it--many critics see as Thoreau's first movement in the direction of what will eventually become a more community oriented understanding of work and nature. Developing Robinson's reading of Thoreau, Lance Newman argues, in "Thoreau's Materialism: From *Walden* to *Wild Fruits*," that, "[b]eginning in the thin atmosphere of Romantic idealism, with its sharp distinctions between spirit and matter, "man" and nature, Thoreau came over time to see the natural and social worlds as inseparably integrated and concrete" (100-1). *Walden* is at the very beginning of his development, Newman argues, and his final essay, *Wild Fruits*, is at the end only because of Thoreau's death: "*Wild Fruits* clearly confirms the trajectory of Thoreau's traverse from idealism and individualism to materialism and communalism" (110). Michael Ziser, in "*Walden* and the Georgic Mode," echoes Newman's understanding of Thoreau's intellectual trajectory. Ziser sees *Walden* as firmly placed withing the georgic tradition, taking transcendentalist thought and rooting it in the earth: "It is by sinking labor [...] into the earth that Thoreau is rewarded with insight into and intimacy with the more-than-human world. It is also how the words that make up his interior world of spiritual possibility get attached to the earth" (184). This move to root transcendentalist thought in the earth is more closely explored by David Robinson in his essay, "Thoreau and Idealism: 'Face to Face to a Fact'," an examination of Thoreau's struggle to reconcile the idealism and

tradition of philosophical speculation he received from Emerson with his own increasing affinity for scientific observation of nature. Robinson sees *Walden* as a breakthrough text, the work within which Thoreau finds his own philosophical and spiritual path, a vision of the world that sees in the smallest natural fact the transcendent whole of the cosmos. He elides natural reality and philosophical speculation in a way that Emerson never could.

The placement of *Walden* at the beginning of Thoreau's growing empiricism is emphasized by Laura Dassow Walls, who argues that Walden Pond, besides being a place "apart from society, enabling escape, regeneration, growth, and return [...] is also the plot of the scientific laboratory, in which the disciplined and independent self enters a sacred space purified of social encumbrances and prepared to be the clear channel for the voice of truth as spoken by God himself" (23). In "Thoreau's Transcendental Ecocentrism," William Rossi notes, however, that, "[w]hile an ecocentric shift in Thoreau's thinking and writing may have begun during his two-year stay at Walden Pond, the deeper process of environmental bonding and the literary effects of it did not become evident before the early 1850s" (28). Connecting with Newman's and Ziser's reading of Thoreau's writing becoming increasingly ecological and community-oriented as he nears his death, Rossi posits that Thoreau's "peculiar transencentalist commitment may actually have fostered rather than retarded his ecocentrism, a connection that invites us to reconceive both" (29). Echoing Robinson, Rossi argues that Thoreau's increasing empiricism later in life is blended with a persistent transcendentalist bent that encourages his ecocritical engagement with nature: "Thoreau's rhetoric appears to redirect rather than to endorse the Enlightenment project of extracting the secrets of nature." He figures a human relationship with nature that is "notably dynamic and reciprocal rather than extractive and progressive" (39).

Adding his voice to discussions of Thoreau's movement from being thoroughly under

Emerson's transcendentalist influence to evincing a certain empirical naturalism with a strong transcendentalist bent, Lawrence Buell, in "Thoreau and the Natural Environment," connects this shift in Thoreau's thinking to his upbringing and education: "Unlike William Bartram, Thoreau had no man of science for a father; unlike Thomas Jefferson, he had no agrarian roots. His first intellectual promptings to study and write about nature were from books, school, and literary mentors like Ralph Waldo Emerson." (171) Thoreau's intellectual roots, Buell argues, influenced his writing throughout his life, granting even his late writing a certain transcendent, mystical quality:

The idea that natural phenomena had spiritual as well as material significance had a lifelong appeal to Thoreau, although he increasingly took an empirical and 'scientific' approach to nature after 1850; indeed, a strong undertone of his growing commitment to exact observation and to keeping tabs on contemporary scientific thought was a lingering testiness at what he took to be its pedantry and formalism. (171-2)

Continuing along these lines, Buell writes, "[n]o matter how devoted [Thoreau's] naturalism became, he continued to want to organize his observations into intellectual, moral, and aesthetic patterns. This at times whetted his appetite for natural history [...] and at other times it reinforced him in the roles of mystic and aesthete, ransacking the local terrain for picturesque views [...] and subjecting landscape configurations to symbolic interpretations" (177-8).

Thoreau's intellectual and literary development, then, move from a clear association with Emersonian transcendentalism to a more explicit environmentalism, retaining a clear transcendental influence, but understanding nature and human culture as indissolubly linked in a dynamic relationship. *Walden* stands at the beginning of this long transition. As Buell writes, it

is a point of departure, the beginning of his independent intellectual development: "One of the reasons that *Walden* is Thoreau's greatest book is that the transitional struggles of a lifetime are pulled into it so fully and complexly" (172). Standing as it does at the beginning Thoreau's development, *Walden* isn't an explicitly environmental book, but Buell points out that it certainly has environmental implications:

In "Economy," *Walden* figures chiefly as a good site for an enterprise. Nature is hardly yet present except as a theater for the speaker to exercise his cabin-craft in. Thoreau proceeds for a full one-ninth of the book before providing the merest glimpse of the pond. "Economy" 's message of simplification is certainly consistent with an environmentalist perspective, [...] but Thoreau does not as yet advocate it on this ground. (175)

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In light of the fact that so many capable voices have contributed to the critical conversation about Thoreau and *Walden*, one fears there is nothing new to say, no fresh angle from which to consider this text. I admit that I have doubted my own ability to say something original, but I can think of few more-fitting texts for our nation's current economic and ecological predicament than *Walden*, considering especially the nature of its first section, "Economy." In my own reading of *Walden*, if it can be called a reading, I will not attempt to deconstruct, historicize, psychoanalyze, or otherwise explain away Thoreau's writing. This is not to say that there are never times in which it is useful to consider the cultural discourses to which he may have been responding, the historical situation in which he was writing, his state of mind during the composition process, and so on, but I do mean to say that I am not interested in explaining

*Walden* as a function of any of these forces; I am concerned with what worthwhile truths may be found in the text. In short, I am operating under the assumption that Thoreau means what he says, and that what he says should mean something to us. With this in mind, I will focus almost exclusively on the first chapter of *Walden*, "Economy," for it is in this chapter that he most overtly considers what it means to carry on a sustainable existence on earth. It is important to note, however, that Thoreau's writing doesn't explicitly address sustainability issues--although he is often considered the original American environmentalist, this characterization is largely based on the *implications* of his ideas, not some explicit purpose in his writing. By no means, however, does this undercut the pertinence to sustainability of Thoreau's arguments, for a central concern in *Walden* is exploring ways to narrow the scope of one's existence without stripping it of its vitality and fulfillment. This is what Thoreau gets at when he writes, "I love a broad margin to my life" (411). This study of "Economy," then, is structured around his thoughts on what he identifies as the three things necessary for life--clothing, shelter, and food. I conclude the chapter by revisiting the idea of progress, considering Thoreau's thoughts and reactions to the particularly American expression of the concept that was taking root in his lifetime.

## ECONOMY

In "Economy," the first and largest chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau clearly plays with various meanings of economy, nodding in turn to the different areas of one's life in which economy holds meaning. Considering its age, the meaning of "economy" has shifted little over time. If we go all the way back to its ancient Greek root, oikonomia, we find its meaning to be roughly "household management," an endeavor in which Thoreau is certainly interested. The emphasis on resource management has remained, though, even in Thoreau's time, the scope of that

management had expanded beyond the household. Its meaning, however, retained at that time more variety than our current understanding, which requires explicit modifiers to communicate when one is limiting the scope of economy to a locale (local economy), household (domestic economy), etc. Otherwise, we are prone to consider "the economy" in much the same way we think about, or don't think about, "the Internet," as some vague undulating force that permeates and influences our lives but over which we have an indeterminate influence.

Thoreau, however, plainly has multiple understandings of economy in mind when writing his text's first chapter. There is, of course, a consideration of household management and resource management generally, about which I will say more later, but he also seems to have in mind some understandings of the word that are foreign to modern readers. Though the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records its last known appearance in 1735, an understanding of economy as "the proper management of the body," or "the rules which control a person's mode of living" with regard to regimen, diet, etc, is clearly one in which Thoreau is interested. A similar understanding, with which he may have been more familiar, is one that focuses on the "organization, internal constitution, apportionment of functions, of [...] an individual body or mind as a structured whole or system" (OED). In fact, he opens the chapter by considering not the management of physical resources, but by examining and evaluating his fellow inhabitants' "mode of living," exclaiming, "I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and every where, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways" (326). Indeed, throughout this first chapter, Thoreau appears to be playing two understandings of economy against each other, asserting that the economy of the mind is sacrificed regularly for the economy of material things, things which, to his understanding, can only cynically be called "resources."

In Thoreau's view, material possessions serve primarily as hindrances to happiness, to living, to doing, to being human; his concern is with "humanbeingness" as opposed to "humanhavingness": "All men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather something to *be*" (341). To the extent that material goods no longer help humans in their *being* or *doing*, those goods, to Thoreau's mind, should not be considered resources but obstacles. It is in this spirit that he declares he is writing *Walden*, in part, for "that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters" (335). Thoreau could have easily written these words today, though he might say our fetters are more plastic than gold or silver, the "accumulated dross" of a consumption fueled by cheap imports and relentless marketing.

Throughout "Economy," Thoreau explores the tension between economy of the mind and economy of material goods by relating different aspects of his stay at Walden Pond, considering, at turns, the various necessities of his existence there, the normal means by which they are procured versus the way in which he acquired them, and how his idea of "necessary" stands in relation to his friends' and neighbors' understanding of the word. He begins his discussion of life's necessities by reminding his readers, somewhat humorously, that "the improvements of the ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence; as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors" (332). This statement is crucial, despite its humor, for it illustrates Thoreau's long view of necessity, a recognition that humankind has survived for ages without the modern comforts of his time and, even more so, our own. He writes,

By the words, *necessary of life*, I mean whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it.

Perhaps inevitably, then, he concludes that

The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success. (332)

In considering the economy of his stay at Walden Pond, then, he examines specifically his clothing, shelter, and food, all the while contrasting it with what is commonly considered necessary in regard to these things. (While Thoreau includes fuel in his list of life's necessities, I will not explicitly address it in this discussion. He does not mean fuel in the same way in which we commonly think about it--powering our vehicles, that is--but as it is necessary for cooking food and maintaining humans' "vital heat," as he puts it. The former meaning is not my primary concern when discussing food, and the latter meaning is more or less covered by discussions of clothing and shelter. Some discussion of fuel, according to our understanding of it, may be included in the chapter's final section on progress, but it is not an overriding concern--while Thoreau likely had some concern for the long-term availability of wood, he could have little imagined the degree to which we've come to be dependent oil.)

## CLOTHING

While Thoreau first lists the necessities of life in the order of food, shelter, and clothing, he proceeds to examine them in reverse order. It seems to me likely that he has inverted the order so that he considers life's necessities according to the degree to which they have assumed the character of superfluities. It is fitting, then, to consider clothing first, for even our own time's flashy cars and coveted smart phones can't compete with clothing's ability to transform the way in which a person is considered by her peers. Mark Twain famously wrote, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." Thoreau writes much the same thing, though he is more bitingly sarcastic: "Even in our democratic New England towns the accidental possession of wealth, and its manifestation in dress and equipage alone, obtain for the possessor almost universal respect. But they who yield such respect, numerous as they are, are so far heathen, and need to have a missionary sent to them" (340). Here Thoreau immediately parses out the economy that is being considered from that which is overlooked. While a person's dress can gain them "almost universal respect," too little attention is paid the character of the person inhabiting such respectable garments. I think it is useful here to quote Thoreau extensively:

A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in; for him the old will do, that has lain dusty in the garret for an indeterminate period. [...] Only they who go to soirées and legislative halls must have new coats, coats to change as often as the man changes in them. [...] I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes. All men want, not something to *do with*, but something to *do*, or rather

something to *be*. Perhaps we should never procure a new suit, however ragged or dirty the old, until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in old, and that to retain it would be like keeping new wine in old bottles.

Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives [...] for clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind. (341)

His meaning here is crystal clear: the degree to which we value the appearance of a person's clothing leads us to be misled and to mislead ourselves. After all, we can be fooled by our own "false colors." To Thoreau's mind, we do not adequately remember what is necessary of clothing: "Let him who has work to do recollect that the object of clothing is, first, to retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness, and he may judge how much of any necessary or important work may be accomplished without adding to his wardrobe" (339).

There may be some who find Thoreau's consideration of clothing to be both impractical and rather grumpy, though I would argue that his grumpiness is something of a put-on, written with half a wink if not a whole one. In fact, I can see a somewhat legitimate response pointing out that most people know clothes do not actually make the man or woman, but, at times, the respect and admiration they garner the wearer, and the confidence she gains from that respect, give her the ability to *do* new things and *be* a new person. I suspect, however, that Thoreau would see this as mere rationalization, and he would repeat his argument that new clothes are not deserved "until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in the old" (341). Moreover, Thoreau clearly sees the sort of confidence and self-worth his peers

derive from wearing stylish, respectable clothing as nothing more than evidence of the degree to which they have allowed themselves to become slaves to the idea of fashion:

Of what use this measuring of me if [my tailoress] does not measure my character, but only the breadth of my shoulders, as it were a peg to hang the coat on? We worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head monkey in Paris puts on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same.

He goes on to point out that fashion is dependent on whimsy and is thus subject to constant change, meaning that keeping up with unpredictable fashion trends--as opposed to making clothing choices primarily on the basis of utility--is an inherently wasteful enterprise. Fashion, in other words, is synonymous with "planned obsolescence," for clothes that will be fashionable for one year only encourage the production of clothes that will last for one year only. (The environmental implications of this wastefulness are obvious. Our present preoccupation with fashion influences more of our decisions than we can count; it at least partially dictates our choice of clothing, furniture, cars and trucks, household accessories (Thoreau's "gewgaws"), etc, and it encourages the replacement of all of these goods within a compressed time frame that is only superficially related to their actual durability or usefulness.) However, he doesn't develop this line of reasoning, being more concerned with the quality of the wearer of clothes, not the clothes themselves. For Thoreau, all costume is ludicrous apart from its (potentially) noble inhabitant:

Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new. We are amused at beholding the costume of Henry VIII., or Queen Elizabeth, as much as if it was

that of the King and Queen of the Cannibal Islands. All costume off a man is pitiful or grotesque. It is only the serious eye peering from the sincere life passed within it, which restrain laughter and consecrate the costume of any people. Let Harlequin be taken with a fit of the colic and his trappings will have to serve the mood too. When the soldier is hit by a cannon ball rags are as becoming as purple. (342-3)

Concluding his thoughts on clothing, Thoreau addresses the textile factory system, quick becoming the common way in which clothing is produced in his time:

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched. In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high. (343-4)

This is a remarkable passage; in many ways Thoreau anticipates Wendell Berry's and others' criticism of market capitalism; as long as the primary objective of an enterprise is profit, all other concerns fade into the background, are wholly unimportant unless, in some way, they begin to influence the enterprise's ability to turn a profit. When Thoreau writes that "In the long run men hit only what they aim at," he asks his readers to reconsider what we might call "first purposes." His aim in this regard is apparent from the beginning of *Walden*. Just before he begins his consideration of clothing, Thoreau relates a story about an American Indian who observed that a white "lawyer had only to weave arguments, and by some magic wealth and standing followed." The Indian decides he will make money by weaving baskets, "Thinking that when he had made

the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man's to buy them." He fails to sell his baskets, however, because he does not realize that "it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least to make him think that it was so." For himself, Thoreau admits that he has woven baskets of his own--metaphorically of course--, but, "instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them" (337-8). (Thoreau pokes fun at himself here; his "baskets" are actually the roughly 700 unsold copies of his previous book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.)

This tale, in conjunction with his thoughts about what it is at which humans aim, clearly indicates his desire for his readers to revisit their lives' "first purposes." However, I am sure some will argue against Thoreau, asserting that many people work for monetary profit not for profit's sake but for other reasons. For example, one might work hard at an enterprise in order to amply provide for her family, their happiness being her first purpose. Thoreau would likely recognize that such situations arise, but that, too often, what one assumes to be her primary motivation becomes subordinate to other concerns. A parent may work hard initially in order to support her family, but the time may come when she decides to accept more responsibility, taking up more of her time and energy, but affording her an increased ability to provide monetarily for her family's well-being. Such an event may reoccur at various points, resulting in a situation in which a family has more than enough money and material possessions but an all-but-absent parent. Thoreau would argue, in this case, that profit has, at least unconsciously, become the woman's primary purpose, rather than the family's health and happiness. Indeed, at the beginning of *Walden*, he writes that men and women

labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed [sic] into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. (327)

Thoreau, then, would say that, if my first purpose is the well-being of my family, I should go about finding a way to provide for their health and happiness that does not demand of me an inordinate amount of time and energy. After all, an integral part of a healthy and happy family is the active, productive presence of each of its members. A family too, as Thoreau would point out, is an economy. E. F. Schumacher, in his book, *Small Is Beautiful*, considers what a Buddhist economy might look like, arguing that one of its primary goals would be to use the least amount of energy and resources needed to maintain its members' happiness (54). I think this is very much like Thoreau's point throughout "Economy"--too many men and women labor under the mistaken belief that more is better, all the while transforming money and the goods money will buy into something of a god, consecrating all actions that promise to increase monetary and material wealth. As I previously stated, this is a situation in which economy of the mind and spirit is subordinate to economy of material goods. Only by reconsidering what is "necessary of life" and revisiting "first purposes," Thoreau argues, can this hierarchy be reversed.

