

Perception and Practice in the Agrarian Environmentalism of Wendell Berry and Martin

Heidegger

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"The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings." -Masanobu Fukuoka

"Et in Arcadia ego." -Death

Environmentalism plays heavily on a moralistic trope of blindness and sight. Edward Abbey wrote, "the love of wilderness is [...] an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need — *if only we had the eyes to see*. Original sin, the true original sin, is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us — if only we were worthy of it." (1968, 167 *italics added*) Being worthy of nature--being worthy of the wild paradise that is all around us yet somehow not sufficiently visible--not sufficiently present to us--begins with overcoming this blindness. Developing "eyes to see" true nature seems to be the precondition for having an ethical relationship with it. But Abbey, like many other eco-critics and nature writers, intuited

that you cannot see nature just by looking. For Abbey, you have to see the environment “intimately, as can only be done on foot, through some direct personal engagement with sand, stone, sun, space, moon, stars, craggly hills...” (2006, 106) “You’ve got to get out of the goddamned [car] and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you’ll see something, maybe. Probably not.” (1990, xiv)

Walking in fact has long been an especially privileged activity for American environmentalism, especially insofar as environmentalism has roots in the celebration of wilderness. The founders of the North American wilderness preservation movement were famed ascetic walkers. It was in an essay titled “Walking” that Thoreau wrote “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” Famed preservationist John Muir characterized his whole career as one long walk, beginning with his solitary trek from Louisville, KY to Florida. “I wandered away on a glorious botanical and geological excursion, which has lasted nearly fifty years and is not yet completed, always happy and free, poor and rich, without thought of a diploma or of making a name, urged on and on through endless, inspiring, Godful beauty.” (1913, 286) Muir represented a sect that was rapidly growing at the turn of the twentieth century, and would include figures like Charles Lumis, who struck out to cross the continent on foot, seeking “neither time nor money, but life [...] life in the broader, sweeter sense, the exhilarant joy of living outside the sorry fences of society, living with a perfect body and a wakened mind.” (Lumis, quoted in Solnit 2000, 127-8).

This idealistic tradition would be carried on into the 20th century by trekkers, tramps, and poet-wanderers, like Bob Marshall, Gary Snyder, and Everett Ruess. Walking emerged, with

the aesthetics and ethics of wilderness, as more than a mere means to other ends; the walking itself takes on a special significance and becomes an explicit object of philosophical celebration and critical scrutiny. To merely walk--with emphasis on the very *mere*-ness of walking--becomes the way to truly *see* the wilderness, to see nature, to overcome an aesthetic and ethical blindness. It is the way to properly be in the wilderness. It is, moreover, the way to fully and properly *be*, period. To walk is to “*truly live*.” And wilderness is the ideal habitat for the walking body.

However, if wilderness walking seems to be the original American eco-critical practice, it is not the only one. Agrarian localism and the language of place, locality, and rootedness,¹ has arguably overtaken wilderness imagery in environmental aesthetics. And the revived arts of traditional farming over the last half century rival walking as the preeminent mode of eco-critical practice, and the dominant model of an ethical relationship to nature. The generic ideal of “getting back to nature” usually fails to differentiate walking and farming as modes of anticipating, visualizing, and cultivating connection with the environment. However, if they are not distinguished from one another--if they are subsumed by environmental theorists under the idea of a single “dream of naturalism” (Wapner 2010) or are indiscriminately implicated in the reproduction of a failed concept of “Nature” (Morton 2006)--then we may not fully understand how such ideals and concepts can be not only produced and reproduced, but also complicated and pluralized, at the level of practice.

Needless to say, not all agriculturalists engage in husbandry and cultivation with a view to becoming more deeply connected with nature or more authentically at one with the earth, but

¹ Wendell Berry, who is one subject of this paper, is perhaps the most important voice in this vein, but see also the written work of David Orr, Gary Paul Nabhan, Bill McKibben, Gene Logsdon, and Wes Jackson, among many others.

traditional agricultural practices and the agrarian “way of life” have been defended in precisely those terms by many critics of industrial modernity. Following the mid-twentieth-century industrialization of agriculture, discontents of “Progress” have consistently advocated an agrarian return to the land as antidote to our alienation from nature, and unlike some other movements midwifed by the ‘60s counterculture, this “new agrarianism” has steadily gained traction over the past half century under the rubrics of “organic” or “sustainable” agriculture, “biodynamic farming,” the “slow food” movement, “bioregionalism,” “food democracy” and “food sovereignty,” and even in the growing enthusiasm for “buying local.”

This paper will examine the eco-criticism of Wendell Berry and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, reading each as an advocate and theorist of agrarian practices as environmental “techniques of the self.” I borrow this term from Michel Foucault to refer to ethical projects of self-fashioning--recursive practices through which one attempts to care for and cultivate one’s own self as an ethical subject--here particularly as an ecological-ethical subject. My usage of this terminology, however, overlaps considerably with another Foucaultian concept--that of “*alethurgic* practices,” or practices the aim of which is to display, reveal, or enact truth. My use of this Foucaultian framework assumes overlap between these two “whys” of practice, and I suggest that such overlap is especially prominent in environmentalism. This paper focuses specifically on the category of “work,” which I will show to have a very specific and important meaning in the writing of both Berry and Heidegger, as a practice that grounds and centers an ethical hermeneutic of the environment in the human body, specifically the subsisting body, or the body in its metabolic capacities.

Wendell Berry and work as connection to the earth

Wendell Berry's nationally recognized conservation advocacy and eco-criticism partakes of a political naturalism that has had growing salience since the Enlightenment, and which is central to environmental politics.² Although the idea that nature is a touchstone for the good, the right, and the true is older than modern science, that notion, which in Europe was largely displaced by monotheism in the Middle Ages, was greatly bolstered when the science of ecology began to reveal order, harmony, and beneficence in wildernesses previously associated with chaos, waste, and evil. Thoreau gave us one early modern articulation of this viewpoint that the good life, and the life that ethically prepares a person for self-government, is necessarily a life lived in contact with nature. Berry's eco-critical essays give us another prominent articulation of this idea. But it is the particular mode of this contact with nature, and the techniques that enact and modulate it, that gives Berry's nature writing a flavor distinct from the literature of wilderness walking. Rather than shaking off the human world and striking out on foot to make unmediated sensual contact with nature's raw materiality, Berry seeks a deep settling into place, which would cultivate and coax forth a direct and fully integrated relationship with nature by establishing a single intensive point of contact in a particular place, where one *lives* deeply.