## **SHELTER**

Thoreau's thoughts on shelter are wide ranging, and they contain some of his hardest, harshest language in all of "Economy." He begins as he often does such discussions, thinking broadly

and philosophically about the idea of shelter, considering what shelter meant for our most ancient ancestors, and attempting to identify the sort of shelter we might call necessary:

As for a Shelter, I will not deny that this is now a necessary of life, though there are instances of men having done without it for long periods in colder countries than this. [...] We may imagine a time when, in the infancy of the human race, some enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock for shelter. Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay out of doors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having an instinct for it. Who does not remember the interest with which when young he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave? It was the natural yearning of that portion of our most primitive ancestor which still survives in us. (344-5)

Here, Thoreau fairly explicitly relates humankind to animalkind, acknowledging what he sees as an instinctual need for some sort of shelter, whether for protection from the elements or from other animals, but he calls into question the *absolute* necessity of shelter in the sense in which we have come to understand it. Despite the sophistication with which we now construct the buildings in which we live, he clearly sees humankind involved in a glorified sort of nesting or burrowing: "Under the most splendid house in the city is still to be found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after the superstructure has disappeared posterity remark its dent in the earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow" (358).

Relating humans' method of obtaining shelter for themselves with that of animals drives Thoreau's primary assertions in this section of "Economy." First, he uses the comparison to highlight the extent to which "civilized" housing has become removed from the idea of

necessity. Second, it causes him to consider seriously the division of labor which relieves most of us of the need to construct our own shelter.

Thoreau's suggestion that a house is still more or less a dressed-up burrow is not without precedent. He relates two accounts of early American colonists--those whom we collectively refer to as "Pilgrims"--actually burrowing out their first homes so as to reserve as much time and energy as possible for agricultural production, food being particularly scarce those first few years (353). Perhaps he had these accounts in mind when, considering what we might rest upon as *necessary* shelter, he suggests that a large wooden box, some six feet long by three feet wide, which he has observed by the railroad, would do well as shelter for one person. She or he

might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free. [...] You could sit up as late as you pleased, and, whenever you got up, go abroad without any landlord or house-lord dogging you for rent. (345)

To present-day readers, such a proposal no doubt will seem absurd, and perhaps some will interpret Thoreau's remarks as sarcastic ones, designed only to get a rise out of his audience. Such interpretations likely touch on the truth; however, Thoreau insists that we seriously consider his proposal, writing, "Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this. I am far from jesting. Economy is a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of" (345-6). His concern here is with the relatively few inhabitants of his "civilized" country who actually own their own property, as well as the way in which renting or paying

installments on one's shelter keeps a person from attaining true independence. That such a situation is of extreme importance to Thoreau is evidenced by the number and variety of statements he makes regarding it:

In the large towns and cities, where civilization especially prevails, the number of those who own a shelter is a very small fraction of the whole. The rest pay an annual tax for this outside garment of all, become indispensable summer and winter, which would buy a village of Indian wigwams, *but now helps to keep them poor as long as they live* [my emphasis]. [...] The man who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in Concord. [...] The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another. On the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and "silent poor." [...] It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages. I refer to the degraded poor, not now to the degraded rich. To know this I should not need to look farther than to the shanties which every where border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked. [...] Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have. [...] It is possible to invent a house still more convenient and luxurious than we have, which yet all would admit that man could not afford to pay for.

Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less? (346-51)

To my mind, Thoreau here anticipates Ivan Illich's concept of a "radical monopoly," to which I've previously referred. These thoughts clearly communicate his concern for the fact that obtaining shelter in America is a driving force of poverty, or at least indebtedness. I am sure he means here to connect these thoughts with his past observation on the textile manufacturing system--as long as the primary aim of shelter construction is to turn a profit, as opposed to ensuring that all American citizens are securely and inexpensively sheltered, the simple act of finding a place to live will continue to make and keep many people destitute. It is also clear that Thoreau sees this common arrangement as a damning characteristic of what we commonly call "civilization":

If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man,--and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantage,--it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run. An average house in this neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this sum will take from ten to fifteen years of the laborer's life, even if he is not encumbered with a family [...] so that he must have spent more than half his life commonly before *his* wigwam will be earned. (347)

It goes without saying that the financial situation for many Americans has only worsened since Thoreau's time. Our comfort with debt, both maintaining a high level of personal debt and

having no qualms about making a profit from the debt of others, has led our country's economy--I mean here economy in the modern sense--into a fairly dark and uncertain period.

The extent to which non-wealthy Americans, whether they be in poverty or a part of the middle class, are prevented from realizing financial independence, however, is not wholly a result of skewed institutional pressures or policies. Thoreau would be quick to point out that our individual desires are also a driving force behind our financial vulnerability, those desires being based upon a false concept of what is necessary in life. Speaking specifically of his contemporaries' homes, he writes:

When I consider how our houses are built and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal economy managed and sustained, I wonder that the floor does not give way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws upon the mantel-piece, and let him through into the cellar, to some solid and honest though earthy foundation. I cannot but perceive that this so called rich and refined life is a thing jumped at, and I do not get on in the enjoyment of the *fine* arts which adorn it, my attention being wholly occupied with the jump; [...] Who bolsters you? Are you one of the ninety-seven who fail? or of the three who succeed? Answer me these questions and then perhaps I may look at your bawbles and find them ornamental. The cart before the horse is neither beautiful nor useful. Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation. (352-3)

Even in Thoreau's time, it was plain to him that too many of his contemporaries were primarily concerned with the veneer of their lives. Their interest was in maintaining the facade of good

character or a fine fortune--making things appear other than they are. (In fact, if we return to Thoreau's story about the basket-weaving Indian, it seems that such deception is more or less built into market capitalism.) The case has only worsened, so that now there are whole industries devoted to deception, though it is commonly seen as legitimate deception. Marketing firms now rarely advise their clients to sell their products based upon each one's merit, engaging instead in "lifestyle marketing." With regard to houses, we have wood that isn't wood, stone that isn't stone, brick that isn't brick, all produced and marketed under the notion that it is so important for our homes to look "just so" that shortcuts and disguised substitutes must be found for those who cannot afford to purchase the "real thing."

To my mind, Thoreau sees this sort of preoccupation with shortcuts and disguised materials--or, in his time, hollow ornamentation--as to some extent a result of the fact that most of us no longer have a hand in building our own homes (presently, most of us don't even have a hand in *maintaining* our own homes, lacking both the skill and motivation necessary to complete minor renovations and repairs ourselves). Thoreau plainly has in mind a particular work *ethic* when he writes about housebuilding:

There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? (359)

When Thoreau asks if construction's pleasure shall always be granted only to the carpenter, he is, of course, considering what it is divided labor does for us (as well as identifying the pleasure to be found in good work, of course). This has everything to do with a work *ethic* Thoreau is considering, and I mean "ethic" here in a way that he would have found familiar. While one contemporary understanding of "ethic" was as "a scheme of moral science" (OED), perhaps Thoreau would have been more familiar with Emerson's statement about ethics in his famous essay, "Nature": "Ethics and religion differ herein; that the one is the system of human duties commencing from man; the other, from God" (Emerson 38). For Thoreau, then, a work ethic would have been a system of human duties inherent in work--that is, he is not only interested in how honestly and diligently a single person goes about her work, he is concerned with the duties or responsibilities (or lack thereof) built into his culture's *system* of work. This is why he wonders, "Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself" (359).

## DIVISION OF LABOR

What Thoreau criticizes here is the as-yet unacknowledged consequences of the division of labor ushered in by industrial capitalism. He asks not what such a division has enabled humankind to accomplish, but what it prevents individuals from doing for themselves (or, perhaps, what it prevents individuals from *being*). Here he anticipates the observations of several cultural critics, perhaps most notably Neil Postman who, in his book, *Technopoly*, points out that technological changes are neither additive nor subtractive, they are ecological, and that such changes are always accompanied by shifts of power--new technologies tend to create

knowledge monopolies, giving rise to an elite class of individuals who alone hold the knowledge and expertise necessary to control and implement these technologies. Simply put, when technological change occurs, there are winners and there are losers (*Technopoly* 9-18). In regards to the division of labor (and let's be clear here, the concept of divided labor, both of the kind found in factory production and of the kind necessary for the continuous specialization of a skill or area of knowledge, is indeed a technology), Thoreau is concerned about the objectives of the winners and what it is exactly that the losers are losing.

Let us ignore for now the kind of division of labor highlighted in Sinclair's, *The Jungle*, and which has continued to this day, reducing production processes to a series of discrete acts so specific and dumbed-down as to be accomplished by nearly anyone regardless of education or training. If we consider just the division of labor with which Thoreau begins--something like trade specialization--we can still draw some startling conclusions as to what is lost because of this specialization. Interestingly, the first thing he mentions is a loss of pleasure ("shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?"), a sensation most of us long ago learned to disassociate from work. It is worth recognizing, however, that a tremendous amount of pleasure is to be had from work of many kinds. Schumacher argues "that work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure" (51-2), and Wendell Berry argues in a similar vein, as we will see in the next chapter. We must recognize, though, that not all work is pleasurable for all individuals, which can at least serve as something of an explanation for the extent to which the division of labor has been accepted and even embraced.

Pleasure, however, is not all that we lose because of this division. Perhaps the most important losses that can be traced back to divided labor practices are a loss of freedom and a loss of security. These two are related, of course, and both are intertwined with a third loss--a true understanding of what is necessary for life. A loss of freedom and security has already been treated to a large extent when considering the oppressive means by which Thoreau's peers secured housing. It should be fairly clear that our individual freedom and financial security tend to be whittled away by the major purchases (houses, cars, etc) required of us by the radical monopolies in which we find ourselves entangled. What isn't so clear is how this can be traced back to the division of labor, nor how it relates to our conception of necessity. Let us return to Thoreau's example: carpentry and construction.

Say that a man possesses the knowledge and skill necessary to build his own home, but, because of the specialization developed by divided labor, he chooses to have an "expert" carpenter build his home for him, believing his own skills to be inadequate for such a project. We can conclude something from such a decision, as well as predict some future outcomes. First, it is likely that the man believes his own knowledge and skills are inadequate because he cannot build a home to the current fashion and/or standards. If it be the former, Thoreau has some biting words for him, arguing that if fashion is his primary concern, a man might as well have the carpenter construct him a coffin, his life is so little worth the living:

Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are slanted over him or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box. It would signify somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, *he* slanted them and daubed it; but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is

of a piece with constructing his own coffin,—the architecture of the grave, and "carpenter," is but another name for "coffin-maker." (360)

If the man be concerned with the latter, that is building standards having to do with increased safety or efficiency, I have no doubt Thoreau would counsel him to hire an "expert" carpenter to *help* him build his home, supplementing his own knowledge and skill with that possessed by the tradesman. In this way he would not only be able to build his own home, he would also improve his own mental and physical abilities in the process. We shouldn't forget that, despite his present-day reputation for solitude and a fierce self-sufficiency, Thoreau tells us that some of his friends and neighbors helped *him* raise his tiny house on Walden Pond:

At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day. (358)

Thoreau, in fact, had an old-fashioned house-raising *party*. As Robert Sullivan relates in his book, *The Thoreau You Don't Know*, "He hosted a house-raising party to lift his little walls in May, using the old country custom, the kind of thing that polite and progressive Concordians frowned on [...] At the party, he gathered a group of philosophers and farmers and even had recent Irish immigrants on hand, all his Concord neighbors" (155). I would argue that Thoreau's claim that his acquaintances' help was not a matter of necessity is most likely a joke. If we remember that Thoreau developed much of his material for *Walden* by giving lectures on the local Lyceum circuit, we can see that this passage was written for a very personal audience, designed to make them laugh and thank them for their contribution of time and labor.

Let us return to the homeowner we've been discussing. If, as planned, he hires an expert carpenter to build his home, a few predictions can be made with, I think, a fair degree of accuracy. First, his own knowledge and skills will not be exercised nor further developed. Second, forfeiting the construction to the carpenter reinforces the homeowner's inadequacy as a carpenter in his own mind, making it more likely that he will forfeit such work again in the future. Furthermore, if the house has been constructed using techniques with which he is unfamiliar, he is all the more likely to hire out maintenance and repair work than learn to do it himself. It is not long before hiring out such work becomes a necessity in this homeowner's mind, and once he comes to see it as a necessity he has lost some of his freedom and security--he is beholden to the expertise, skill, and honesty of the help he hires. Most importantly, this man's children will grow up understanding such dependency to be the norm, and, because they never see their father use the knowledge and skills he possesses--in terms of carpentry or any other trade--they will fail to inherit even his rudimentary ability and know-how. His children then will most likely find themselves utterly dependent on hired help and the money needed to hire that help. Furthermore, not all the tradesmen they hire will be honest, and they will be persuaded to pay for services and products they do not need, because they will lack the knowledge necessary to hold the tradesmen accountable.

It quickly becomes evident that Thoreau uses his discussion of home building as a starting point merely. Though he doesn't often spin out his ideas in the same way I have above, it is clear that he understands their implications according to a long view of matters. Moreover, he has in mind more than just home-building skills, knowing that the division of labor extends to nearly all trades and disciplines. Let us return, however, to the way Thoreau relates our own "burrowing" habits with those of animals. It is easy to see the differences between the way we, as Americans,

understand necessity and the way, say, a woodchuck understands necessity (this assumes, of course, that a woodchuck *can* understand necessity on a higher plane than instinct). Even before the wonders of the industrial revolution, we enjoyed a much more sophisticated life than woodchucks experience, and what humans counted then as necessary for life, especially necessary for a *good* life, would have easily outstripped those things necessary for woodchucks.

Relating the division of labor to animal behavior is more tricky, however, but there are connections to be made. For the most part, we might look in vain among animalkind for the sort of intra-species specialization we exhibit in our own division of labor. There are, of course, animals who cooperate, hunting in packs and so forth, and there are insect colonies, such as those built by ants and bees, that are highly structured, but individual insects in these colonies possess nothing like the sort of autonomy we enjoy as human beings. (It is no coincidence that factory workers and employees in large bureaucratic organizations are so often characterized as "drones.") Thoreau plays with these relations not to glorify the animal side of "human nature"--he isn't exalting the "primal" above the "civilized." By making the comparison, however, Thoreau asks us to consider the extent to which our lives have become abstracted from reality. We have trouble considering our method of dividing labor being used by woodchucks (apart from the fact that they lack the higher faculties necessary for such an operation), but can we not imagine a time in which it would have seemed absurd to foresee a day when human work would become so specialized that a person might procure food, clothing, shelter, and many additional amenities, without ever having a direct hand in their production or maintenance whatever?

Thoreau's point, furthermore, is that such distance from the source of our necessities obscures not only the true cost of those necessities, it hides the true vulnerability of such a position. His animal comparison is an attempt to prod us, either through shock or humor, into delving down

through our lives' layers of abstraction to something real, to undeniable necessities. This is also what he means when, in "Where I Live and What I Lived For," he writes:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake. (400)

## FOOD

I want to forego a thorough discussion of Thoreau's thoughts on obtaining food, not because they aren't worth examining, but because it will be more productive to consider them in the following chapter wherein they can be compared to Berry's thoughts on the matter (specifically, food and energy use). For now, I think, it is sufficient to note that Thoreau writes about food in much the same way he writes about clothing and shelter. As with those topics, he quickly dives to the heart of the matter of food, writing,

if one would live simply and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate, and not exchange it for an insufficient quantity of more luxurious and expensive things, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground, and that it would be cheaper to spade up that than to use oxen to plough it, and to select a fresh spot from time to time than to manure the old, and he could do all his necessary farm work as it were with his left hand at odd hours in the summer; and thus he would not be tied to an ox, or horse, or cow, or pig, as at present. (366)

In many ways, this passage mirrors his very famous statement, "But lo! men have become tools of their tools" (352). He criticizes here the fact that his neighbors have become accustomed to a particular system of farming, what Postman calls an "invisible technology," and that system now constricts their ability to recognize alternative farming methods. As Postman writes, "When a method of doing things becomes so deeply associated with an institution that we no longer know which came first--the method or the institution--then it is difficult to change the institution or even to imagine alternative methods for achieving its purposes" (*Technopoly* 143). I doubt that Thoreau's contemporaries were beyond recognizing that one could eke out a living in a manner similar to that which he describes above; however, they were no doubt concerned with doing more than just surviving, wishing to live in line with the trends of the day, dietary and otherwise. As Thoreau would argue, though, when a person lives according to such trends, his or her idea of "necessity" is likely to become too abstract.

Nevertheless, we are apt to find Thoreau's remarks about farming preposterous, as when he writes, "Certainly no nation that lived simply in all respects [...] would commit so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals" (367). We are so far removed from a time in which farming was accomplished with animal labor, and the idea of farming with their labor has been so far romanticized in our collective memory, that it is extremely easy to dismiss these lines as cranky and unreasonable. Thoreau, however, here makes a now-familiar argumentative move, prodding his reader to entertain the possibility that contemporary farming practices have superfluous characteristics by considering the minimum amount of effort needed to raise only that food "necessary for life," as he puts it. Thoreau's point is that his farming neighbors' usual "necessities"--a herd of cattle, vast fields on which to raise crops, not only for themselves but for the market, a team of oxen or horses with which to plow their fields, the necessary supplies to

feed and tend their cattle and plow team, the tools and materials necessary to maintain fences, barns, etc--quite possibly, as he says elsewhere, "[cost] more than [they come] to" (368).