This point of contact, for Berry, is the farmstead--the dwelling place, or subsistent 'household' in the traditional enlarged sense of that term--and the most meaningful connection to

² The scholars who have made valuable explorations of the intellectual history and the philosophy of the politics of nature in this sense are too numerous to list. But a few recent works that take up the topic as a central concern deserve mention. John Meyer's exploration of two opposed Western traditions of thought linking politics and nature--the "dualist" conception, in which politics marks our escape from nature, and the "derivative," wherein politics is derived from nature, forming a logical unity with it (whether that means human nature or a more totalizing conception of the natural world). The notion that Nature is a touchstone for truth and justice is integral to the "derivative" tradition, and has been explored recently in Paul Wapner's *Living Through the End of Nature*. Bruno Latour's book *The Politics of Nature* contains in its early chapters one of the best articulation of the political and philosophical dilemmas surrounding this historical viewpoint.

the earth comes from precisely the *work* of cultivating the land to meet one's vital needs. "The real name of our connection to this everywhere different and differently named earth," says Berry, "is 'work'." (1992, 35) This assertion is central to Berry's thought. In the shallow sense, this statement simply asserts that all actual economic activity enacts a real physical and metabolic connection to the earth. We depend upon the earth, and what we do towards making our living affects it. Our *work* affects it. This is just another way of stating the central tenet of ecological economics: that the economy is a subsystem of a finite global ecology. But for Berry it is crucial to distinguish between the 'good work' of the farmstead as an enlarged household and the 'bad work' of industrial agribusiness. "The name of our present society's connection to the earth," Berry writes, "is 'bad work' – work that is only generally and crudely defined, that enacts a dependence that is ill understood, that enacts no affection and gives no honor." (1992, 36) Berry's eco-criticism centers on the assertion that the machines, corporations, and absentee owners that have replaced small farmers as the principal agents *working* the land cannot care for the earth the way people can. Berry does not claim that pre-industrial or non-industrial farmers have always been ecologically careful and far-sighted, but that the amalgamations of disembodied monetary self-interest that we call corporations will *never* be.

In the first place, this distinction, and the larger argument it serves, turns on the question of motivation--of what we might call, to use Jane Bennett's terminology, *ethical energies*--but which Berry usually speaks of in terms of love or affection. "The primary motive for good care and good use of the land-community," says Berry "is always going to be affection." (2012) However, "the corporations and machines that replace [free-holding farmers]," Berry writes, "will never be bound to the land by the sense of birthright and continuity, or by the love that

enforces care.” (1970, 76) Corporate energies are, by design, both directed and nourished by profits to the near exclusion of all other possible motives.³ In the second place, Berry’s argument is about *perception and praxis*. The new corporate workers of the earth are ham-handed, reductively rational, big-thinking, single-minded, and tunnel-visioned. Economies of scale cannot see and respond to details even if they did have the desire to do so. Small farms worked intensively by owners who live on them, on the other hand, can and often do operate by motives other than economic gain. Moreover, small farmers can “think little,” see details, and engage with the earth in the way of an artist or craftsman. “The discipline proper to agriculture [...] is not economics but ecology,” Berry insists. “And ecology may well find its proper disciplines in the arts, whose function is to refine and enliven perception, for ecological principle, however publicly approved, can be enacted only on the basis of each man’s [sic] perception of his relation to the world.” (1970, 96)

cultivating the earth and cultivating the self

These two aspects of Berry’s argument are related; that is, the practices out of which love and care for a place grow are the same practices that bring us a clarified perception of the ecological gestalt. This is what “good work” does. The small freeholding farmer is the great ecological hope because her craft is an *alethurgic* practice, and an environmental ethical technique of the

³ The greening of corporations is a limited but real emergence of the last few decades. To the extent that consumers and investors express preferences for environmental values, firms have responded with green marketing campaigns, the lofty claims of which usually carry at least a grain of truth. However, as Mark Sagoff (2006) points out there are probably stark limits to the suitability of “the economy,” as a specific arena and context of decision making, to forge and express environmental values. According to Sagoff, preferences expressed through market decisions are fundamentally distinct from the values expressed in political discourse, judgement, and decision. Sagoff’s often cited argument can be seen as parsing, in economic terms Hannah Arendt’s distinction between political judgement and consumption as distinct modes of the human condition. We can, moreover, read Berry as accepting Sagoff’s critique and adding to his argument with the assertion that the “values” Sagoff speaks of also need to be cultivated within an agrarian culture through the everyday embodied practices of living on the land.

self. It cultivates an enlivened perception of the earth's metabolism and our place in it, as it also cultivates affective attachment. It performs "our *proper* connection to the earth. [..F]or good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing." (1970, 35) "Honor" here is directed to the things, places, and beings of this world, and yet the word also carries a religious depth and importance. The paragon of the good work that gives honor is *agriculture* in the true and ancient sense. "The word 'agriculture,'" Berry writes, "means 'cultivation of land.' And *cultivation* is at the root of the sense both of *culture* and of *cult*. The ideas of tillage and worship are thus joined in culture. And these words all come 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 to the idea of a cycle." (1977, 87) The etymology lends profundity to Berry's normative agrarianism. Agriculture is in its essence connected with human life itself. Our existence as humans, our human *being*, is revealed as dwelling, which is a revolving in metabolic and ecological cycles that is essential to agriculture. The work of sustainable cultivation therefore grounds us in the truth of our own ongoing existence and connects our embodied selves *essentially* with the surrounding world.