## PROGRESS

If I were to identify a central theme in "Economy," it would be the previous thought: "It costs more than it comes to." Thoreau here begins to anticipate Wendell Berry's argument, which will be examined more closely in the following chapter, that the so-called production of civilized life is only held to be profitable or sustainable by accounting processes that obscure certain costs. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, however, Thoreau isn't categorically opposed to progress, and he isn't a Luddite. When responding to the idea that "civilization is a real advance in the condition of man," he writes, "I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages" (347). If he is convinced of anything regarding the idea of progress, it is only of its relative goodness. Throughout this chapter, I have at turns examined Thoreau's tendency to play with opposites--ideas of necessity, meanings of economy, etc--and much the same proclivity is evident in his ideas about progress. In fact, this play of opposites in regard to progress is more or less inherent in the bulk of "Economy," as well as elsewhere in *Walden*. If he is primarily concerned with an economy of the mind and spirit over and above an economy of goods and services, this is much the same as saying that he is principally interested in moral, spiritual, and intellectual progress over and above technological progress.

While Thoreau's main concern was moral progress, however, he was no stranger to technological progress. His parents owned a pencil-making company, and he developed a manufacturing process that made his family's pencils the best in America. As Sullivan relates,

he developed a way in which to inject lead into the wood of pencils, the seamless pencil being a goal of pencil makers at the time. The pencil that was popular prior to Thoreau's development was manufactured by cutting the wood in half, filling it with graphite and gluing the wood together again. Thoreau studied various graphite hardnesses and invented a machine that manufactured a finer grind. [...] The new invention pushed the company ahead of its rivals. (141-2)

Besides his family's business, Thoreau made a significant portion of his living from his skills as a surveyor, a business which depends to a large extent on the sort of development that goes hand-in-hand with technological progress. It is probably best, then, to describe his relation to progress as an ambivalent one, and his ambivalence is clearly on display in *Walden*, expressed in his assertion that technological improvements are relatively good, but not wholly so.

In "Economy," Thoreau argues that, in regards to "'modern improvements;' there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance" (363). To make his point, he picks on the most recognizable technological improvement of his time: the railroad. Here, as elsewhere, he points out that the railroad is not the wholesale advancement it is presumed to be--its "picks" winners and losers:

Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts "All aboard!" when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over. (364-5)

This criticism is as pertinent today as it was in Thoreau's own time, highlighting the now-nearly-invisible cultural discourse that technological development will in the long run bring great freedom, enjoyment, and fulfillment to all humans. This certainly hasn't come to pass, and here he argues that it *won't* come to pass--if certain technical advancements appear to be universally enjoyed in western culture, it is only because people in some other corner of the globe are being "run over." In short, exploitation won't disappear, it will simply move. Thoreau recognizes, however, that we are apt to become attached to technological progress--it is an easy phenomenon to romanticize. Technical advancements are often attended by great narratives, glorifying their inventor, and praising his or her invention. Moreover, the implementation of these technologies often requires a tremendous effort of an extraordinary number of people--the massive collective effort toward a common purpose carries with it a religious/ritualistic quality, and the feelings of accomplishment and camaraderie experienced by the labor force, not to mention their understanding of being part of an effort greater than themselves, tends to consecrate the technological endeavor for which they have been working. Thoreau's realization of this romantic attachment leads him to follow his criticism of the railroad with this clarification: "'What! exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, 'is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?' Yes, I answer, *comparatively* good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt'" (365).

Perhaps more important than Thoreau's concern for technology's tendency to pick winners and losers is his criticism of the way in which it affects our conception of time. He worries over Americans' tendency--fostered by technological development and a fascination with "the new"--to neglect attending to the present, being so thoroughly enamored with the anticipated glories of

a future time. Here, again, we see why it is so easy to conflate technological and moral progress. A common criticism of evangelical religious movements is that they neglect the needs of living people, being wholly preoccupied with the coming Rapture. Jaron Lanier criticizes technologists in much the same way, writing,

The difference between sanity and fanaticism is found in how well the believer can avoid confusing consequential differences in timing. If you believe the Rapture is imminent, fixing the problems of this life might not be your greatest priority. [...] In the same way, if you believe the Singularity is coming soon, you might cease to design technology to serve humans, and prepare instead for the grand events it will bring. [...] The Rapture and the Singularity share one thing in common: they can never be verified by the living. (25-6)

In truth, Thoreau responds to both a kind of futurism and historicism in *Walden*, evident by the number of times and the manner in which he discusses the importance of the present moment. Near the beginning of "Economy," he writes, "I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line" (336). In "Where I Lived; and What I Lived For," he argues, "God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages" (399). In "Sounds," he relates that "There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life" (411). Finally, in "Spring," he finds almost a celebration of the present in that freshest of seasons, writing, "We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which

confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities" (572-3). For Thoreau, then, attending to the present moment is a balancing act, negotiating the burden of history and the pressure of a promised future so as to reach a kind of equilibrium of influence. His ambivalence about progress lies precisely in its tendency to disrupt this equilibrium, tipping the balance toward the future, and weakening history's ability to act as a natural check on futurist impulses.

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I want to conclude this chapter on *Walden* by considering, in a broad sort of way, how much weight we may give its words--that is, how much authority its author really has. Thoreau's status as an American prophet seems fairly secure--at the very least, he is considered by most to be the "original" environmentalist. As with most prophets, however, his words have been subject to tremendous scrutiny, and the lines of his life have been thoroughly traced for any semblance of hypocrisy or disingenuousness. All this attention has ironically resulted in a kind of doubleness to our understanding of him, ironic because Thoreau himself writes, "[I am] sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another" (429). We see in his words a desire to change the world, but his life appears to many to be a disappointment--he is never quite what we hoped he would be. As has been argued by Robert Sattelmeyer, this impression of Thoreau was largely set into place by those accounts of his life given immediately following his death, not the least of which is Ralph Waldo Emerson's eulogy. Though at one time he was Thoreau's great friend and mentor, Emerson's relationship with him became strained over the years, and his eulogy contains some expected equivocation. On the one hand, Emerson

writes, "No truer American existed than Thoreau" ("Thoreau" 1013). On the other hand, the eulogy contains this now-famous characterization of him:

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command: and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. (1024-5)

That this sort of equivocation regarding Thoreau has persisted reflects the extent to which we find him disappointing. Perhaps we sympathize with Emerson, wishing Thoreau had been more ambitious. Perhaps we are disillusioned by the apparent disconnect between his writing in *Walden* and what we know about his actual existence there and for the remainder of his life in Concord. Perhaps, though, we aren't reading Thoreau carefully enough.

In his essay commonly referred to as "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau writes, "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" (120). When considering philanthropy in *Walden*, he similarly writes, "Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings" (384). That is, help those in acute need of assistance, and attend to the details of your own life. How is one to square these sentiments with all the suggestions and exhortations examined throughout the chapter? I think the answer lies later on in the same passage from "Civil Disobedience," in which Thoreau goes on to say, "A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do *everything*, it is not necessary that he should do *something wrong*" (120). Here we see that, contrary to Emerson's characterization of him, Thoreau is not interested in being the "captain" of *any* party, he is not interested in any such

appointment that would tend to swing the scope of his concerns from *something* to *everything*. He is consistent in this regard, always striving to maintain the narrowness of his existence so as to preserve its "broad margins," cultivating a keen distinction between those things he can affect and those he cannot. This is a limitation he explicitly recognizes at the very beginning of *Walden*: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew so well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience" (325). He also pays homage to this limitation when he says, as quoted above, that he came into the world primarily "to live in it." First of all, his wording is intentionally ironic--he assumes a certain agency in his appearance on earth, an active role in his creation that, of course, none of us have. And that is the point. No one comes into the world to do anything *but* live, and all other purposes, to Thoreau's mind, are usually suggested to us by others and are usually interferences with life's living anyway. What makes his life and his thoughts so pertinent to our own time is his recognition of, and constant attention to, the length of his own vision, the natural boundaries of his knowledge and wisdom. He did not wish to engineer for all of America, much to Emerson's chagrin, because he recognized the hubris involved in believing one's vision could extend to such lengths; he understood that in attempting to do *everything*, he was likely to do many *somethings* wrong. Thoreau's great example, then, is his awareness and acceptance of his limits and his understanding that any change he effected in his life would have to occur through his limited living of it. As we shall see in the next chapter, these are themes that resonate deeply throughout Wendell Berry's writing.

## CHAPTER 3: Berry's Unsettling Vision

Critical literature on *The Unsettling of America* is notable primarily for its absence. It is referenced here and there, but, rather than treat it specifically, critics tend to engage the patterns of thought in Berry's writing of which *Unsettling* is exemplary. When considering that writing, a central critical move has been to consider the intellectual tradition(s) in which Berry falls and to which he is indebted. In "Wendell Berry and the Politics of Agriculture," Gregory McNamee reiterates many of the arguments found in Berry's non-fiction writing and looks at his immediate influences. Characterizing Berry as an unlikely radical, McNamee writes, "[he] has throughout his working life been a man of profoundly felt, sometimes unpopular convictions, unusual enough in these days of quietude and desperate accommodations to things as they are. He would not, I suspect, disown the adjective [radical]" (90). McNamee continues, arguing that in response to

the cartoon balloon of prosperity that floats above us, Wendell Berry works as a farmer, a poet, a novelist, a social critic. A prophet by accident, his eyes opened by the necessities of tilling a hardscrabble patch of barely arable ground and by the destruction of small communities [...] that verge his world, Wendell Berry's writing has been the most influential body of agricultural criticism to emerge in America since the turn of the century. (94)

Exploring his intellectual heritage, McNamee asserts that Berry's "agricultural and social-critical writings [...] reflect a [...] specifically American intellectual and political heritage that has been all but forgotten today." Drawing a distinction between the "southern planter" and the "yeoman farmer," McNamee describes the planter as having "typically enjoyed prosperity, his farms

situated in choice plains or along soil-rich deltas," and the yeoman as typically working "a croft on marginal ground--stony hillsides, briar-tangled ravines, dogpatches--with the simplest of technologies, horses and hands. [...] He amassed almost no wealth, and he owned no one; he was culturally rich, but cash-poor." "Where Wendell Berry's allegiances lie is plain enough," McNamee argues. Furthermore, he sees elements of Berry's arguments in "[s]outhern agrarian journals dating to the early nineteenth century," and finds considerable connections between Berry's thinking and "Clarence Hamilton Poe's influential journal *The Progressive Farmer*." McNamee continues, explaining that "Mr. Berry's subsequent themes emerge repeatedly in Poe's great agrarian journal, as they do in the pages of such radical grangers as Liberty Hyde Bailey, whose *Country-Life Movement* (1911) and *Holy Earth* (1915) remain resoundingly modern in tone and outlook." He finds Berry's most recent antecedent in "the work of the Twelve Southerners, the Nashville-centered intellectual circle from which the Fugitive Poets emerged," looking specifically in "the pages of their 1930 manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*," about which Berry himself has written. Despite the extent of their similarities, McNamee clarifies that "Berry cannot be too closely identified with the neo-Confederate Twelve Southerners; his penetrating condemnation of the racism underlying American history, *The Hidden Wound*, forces a distance between Berry and those who yearn for the stars and bars" (97-100).

A glaring omission from McNamee's investigation is Berry's highly scrutinized connection with Thoreau. A testament to the vital link between Thoreau and Berry, Jason Peters devotes the first four pages of his introduction of the collection, *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, to the connection between the authors. While he recognizes many similarities, Peters also asserts the importance of Berry's divergence from Thoreau: "If Berry's voice seems an anamnesis of the oracle of *Walden*, it also resounds within a richly varied tradition, and his critique reaches further

and sustains an urgency greater than anything Thoreau ever attempted" (4). Developing this connection, Herman Nibbelink, in "Thoreau and Wendell Berry: Bachelor and Husband of Nature," describes Thoreau's and Berry's connection as "a kinship that deserves further definition." While Berry is both a writer and a farmer, "Thoreau was squeamish about husbandry and full of cranky complaints about farmers" (135). In regard to *Walden*, Nibbelink writes that "Berry agrees with Thoreau about the cultural disease carried as the materialist burden; but his Jeffersonian vision of a nation of small farmers, caring about their land and one another, differs radically from Thoreau's view of agriculture even while it recalls a Thoreau-like respect for nature" (137). Pointing specifically to "the ironic pattern--the interplay between attraction (or involvement) and detachment--that pervades *Walden*," Nibbelink discerns in the text a tension between a concern for nature and a desire for individual freedom:

Justly concerned about the destructiveness of commercial farming and land development, Thoreau is no less concerned about the loss of individual freedom resulting from commitment to the soil. [...] Enslavement of the individual is for Thoreau a corollary of the destruction of nature. Commitment, even to husbandry, offers dissipation rather than fulfillment; and such indulgence, by weakening the body, enslaves and ultimately extinguishes the spirit. Thoreau's report of his attempt at husbandry parallels his account of hunting: both offered necessary learning experiences on the way to an adulthood of restrained admiration for the natural world. (138-9)

Nibbelink sees Berry's connection to, and ultimate separation from, Thoreau's view of nature as beginning in his childhood:

Much of Berry's writing has been done in a rebuilt cabin, adjacent to Lanes Landing Farm, originally constructed by a bachelor uncle Berry admired in childhood. [...] Berry's relationship to his bachelor uncle suggests the nature of his psychic kinship with Thoreau, from whom the legacy has also been rich while large differences remain. Having been tutored in his view of nature and its ways by a bachelor kinsman who sojourned there, Berry has brought to nature his marriage, commitment, and the acts of understandings of husbandry. (141)

As opposed to Thoreau, Nibbelink argues that Berry's "farm is no hobby, or garden of metaphors; this farmer's thought is not idle musing. In agriculture--Berry's vision of agriculture-nature and culture are married" (151).

Taking as a starting point Nibbelink's essay, Ted Olson's, "'In Search of a More Human Nature': Wendell Berry's Revision of Thoreau's Experiment," argues that Berry has steadily moved away from his early works, influenced greatly by Thoreau's model of ecocentrism, toward writing that displays "increasing confidence in the power of human culture, if based on an ecologically sound way of life, to bind people and nature together in a constructive--not destructive--interrelationship" (61-2). Olson goes on to explain that "Berry had become convinced that most environmentalists, exhibiting a penchant for fervent ecocentrism, overrelied on politics when addressing environmental problems," arguing that "culturally created problems required cultural solutions" (62-3). There is something of an "anxiety of influence" in Berry's changing attitude toward Thoreau, Olson argues: "Although his early work frequently reflected, stylistically as well as thematically, the influence of Thoreau, Berry has revealed considerable ambivalence toward his literary predecessor since the mid-1970s, the consequence of increasing disagreement with Thoreau's position on agriculture, marriage, family, community, and

Christianity" (68). As many critics have pointed out, however, Thoreau himself moved away from the brash independence he exhibits in *Walden*--which Berry refers to as "a young man's book"--finding later in a life a more georgic, community-focused sensibility which certainly seems resonant in Berry's writing. Perhaps it is better to say that Berry's ambivalence is focused primarily on the Thoreau of *Walden*, a Thoreau beyond which both authors grow. In his essay, "'The Country We Have Married:' Wendell Berry and the Georgic Tradition of Agriculture," Dr. Thomas L. Altherr argues that Berry's emphasis on responsible agriculture as a means to responsible living indeed places him within the georgic tradition: "Berry's prose and poetry have carried on the Georgic tradition of agrarian literature, [... espousing] not the bucolic pleasures of misty pastoralism, but rather the Georgic canons of hard toil, constant attention to the land and season, and ritualistic celebration of timeless connections to agricultural cycles" (105).

Resisting the impulse to read Berry as a communitarian version of Thoreau, Freyfogle's, "Wendell Berry and the Limits of Populism," argues that a serious strain of individualism runs through Berry's work, and that that individualism is an inherent limitation his arguments:

The social problems that Berry diagnoses [...] are not likely to disappear merely through efforts by individuals, one by one. More than that is needed, particularly in the political realm, to build relationships that Berry views as vital. [...] Indeed, to lay stress simply on change at the individual level is to risk reducing complex economic and social problems to matters merely of private morality. It can divert attention from our insistent needs for structural change. It can sap strength from the kinds of organized political efforts that make wide-ranging change possible. (173-4)

Freyfogle continues in this vein, questioning Berry's resistance to social and political "movements":

But how are [...] structural changes to take place, if good people remain silent? How are they to come about if no movement pushes them? [...] Ultimately, what we see in Berry's work [...] are images of the responsible individual, the farmer or barber or tradesman who stands tall on his land or doorstep, lives as virtuously as possible, cares for his neighbors, respects other life, and lends support to the surrounding community. They are good and indispensable images, valuable so far as they can take us. But they do not take us as far as we need to go. (183)

While Freyfogle finds Berry's individual moral challenges compelling, he argues that "we need to augment [his] work with more effective means of social change." Even though he thinks that we "need Berry more than ever, and his criticism rings true," he asserts the need to "attach this criticism to a realistic understanding of structural change." For Freyfogle, "Berry [...] remains too wedded to Jacksonian democracy and dated images of the independent entrepreneur to give advice on the best means of confronting global capitalism. Just as surely, though, we are cast adrift without his prophecy or something very much like it" (189-90).

To my mind, Freyfogle comes very close to contradicting himself in his attempt to find his own critical space next to Berry. Moreover, he appears to totally miss the point of Berry's arguments about responsible, moral individual action and the problem with "movements." Berry doesn't contradict himself, as Freyfogle implies, when he "criticizes social 'movements' and does not want to be part of one [... but] promotes the idea of community-supported agriculture and organized sustainable farming and forestry initiatives" (182). For Berry, these are not mutually

exclusive acts. His criticism of "movements" involves Americans' tendency to use them as proxies for individual action, to turn what should be one's own work for change into another form of consumption. Social and political organizations are worthwhile, to Berry's view, only so far as we are able to act within them as individuals, as we are able, through our presence and work, to define those organizations rather than allow them to define us.