If cultivation is the true human connection to the ecological earth, it is not just a theme to abstractly appreciate, or a metaphor to theorize or celebrate. It is something we should *do*. *Do* try this at home! "Go into the countryside," writes Berry in no uncertain terms, "and make a home there in the fullest and most permanent sense: that is, live on and use and preserve and learn from and enrich and enjoy the land. ...it offers the possibility of a coherent and

particularized meaningfulness that is beyond the reach of the ways of life of ‘average Americans.’” Going back to the land is not a means of ‘dropping out,’ Berry writes, it is rather “a way of dropping *in...*” (1965, 89 *original emphasis*) Committing oneself in this permanent, practical, fundamental way to a particular place is a way of plugging in to the greater cyclical logic of the living world at large, or of the Universe itself. Farming is an art, Berry says, “but it is also a practical religion, or a practice of religion, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness. In the cycles of farming, which carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within reach of the imagination. [...] we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them.” (1977, 87)

In Berry’s depiction the traditional farmstead is thus a microcosm. It is a privileged access point for the cosmically environed life--the dwelling place where human existence is authentically realized. Through the labor of subsistence farming, one establishes a kind of direct connection--in consciousness and in fact, in consciousness *because* in fact--between the planet and the household, between the metabolic body and the ecological earth. “Those are the poles,” Berry writes, “between which a competent morality would balance and mediate, the doorstep and the planet. ...These two poles of life and thought offer two different points of view, perspectives that are opposite and complimentary. But morally, because one is contained within the other and the two are interdependent, they propose the same consciousness and the same labor.” (1965, 79)

The labor fosters the consciousness and affective attachment, and this affectively enlarged consciousness disciplines and gives meaning to the labor.

farming and true seeing

The ethical edification of farming is linked in Berry's essays to its own subtle ideal of "true seeing." The life-long practice of cultivating a place on the earth opens the senses to the physical real as the immediate environment, and in Berry's language, that true opening of perception to the immediate milieu is just a hair's breadth from the intuition of ecological moral Truth. As a farmer, "the elemental realities of seasons and weather affect one directly," Berry testifies, "and become a source of interest in themselves; the relation of one's life to the life of the world is no longer taken for granted or ignored, but becomes an immediate and complex concern." (1970, 84)⁴ Berry's language of perceptual authenticity comes close to the "true sight" of the walking body anticipated by wilderness walkers like Thoreau, Muir, and Abbey. But here it is not the primordial physical simplicity of the act of walking that grounds perception, it is the cyclical, metabolic, elemental labor of subsistence cultivation and the permanent, habitual association with a single place that it entails. The farmer's concern with growing the food that sustains the body is so primordial, so fundamental to existence, and his labor of cultivation makes such an intimate intercourse with the totality of this one place on earth, that the farmer's senses gain privileged access to matter. Even a token participation in cultivation, such as growing a kitchen garden, can do the trick. "A person who undertakes to grow a garden at home, by practices that will preserve rather than exploit the economy of the soil, is making vital contact with the soil and the weather on which his life depends. He will no longer look upon rain as an impediment of traffic, or upon the sun as a holiday decoration. And his sense of man's dependence on the world

⁴ The slippage in the word 'life' serves Berry in such formulations. The word has for a long time and in many languages housed two meanings: it means one's own lived life, and it also means life as the transcendent principle of living things, as Nature, or as the total ongoing phenomenon of the biosphere, etc. Berry does not worry over the etymology, but he suggests that these different meanings share one word for a good reason--he insists we must (re)engage and (re)connect our lived lives with the *Life* of the world.

will have grown precise enough, one would hope, to be politically clarifying and useful.” (1970, 84)

It is hard to miss the unwritten “mere” in this sentence before “traffic impediment” and the unwritten “only” before “holiday decoration.” It is the fundamental down-to-earth concerns of farming that makes one see the sun, wind, and rain in their true significance. And this concrete opening of perception to the immediate environment is crucial to a more figurative or ideological ecological enlightenment.

What will cure us? At this point it seems useless to outline yet another idea of a better community, or to invoke yet another anthropological example. These already abound, and we fail to make use of them for the same reason that we continue to destroy the earth: *we remain for the most part blind to our surroundings*. What the world was, or what we have agreed that it was, obtrudes between our sight and what the world is. If we do not see clearly what the nature of our place is, we destroy our place. If we cannot see how our own lives are drawn from the life of the world, and how they are involved and joined with that greater life, then such efforts as we may make to preserve the greater life will be inept and destructive. (1991, 38-9)

Clarified perception, in other words, leads to clarified politics because it grounds morality in the truth of the metabolic body-earth nexus.

becoming a fragment of a place

The imagery of connectedness with place in Berry’s writings proliferates beyond a ideal of true seeing or immaculate perception into a vision of literal and physical one-ness with the local ecology of plants, animals, and natural processes. When Berry narrates his own return, as a

young man, to his “native hill” in Port Royal, Kentucky, he is also narrating the process of becoming opened to, enveloped by, and eventually dissipated into his immediate surroundings.

I had come back to stay. ... And once that was settled I began to *see* the place with a new clarity and a new understanding and a new seriousness. ... I walked over it, looking, listening, smelling, touching, alive to it as never before. I listened to the talk of my kinsmen and neighbors as I never had done, alert to their knowledge of the place, and at the qualities and energies of their speech. I began more seriously than ever to learn the names of things--the wild plants and animals, the natural processes, the local places--and to articulate my observations and memories. My language increased and strengthened, and sent my mind into the place like a live root system. ... I came to see myself as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants. (1965, 178)

Berry describes his homecoming as a kind of conversion experience. His own essence comes to meld with the essence of this place. Here is a process of becoming native in a radical sense--becoming rooted like a plant and making oneself not only at home in a place, not only living in harmony with the elements of a place, but becoming an articulation of the place--a natural outgrowth. The image of rootedness is frequently invoked in Berry’s ideal of place-belonging. He draws occasionally on the example of native animals, but the imagery of the rooted plant is an even more perfect expression. The plant is bound fast, in place. It grips the soil that *is* its place, and the plant--the pattern of its growth, its very physical form, the fact of its own thriving--is dictated continuously, intimately, and in infinite nuance and detail by its immediate environment. By patterns of light and shade, qualities of soil, weather, atmosphere. Animals are

moved by their own internal animus, but plants, we can imagine, are merely there--in a mode of total responsiveness, as perfect expressions of the place in which they are rooted.