One of the few critical works to engage *Unsettling* directly is Steven Weiland's, "Wendell Berry Resettles America: Fidelity, Education, and Culture." Weiland argues that *Unsettling* is in part a response to a question Berry has posed to himself: "'What must a man do to be at home in the world?' He must, [...] find personal solutions for the crises we face: of character, agriculture, and culture." Weiland continues, suggesting that "[o]ne purpose--certainly a persuasive one--of *The Unsettling of America* is to make a compelling case against federal agricultural policy and [...] the unhappy effects on American farming of the land grant universities and their schools of agriculture." Moreover, Berry critiques our culture's "hunger for 'specialization' and [our] uncritical deference to 'expertise'" (38), as we shall see later in this chapter. Striking a more critical tone, however, Weiland argues that "many supporters of Berry's views on agriculture and the natural world [... will] no doubt find his conviction on certain necessities of domesticity unappealing," though he admits that from Berry's point of view, "they are inseparable" (40). A recognition apparent in nearly every critical piece, however, is that Berry's own life has served as a model for his writing, "has nourished and been nourished by an extraordinary rich metaphor: man as husband, in the oldest senses of the word, having committed himself in multiple marriages to wife, family, farm, community, and finally to the cycle of great nature itself. It is the central stream of [his] writing" (Hicks 52).

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Early in *Walden*, Thoreau asks, "Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve?" (359). In many ways, Berry's, *The Unsettling of America*, is an answer to that question, or at least an extension of Thoreau's line of inquiry. The division of labor that Thoreau found problematic has grown into a sophisticated system of specialization, a system which Berry considers to be a pervasive cultural illness: "The disease of the modern character is specialization" (19). Though such a comparison may at first appear problematic, I would argue that Berry's characterization is justified. In the previous chapter, I pursued the implications of Thoreau's question of divided labor and house-building by examining a hypothetical homeowner and the logical results of his decision to hire out the construction of his home--a loss of freedom and ability, dependence on the labor of others, dependence on money and the system of valuation it represents, and the amplification of these resultant dependencies and vulnerabilities in his children. Berry similarly traces the influence of divided labor practices, though his context is larger and no longer hypothetical.

Berry begins by acknowledging that specialization can be considered a reasonable response to reasonable concerns: "the aim of specialization may seem desirable enough. The aim is to see that the responsibilities of government, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, education, etc., are given into the hands of the most skilled, best prepared people" (19). The purpose of specialization, thus considered, seems even admirable; however, the specialization system we now use does much more than allow individuals the opportunity to develop their peculiar talent for or singular interest in a certain skill or realm of knowledge--it develops that talent and knowledge to the exclusion of other talents and ways of knowing: "The first, and best known,

hazard of the specialist system is that it produces specialists--people who are elaborately and expensively trained *to do one thing*. We get into absurdity very quickly here" (19). It is easy to find examples of the absurdities Berry points to; our system of experts gives us school administrators who have never taught, retail company executives who have never worked in retail, hospital administrators who have never administered health care as doctors or nurses. (It is also easy to see, however, that such decrying of experts can quickly go too far in the opposite direction, positing some sort of holistic paradise in which individuals are experts unto themselves, having absolutely no need to rely on family, friends, and neighbors for anything. In any case, we cannot afford to think of specialization and self-reliance in a dichotomous fashion.) Berry's concern here is that over-specialization produces experts with partial vision. The realm of knowledge and skill that makes up an expert's discipline acts as a blinder, constraining her understanding of the world, and thus preventing her from making lateral/peripheral connections to other skills or knowledge. A system of over-specialization, then, prevents us from seeing--or at least comprehending--the interconnectedness of our world, the ecological nature of human existence.

In addition to limiting our ability to perceive and understand our world, Berry argues that specialization degrades human existence, subverting the complexity of knowledge required for self-reliance, and contributing mightily to our own ignorance and dependence:

Even worse, a system of specialization requires the abdication to specialists of various competences and responsibilities that were once personal and universal. Thus, the average [...] American citizen now consigns the problem of food production to agriculturalists and "agribusinessmen," the problems of health to doctors and sanitation experts, the problems of education to school teachers and educators, the problems of

conservation to conservationists, and so on. This supposedly fortunate citizen is therefore left with only two concerns: making money and entertaining himself. (19-20)

Furthermore, such a reduction in individual concerns leads not to happiness, but to anxiety, an anxiety that *should* be felt. Berry writes, "If [a citizen] lives by the competence of so many other people, then he lives also by their indulgence; his own will and his own reasons to live are made subordinate to the mere tolerance of everybody else." He goes on to argue that the fact that so many live in such a state of vulnerability clearly indicates systemic failure, writing, "The specialist system fails [...] because a person who can do only one thing can do virtually nothing for himself" (21).

Berry's critique of specialization speaks directly to the challenges we face in regard to sustainable living. If we understand the challenge of sustainability to be the acquisition and development of sufficient quantities of climate-neutral, environmentally-sound fuel and other raw materials, then we conceive of the problem as one for scientific experts. But how can we trust these experts' judgment or ability to consider all the possible consequences--good or bad--that may come from the development of a new fuel or technology? Moreover, who will control these new energy sources and technologies, and whose interests will they serve? If we add to this mix of issues the sustainability of our food supply, we still run into questions that usually call for expert responses: How can we be sure we'll have an adequate supply of food?; How can we be sure our food will be safe to eat? Berry's criticism of specialization, then, characterizes exactly the average person's relationship to the challenges we face due to climate change, ecological degradation, and a looming energy shortage. She is dependent on experts whom she doesn't know and cannot see at work, and she naturally feels anxious and vulnerable because of her seeming inability to respond to these challenges in a personal manner. That Berry's criticism

should relate so well to matters of sustainability may initially seem peculiar--his overriding concern in *Unsettling* is modern agriculture. As Michael Pollan highlights, however, unless our nation's agricultural practices are addressed, we "will not be able to make significant progress on [...] energy independence or climate change" (Farmer para 2). Another way of saying this is that agricultural practices inevitably resonate throughout our culture, and their effects are felt in surprising ways; the nature of this relationship is suggested by the subtitle of Berry's text: *Culture and Agriculture*. As Berry points out in his preface to *Unsettling*, "the cultural issues that I attempt to deal with have been with us since our history began, and, barring miracle or catastrophe, they will be with us for a long time to come" (vii).

My analysis of Berry's text is divided into three parts. I begin with brief etymological ruminations on "unsettled" and "settled." Berry purposefully fosters ambiguity with his title, and I think it is useful to consider its multiplicity of meaning. Next, I consider the ways in which the cultural forces Berry examines are connected through their tendency to foster social and cultural abstraction. Within this discussion, I revisit and expand upon Berry's critique of specialization, consider his thoughts on the way in which we assign value to things, people, and land, examine his critique of the way we use and think about energy, and, finally, reflect on the chapter, "The Body and the Earth," within which he posits an increased awareness of humans' connection with the earth--with natural processes--as well as our connections to other humans, in order to combat the abstraction which permeates our culture. Finally, I examine how Berry argues in *Unsettling* that change occurs from the inside-out, how individual, personal actions help to catalyze cultural change.

## **UN/SETTLED**

The agrarian bent of Berry's text inevitably leads us to make an immediate association between "unsettling" and the act of "settling" the land, putting down roots, making a home, working the soil, and so forth, the assumption being that Berry is writing about pulling up roots and losing a home. He *is* writing about those acts, but, to my mind, his understanding of what it means to be "settled" or "unsettled" is much broader than this. If we pause for a moment and consider how we commonly use the word "settle," it is surprising to see how so many uses can be connected back to argumentation. Disagreements--that is opposed arguments, informal or legal--can be settled. Monetary accounts can be settled, and this too relates to arguments; the act of loaning money or borrowing money seems to be one that generates endless disputes and arguments, and one way to understand such transactions is as arguments about value--the value of land, the value of personal property, the value of one's word, one's promise. Such transactions are always arguments and sometimes disputes. Even the act of becoming settled in a place--connecting with the land, making a home, making a life--is an argument. The decision to "settle down" is an argument for staying put, for going no further, for ignoring the promise of greener pastures, which are probably illusory anyway. To decide to settle in a place is to argue that it is good--at least as good as any other place. To be unsettled, then, is to be adrift in a number of ways: to be in a state of constant disagreement; to live with unbalanced accounts; to live without roots; to accept an idea of home that presupposes transience.

Another way in which we use the idea of being unsettled is in relation to someone or something being stirred up, worked up, or disturbed. When two people are having a heated dispute, they are often told to "settle down"--before their disagreement can be settled, they must be settled themselves. There is also the sense in which earth can become unsettled, turned up,

broken, fractured, fragmented. This suggestion of fragmentation is probably purposeful; Berry explicitly connects industrial capitalism with fragmentation and exploitation, the former being the consequence of the latter. The "unsettled," exploitative mindset is one that he sees stretching all the way back to the "discovery" of our continent:

the sovereignty that crossed the surf onto the shore of the New World was a new sovereignty of the human mind. What appeared to the eyes of the discoverers was not one of the orders of Creation that required respect or deference for its own sake. What they saw was a great concentration of "natural resources"--to be used according to purposes exterior to them. That some of those resources were human beings mattered not at all. (54)

Fragmentation soon follows exploitation, Berry argues, because the "first principle of the exploitative mind is to divide and conquer" (11), a maxim that illuminates the increased ease with which material--or for that matter a people--may be conquered once it is broken apart, once it has lost its solidarity. Fragmentation *allows* for easier exploitation.

There are, however, a couple ways to look at this connection--let us take the earth as an example, examining two ways in which humans commonly relate to it. As Berry would point out, our primary relationship with the earth involves food. In order to raise vegetable matter, in a garden or on a farm, the soil must be turned, broken up, fragmented. This unsettled soil then must be built up in order to increase or sustain its productive capacity, receiving compost, manure, perhaps sand, whatever materials are needed to work the soil toward an optimum consistency and nutrient content. It is fitting, then, that we do not commonly think of this process as fragmentation, for the soil isn't being broken apart and scattered but molded, worked,

developed. A second important way in which we enter into a relationship with the earth is through mining, extracting precious materials from it--this process involves a tremendous amount of fragmentation. In order to get these materials, humans must burrow into the earth, or, increasingly, peel the earth away, layer by layer, exposing and extracting the desired materials. In *Unsettling*, Berry argues that these two ways of relating to the earth, both involving a level of fragmentation, are not the same. Ideally, farming and gardening involve no exploitation at all; though the soil is disturbed, it is done so in order to improve it, to build it through the addition of other organic materials. Such work is done by, and encourages the development of, a nurturing mind. On the other hand, mining is inherently exploitative, a process which takes as its starting principle an understanding of the earth as divided between material that is valuable and material that is worthless. Before mining begins, it is understood that the vast majority of whatever is hauled from the mine will be "worthless," and will therefore be discarded as "waste." For Berry, such work can only involve and further develop an exploitative mind.

This distinction can be easily applied to humans and human societies, and it is this application which I see as Berry's overall project in *Unsettling*. Perhaps, however, it is better to say that Berry's project is simply to *make* the distinction between these two relationships with the earth and to argue for the importance of that distinction. To his understanding, we have for some time been failing to make this distinction, applying to the practice of farming an understanding of value and a conception of our relationship with the earth that is distinctly tied to mining, so that value is no longer built in the soil, it is wrested from it. The disappearance of this distinction has had a profound effect on Americans and American culture (a connection, as previously noted, that is hinted at by the subtitle of Berry's text, *Culture and Agriculture*). Furthermore, the growing dominance of the mining paradigm can be directly connected with many of our

environmental problems and our difficulty in developing a sustainable mode of living--it is hard to live in balance with an earth we are actively exploiting. Thus, the "unsettling" in Berry's title comes to mean the unease we feel, the creeping sense of dread we experience, as we become aware of the unbreakable thread which binds us to this tradition of exploitation. As Berry writes,

I cannot think of any American whom I know or have heard of, who is not contributing in some way to destruction. The reason is simple: to live undestructively in an economy that is overwhelmingly destructive would require of any one of us, or of any small group of us, a great deal more work than we have yet been able to do. How could we divorce ourselves completely and yet responsibly from the technologies and powers that are destroying our planet? The answer is not yet thinkable, and it will not be thinkable for some time--even though there are now groups and families and persons everywhere in the country who have begun the labor of thinking it. (18)

This apprehensiveness we feel, then, is two-fold, expressing both the anxiety that results from an awareness of our connection to the exploitative practices that are part and parcel of an industrial economy, and the related fear that the only way to correct this exploitation, to bring our way of living in balance with the earth, will require us to relinquish most of our present lifestyle's luxuries, luxuries to which we have grown thoroughly attached.

## **ABSTRACTION**

### *1. Specialization and Vulnerability*

The fragmentation that Berry sees as attendant on our system of specialization runs against an unalterable fact of our existence--it is inescapably ecological. We cannot abstract ourselves or any part of our existence out of natural ecosystems. As Berry writes,

For some time now ecologists have been documenting the principle that "you can't do one thing"--which means that in a natural system whatever affects one thing ultimately affects everything. Everything in the Creation is related to everything else and dependent on everything else. The Creation is one; it is a uni-verse, a whole, the parts of which are all "turned into one." (46)

One doesn't have to embrace the Christian overtones inherent in Berry's use of the term "Creation" to understand and embrace his point--there is a wholeness to life on earth that cannot be dismissed. Whether we like it or not, our actions affect our planet's natural systems. The over-arching abstraction of our lives, then, is one that has divorced us from an awareness of this wholeness. As previously noted, our specialist system produces experts "who are elaborately and expensively trained *to do one thing*" (19), but just because we are trained to attend to only one realm of knowledge and skill, or one part of one realm of knowledge and skill, it does not mean the wholeness of our existence ceases to be true. Berry suggests, however, that we are seriously compromising the health of our natural and cultural ecosystems by neglecting the importance of their unity. In the same way that a natural ecosystem is healthy when its various forces are in balance, Berry sees the most healthy cultures as having achieved a similar balance:

It remains only to say what has often been said before--that the best human cultures also have this unity. Their concerns and enterprises are not fragmented, scattered out, at variance or in contention with one another. [...] The definitive relationships in the universe are thus not competitive but interdependent. And from a human point of view they are analogical. We can build one system only within another. We can have agriculture only within nature, and culture only within agriculture. At certain critical points these systems have to conform with one another or destroy one another. (47)

Perhaps the best-known study of the need to maintain such balanced unity is Jared Diamond's book, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, which examines various cultures that have collapsed because of their inattention to the necessity of ecological and cultural balance. The fact that these cultures had in many cases realized a high degree of sophistication was no defense against the exploitative nature of that sophistication--at some point, due to a natural disaster, a change in weather patterns, or in some cases inexplicable blindness to the obvious negative effects their actions were having on their environment, these societies buckled under the weight of their own sophistication--the complexity of their existence was simply unsustainable. It hardly needs mentioning that such collapses should serve as cautionary tales for our own culture.

In his discussion of specialization, Berry is clear that our specialist system is fostering a considerable degree of sophistication, but it is not at all clear that this complexity is joined by a degree of caution sufficient to prevent the sort of cultural collapse Diamond highlights:

What happens under the rule of specialization is that, though society becomes more and more intricate, it has less and less structure. It becomes more and more organized, but

less and less orderly. The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death--just as the individual character loses the sense of a responsible involvement in these relations. No longer does human life rise from the earth like a pyramid, broadly and considerately founded upon its sources. Now it scatters itself out in a reckless horizontal sprawl, like a disorderly city whose suburbs and pavements destroy the fields. (21)

The concluding image of this passage suggests the vulnerability of our sprawling sophistication. Without an adequate foundation--a broad but *cohesive* foundation--our culture's existence is indeed precarious. (I think it is important to recognize here that Berry is not contrasting the *amount* of the earth used, but the way it is used. While the first image presents a culture "broadly and considerately founded upon its sources," the other takes the form of a "reckless and horizontal sprawl." These characterizations contrast two ways of using land, but they share a recognition of a certain cultural breadth. As Berry elsewhere writes, "we cannot hope--for reasons practical and humane, we cannot even wish--to preserve more than a small portion of the land in wilderness. Most of it we will have to use" (30). The question is, will we use it considerately or recklessly? The implication, of course, is that we are using the earth quite recklessly, making our existence--or at least the present form of our existence--quite vulnerable.) Beyond its precariousness, however, Berry points out that most of us aren't even happy with our specialized culture. This is where we see the logical result of the divided labor practices that concerned Thoreau--though our specialist system has freed us from the need to

worry over most of the basic production processes and responsibilities that sustain our existence, this freedom has brought not overwhelming happiness but an ironic and pervasive anxiety. It is worth quoting Berry at length here:

The beneficiary of this regime of specialists ought to be the happiest of mortals--or so we are expected to believe. *All* of his vital concerns are in the hands of certified experts. He is a certified expert himself and as such he earns more money in a year than all his great-grandparents put together. [...] The fact is, however, that this is probably the most unhappy average citizen in the history of the world. He has not the power to provide himself with anything but money, and his money is inflating like a balloon and drifting away, subject to historical circumstances and the power of other people. From morning to night he does not touch anything that he has produced himself, in which he can take pride. For all his leisure and recreation, he feels bad, he looks bad, he is overweight, his health is poor. His air, water, and food are all known to contain poisons. There is a fair chance that he will die of suffocation. He suspects that his love life is not as fulfilling as other people's. He wishes that he had been born sooner, or later. He does not know why his children are the way they are. He does not understand what they say. He does not care much and does not know why he does not care. He does not know what his wife wants or what he wants. Certain advertisements and pictures in magazines make him suspect that he is basically unattractive. He feels that all his possessions are under threat of pillage. He does not know what he would do if he lost his job, if the economy failed, if the utility companies failed, if the police went on strike, if the truckers went on strike, if his wife left him, if his children ran away, if he should be found to be incurably ill.