That is to say, the naturalism of being 'native' suggests a dimension of non-agency and de-subjection, achieved paradoxically through practice. If you hew closely enough to the dictates of the immediate physical environment--the lay of the land, the weather patterns, the ecological workings--perhaps your own will could become indistinguishable from the animus of the place itself, which is of a piece with the animus of the world. "...I slowly fill with the knowledge of this place, and sink into it, I come to the sense that my life here is inexhaustible..." (1965, 210) To fully sink into place would be to become de-subjected, absolved of your own agency--as perfectly peaceful and blameless as the earth itself. "[My native hill] has killed no one in the service of the American government," says Berry. "Then why should I, who am a fragment of the hill? I wish to be as peaceable as my land, which does no violence, though it has been the scene of violence and has had violence done to it." (1965, 36)

This ideal of merging with the animus of place is sometimes depicted in terms of unalloyed life--truly living, surviving on the earth, living deeply--but in other passages becoming a fragment of a place is likened to to death and dying. "I saw my body and my daily motions as brief coherences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into the earth like the leaves in autumn." (1965, 178) After all, one way to collapse one's own lived life with the Life of Creation is to die. On the last page of *The Long Legged House* Berry leaves us with a moving vignette that proposes a curiously dark form of the pastoral idyll.

The newly fallen leaves make a dry, comfortable bed, and I lie easy, coming to rest within myself as I seem to do nowadays only when I am in the woods.

And now a leaf, spiraling down in wild flight, lands on my shirt front at about the third button below the collar. [...] And suddenly I apprehend in it the dark proposal of the ground. Under the fallen leaf my breastbone burns with imminent decay. Other leaves fall. My body begins its long shudder into hummus. I feel my substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left to me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed inter-reaching of the treetops, the leaves falling--and then that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace.

When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world. (1965, 213)

the nature alienation problematic and the dwelling ideal in Heidegger's philosophy

This brief exploration of Berry's place-based eco-criticism has focused on "work" as the set of practices that ground his normative localism, and on the profound emplacement that this localism works toward. But it may be helpful to take a step back to look more broadly for a moment at the theme of place and placelessness in philosophy and social criticism. It is by no means peculiar to environmentalism or agrarianism. A focus on the particularity of place runs through counter-Enlightenment romanticism, into the pastoral tradition of English literature,⁵ communitarian and republican democratic theory,⁶ and various versions of nationalism. But perhaps the most thorough philosophical thinking-through of place has come from the phenomenological tradition.

⁵ See esp. Christopher Lash's *The True and Only Heaven*, Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*, and Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*.

⁶ In the works of Rousseau and Tocqueville, for example, we can find early articulations the importance of place to republicanism. Contemporary political theorists who address the political implications of place and placelessness include Sheldon Wolin, Paul Virilio, and Charles Taylor.

In particularly, environmentalists have found Martin Heidegger's focus on everyday experiential *praxis* and the phenomenology of "environment" and "dwelling" amenable to their hopes of re-inscribing sympathies upon what has been revealed as or mistaken for a disenchanting, external, objective world. Here, though, I put forth the argument that there is, in particular, a substantial point of contact between Heidegger and Berry's brand of North American environmental thought, and that this point of contact lies in the idea that agrarian practice is a kind of environmental *alethurgic* practice, a technique of the self that performs the truth of the human-earth connection, and thus opens an authentic relationship of the self to the environment-as-place. I will argue that this idea is fundamental to Heidegger's philosophy, and I would suggest that the ideal of place-belonging it supports is a significant part of what Heidegger's sympathetic readers have found compelling in his thought.⁷

In my reading, what is at stake in Heidegger's philosophical project is nothing less than the authentic apprehension of the world--a mode of apprehension that would fulfill the affective potential of human existence in the most general sense--which he thought was threatened by certain cultural, intellectual, and historical forces. He believed this fundamental relationship of the modern human being with its world was gravely and deeply, albeit subtly, imperiled, particularly by the modern techno-scientific "enframing" of nature and by Western philosophy's view of the world as a mere expanse of "present-at-hand" objects. These terms, for Heidegger, indicate the alienating modes in which the things, events, beings, and places of the world are revealed as so many mere objects, or as so much calculable and measurable "standing reserve."

⁷ This is so particularly in the case of environmentalist readings of Heidegger that link his rhetoric of existential authenticity with his imagery of immersion in a surrounding environment. See for example, Foltz 1994, McWhorter 2009, McWhorter and Stenstad 2009. See also Ingold 2000.

Heidegger's story of alienation from nature--told through his critique of philosophy's objectivizing vision of things, "enframing," and the existentially deadening "world picture" of the scientific age--also finds expression in the obverse concepts and ideals he articulates as philosophical correctives for these harbingers of existential estrangement. Heidegger's extraordinary reputation as a philosopher was built largely on the analysis in his early masterwork, *Being and Time*, which was dedicated to showing how the overweening idea of a "present-at-hand" objective reality is built on the back of a more primary but under-acknowledged mode in which the world is revealed to us as the "ready-to-hand" realm of our ongoing, embodied, practical engagement. His later writings diverge from this foundational analysis, introducing a series of palliative concepts that includes "language," "clearing," "the turning," "the event of appropriation" (*Ereignis*), "earth," and "dwelling." (Heidegger 1968, 1971, 1977, 1982, 1999)

Heidegger's development of these concepts in his later writings is not infrequently left to one side by philosophers, many of whom have found it perplexing and suspiciously poetic and mystical. However there are plenty of sympathetic scholarly readings of the later work, and a large part of them have been addressed to the problematic of environmental ethics.⁸ Eco-philosophy has been particularly drawn to Heidegger's critique of industrial technology in "The Question Concerning Technology" (1977) and to his poetic exploration of the metaphysics of "dwelling" as "caring for the earth" articulated in the essays collected under the English title *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971)--particularly "The Origin of the Work of Art," "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," and "The Thing." It is in these latter essays (which I will refer to simply as

⁸ The work of Arne Naess, the founder of "deep ecology," is markedly influenced by Heideggerian philosophy. See also Foltz 2004, McWhorter and Stenstad 2009, Dreyfus and Spinoza 2003, Zimmerman 1986, Dolores Lachapelle 1978; Devall and Sessions 1985, Naess 2005.

“the fourfold essays”) that Heidegger develops one of his most perplexing concepts; “the fourfold” [*Das Geviert*]. Environmentalist readings of Heidegger have been drawn to the notoriously difficult fourfold essays as Heidegger’s most sustained effort to portray a better mode of living within the natural world. In this sense the critique of modern technology and the poetic-ontological idea of “the fourfold” developed in the essays of *Poetry, Language, Thought* appear as complimentary projects,⁹ and taken together they represent well the Heidegger that environmentalism has taken as its own.

In broad strokes Heidegger’s critique in “The Question Concerning Technology” shares a good deal with the some of the foundational critiques in American environmental thought, such as Lynne White’s *Cultural Roots of the Environmental Crisis*. Both White and Heidegger take to task the industrial paradigm of Nature-as-resources. White laid the blame for contemporary environmental destruction largely on the Judeo-Christian notion of Man’s divinely conferred dominion over nature. Many other American environmental Jeremiads have been true to this form while substituting liberal individualism or other signature Western ideological trappings where White indicts Abrahamic monotheism. But in these kinds of accounts, technological advancement simply instrumentally aids and abets a problematic worldview, which is understood to be essentially intellectual in origin. In Heidegger’s treatment, on the other hand, modern technology itself takes center stage as the antagonist. It is not a question of getting technology “spiritually in hand” (1977, 5) by a change of values or an extension of ethics. Heidegger asserted, rather, that modern technologies themselves and our practical involvements with them constitute a problematic mode of revealing, or bringing-to-presence, in which the environment

⁹ As Albert Borgman puts it, “anyone familiar with Heidegger can tell you on the spot that his discussion of technology pivots on the notion of the *Gestell*--the framework of technology, and that his vision of a better world revolves about the *Geviert*--the fourfold world of centering things.” (2003)

can appear only as a “standing reserve” of exploitable resources. Heidegger indicated this mode with the terms “enframing” [*gestell*] and “challenging-forth” [*Herausfordern*]. This essay is often acknowledged as portending the proliferation of philosophical treatments of technology in the later half of the twentieth century, and it may even be seen as a precursor to the recent turn toward a “new materialism” in critical social and political thought.

Where “The Question Concerning Technology” is a decidedly critical essay, the fourfold essays contain Heidegger’s attempt to access a better mode of “presencing” that must lie beyond or beneath enframed nature. Attempts to make philosophical sense of the fourfold have yielded a wide divergence of interpretations and an utter lack of consensus. Here I suggest that we hold the conceptual-analytical questions in abeyance, and attend instead to the tone and imagery, the rhetoric of these writings. The various possible linkages between the four elements or “regions” of Heidegger’s fourfold and certain other philosophical concepts from earlier works is not more worthy of critical attention than the balanced, encompassing, wholistic image of human existence in a re-enchanted pre-Galilean environment that Heidegger portrays. The figures of earth, sky, gods and mortals lend a mythic, timeless aura to Heidegger’s voice in this text. They also reflect Heidegger’s abiding interest in the cosmological aesthetic of Greek Antiquity, where earth’s below-ness bears the hidden mystery of fertility, and the superlunary sky is a world apart, qualitatively different from the earthly realm. Most notably for our purposes, however, the imagery of authentic “dwelling” within the fourfold that Heidegger invokes here is also strikingly reminiscent of the self-sustaining agrarian existence celebrated by Berry. And like Berry, Heidegger looks to ancient etymologies to establish the existential primacy of “dwelling” as caring for and cultivating the earth.

Bauen originally means to dwell. Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen, buan, bhu, beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin, du bist mean*: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *barren* however also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine. Such building only takes care--it tends the growth that ripens into its fruit of its own accord. (1971, 147 *original emphasis*)

Dwelling, as Heidegger's etymology tells us, is the mode of existence peculiar to humans. It is the proper name of the very being of mortals. And yet in simply being alive there is no guarantee that true dwelling takes place. Human existence, Heidegger tells us, must enter into its own essence through a certain mode of living in place. And it is crucial here that it be "in place." "The Old Saxon *wuan*, the Gothic *wunian*, like the old word *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in place." (*ibid*) It is hard to put your finger on it, but Heidegger seems to know true dwelling when he sees it; and he illustrates with one of his more famous examples:

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden

of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead" - for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum* -- and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. A craft which, itself sprung from dwelling, still uses its tools and frames as things, built the farmhouse. (1971, 160 *original emphasis*)

This farmhouse was built by the "dwelling of peasants," Heidegger tells us. But "dwelling" itself, which is here formulated as "the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things," is the impersonal "It" that acts in these sentences. "It" orders, *it* makes room, *it* places--*it* designs, gives form, does not forget--and the it-ness of this "It" consists in the timeless, generational cycles of life and death, and in the materiality of *just this place* with its specific weather patterns, its mountain slopes and long winter nights. By this sheer existing-in-place the farmhouse comes to be just as it is--a naturally determined outgrowth of its environment--and mortals, in so dwelling, are vaguely de-subjectified as they become centered in the fourfold--wholly, cosmically environed. Around the peasant, or the peasant's dwelling, the world falls into place--into its own balanced wholeness, the "simple one-ness of the four." (1971, 149)

What is the relationship of this agrarian ideal of dwelling to Heidegger's larger philosophy? *Being and Time* has proven so philosophically groundbreaking and so intellectually fertile there is a certain temptation to write off such passages--if not the entirety of his later work--as thought-provoking but ultimately unsuccessful experiments by an otherwise great philosopher. I assert, however, that we cannot so neatly excise Heidegger's ideal of dwelling-in-place from his most important intellectual contributions without missing an important aspect of

his own philosophy as well as eliding its deeper connection to environmentalist thought. In fact, *Being and Time* lays the foundation for Heideggerian dwelling.