And for these anxieties, of course, he consults experts, who in turn consult certified experts about *their* anxieties. (20-1)

In many ways, the passage above mirrors the thoughts of Christopher Lasch, in his book, *Haven in a Heartless World*. Published in the same year as Berry's *Unsettling*, 1977, Lasch's text "describes and criticizes" the "tradition of sociological study" that concerns itself with the so-called crisis of the family (*Haven* xiv), a crisis he sees extending back at least one hundred years. Though I don't want to consider Lasch's book at length, I think it is useful here to diverge briefly and examine its introduction, for the broad outlines of his study relate to Berry's argument in three ways. First, Lasch traces a tradition of exploitation similar to the one Berry offers at the very beginning of *Unsettling*, in which the

colonists who drove off the Indians came to be intolerably exploited by their imperial governments. And that alien imperialism was thrown off only to be succeeded by a domestic version of the same thing; the class of independent small farmers who fought the war of independence has been exploited by, and recruited into, the industrial society until by now it is almost extinct. (4-5)

For Lasch, the rise of an exploitative industrial society has resulted in the socialization of production and, ultimately, a total loss of individual control:

The history of modern society, from one point of view, is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals or their families. During the first stage of the industrial revolution, capitalists took production out of the household and collectivized it, under their own supervision, in the factory. Then they proceeded to appropriate the

workers' skills and technical knowledge, by means of "scientific management," and to bring these skills together under managerial direction. Finally they extended their control over the worker's private life as well, as doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, child guidance experts, officers of the juvenile courts, and other specialists began to supervise child-rearing, formerly the business of the family. (xiv-xv)

This brings us to the second connection between Lasch and Berry--a similar understanding of industrial society's impact on the individual and her relationship with her family. As we have seen already, Berry understands the specialist system as providing individuals with an ironic anxiety-ridden freedom from production, extending all the way to the creation--in a cultural sense--of children. Lasch makes much the same argument. His book's title, *Haven in a Heartless World*, seems to imply that "isolation makes the family impervious to outside influences." The title, however, is ironic:

In reality, the modern world intrudes at every point and obliterates [the family's] privacy. The sanctity of the home is a sham in a world dominated by giant corporations and by the apparatus of mass promotion. Bourgeois society has always held out the promise that private satisfactions will compensate for the reduction of work to a routine, but at the same time it undermines this compromise by organizing leisure itself as an industry. Increasingly the same forces that have impoverished work and civic life invade the private realm and its last stronghold, the family. (xvii)

Finally, both Berry and Lasch recognize specialization as an abstracting force. Berry points out that a system that "elaborately and expensively" trains individuals to do only one thing quickly results in absurdities. In his text's introduction, Lasch identifies one of these absurdities: a

cursory understanding of history and a consequent tendency to misinterpret historical trends. He specifically points to what are understood as economic "laws" and "abstract, impersonal social processes":

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the classical economists interpreted industrial capitalism but also provided it with an elaborate apology, which disguised the social relations peculiar to capitalism as universal principles of economics. Whereas these social relations represented the end product of a particular line of historical development in western Europe, political economy mistook them for natural laws, disguised exploitation as the natural order of things, and thus gave class rule an aura of inevitability. [...] If political economy failed to see modern market relations as the outcome of a specific historical process (through which peasants and artisans lost control of the means of production and became wage laborers), social science equally fails to see that "interdependence" merely reflects changing modes of class rule: the extension and solidification of capitalist control through the agency of management, bureaucracy, and professionalization. (xv-xvi)

The end result of our system of specialization, then, has been the institutionalized exploitation and the gradual--and nearly complete--surrendering of individual freedom to "capitalist control through the agency of management, bureaucracy, and professionalization." As previously noted, such a system, while sophisticated, leaves us highly vulnerable and generally dissatisfied.

I have included this brief look at the similarities between Berry's and Lasch's texts in order to emphasize their understanding of the fractured state of the modern parent-child relationship. For some parents, raising a child now means shuttling her from one expert visit to another,

occupying her with expert-produced "edutainment" in between such visits. In fact, however, the nature of this relationship highlights the great ambivalence we feel in response to our specialist system. A great many parents are concerned about the degree to which they are expected to turn their children over to specialists--for education, for health care, for extracurricular activities like sports, music lessons, etc. At the same time, parents don't want their children to be at a disadvantage when they grow older, unable to succeed because they have been deprived of exposure to the particular, sophisticated knowledge and training available through experts. Moreover, there are certain instances in which expert knowledge or skill is needed, when a child's health problems, learning needs or hobbies and interests grow beyond our individual (or familial) capacity to attend to them. As this illustrates, we seem to be of two minds in regard to experts and the system of specialization that produces them. On the one hand, we lament the loss of control we feel because of our specialist system--we don't like being told we are doing an inadequate job raising our children, providing for our family, caring for our property (if we are lucky enough to own any), etc. On the other hand, when we face something that thoroughly outstrips our ability to deal with it, such as when tainted meat makes it into our nation's food supply or some sort of major engineering disaster occurs, we immediately clamor to blame a lack of expertise. Government inspectors are obviously incompetent or too few in number, we cry, demanding that the situation be fixed by better and more-numerous experts. Of course, there are some individuals who will respond to such situations by questioning the entire system, scrutinizing, for example, a system of meat production and processing that requires so many experts and inspectors in the first place, and that, when expert management fails, results in such widespread contamination. In the realm of food production, this sort of questioning is gaining legitimacy, but on the whole individuals who are willing to critique such systems, to question not

only their effectiveness but also their *legitimacy*, are written off as fanatics. In many cases these individuals are, if not crazy, certainly compromised--their motivation easily called into question because of troubling political or business interests--but this hardly means that asking such questions is a worthless endeavor.

What our common mode of response to experts indicates, to my mind, is our tendency to fall back on dichotomies. When a specialist system breaks down, when experts fail, we want to either believe in the system and blame the individuals (it's not that they're experts, it's that they're *bad experts*), or deny the need for expertise completely. These reactions, however, reveal an underlying problem--our collective inability to negotiate the space between individual resourcefulness and expert opinion, to do the hard work necessary to determine where expert knowledge and skill are necessary and worthwhile, and where individual, family, or community knowledge and skill are sufficient and perhaps better-suited to meet our needs. It is easy to either embrace or reject expertise wholesale; it is difficult to foster a culture of limited expertise.

## 2. *Economic Abstraction*

There is perhaps no better way to examine the abstracting force of our specialist system than through the structure of valuation it has helped to create. As Berry argues, "One of the most troubling characteristics of the specialist mentality is its use of money as a kind of proxy, its willingness to transmute the powers and functions of life into money" (22-3). It is understandable that some people will find Berry's argument strange; because we have become so accustomed to our culture's reliance on money as an indicator of value, it takes some mental effort to get outside the system of valuation with which we are so familiar, to consider other ways of understanding value. For this reason, Postman would identify our abstract monetary

system as an "invisible technology," and he would also recognize its reliance on another invisible technology: statistics.

Postman points to Francis Galton as a prime actor in the push to privilege statistical knowledge, and so we can consider him to be at least somewhat responsible for the way in which we currently use and think about money. According to Postman, Galton "believed that anything could be measured and that statistical procedures, in particular, were the technology that could open the pathway to real knowledge about every form of human behavior." His preoccupation with quantification originated such ridiculous practices as beauty pageants, in which beauty is "measured," and greatly influenced the creation of the IQ test, which similarly "measures" intelligence. In fact, he is most remembered for his preoccupation with quantifying intelligence, a passion which famously led him to appropriate his cousin Charles Darwin's theories in service of "eugenics," the "science" of which Galton was the founder (*Technopoly* 129). The obvious point here is that Galton's obsession with measuring every aspect of human existence is not particularly peculiar; while eugenics is now certainly rejected as a regrettable use of statistical measurement, beauty pageants and IQ tests are still with us. In fact, the proliferation of standardized tests, which claim to measure knowledge, ability, aptitude, personality, and a hundred other subjective human characteristics, is a very visible result of our culture's obsession with measuring and ranking our existence. Our use of money is merely an extension of this obsession.

Money, we must remember, is just another form of measurement, an abstract scale against which value can be determined. The invisibility of this system, however, encourages us to forget that it is an abstraction, to reify money's expression of value. When we fail to consciously comprehend money as metaphor, we effectively prepare ourselves to misinterpret value. Berry

writes, "Akin to the idea that time is money is the concept, less spoken but as commonly assumed, that we may be adequately represented by money" (23), implying, of course, that it is problematic to assume that *anything* can be adequately represented by money. This is what Berry gets at when he writes elsewhere that we live within a "total economy"--our culture's operating assumption is that everything *can* be adequately represented by money, that such representation is okay, and, consequently, that our entire existence is on the market. Berry's argument is a hard one to refute--we are used to thinking about value in terms of money, mentally slicing up our possessions into the dollars and cents we have paid for them; they are so many tiny, measurable packages of value. Newspapers and television news shows are fond of pointing out, from time to time, exactly how much a child will cost over the span of years required to raise it. These articles or news segments, I can only imagine, are primarily meant to grab our attention, to shock us into picking up the newspaper, or startle us into leaving the television on a particular news show. To my mind, however, these "news stories" are much more powerful than their use as simple hooks suggests. The hubris involved in measuring in terms of dollars and cents the value of a child's existence, her relationships, her failures and triumphs, heartbreak and happiness, experienced from the time of her birth to her passage into the adult world, both by herself and her parents, is breathtaking. But we have grown accustomed to thinking about our existence along these lines, quantifying the value of our home, our possessions, our relationships, and even ourselves. The case is such that our understanding of abstraction has been reversed; we now understand money as real, solid value, and we see worth apart from money as abstract and ephemeral.

In order to gain a better perspective on our concept of money and the way in which it distorts our perception of value, I think it is useful to revisit Berry's remarks about the New World's

"discovery." When he writes that what "appeared to the eyes of the discoverers was [...] a great concentration of 'natural resources'--to be used according to purposes exterior to them" (54), he reminds us that the motive force of colonization was commerce--after all, Jamestown, the first permanent European settlement on the American continent, was the result of a business venture by the Virginia Company of London. Berry here makes much the same point as Lasch makes in his introduction to *Haven*; what we see as the "normal" way of assessing value is actually the result "of a particular line of historical development" (*Haven* xv-xvi). From the very beginning, then, our culture's understanding of value has been driven by market concerns, by a desire to turn everything possible into money. Such a desire not only resulted in slavery, a total conflation of human beings with money, it also resulted in the opposite conflation, the fusion of money--in the form of a corporation--with the concept of personhood.

For Berry, this equation of corporation to person lies at the heart of the our ecological and cultural vulnerability--it legitimizes a radical abstraction which more or less guarantees exploitative behavior. In his essay, "The Total Economy," Berry expands on some of his ideas in *Unsettling*, writing,

[t]he folly at the root of this foolish economy began with the idea that a corporation should be regarded, legally, as "a person." But the limitless destructiveness of this economy comes about precisely because a corporation is *not* a person. A corporation, essentially, is a pile of money to which a number of persons have sold their moral allegiance. Unlike a person, a corporation does not age. It does not arrive, as most persons finally do, at a realization of the shortness and smallness of human lives; it does not come to see the future as the lifetime of the children and grandchildren of anybody in particular. It can experience no personal hope or remorse, no change of heart. It cannot

humble itself. It goes about its business as if it were immortal, with the single purpose of becoming a bigger pile of money. [...] I don't mean to say, of course, that all corporate executives and stockholders are bad people. I am only saying that all of them are very seriously implicated in a bad economy. (69-70)

Stockholders invest in a corporation in order to "grow" their money. But the larger a corporation is, and the greater the number and type of businesses it encompasses, the more obscured is the means by which these investments grow. In a sense, then, corporate investment is a form of alchemy, transforming a small pile of money into a larger pile of money by means of an ephemeral, veiled process most of us do not understand. To Berry, this arrangement not only makes our understanding of "investment" dangerously abstract, it makes it possible for us to unwittingly support exploitative businesses, and it makes possible our understanding of money as a thing itself with intrinsic value. This abstract concept of money in turn supports a financial "industry" which greatly adds to the sophistication of the structure of investment. As wealth, investment, and growth become ever more abstract, the statistical means by which they are tracked and understood become similarly abstract. At a certain level of sophistication, these statistical measurements become difficult to interpret accurately, a reality spectacularly displayed in the recent financial collapse and ongoing economic crisis precipitated by securities constructed from problematic mortgages. As Postman points out, however, this sort of difficulty is to be expected when statistical measurement is relied upon so heavily, for "statistics creates an enormous amount of completely useless information, which compounds the always difficult task of locating that which is useful to a culture. [...] When it is out of control, statistics buries in a heap of trivia what is necessary to know" (*Technopoly* 136-8). Consequently, a financial system as sophisticated as ours creates a paradox. In order to make sense of its structure, to recognize

large-scale investment patterns and keep those investments growing, statistical models must be utilized. The more such models are used, however, and the more complex they become, the more likely they are to produce a quantity of statistical information greater than financial experts can accurately interpret. To some extent, this was one of the causes of our current financial crisis, and it is what led Ira Glass, in a recent episode of *This American Life*, to characterize the crisis as "the triumph of data over common sense" ("Return").

This look at our culture's pervasive and accepted economic abstraction should serve as a cautionary tale for our society as a whole. Over the past year or so, a great many Americans have responded to the events that precipitated the so-called "Great Recession" by asking, justifiably, how the vast majority of the world's economic and financial experts failed to see the flaws in their industry's behavior, failed to foresee the possibility that the investment bubble they were helping create could burst so spectacularly and with such dramatic consequences. In *Collapse*, Jared Diamond devotes an entire chapter to answering similar questions about the cultural collapses he investigates. His conclusion is that "human societies and smaller groups may make disastrous decisions for a whole sequence of reasons: failure to anticipate a problem, failure to perceive it once it has arisen, failure to attempt to solve it once it has been perceived, and failure to succeed in attempts to solve it" (438). What many of these failures share is abstraction of experience: there may be an abstraction of time "if [an] experience happened so long ago as to be forgotten"; there may be analogical abstraction, failing to compare a crisis to the correct previous experiences; there may be the abstraction of distance--a problem may not be perceived because of "distant managers, a potential issue in any large society or business"; experience may be abstracted by gradual change and the lack of a consistent, unchanged model for comparison, so that individuals forget, for instance, "how different the surrounding landscape

looked 50 years ago, because the change from year to year has been so gradual"; and finally, there may be overly abstract relationships between people, making it easy for some individuals to "reason correctly that they can advance their own interests by behavior harmful to other people" (Diamond 421-30). Berry, to my mind, would add to this the observation that any abstracting force increases the chance for failure, and that our abstract understanding of money and value multiplies the abstracting forces at work in our society. It abstracts human relationships, separating us along socio-economic lines, and making overt exploitative behavior more palatable. It encourages absentee business owners or managers, increasing the likelihood they will fail to perceive problems when they arise, or that they will make decisions that negatively affect their employees, employees they do not actually know nor care about. It encourages an almost complete ignorance of the lessons of history or adequate respect for future generations by emphasizing immediate profits. All this flows from our abstract system of valuation, because, as Berry writes, "the willingness to be represented by money involves a submission to the modern divisions of character and community" that are the products of our specialist system (23).

### 3. *Energy*

In the opening paragraph of Berry's chapter on energy use, he makes this remarkable statement: "In speaking of the use of energy [...] we are speaking of an issue of religion, whether we like it or not" (81). In one sense, saying that energy is a religious issue seems logical, in that debates about energy tend to elicit emotional fervor similar to that aroused by religious arguments. Furthermore, present-day environmental discussions--at least those that find their expression in mainstream media outlets--seem disproportionately focused on energy use.

Perhaps this is because it is the most conspicuous challenge in an array of environmental challenges now facing us, and it is so intertwined with our economic concerns that energy news can find a ready audience even among individuals who aren't necessarily worried about environmental degradation. Finally, we can easily feel personally connected to the energy issue, choosing to drive a particular car, deciding to use a certain light bulb, and feeling satisfaction at these consumer choices because of the knowledge that they are visible to others--our friends and neighbors can *see* us being environmentally responsible (or purposefully thumbing our nose at such "green" products). Berry, however, makes a more fundamental connection; energy, in all its various forms, is life, and "[r]eligion, in the root sense of the word, is what binds us back to the source of life" (81).

Berry's decision to consider the etymological root of "religion" and its relationship to energy is indicative of the degree to which his thoughts on energy connect with Thoreau's writing. While one can trace a line of influence from Thoreau to Berry at many points throughout *Unsettling*, nowhere is Thoreau's legacy of thought more clearly on display than in the chapter, "The Use of Energy." Etymological investigations and ruminations were a favorite intellectual endeavor of Thoreau and his contemporaries, a practice through which they sought to peel back words' layers of meaning and reach the nugget of truth buried deep in language. They were, of course, aware that language is metaphor--that, as S. I. Hayakawa reminds us, "the word is not the thing" (19)--but they worked to strip these metaphors down to their barest representation, to trace the history of words' meanings, and to gain a clearer picture of how one word relates to another and how language relates to reality. Berry's work in this chapter is much the same, seeking to cut through layers of obfuscating metaphor so as to reach a clearer understanding of what it means to talk about energy use.

At its root, "energy" means "work," and it is generally used in two contexts. On the one hand, we conceive of energy in terms of expression--the force, vigor, or intensity of a personal action or utterance. The concept of energy that drives our understanding of the "energy crisis," however, is derived from physics, indicating the "power of 'doing work' possessed at any instant by a body or system of bodies," and providing us with such derivative phrases as "potential energy," "static energy," "latent energy," etc (OED). Berry's concern is that present-day discussions about energy obscure its relationship to work, because the mechanisms through which work is done have become so complex and abstract that we forget it is being done at all. Our personal connection with work--that is, our intimate, individual knowledge of manual labor--has been reduced by so many "labor-saving devices" that it is easy to slip into a comfortable relationship with these products, viewing their work as a kind of technological magic. Berry seeks to work against this understanding of technology and its inherently abstract concept of energy. When he writes that energy is "an issue of religion, [...] is what binds us back to the source of life" (81), he reminds us that energy is not just what we get when we plug a cord into an electrical socket or put gas in a car, but that it also comes from the food that we put in our bodies, that it is intimately connected to agriculture, and that, if energy is a religious issue, and if in one sense religion means "to bind back or bind fast," then energy is obligation. This idea of energy as obligation is what underpins Berry's central argument in this chapter: the "energy crisis" is a crisis of morality.

This connection between energy and moral responsibility leads Berry to conceive of technology in a very particular way. Though he doesn't engage in an etymological investigation of the term "technology," his purpose is a similar elucidation of root or fundamental associations:

We have two means of bringing energy to use: by living things (plants, animals, our own bodies) and by tools (machines, energy-harnesses). For the use of these we have skills or techniques.

All three together comprise our technology. Technology joins us to energy, to life. It is not, as many technologists would have us believe, a simple connection. Our technology is the practical aspect of our culture. By it we enact our religion, or our lack of it. (82)

Berry's concern for modern technology is that it connects us to energy, to life, by means of an extensive elaboration on primarily only one aspect of technology: tools. Our tools have become ever more elaborate, and to some degree the techniques associated with those tools have achieved a similar sophistication. But this complexity, Berry argues, has largely been achieved at the expense of the living things through which we use energy. He writes,

At some point in history the balance between life and machinery was overthrown. I think this began to happen when people began to desire long-term stores or supplies of energy--that is, when they began to think of energy as volume as well as force--and when machines ceased to enhance or elaborate skill and began to replace it. (82)

As this balance has been upset, it has altered a similarly important balance between two types of energy: "that which is made available by living things and that which is made available by machines" (83). For Berry, the emphasis our culture places on sophisticated mechanical tools, and the energy used by and made available by such tools, has fundamentally altered our understanding of energy itself. As he points out in the beginning of the chapter, energy is a kind of paradox--we cannot use it except by destroying it: "The lives that feed us have to be killed before they enter our mouths; we can only use fossil fuels by burning them up. We speak of electrical energy as "current": it exists only while it runs away; we use it only by delaying its

escape. To receive energy is at once to live and to die" (81). As our tools have become more elaborate, however, this understanding of energy as current, as dynamic cycle, has given way to an idea of a static, long-term store of energy, an energy "battery" (a word that has spectacularly slipped from its etymological foundation). Such batteries allow us to operate under the illusion that we have escaped the energy cycle--the cycle of work--but batteries are only extreme delays in current, a putting off of energy's paradox of use and destruction.

From Berry's point of view, the irony of this conception of energy is that it has allowed humans to become entrapped by the development of numerous labor-saving devices, devices that are supposed to free us from all sorts of drudgery:

This mechanically derived energy is supposed to have set people free from work and other difficulties once considered native to the human condition. Whether or not it has done so in any meaningful sense is questionable--in my opinion, it is highly questionable. But there is no doubt that this sort of energy has freed machinery from the natural restraints that apply to the use of organic energy. [...] And yet, in the long term, this liberation of the machine is illusory. Mechanical technology is based on quantities of materials and fuels that are finite. (83)

So, neither human nor machine is liberated in any real sense. As we have already examined--in this chapter and the previous one--a person may be liberated from one type of work or another, but she is ultimately just trading one kind of dependency for another more-precarious kind. In a similar manner, the energy battery may appear to have liberated mechanical technology from natural, replenishable energy sources--such as wind energy, water energy, or human and animal energy--but it is a false liberation. Berry notes, however, that a recognition of the finite nature of

the resources upon which mechanical energy rests has not slowed the elaboration of our technology. Rather, it has precipitated a push for the development or discovery of renewable energy stores, relying on ever more sophisticated technology in the process. For Berry, all such discussions of renewable energy sources are problematic because they fail to address the privileged conception of energy storage as stockpile (as opposed to energy as current) and its inherent emphasis on bigness. Again, Berry argues, this is an issue of moral responsibility:

If the prophets of science foresee "limitless abundance" and "infinite resources," one must assume that they are speaking figuratively, meaning simply that they cannot comprehend how much there may be. In that sense, they are right: there are sources of energy that, given the necessary machinery, are inexhaustible *as far as we can see*. The great difficulty, which these cheerful prophets do not acknowledge at all, is that we are trustworthy only as far as we can see. The length of our vision is our moral boundary. [...] By our abuse of our finite resources, our lives and all life are already in danger.

What might we bring into danger by the abuse of "infinite" sources? (83-4)

Implicit in this passage is Berry's concern for the balance of living energy and mechanical energy. It is clear that mechanical elaboration has come at the cost of living things, that past a certain point the development of more sophisticated tools and techniques encourages a less sophisticated relationship with the living world. In regards to "infinite" energy sources, Berry plainly worries that their use or abuse will lead to a reciprocal, "infinite" reduction in the complexity of our relationship with the earth--that human life will be "reduced" right out of existence.

Berry's critique of our energy imbalance also implies a similar cultural imbalance. He draws

on the writing of Ivan Illich at the end of this chapter, and I think he has Illich's ideas in mind here as well. In his monograph, *Energy and Equity*, published shortly before Berry's *Unsettling*, Illich argues that, past a particular limit, mechanical energy works against social equity:

[O]nly a ceiling on energy use can lead to social relations that are characterized by high levels of equity. [...] The widespread belief that clean and abundant energy is the panacea for social ills is due to a political fallacy, according to which equity and energy consumption can be indefinitely correlated, at least under some ideal political conditions. Labouring under this illusion, we tend to discount any social limit on the growth of energy consumption. But if ecologists are right to assert that non-metabolic power pollutes, it is in fact just as inevitable that, beyond a certain threshold, mechanical power corrupts. (5-6)

High levels of energy consumption undermine equity, Berry would similarly argue, because massive consumption implies massive energy stockpiles. Significant stores of energy, or any other precious resource, naturally beg the question, Who will control this resource? In this case, consolidated energy *is* consolidated power--distribution of energy according to the will of one person, or at the least the will of some sort of oligarchical entity. Such a division of power quickly becomes a case of the "have's" and the "have-nots," threatening cultural cohesion, and it is because of this disparity, among other reasons, that Berry argues that we need to shift our emphasis from mechanical energy to living energy:

This mechanically rendered infinitude of energy is an ambition surrounded by terrific problems. Such energy cannot be used constructively without at the same time being used destructively. And which way the balance will finally fall is a question that baffles

the best minds. [...] The energy that is made available to us by living things, on the other hand, is made available not as an inconceivable quantity, but as a conceivable pattern. And for the mastery of this pattern--that is, the ability to see its absolute importance and to preserve it in use--one does not need a Ph.D. or a laboratory or a computer. (84-5)

As this passage shows, living energy works against inequality in a couple of ways. First, since energy is conceived of as a pattern instead of a quantity, ownership is devalued--such a pattern can be easily perceived and understood, but it is difficult to possess, and nearly impossible to hoard. Second, this living pattern of energy does not require a host of experts in order to understand and respond to it. Berry elaborates on this second point, writing, "It is conceivable not so much to the analytic intelligence, to which it may always remain in part mysterious, as to the imagination, by which we perceive, value, and imitate order beyond our understanding" (85).

Berry's emphasis on energy as an understandable pattern inevitably leads him to the subject of agriculture. This connection is expected and welcome--if we conceive of energy as current, as a pattern or a cycle, its most evident expression is found in the earth's natural cycles. He writes,

In an energy economy appropriate to the use of biological energy, all bodies, plant and animal and human, are joined in a kind of energy community. [...] They are indissolubly linked in complex patterns of energy exchange. They die into each other's life, live into each other's death. They do not consume in the sense of using up. They do not produce waste. What they take in they change, but they change it always into a form necessary for its use by a living body of another kind. (85-6)

This cyclical characterization of energy is also, for Berry, where its status as a religious issue becomes especially clear: "How long this cycling of energy will continue we do not know; [...] But by aligning ourselves with it here, in our little time within the unimaginable time of the sun's burning, we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them." Furthermore, Berry argues that an understanding of the importance of these natural cycles is built into our language. Agriculture, he reminds us, "means 'cultivation of the land.' And *cultivation* is at the root sense both of *culture* and of *cult*. The ideas of tillage and worship are thus joined in culture." Most importantly, these all derive from "an Indo-European root meaning both 'to revolve' and 'to dwell.' To live, to survive on the earth, to care for the soil, and to worship, all are bound at the root idea of a cycle" (87). Here, Berry clearly connects to a pre-enlightenment understanding of the world. Earlier in the chapter he makes a similar connection, writing, "[t]he energy that comes from living things is produced by combining the four elements of medieval science: earth, air, fire (sunlight), and water. This is current energy" (83). These references are intended to trouble the privileged scientific mindset we take for granted, not dismiss it outright. Berry does not wish to eliminate the measuring, analytical mind, he only wishes to balance it with an equally strong intuitive, analogous relationship with the earth.

Berry's reconnection with a pre-enlightenment worldview is also a way to critique our culture's controlling metaphor: the machine. In the medieval world, the earth's natural cycles controlled humans' understanding of their existence. As Postman relates, before the enlightenment we find "what may be called cyclical theories--a golden age declining to a silver age, a silver age to an iron age, which is eventually succeeded by a new golden age. The idea of decadence is as strong

and ever-present as the idea of progress" (*Building* 26). However, as the dominant understanding of energy shifted from biological, cyclical energy to energy as battery, the living part of technology began to be overpowered by the mechanical. [...] Let loose from any moral standard or limit, the machine was also let loose in another way: it replaced the Wheel of Life as the governing cultural metaphor. [...] the Wheel of Life became an industrial metaphor; rather than turning in place, revolving in order to dwell, it began to roll on the "highway of progress" toward an ever-receding horizon. (*Unsettling* 89)

This shift in metaphor is at the root of Berry's moral responsibility crisis; the concept of progress obscures cycles and devalues those who lead lives connected to those cycles, "revolving in order to dwell." Once this specific, naturally patterned connection to a place deteriorates, a significant motivator for responsible behavior disappears from the culture.

With the machine as our culture's controlling metaphor, our relationship with the earth has been fundamentally altered. Mechanical conceptions of energy have almost wholly usurped living, biological understandings of energy. Nature itself is perceived as a mechanical system, and thus everything within nature is understood and related to in a mechanical fashion. As Berry writes,

If animals are regarded as machines, they are confined in pens remote from the source of their food, where their excrement becomes, instead of fertilizer, first a "waste" and then a pollutant. [...] If plants are regarded as machines, we wind up with huge monocultures, productive of elaborate ecological mischiefs, which are in turn productive of agricultural

mischief [...] If the soil is regarded as a machine, then its life, its involvement in living systems and cycles, must perforce be ignored. It must be treated as a dead, inert chemical mass. [...] If people are regarded as machines, they must be regarded as replaceable by other machines. They are regarded, in other words, as dispensable. (90)

These changed conceptions of animals, plants, the soil, and people are, of course, a result of the machine's emphasis on quantification and efficiency. To my mind, this emphasis on quantification can be seen as our culture's most basic and troubling abstracting force, reducing our existence to pure representation. Berry parses out the troubling aspects of quantification by considering the way it has reshaped our understanding of "skill." He writes,

Skill is the connection between life and tools, or life and machines. Once, skill was defined ultimately in qualitative terms: How *well* did a person work; how good, durable, and pleasing were his products? But as machines have grown larger and more complex, and as our awe of them and our desire for labor-saving have grown, we have tended more and more to define skill quantitatively: How speedily and cheaply can a person work? We have increasingly wanted a *measurable* skill. And the more quantifiable skills became, the easier they were to replace with machines. (91)

In short, the logic of machines results in the elimination of skill; in the name of efficiency every possible productive practice is systematized, broken down into basic tasks that can be performed by the most unskilled workers. Such productive systems represent a troubling cultural degradation, because, as Berry reminds us,

we cannot live in machines. We can only live in the world, in life. To live, our contact with the sources of life must remain direct: we must eat, drink, breathe, move, mate, etc. When we let machines and machine skills obscure the values that represent these fundamental dependences, then we inevitably damage the world; we diminish life. We begin to "prosper" at the cost of a fundamental degradation. (92)

To put the machine at the center of our culture, then, is to deny our own importance, to replace human needs with mechanical needs. With this arrangement in mind, it seems inevitable that our understanding of energy would become warped, driven by considerations of volume and mechanical consumption, and that, eventually, even our relationship with food would become similarly focused on volume and re-figured as a mechanical act of refueling. Science fiction stories regularly pit humans against machines, imagining a day when robots will become self-aware and begin enslaving humans. It seems, however, that we have already enslaved ourselves—we long ago became androids, machines in our own minds.

The most important casualty in the machine's steady destruction of human skill has been the skill of responsibility. It may seem odd to speak of responsibility as a skill, but it surely is one. As with any such skill, responsibility must be practiced regularly for it to be performed with any consistency. In order for such practice to take place, occasions must arise in which responsible behavior is called for, those occasions must be perceivable to humans, and they must include explicit, foreseeable consequences for failing to act in a responsible manner. As our technology has evolved, Berry argues, it has required us to develop greater skill not only in the use of that technology but also in the skill of responsibility, attending to the consequences of our technology's use. He uses the digging stick as an example, which

brought in a profound technological revolution: it made agriculture possible. Its use required skill. But its *effects* also required skill, and this kind of skill was higher and more complex than the first, for it involved restraint and responsibility. [...] the skill used in disturbing the earth called directly for other skills that would preserve the earth and restore its fertility. (92)

Berry clearly channels Thoreau here. In *Walden*, when Thoreau writes, "I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men," or when he argues, "Certainly no nation that lived simply in all respects, that is, no nation of philosophers, would commit so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals" (367), he is not thinking of the skill required to use them, albeit considerable, he is thinking of the skill required to care for the effects of their use, the need to care for the animals themselves, for the earth that they have disturbed, and for the crops whose growth they make possible. For all his reputation as a reclusive nature writer, Thoreau here reveals himself as principally concerned with people, not worrying so much over the animals' effect on the land but over the great burden of responsibility their use places on humans, complicating their lives, and depriving them of the free time needed for intellectual cultivation. He goes on to anticipate both Berry and Illich in his consideration of the scale of animal use. Animal labor is, after all, a form of energy use, and Thoreau points out that even this use of biological energy, if sufficiently consolidated, can promote social inequity:

*I should never have broken a horse or bull and taken him to board for any work he might do for me, for fear I should become a horse-man or a herds-man merely; and if society seems to be the gainer by so doing, are we certain that what is one man's gain is not another's loss, and that the stable-boy has equal cause with his master to be satisfied? [...]*

When men begin to do, not merely unnecessary or artistic, but luxurious and idle work, with their assistance, it is inevitable that a few do all the exchange work with the oxen, or, in other words, become the slaves of the strongest. (367)

Thoreau, then makes much the same point as Berry and Illich make in regard to energy use, even if his scale is much smaller. If humans benefit from animal labor, it is not at all clear to Thoreau that those benefits are equally distributed, that the use of animals does not tend, in the long run, to enrich the few at the expense of the many.

While Berry certainly breaks with Thoreau in terms of scale, I suspect this separation has more to do with their technological distance from each other than anything else. Thoreau, after all, had no mechanized agriculture to respond to. Furthermore, Berry's arguments for a shift in scale from colossal, mechanized farming corporations to small, independent, biologically powered farms is more or less equitable to Thoreau's arguments in favor of eschewing his neighbors' traditional farming practices and instead obtaining food through limited gardening, scavenging, fishing, etc. In both cases, their primary concern is to find an acceptable scope for human action, to identify the scale at which humans can sustain a full, responsible life, while retaining as much freedom and independence as possible. In Berry's case, though he advocates the virtues of animal labor over machine power, he readily admits the burdens of skill their use places upon humans. When people began farming with animals,

[the] skills of use had to become much greater, for the human mind had to relate to the animal mind in a new way: not by the magic and cunning of the hunt, but in the practical intricacies of collaboration. And the skills of responsibility had to increase proportionately. More ground could now be disturbed, and so the technology of

preservation had to become much larger. Also, the investment of life in work greatly increased; people had to take responsibility not only for their own appetites and excrements but for those of their animals as well. (92)

Berry embraces and recommends these responsibilities in part because he writes for a different culture than the one Thoreau addresses in *Walden*. While there are clear threads of tradition and thought that run from Thoreau's time to our own, the prevalent alienation we daily experience in present-day America--neighbors who do not know each other, communities bound together by no explicit ties of dependency--was utterly foreign to him (though the forces precipitating that alienation had begun to do their work). Though the individualism and independence he supports in his writing can certainly be seen as an expression of the transcendentalist values he inherited from Emerson and others, Thoreau's independent streak is, to my mind, equally a reaction to the tight-knit nature of the culture in which he lived. Small town life is often romanticized in our own time, but we should remember that such communities encourage their own anxieties, worries often born not from alienation but from a lack (or at least a perceived lack) of self-determination. Berry writes for a culture that takes autonomy for granted, a society that has pursued individual freedom to an absurd and often contradictory point. He looks to the use of animals in agriculture precisely because their use demands collaboration, and hence restraint, a demand not made by machine power:

[I]t requires more skill to use a team of horses or mules or oxen than to use a tractor. It is more difficult to learn to manage an animal than a machine; it takes longer. Two minds and two wills are involved. A relationship between a person and a work animal is analogous to a relationship between two people. Success depends upon the animal's

willingness and upon its health; certain moral imperatives and restraints are therefore pragmatically essential. No such relationship is either necessary or possible with a machine. Within the range of the possible, a machine is directly responsive to human will; it neither starts nor stops because it wants to. A machine has no life, and for this reason it cannot of itself impose any restraint or any moral limit on behavior. (92-3)

In short there is an inherent tyranny in machines; once set in motion, a machine spins out the logic of its mechanism, no matter the consequences, unless it meets with some exterior restraining force. Berry sees this tyranny transferred to human users of machines, and as our ties of responsibility to other humans and animals decrease, there is a related increase in the ease with which a machine's tyranny can become our own. It is this relationship that underlies his opposition to multinational (or any large-scale) corporations--they combine near-complete abstraction with vast supplies of mechanical power. With such an arrangement, the question is not *whether* a corporation's actions will be tyrannical, the question is can a corporation *refrain* from tyranny? Berry's answer is clearly "no," or at least "not often enough for it to matter." By embracing machine power, then, and the spiraling technological development it makes possible, we embrace reckless tyranny: "From the beginning of the history of machine-developed energy, we have been able to harness more power than we could use responsibly. [...] And so the issue is not of supply but of use" (94). This problem with tyranny, more than anything, is what makes the energy crisis a moral crisis, and it is why, for Berry, we can only master it by embracing "one of the fundamental paradoxes of our condition: we can make ourselves whole only by accepting our partiality, by living within our limits, by being human--not by trying to be gods. By restraint [we] make [ourselves] whole" (95).