environmental vision and the ready-to-hand in Being and Time

In *Being and Time*, the principle conceptual distinction is between “readiness-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*), or the way the world is encountered in our everyday practical lives, and the “presence-at-hand” (*Vorhandenheit*), or the way science tells us things must objectively exist—that is, as things defined by their various properties. Heidegger believed the successes of the scientific worldview, which sees reality as composed of substances and entities bearing certain properties such as weight, volume, shape, *etc.*, had effectively occluded any deep consideration of the primary mode of our existence in the world. Thinking of things as present-at-hand entities is only possible in the first place, Heidegger asserts, because we always already live in amongst a world that appears to us continually not as mere objects but as the equipment seamlessly incorporated into the totality of our practical, embodied dealings with the world. The door handle, for example, does not first appear in its object-hood, as a radially symmetrical piece of metal protruding from a wooden panel, nor visually, as a brass-colored reflective region amid a white background; rather it exists embedded in an always already meaningful ready-to-hand environment, as part of a possibility of going out to the front stoop, for example, to pick up the paper, to read the news, to learn about the war... The understanding of things as present-at-hand objects, which Heidegger suggested had preoccupied Western philosophy for centuries, is therefore a derivative “special case” of the more primary and primordial mode of being-in-the-world. This conceptualization of present-at-hand objects has yielded great technical successes,

but what it misses becomes important when we begin to ask questions about ourselves--about mind and body, or the meaning of our existence in the world. Or worse yet, it makes it impossible to properly ask such questions. The world, Heidegger thought, is in fact much *nearer* to us than we think, and in his view our way of thinking and living ignores and covers over this *nearer* world to our existential detriment.

Heidegger's interpreters have offered many differing accounts of the transition between the "early" and "later" works of Heidegger. Where some scholars depict Heidegger's "turn" as a radical break, others see his work as a coherent corpus in spite of a shift in emphasis, while still others suggest an evolving and exploratory path of thought. Likewise, Heideggerian scholarship has produced little in the way of consensus about the proliferation of guiding concepts in his later work and the relationship of those concepts to the "tool analysis" in *Being and Time*. Where some highlight ruptures and reversals, others cast the later writings as iterative explorations in the evolution of a more or less coherent philosophy.¹⁰ Graham Harman, to take one recent example from the latter category, boldly asserts that the idea of the ready-to-hand/presence-at-hand distinction is the central concept of Heidegger's entire philosophical corpus, and moreover that it is his most important contribution to philosophy in general. In Harman's words,

Heidegger poses the question of being by launching a ferocious attack on all forms of presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*). He does this phenomenologically through the tool-analysis; he does it rhetorically through his repetitive use of the word "mere" to dismiss all ontic arguments; he does it historically through his assertion that presence-at-hand has dominated the history of

¹⁰ See Olafson (1993) for a summary of this longstanding and unresolved debate.

metaphysics. The Goal of Martin Heidegger's career was to identify and to attack the notion of reality as something present-at-hand. (2002, 16)

Whether the analysis of *Zuhandenheit* is a revolutionary event the history of metaphysics or not, I am in agreement with Harman about its central significance within Heidegger's thought. I suggest it is in that analysis that the ideal of dwelling and the imagery of being-fully-in-place, which haunts the whole of Heidegger's work, is rooted. Moreover, I find this ideal is closely related in that analysis to a certain genre of *praxis*--the labor of agrarian subsistence--which, as with Berry, functions for Heidegger as an environmental *alethurgic* practice.

Being and Time lays out what Heidegger saw as a groundbreaking philosophical insight that it is in our largely unthought, everyday, practical "involvement" with the world of the ready-to-hand that true being, the true "worldhood" of the world, which we all too easily miss, is brought forth. By contrast, Heidegger suggests that the intellectualized distance of philosophical or scientific contemplation, which tempts heavy thinkers to pose the "object" as a philosophical problem, is where the enfolding "aroundness" of Being-in-the-world (*Inderweltsein*), which is the "ownmost" essence of of the human mode of being, is lost to itself.

Heidegger's philosophy of readiness-to-hand might seem to involve an ideal of immaculate perception, whereby one's everyday task-oriented embodied dealings with things yields, as a kind of secret in plain sight, an absolute contact the things themselves or direct apprehension of reality. But Heidegger is well aware of the pitfalls of basing perceptual or existential authenticity on something like a transparent, transcendent eyeball. He explicitly condemns that idea as precisely the conceit into which Western philosophy's orientation to the present-at-hand is ever leading us--we are always trying to get behind or beyond our seeing of

things *as* this or *as* that in order to get to the primacy of the thing/percept/phenomenon in its truth. One of Heidegger's major revisions of the phenomenological tradition¹¹ lies in his assertion that the "'as'-structure" goes all the way down--is part of the structure of being-in-the-world in the most fundamental sense. (Heidegger 1962, 188-211)

And yet, for Heidegger there are different modalities of this basic structure of "seeing-as." Most notably, Heidegger distinguishes between the "existential-hermeneutical 'as' [and] the "apophantical 'as'" of the assertion"--which is to say, "the kind of interpretation which is still wholly wrapped up in concerned understanding [or circumspection] and the extreme opposite case of a theoretical assertion about something present at hand." (1962, 201) When this distinction is situated within the overall existential primacy Heidegger accords readiness-to-hand, the ideal of "immaculate perception" is tipped on its head. Authentic contact with materiality is here situated in the everyday meaningfulness through which things appear as significant to us *as something or other*, rather than in a chaste "mere staring." Nevertheless, this hermeneutical insight introduces a complex uncertainty into Heidegger's theory of the ready-to-hand, since the full proximity and pure presence of entities is never accessed neither in the thing itself present-at-hand before us, nor in that with which we are circumspectively involved. Presence-at-hand elides what is "nearest" to us, while the ready-to-hand always necessarily withdraws itself. "The ready-to-hand," Heidegger writes, "is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw [zurückziehen] in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically." (1962, 99)

¹¹ See Lafont 1999, 59-60.