#### 4. *The Body and the Earth*

The apex of Berry's *Unsettling*--both literally and figuratively--is the chapter, "The Body and the Earth." In the previous chapter, "The Use of Energy," he argues that we can only conquer the "energy crisis" and find wholeness by "accepting our partiality, by living within our limits" (95), using the example of animal labor in farming as a naturally limited use of energy. In order to appropriate animal energy for human concerns, humans have to enter into a relationship with the animals involved--at least two wills are involved (93), and the animals' desire imposes a certain pragmatic restraint on the farmer. Great skill is required in their use, in their care, and in attending to the results achieved with their labor. Unlike machine power, the use of animal energy encourages patterns of responsible behavior--responsible restraint becomes a pragmatic requirement of the human-animal relationship. This idea of relationships that encourage or require responsible, restrained behavior is at the root of "The Body and the Earth." Berry approaches these connections ecologically, exploring the intertwining pattern of relationships and dependencies inherent in our existence, and highlighting those relationships which, carefully tended, require us to practice the skill of responsibility.

"The Body and the Earth" refers to the two fundamental connections of our existence--a person's relationship with the earth, including plants, animals, etc, and a person's relationships with herself and with other humans. For Berry, there are deep parallels between our human relationships and our relationship with ourselves. As he writes, "While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures. It is hardly surprising, then, that there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth" (97). Our individual

connection with the earth has, at various points, already been considered by Berry, but here he examines it more directly. He argues that the arrival of the "modern" way of living, especially the widespread use of railroad, automobile, and air travel, have caused us to largely overlook our connection to the earth's natural processes:

[B]ecause we no longer traveled in the wilderness as a matter of course, we forgot that wilderness still circumscribed civilization and persisted in domesticity. We forgot, indeed, that the civilized and domestic continued to *depend* upon wilderness--that is, upon natural forces within the climate and with the soil that have never in any meaningful sense been controlled or conquered. Modern civilization has been built largely in this forgetfulness. (100)

I think it is important here to recognize Berry's emphasis on the dependency upon wilderness of even our domestic urban and suburban spaces, his reminder that nature persists even in the most engineered existences. This is an important reminder both for those who feel completely separated from wilderness and for those who strive to experience it, protect it, and renew its presence in our lives. Earlier in the text, Berry frames our relationship with nature as partly a product of our specialist system--the fragmentation of our lives into specialties has also specialized the world around us. He reiterates that idea here, arguing that

the most dangerous tendency in modern society, now rapidly emerging as a scientific-industrial ambition, is the tendency toward encapsulation of human order--the severance, once and for all, of the umbilical cord fastening us to the wilderness or the Creation. The threat is not only in the totalitarian desire for absolute control. It lies in the willingness to

ignore an essential paradox: the natural forces that so threaten us are the same forces that preserve and renew us. (130)

In our specialized culture, wilderness is nature to look at, perhaps vacation in if one is particularly adventurous, but it is "there" and we are "here"; conceptually, wilderness has become wholly separated from the places in which we live. Berry's point here, however, is that we cannot truly escape interaction with wilderness, we can only overlook it through a kind of forgetfulness.

Our culture's specialist system and scientific mindset has also, to Berry's view, contributed to our abstract understanding of the earth. Even when we experience it--as scenery or as vacation space--we cannot "become appreciators of the Creation until we [have] taken its measure" (100), until we have understood a mountain's height or a lake's depth in terms of feet, a river's rushing vitality in terms of miles per hour, or a forest's vastness in terms of square miles. For Berry, the way we experience the world is problematic if we feel "compelled to validate or prove" our experiences' legitimacy through quantification and comparison. Such a way of understanding nature, however, has become so common that it doesn't occur to most of us that the world can be "known" in a different way. In the same way that machines have completely changed how we understand limits, our culture's widespread impetus to quantify our existence has changed the way we understand reality. As Postman writes, "because our minds have been conditioned by the technology of numbers [...] we see the world differently than [our ancestors] did. Our understanding of what is real is different" (*Technopoly* 13). Berry argues that this modern, measured way of knowing the earth is a fundamental shift in the way humans conceptualize existence. We have separated ourselves from the planet we live upon; we have abstracted ourselves from our picture of nature, forgotten that we have a place within it. He writes,

[u]ntil modern times, we focused a great deal of the best of our thought upon [...] rituals of return to the human condition. Seeking enlightenment or the Promised Land or the way home, a man would go or be forced to go into the wilderness, measure himself against the Creation, recognize finally his true place within it, and thus be saved both from pride and despair. Seeing himself as a tiny member of a world he cannot comprehend or master or in any final sense possess, he cannot possibly think of himself as a god. And by the same token, since he shares in, depends upon, and is graced by all of which he is a part, neither can he become a fiend; he cannot descend into the final despair of destructiveness. (99)

It is for this purpose--so that humans may have some form of intimate interaction with nature, experiences which help us remember the true order of our existence--that Berry argues for the preservation of "sacred groves," places "where the Creation is let alone, to serve as instruction, example, refuge" (131), places that show us what it is to live at a human scale and remind us that "[p]ast the scale of the human, our works do not liberate us--they confine us" (104).

In the same way that our relationship with the earth has become abstracted--and, consequently, our understanding of humanity's place within nature has lost all proportion--Berry argues that our relationships with ourselves and with one another have become equally abstracted. In fact, he sees these abstractions as intimately connected, linked through the earth's ecology of existence, which binds together in a web of influence all organic bodies and natural forces:

Body, soul (or mind or spirit), community, and world are all susceptible to each other's influence, and they are all conductors of each other's influence. The body is damaged by

the bewilderment of the spirit, and it conducts the influence of that bewilderment into the earth, the earth conducts it into the community, and so on. (110)

Beginning with the division of body and soul--that is, the division of one's "identity"--Berry traces a pattern of abstraction running through our lives, following our culture's seemingly systematic attempt to cordon off different aspects of our existence and refuse recognition of our place within the earth's ecology. This division of identity has precipitated a crisis of both mind and body. For Berry, the mental crisis finds its expression in the peculiarly modern desire to "find oneself." He argues,

it seems likely that the identity crisis has become a sort of social myth, a genre of self-indulgence. It can be an excuse for irresponsibility or a fashionable mode of self-dramatization. It is the easiest form of self-flattery--a way to construe procrastination as a virtue--based on the romantic assumption that "who I really am" is better in some fundamental way than the available evidence proves. (111)

The related crisis of the body is one "of the commonplaces of modern experience." As Berry writes, this "hardship is perhaps greater [...] because the body, unlike the self, is substantial and cannot be supposed to be inherently better than it was born to be. It can only be thought inherently worse than it *ought* to be" (112). His solution to the identity crisis would be for the identity to "find itself in finding its work" (111), which perhaps seems peculiar to many of us. There is, of course, in many cultures a long tradition of tying a person's identity to her work, her practice, her vocation, but our own culture seems ambivalent at best about making such a connection. In one way, we can see the separation of identity and work as a result of industrial capitalism, of the push to reduce the skill and intellect required for most work to the point that no

one would want to tie their identity to its mindlessness. Furthermore, the modern employee is so expendable, is so sure to lose her job or switch careers at least once in her life, that to form a strong bond between who she is and what she does is to invite considerable anguish. Berry would point out, of course, that anguish is what one *should* feel at the loss of her vocation, that the problem is not her oversensitive, poorly insulated identity but her status as expendable. In attempting to remedy the anguish felt from these losses, however, we have only attended to the immediate causes, not the structural deficiencies.

The same forces that have contributed to so many identity crises have had a similar impact upon our most cherished human relationships--those of marriage and household. Berry's thoughts about our culture's "marriage crisis" and the deterioration of the household are nuanced ones. Many will no doubt take exception to some aspects of his discussion--not the least of which is his fairly traditional framing of the matter in terms of sexuality, family structure, etc--and so a reading equal in nuance to his argument (made in *Unsettling* as well as other texts) is certainly called for. For the purposes of this study, however, I do not think a full critical treatment of Berry's point of view here will do much good, and, more likely than not, will only distract from my overall argument. Nevertheless, his thoughts on marriage and the household are worth considering briefly. For Berry, the marriage crisis is an issue of sexual division precipitated by industrial capitalism:

The first sexual division comes about when nurture is made the exclusive concern of women. This cannot happen until a society becomes industrial; in hunting and gathering and in agricultural societies, men are of necessity also involved in nurture. In those societies there usually have been differences between the work of men and that of

women. But the necessity here is to distinguish between sexual difference and sexual division. (113)

What Berry implies here (and is elsewhere explicit about) is that, in pre-industrial societies, marriage was a productive relationship. Husband and wife were both involved in the acts of nurturing and providing for the household, though their specific tasks may have taken different forms. With the development of industrial capitalism, the household became divided sexually. Men remained providers, but their status as nurturers "became completely abstract." Women, in most cases, no longer acted as providers but were called upon to do all the nurturing, fulfilling the husband's needs, tending to the children, and caring for the household, a determination "signify[ing] to both sexes that neither nurture nor womanhood was very important." To Berry, then, modern marriage has become a divided practice, and the household is "no longer a circumstance that require[s], dignifie[s], and reward[s] the enactment of mutual dependence, but the site of mutual estrangement. Home [has become] a place for the husband to go when he [is] not working or amusing himself. It [is] the place where the wife [is] held in servitude" (113-5). It is unsurprising that such an arrangement tends to make its participants frustrated, anxious, and often unwilling or unable to sustain the relationship.

In recognizing modern problems with marriage, however, Berry argues we have again attended only to immediate causes instead of underlying structural issues. One response has been to push for greater autonomy on the part of women, re-imagining the household as a contract between two capable providers who share the responsibilities of nurture (in fact, women recently surpassed men in employment outside the home). In reality, it has more often been the case that, thought both husband and wife are providers, no one attends to nurturing at all. This leads Berry to conclude that "[t]here is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there

is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence" (111). The modern move in marriage--or any similar relationship--has been to deny the need for dependence whatsoever, which is very close to having no marriage at all. A second response to the marriage crisis has been to strengthen the bonds of marriage through sexual energy alone. As Berry writes,

Without the household--not just as a unifying ideal, but as a practical circumstance of mutual dependence and obligation, requiring skill, moral discipline, and work--husband and wife find it less and less possible to imagine and enact their marriage. Without much in particular that they can *do* for each other, they have a scarcity of practical reasons to be together. [...] Aside from affection for any children they may have and their abstract legal and economic obligations to each other, their union has to be empowered by sexual energy alone. (116-7)

In one sense, this is a logical response, for human sexuality is an inherently productive energy. Berry argues, however, that the "isolation of sexuality makes it subject to two influences that dangerously oversimplify it: the lore of sexual romance and capitalist economics" (117). By "the lore of sexual romance," he of course means the pervasive sentimentality found in music, books, movies, etc, a series of misrepresentations about love and marriage that glorify them but simultaneously set up completely unrealistic expectations about their character. This sentimentality is certainly potent enough to get most couples to the altar, but Berry sees it quickly give "way to the possessiveness of sexual capitalism. Failing, as they cannot help but fail, to be each other's all, the husband and wife become each other's only" (118). Such possessiveness is inherently destructive of relationships, forcing the two parties to enter into

sexual competition with one another, fostering jealousy of anyone who might upset one's ownership of the other, and often functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy--each partner at the same time jealously guards and deeply loathes the other. As Berry writes, "[w]ithin the capsule of marriage, as in that of economics, one intends to exploit one's property and to protect it. [...] The tragedy, more often felt than acknowledged, is that what is exploited becomes undesirable" (119).

What relates these crises--the identity crisis and the problem of marriage and the household--and links them to the larger environmental and agricultural crises is their collective connection to the issue of production. The deterioration of our culture's agricultural, marriage, and domestic practices are all expressions of our degraded--and degrading--conception of work; we cannot have cultural health without a healthy conception of work. Berry argues that

[g]ood work is not just the maintenance of connections--as one is now said to work "for a living" or "to support a family"--but the enactment of connections. It *is* living, and a way of living; it is not support for a family in the sense of an exterior brace or prop, but is one of the forms and acts of love. To boast that now "95 percent of the people can be freed from the drudgery of preparing their own food" is possible only to one who cannot distinguish between these kinds of work. (138-9)

Good work, then, is the connecting fiber of our relationship with the earth and with one another. We cannot enact our connection with the earth except through responsible agricultural work; we cannot enact marriage or any other such relationship except through collaborative work that recognizes, accepts, and celebrates our interdependency, our shared responsibility. Berry's larger point here, of course, is that such good work cannot be enacted unless we retain some measure of

control over our work, that we cannot help but fail to be responsible for our connections to one another and to the earth as long as those connections retain their present abstraction.

## INSIDE/OUT

Unlike Thoreau's *Walden*, which in many ways is all about individual action, Berry's *Unsettling*, appears, at first glance, to say very little about addressing at a personal level the sorts of concerns he raises. *Unsettling* is easily read as a historical overview of American agriculture, explicitly examining and critically commenting upon our nation's government- and corporate-sponsored transition from traditional, small farming practices to gigantic agribusiness operations. Berry deals with major social and cultural movements, with government policies and corporate business practices, and these seem well out of the concerned individual's realm of influence--in short, a cursory reading of Berry's text can easily leave a person just as frustrated, if not more so, with American culture, agriculture, business, and government as she was before considering his arguments. A more careful reading, however, reveals that he sprinkles throughout his text suggestions--sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit--for individual actions that can be made in response to our nation's environmental and cultural crises.

Near the end of "The Body and the Earth," Berry admits the inherent difficulty of addressing the sorts of environmental and cultural issues he raises: "Cultural solutions are organisms, not machines, and they cannot be invented deliberately or imposed by prescription. [...] Ways of life change only in living. To live by expert advice is to abandon one's life" (131). His point here is that the ecological nature of our existence makes it supremely difficult to identify primary events, that the parallel deterioration of our environment, our identities, our marriages and households, and our culture's general cohesiveness are all related and to some extent mutually reinforcing, making it nearly impossible to know which crisis precipitated the others. Berry

reminds us, however, that though our impulse may be to want to analyze these cultural relationships, to try to make sense of them and form some sort of prescription for their improvement, change can only be effected by living it, and we can only live our own lives. This suggests that cultural change moves from the inside out, from individuals to families to communities to nations, and there is a whole tradition of thought to support this idea. Berry touches on this tradition when, in the first chapter of *Unsettling*, he writes, "we have lost sight of the profound communion--even the union--of the inner with the outer life. Confucius said: 'If a man have not order within him / He can not spread order about him'" (11). In the following chapter, he is even more explicit: "one must begin in one's own life the private solutions that can only *in turn* become public solutions" (23). In *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher argues along similar lines, writing,

[t]here is no such thing as the viability of states or of nations, there is only a problem of viability of people: people, actual persons like you and me, are viable when they can stand on their own feet and earn their keep. You do not make non-viable people viable by putting large numbers of them into one huge community, and you do not make viable people non-viable by splitting a large community into a number of smaller, more intimate, more coherent and more manageable groups. (67)

What Schumacher means is that people are not viable or non-viable in relation to the way they are managed, but that they can only be viable when afforded the opportunity to make themselves viable. This in no way suggests a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" self-sufficiency, but it does recognize that a person can't be *made* viable through some sort of cultural or social engineering. Moreover, his assertion that states or nations cannot be viable is an understanding

of states and nations as inseparable from their citizens. The idea of a state or a nation, or for that matter a culture, is a level of abstraction above the idea of a person, and hence a state, nation, or culture can only be understood through the people who comprise it; there cannot be a viable state comprised of non-viable people, and there cannot be a non-viable state comprised of viable people. What Berry and Schumacher argue, then, is that there is no action *besides* individual action--all change must work its way from the inside out.

At its most basic level, Berry's suggestion for personal action is that each of us should, as far as possible, work to become a producer instead of a consumer. He argues that if

one is aware of the abuses and extortions to which one is subjected as a modern consumer, then one may join an organization of consumers to lobby for consumer-protection legislation. But in joining a consumer organization, one defines oneself as a consumer *merely*, and a mere consumer is by definition a dependent, at the mercy of the manufacturer and the salesman. [...] What has not been often said, because it did not need to be said until fairly recent times, is that the responsible consumer must also be in some way a producer. Out of his own resources and skills, he must be equal to some of his own needs.

For Berry, this shift from consumer to producer is achievable in small ways: using one's own kitchen to prepare a thoughtful, nutritious meal; producing one's own food, as far as possible; and even ignoring the television, producing one's own entertainment through story-telling, game-playing, music-making, etc (23-5). Implicit in this statement is the idea that cooking and gardening can be themselves rewarding and *entertaining* productive activities, that they offer both creative fulfillment and personal enjoyment. I would add to Berry's list the cultivation of a

habit of productive maintenance. For the foreseeable future, it will not be possible for most of us to refrain from buying such things as houses, cars, and certain household appliances.

Developing a habit of productive maintenance in regard to these possessions not only increases our knowledge, ability, and freedom, it also encourages restraint when making consumer choices--a house should not be so big or complex that its owner cannot manage to maintain it himself or herself.

Finally, the most important aspect of acting as a producer instead of a consumer is that productive work tends to foster a certain ecological mindfulness. Gardening especially encourages one to consider the ecological character of existence. A gardener must be mindful of a great number of things--soil health, sunlight, rainfall, what plants grow best when grouped together, what plants need to be separated, when to plant what and how to tell when each plant's fruit is ready for harvest--and these concerns overlap and intersect not only themselves but others as well, creating a dynamic web of issues to which one must respond carefully and skillfully. Most productive endeavors, however, encourage the development of some level of mindfulness, and this is Berry's point: at the personal level, we can easily consume mindlessly; but it is nearly impossible to mindlessly engage in a productive practice.

## CONCLUSION

In this study's introduction, I argued that the ideas and arguments found in Thoreau's and Berry's texts give us reason to be both distressed and hopeful. I still think this is true, but I must admit that I feel more distress than hope. I am certainly not alone, however, in thinking about the issues of sustainability--in fact, it is something of a hot topic among intellectuals these days, brought to the forefront by a recent surge of journalists and critics who have taken on the subject of food and American agriculture. In many ways, this surge flows from the same stream of critical thought I have traced through Thoreau's and Berry's writing. Michael Pollan, whose best-selling, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, makes him perhaps the most well-known author to have addressed the subject of American food and agriculture, explicitly cites Berry's influence on his own thinking--for him, Berry's writings serve as a critical link between Thoreau's ideas and the modern world. In a recent article for *The Nation*, Pollan writes,

the national conversation unfolding around the subject of food and farming really began in the 1970's, with the work of writers like Wendell Berry, [...] supreme dot-connectors, [...] far ahead not only in their grasp of the science of ecology but in their ability to think ecologically: to draw lines of connection between a hamburger and the price of oil, or between the vibrancy of life in the soil and the health of the plants, animals and people eating from that soil. (para 3)

He goes on to explain that it was Berry who "helped me solve my Thoreau problem, providing a sturdy bridge over the deep American divide between nature and culture" (para 11). I find it encouraging that Thoreau's and Berry's influence is explicitly felt in our nation's current agricultural and environmental conversations, but I worry that too many of these conversations

are being carried on by individuals (including myself) who have no actual farming experience, that these discussions have, to some extent, been hijacked by intellectuals who spend considerable time *thinking* about agricultural and environmental issues, but who spend considerably less time *experiencing* these issues first hand (Berry, of course, is a farmer himself, but I have in mind here authors who have picked up this subject more recently). With that in mind, I think it will be useful to conclude this long meditation on issues of sustainability by briefly considering a recent, fairly well-publicized article by an American farmer: Blake Hurst's, "The Omnivores Delusion: Against the Agri-intellectuals."

Hurst's article is a good one--his arguments are serious and need to be addressed, but they are too often left out of conversations about sustainable agriculture. Though he was spurred to write after a chance encounter on an airplane with a loud, passionate, and apparently ignorant proponent of organic farming, Hurst's response to the the so-called agri-intellectuals has clearly been developing for quite some time. Sounding rather exasperated, he writes, "I'm so tired of people who wouldn't visit a doctor who used a stethoscope instead of an MRI demanding that farmers like me use 1930s technology to raise food [ ... who expect] me to farm like my grandfather, and not incidentally, I suppose, to live like him as well" (para 2-4). Hurst's frustration runs deeper than a mere irritation at ignorance; he expresses concern over, and clearly takes offense at, the transformation of the American farmer into an "other," a figure simultaneously vilified, pitied, and sanctified. Villainous farmers "are too stupid to farm sustainably, too cruel to treat their animals well, and too careless to worry about their communities, their health, and their families" (para 4). The pitied farmer is "a mere pawn of Cargill, backed into his ignorant way of life by forces too large, too far from the farm, and too powerful to resist" (para 30). The sanctified farmer appears in caricature, "saving the whole

organic movement by his saintly presence, chewing on his straw, plodding along, at one with his environment, his community, his neighborhood" (para 5). Berry addresses just this sort of otherizing in his essay, "The Prejudice Against Country People":

The image of the farmer as the salt of the earth, independent son of the soil, and child of nature is a sort of lantern slide projected over the image of the farmer as simpleton, hick, or redneck. Both images serve to obliterate any concept of farming as an ancient, useful, honorable vocation, requiring admirable intelligence and skill, a complex local culture, great patience and endurance, and moral responsibilities of the gravest kind. (109-10)

These characterizations of farmers are, of course, recognizable as the sorts of descriptions made about minorities, attempts at understanding people with whom one has little to no contact and from whom one's life experiences are far removed. As Berry goes on to clarify, "I am not trying to attribute any virtues or characteristics to farmers or rural people as a category. I am only saying what black people, Jews, and others have said many times before: These stereotypes don't fit. They don't work" (110). The point is that farmers *are* a minority, and a systematically cultivated minority at that. Hurst and Berry differ in terms of whether or not the move toward an agriculture that depends on such a tiny fragment of our nation's population is a good thing agriculturally. Culturally, however, it is plainly problematic, making it difficult for most of us to know in any real way our fellow Americans who raise the animals and grow the vegetables, fruit, and grains we daily eat.

I want to examine two other main points from Hurst's article, the first of which is his defense of so-called "factory farming" practices. He relates the story of a neighbor of his who, 50 or so years ago, began raising turkeys that were "what we would now call 'free range'." This neighbor

allowed them to roam around in the open air primarily for financial reasons: "Sheds are expensive, and it was easier to raise turkeys in open, inexpensive pastures." This decision, however, served to be his neighbor's ruin: "It seems that turkeys, at least young ones, are not smart enough to come in out of the rain, and will stand outside in a downpour, with beaks open and eyes skyward, until they drown. One night [he] lost 4,000 turkeys to drowning, along with his dream, and his farm." The obvious solution to this problem, Hurst argues, is the large open sheds in which turkeys are now commonly raised. He writes, however, that

critics of 'industrial farming' like to point out [that] the sheds get quite crowded by the time Thanksgiving rolls around and the turkeys are fully grown. And yes, the birds are bedded in sawdust, so the turkeys do walk around in their own waste. Although the turkeys don't seem to mind, this quite clearly disgusts the various authors I've read whom have actually visited a turkey farm. (para 12-3)

Hurst cites similar differences of perception in regard to pig gestation crates. Factory farming critics, he argues, think that "only a person so callous as to have a spirit that cannot be revolted, or so hardened to any kind of morality that he could countenance an obvious moral evil, could say a word in defense of caging animals during their production" (para 11). In response, he tells of his childhood 4-H experience raising pigs, for which he used "the kind of wooden pens that our critics would have us use, where the sow could turn around, lie down, and presumably act in a natural way. Which included lying down on my 4-H project, killing several piglets and forcing me to clean up the mess when I did my chores before school." It is for this reason that the gestation crates that are now being outlawed throughout the country were originally adopted:

The crates protect the piglets from their mothers. Farmers do not cage their hogs because of sadism, but because dead pigs are a drag on the profit margin, and because being crushed by your mother really is an awful way to go. As is being eaten by your mother, which I've seen sows do to newborn pigs as well. (para 14)

Hurst's argument, then, is that the passionate critical response to factory farming practices, such as housing turkeys in large sheds or using gestation crates with pigs, is more an indication of how little most critics understand about the history of these practices. Yes, an element of their adoption was indeed the desire for greater profit, but it was equally a response to animal suffering. The implication here, of course, is that these motivations are not mutually exclusive, though to Hurst's mind the critics clearly treat them exclusively.

To my mind, Hurst makes a strong case here for a reconsideration of our culture's near-unanimous condemnation of these animal farming practices. It seems likely that Americans' discomfort with such sheds, crates, etc, is a result of our thorough insulation from the realities of animal farming, whether these practices are used or not. Michael Pollan makes just this sort of argument in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*:

The meat industry understands that the more people know about what happens on the kill floor, the less meat they're likely to eat. That's not because slaughter is necessarily inhumane, but because most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat is or what it takes to bring it to our plates. [...] philosophers like [Peter] Singer and organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals [...] have given us new reasons to doubt meat is good [...] for our souls or our moral self-regard. [...] It may be that our moral enlightenment has advanced to the point where the practice of eating

animals--like our former practices of keeping slaves or treating women as inferior beings--can now be seen for the barbarity it is, a relic of an ignorant past that very soon will fill us with shame. [...] But it could also be that the cultural norms and rituals that used to allow people to eat meat without agonizing about it have broken down for other reasons. Perhaps as the sway of tradition in our eating decisions weakens, habits we once took for granted are thrown up in the air, where they're more easily buffeted by the force of a strong idea or the breeze of fashion. (304-6)

This nuanced consideration seems to indicate that Pollan's thinking is similar to Hurst's, but he goes on to argue that, "at the same time many of us seem eager to extend the circle of our moral consideration to other species, in our factory farms we're inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any time in history" (306). While Pollan recognizes that much of Americans' discomfort with animal farming arises from our distance from it, he still vilifies factory farming, whereas Hurst clearly believes its cruelty is overstated.

There are a couple different aspects to this debate I want to parse out, because I don't think that Pollan and Hurst are, in reality, that far apart in their thinking. First, a cultural shift has clearly taken place in terms of the way we think of animals--we are increasingly likely to engage in anthropomorphism when it comes to our pets, sentimentalizing our relationships with them. This sort of human-animal relationship has been slow to develop beyond the dog and cat world, however. As Pollan, writes, "There's a schizoid quality to our relationship with animals today in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side. Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us ever pause to consider the life of a pig--an animal easily as intelligent as a dog--that becomes the Christmas ham" (306). The real question here, of course, is what are animals for? I think it is likely that our changing attitudes toward animals is

similar to the shift Berry highlights in our understanding of nature. While nature was once understood primarily according to the ways we could make use of it (a sort of kindly use to which Berry argues we need to return), nature has become scenery for most of us--it is just another consumer good. In the same way, our pets may be understood as consumer goods. While cats were once kept mainly as mousers, and dogs were prized primarily for their work as hunters, shepherds, etc, we now treat them as glorified accessories or even children. In a recent discussion with my wife's grandfather, whose family has farmed in the mountains of southwest Virginia for the last two centuries, he expressed his awareness of just this sort of change in our attitude toward animals, considering in particular our changing relationship with horses as they have all but disappeared as working farm animals:

We sold our horses to be slaughtered for sale for either dog food [or] to where ever they ate horses. Never knew anyone who ate horse meat, myself. From my point of view, today, a horse when it outlives its usefulness, should be disposed of as its owner wishes. Since so many slaughter houses that do horse slaughter have been forced to be closed, if you have an old horse about all you can do is to get a vet to kill it and then bury it. [...] Oxen used to be eaten after they could no longer work, what is the difference? (Smith)

There does seem to be a difference to many of us, though. And there is a difference, but it isn't our development of a greater capacity for understanding or compassion for these animals--it's our changed relationship with them, a shift from understanding them as work animals to knowing them in a leisure or recreational capacity. In this newer relationship, we are more likely to attend to their individuality, to begin treating them as autonomous beings who experience the world in much the same way as us. This is why we have such a hard time imagining a turkey being

"okay" with its life in an open shed--we conflate our own feelings with the turkey's and can only imagine it as equally distressed by its seemingly filthy living conditions. Hurst argues that to do so is to seriously distort a turkey's existence, and, based on my own experiences, I would have to agree with him. My wife and I bought a dog a couple years after we were married. I had never owned a dog before, and so I was surprised how quickly I became attached to her, to the lively complexity of her personality and the remarkable affection she exhibits toward my wife and me. After living with my dog for three and a half years, however, I am keenly aware of our differences. Though my wife and I take many steps to allow her to live with us, to exist primarily in a human environment, she is still a dog. She loves to play in the mud, she barks at anything that looks or sounds "weird," and she deliberately rolls in other animals' waste whenever she can. On more than one occasion I have seen her eat horse droppings. In short, though our interaction with some animals allows us to understand them in a more nuanced, personal way, we should be cautious of the tendency to ignore our differences, to conflate our own thoughts and feelings with theirs.

The second aspect of the factory farming debate that deserves some brief consideration concerns use and size. Pollan clearly sees such farming as cruel, while Hurst characterizes it as kindly pragmatism--they are probably both right. Factory farming techniques are, after all, just that--techniques--and like all technology, the use of these techniques is not inherently good or bad. As Hurst illustrates, they were developed as pragmatic responses to more than just the profit problem, but, as Pollan indicates, these techniques can certainly be used cruelly. This good/bad split is nothing new--when dogs, horses, and oxen were used extensively for farm work, there was equal disparity in the way they were used--some owners cultivated kind, responsible relationships with their work animals, while some probably used their animals in a

capacity approaching something very much like slavery. It seems to me that the main issue here is size. Hurst indicates this in his article, finding it

instructive that the first company to move away from farrowing crates is the largest producer of pigs. Changing the way we raise animals will not necessarily change the scale of the companies involved in the industry. If we are about to require more expensive ways of producing food, the largest and most well-capitalized farms will have the least trouble adapting. (para 20)

There are a couple implications here, one being that a move many assume will help small farmers may actually be a burden, the other--and I'm not sure this is purposefully implied by Hurst--being that if the largest pig producer in the country used gestation crates cruelly, they are just as likely to use another technology cruelly, even if it is only cruel neglect and inattention. As Berry would remind us, "there is a limit to the capacity of [human] attention" (*Unsettling* 93), and any increase in the size of a farming operation, or the speed at which it is to operate, similarly increases demands on attention. Past a certain point, a deficit of attention--and hence responsibility--is unavoidable.

The final aspect of Hurst's article that bears consideration is the connection he draws between world population, the problem of hunger, and commercial fertilizer. In his biggest swipe at Pollan, Hurst explains that

Pollan quotes geographer Vaclav Smil to the effect that 40 percent of the people alive today would not be alive without the ability to artificially synthesize nitrogen. But in his directive on food policy, Pollan damns agriculture's dependence on fossil fuels, and urges the president to encourage agriculture to move away from expensive and declining

supplies of natural gas toward the unlimited sunshine that supported life, and agriculture, as recently as the 1940s. (para 22)

This is indeed what Pollan writes--he is fairly clear in stating that world population growth is dependent on commercial fertilizer:

By 1900, European scientists recognized that unless a way was found to augment this naturally occurring nitrogen, the growth of the human population would soon grind to a very painful halt. The same recognition by Chinese scientists a few decades later is probably what compelled China's opening to the West: After Nixon's 1972 trip the first major order the Chinese government placed was for thirteen massive fertilizer factories. Without them, China would probably have starved. (*Omnivore's* 43)

The English agronomist, Sir Albert Howard, a significant influence on Berry and hence on Pollan as well, puts it even more bluntly: "Artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals and finally to artificial men and women" (37). Hurst's criticism of Pollan here is legitimate--though he indicates the precariousness of our earth's population, the tremendous extent to which it depends on synthetic nitrogen for its continued growth, he fails to pursue this issue, dropping it entirely for the remainder of the book. For his part, Hurst seems content to continue using commercial fertilizer and the methods of industrial farming it supports. He argues that only "'industrial farming' can possibly meet the demands of an increasing population and increased demand for food as a result of growing incomes" (para 9). As Berry indicates, though, relying on synthetic nitrogen doesn't really solve our problem, it only puts it off: "In any biological system the first principle is restraint--that is, the natural or moral checks that maintain a balance between use and continuity. The life of one year must not

be allowed to diminish the life of the next; nothing must live at the expense of the source" (*Unsettling* 93). The only obvious conclusion is that our current path, not only maintaining but increasing the earth's human population, can only persist at the expense of the source. We can only continue to ignore the requirements of nature by leveraging the stores of fossil fuels found in the earth, but we cannot rely on that leverage forever.

Again, then, we come to the problem of scale, and this seems to be the central problem of sustainability: the scale of human existence is fundamentally limited, and by increasing the scale of our existence far beyond that limit, we have created for ourselves a crushing problem in the form of overpopulation. The sweeping nature of the limitations we would have to impose on ourselves in order to bring human existence back within the bounds of the earth's natural systems make them almost unfathomable. It is for this reason that, near the beginning of *Unsettling*, Berry writes,

[h]ow could we divorce ourselves completely and yet responsibly from the technologies and powers that are destroying our planet? The answer is not yet thinkable, and it will not be thinkable for some time--even though there are now groups and families and persons everywhere in the country who have begun the labor of thinking it. (18)

That this problem is to some degree "not yet thinkable" is indicated by Pollan's glossing over of it and Hurst's apparent desire to continue on our present technology-driven path. Berry, however, offers us a vision of what it will take to address overpopulation, finding the answer in the Hunza people of northern Pakistan:

What is of interest is that in their isolation in arid, narrow valleys surrounded by the stone and ice of the Karakoram Mountains, these people [have] practiced sexual restraint as a

form of birth control. They [have] neither statistical expertise nor our doom-prophets of population growth; it just happened that, placed geographically as they were, they lived always in sight of their agricultural or ecological limits, and they made a competent response. (*Unsettling* 133)

So, as we have seen many times before, the answer to the problem of scale is self-imposed restraint, and it is this answer that causes me to be both distressed and hopeful, but mostly distressed. I am hopeful because there are real individual responses that can be made--placing ourselves geographically, and cultivating an awareness of our ecological limits in that place--but distressed because thus far humankind has not shown a very widespread or persistent ability to restrain its appetite, sexual or otherwise. I fear the overwhelming nature of this problem will continue to make its solution always "not yet thinkable," that our existence will only fall back within its natural balance once the resources we've been leveraging will no longer support us, and that that fall will be both spectacular and horrible.

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