And yet Heidegger suggests that it is nonetheless through this very interplay of presence and withdrawal of the ready-to-hand that the *umwelt* or “totality of involvements” properly comes into being. “That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work--that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered.” (1962, 99)

Heidegger, in other words, finds a close connection between everyday familiar embodied practices and the “aroundness” of the environment in Heidegger’s language. The particular readiness-to-hand of tools and familiar objects of everyday use provides a model for the most fundamental and authentic relationship we can have to our world, but for Heidegger the environment (*Umwelt*) exists in its own right, so to speak. More than a mere collection of tools, beings, or things, Heidegger’s analysis of things as ready-to-hand casts the environment as “the totality of involvements for which the ready-to-hand, as something encountered, is freed.” (1962, 137) This “totality of involvements” comprises a totally involving environment that is somehow even more primary to existence, even more ready-to-hand, than any given ready-to-hand entity.¹² It “has the *character of inconspicuous familiarity*, and it has it in an even more primordial sense than does the Being of the ready-to-hand. [...] this spatiality has its own unity through that totality-of-involvements in-accordance-with-the-world [weltmassige] which belongs to the spatially ready-to-hand.” (1962, 138 *original emphasis*)

Now, if the “environment” (*Umwelt*) is this background “totality of involvements” in which we are always already absorbed when we are engrossed in some familiar task, Heidegger

¹² Foltz (1995) explicates a Heideggerian vision of nature as more primordial than the ready to hand.

finds it is threatened, as such, by the the present-at-hand world that we are always problematically positing for ourselves. And moreover, for Heidegger, it is by failing to attend to this primordial inconspicuous familiarity that we risk loosing sight of the true wonder, grandeur, and poetry of Nature.

As the 'environment' is discovered, the 'Nature' thus discovered is encountered too. If its kind of being as ready-to-hand is disregarded, this Nature itself can be discovered and defined simply in its pure presence-at-hand. But when this happens, the Nature which 'stirs and strives' which assails us and enthralls us as a landscape, remains hidden. The botanist's plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow, the 'source' which the geographer establishes for a river is not the 'springhead in the dale'" (1962, 100)

In other words, the grandeur of nature is, for Heidegger, closely related to the familiar, habitual, local environment--a perspective quite different from that of the wilderness walker, for whom the raw matter of nature is often celebrated for its tendency to disrupt everyday human habits and associations. Heidegger's proximity to a romantic vision of pastoral nature, which is prominently on display in his later work, is already strongly indicated in passages like this one from *Being and Time*. That is to say, finding our true eyes for nature is central to Heideggerian thought. Charles Taylor contends the primary importance of Heidegger's philosophy of the ready-to-hand lies in the great headway it makes against modern rationalism, (Taylor 1993) yet it is clear that this critical/corrective project does not exhaust Heidegger's aims. His later work would culminate in the assertion that the most urgent task of modern humanity and its philosophical vanguard is to make a space or open a "clearing" for Being itself. And indeed,

even in the beginning of *Being and Time* we can sense a very similar “positive” project. It is hard to avoid the impression that the tool-analysis already aims to offer a glimpse of the “springhead in the dale” in its true Being--an authentic glimpse of what is all around us, what is “nearest” to us, with a vision un-compromised by our modern cultural, philosophical, and technological provenance. And, similar to Berry, the simple daily tasks of just “getting by” are somehow the key to an authentic relationship with physical nature--to truly and fully dwelling-in-the-world as an embodied being. We thus begin to see the outline of a close connection between the tool analysis and the dwelling ideal explored in the previous section.

agrarian praxis and Heidegger’s environmental hermeneutic of the metabolic body

The early Heidegger’s consistent point of departure in this regard is the “concernful circumspection” of the the task-oriented person, and it only takes a little attention to notice that just which sorts of tasks these should be matters a great deal to Heidegger. His classic example is the swinging of a hammer. We might suppose that this particular activity was chosen for its simplicity as an archetypal example of tool-use. And surely that is at least partly the case. But it is notable that in both *Being and Time* and Heidegger’s later works, the tasks that exemplify being-in-the-ready-to-hand world center on the practical and productive work of traditional rural life. Conversely, the somehow-less-than-fully-practical engagements of the meteorologist, the botanist, or the geographer, or the “hurried and harried” routine of the city dweller are elided or offhandedly implicated in problematic modes of human existence, in which the world is confronted inauthentically, or as the “merely” present-at-hand. Heidegger’s environmental techniques of self, in other words, tend to be agrarian. The countryside, the farmstead, and the

craftsman's workshop are the predominant settings where the anonymous characters that populate *Being and Time* and later works live their *Zuhandenheit* lives, while the rationalizing tasks associated with industrial production and scientific study--tasks of measuring and calculating especially--bear the brunt of Heidegger's criticism.

Heidegger does not specifically explain this predilection, but there are clues as to why and how these tasks carry such importance in the discussion of "the totality of involvements," which constitutes the authentic nexus of *Dasein* and the ready-to-hand. Heidegger writes, "when an entity within-the-world [such as Heidegger's hammer] has already been proximally freed for its Being, that Being is its "involvement". With any such entity as entity, there is some involvement." (1962, 116-7) For Heidegger the hammer has its being, its readiness-to-hand, within a coherent concentric schema of subjective spheres of concern. With the hammer, "there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protection against bad weather; and this protection 'is' for the sake of [*um-willen*] providing shelter for *Dasein*—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of *Dasein's* Being." (1962, 116-7) Heidegger goes on to make clear that it is the tenuous possibility of *Dasein's* own being that stitches together these active involvements with the material world into one coherent totality.

In a workshop, for example, the totality of involvements which is constitutive for the ready-to-hand in its readiness-to-hand, is 'earlier' than any single item of equipment; so too for the farmstead with all its utensils and outlying lands. But the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a "towards-which" in which there is *no* further involvement: this "towards-which" is not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is

rather an entity whose Being is defined as Being-in-the-world, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs. This primary "towards-which" is not just another "towards-this" as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary 'towards-which' is a "for-the-sake-of-which". But the 'for-the-sake-of' always pertains to the Being of *Dasein*, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue. We have thus indicated the interconnection by which the structure of an involvement leads to *Dasein*'s very Being as the sole authentic "for-the-sake-of-which"... (1962, 116-7)

With Heidegger it is always a specific kind of practical activity that establishes an authentic relationship to the environment as the "totality of involvements." In essence, it is what Heidegger calls *Dasein*'s "being-toward-death" that ensures this linkage. This, it seems, is what distinguishes certain tasks and modes of activity as proper environmental techniques of the self for Heidegger. That is to say, this peculiarly central thematization of mortality is the key to Heidegger's consistent concern with subsistence activities, and particularly with the habitual, situated work of rural, agrarian life. The mortal condition, ultimately, is what puts the "concern" in "concernful circumspection," thus drawing together the "circum" for our "spection."

Heidegger de-sanitizes and de-rationalizes the philosophico-scientific world picture by showing that the as-structure, or what we might call the "modality of meaningfulness," goes all the way down, and is the necessary ground for any objectivist viewpoint that philosophers might build upon it. But Heidegger's modality of meaningfulness (the hermeneutic "as-structure" of "concernful circumspection") is given a particular orientation. It is centrally human, and more specifically its human-centeredness lies in the trace of death that runs through it--a gravely human significance grounding, centering, and gathering the surroundings. For lack of more dramatic

term, we could call this Heidegger's environmental hermeneutic of death, but perhaps it would be no less accurate to associate it with "life," so let us call it a hermeneutic of the metabolic body.

We can see this hermeneutic at work in *Being and Time's* treatment of "place" and "region." In rejecting DesCartes' understanding of space, Heidegger turns to the readiness-to-hand of an environment of "regions." "Churches and graves, for instance, are laid out according to the rising and setting of the sun--the regions of life and death, which are determinative for Dasein itself with regard to its ownmost possibilities of Being in the world." (1962, 137) When we recognize the hermeneutic importance of the metabolic body we can see how the agrarian themes of Heidegger's examples of the "acceptance" of the primordially significant environment are overdetermined. "If, for instance," writes Heidegger,

the south wind 'is accepted' ["*gilt*"] by the farmer as a sign of rain, then this 'acceptance' ["*Geltung*"] —or the 'value' with which the entity is 'invested'—is not a sort of bonus over and above what is already present-at-hand in itself—*viz*, the flow of air in a definite geographical direction. The south wind may be meteorologically accessible as something which just occurs; but it is *never* present-at-hand *proximally* in such a way as this, only occasionally taking over the function of a warning signal. On the contrary, only by the circumspection with which one takes account of things in farming, is the south wind discovered in its Being. (1962, 111-2)

The similarities with Berry are striking. Like Berry, Heidegger grounds authentic unadulterated contact with the immediate surrounding world in the biological, metabolic realities that link the mortal human body to the earth. And as with Berry, this grounding passes *through*

agrarian praxis as the archetype of “work.” Graham Harman discounts Heidegger’s thematic preoccupation with what in 1920s Germany could still be referred to as “peasant life” as an inconsequential authorial eccentricity,¹³ but I argue that Heidegger is not merely a philosopher with agrarian proclivities and a penchant for romanticized rustic imagery; rather his is truly an *agrarian environmentalist* philosophy. Like Berry, Heidegger finds *work* to be the name of our truest relationship to the world, where “work” is a name most appropriately applied to the serious labor directly concerned with subsisting on the earth, and “the world” is the “here” of one’s immediate environment, the habitual lifeworld or dwelling place--what Berry called the “everywhere different and differently named earth.”

Heidegger’s work world

Even so, Heidegger the philosopher was never entirely comfortable with his agrarianism. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger claims an official agnosticism about the *alethurgic* status of agrarian practices.

“a distant mountain range under a vast sky--such a thing ‘is.’ What does its Being consist in? When and to whom does it reveal itself? To the hiker who enjoys the landscape, or to the peasant who makes his daily living from it and in it, or to the meteorologist who has to give a weather report? Who among them lay’s hold of Being? All and none.” (1961, 37)

But Heidegger’s readers know his sympathies lie with the peasant. The special place of *work* as such in Heidegger’s thought is nowhere more plainly shown than in a short publication titled

¹³ See Harman, 2002 180-190.

“Why do I stay in the provinces?” which Heidegger wrote after quitting his rectorship of Freiburg University in 1934 and turning down a position in Berlin. It is worth quoting at length here. Heidegger begins the dispatch with an ode to his own Black Forest dwelling and its surroundings.

On the steep slope of a wide mountain valley in the southern Black Forest, at an elevation of 1,150 meters, there stands a small ski hut. The floor plan measures six meters by seven. The low-hanging roof covers three rooms: the kitchen which is also the living room, a bed-room and a study. Scattered at wide intervals throughout the narrow base of the valley and on the equally steep slope opposite, lie the farmhouses with their large overhanging roofs. Higher up the slope the meadows and pasture lands lead to the woods with its dark fir-trees, old and towering. Over everything there stands a clear summer sky, and in its radiant expanse two dark hawks glide around in wide circles. (2006, 16)

But this mere description of the present-at-hand landscape is then disavowed, and juxtaposed to a oneness-with-place that is deeper than mere observation.

This is my work-world – seen with the eye of an observer: the guest or summer vacationer. Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the season. The gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the slow and deliberate growth of the fir-trees, the brilliant, simple splendor of the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow – all of this moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in forced moments of “aesthetic” immersion or artificial empathy, *but only when one’s own existence stands in its work. It is the*

work alone that opens up space for the reality that is these mountains. The course of the work remains embedded in what happens in the region. (2006, 16 *italics added*)

Working, in other words, is the no nonsense mode of existing that enacts a true and deep connection with the environment-as-place. “My work-world” is the true name for Heidegger’s environment, and it is existing-as-working that opens a clearing for the true being of place to bear itself forth. But wait, the “work” Heidegger is speaking of in this passage is his own philosophical work, not the labor of living off the land. Stay tuned though. Heidegger makes it clear in the next breath that it is only by virtue of the special kinship that *his* philosophy has with the peasants’ work that it affords this opening of place into its own true being.

[...] this philosophical work does not take its course like the aloof studies of some eccentric. It belongs right in the middle of the peasants’ work. When the young farm boy drags his heavy sled up the slope and guides it, plied high with beech logs, down the dangerous descent to his house, when the herdsman, lost in thought and slow of step, drives his cattle up the slope, when the farmer in his shed gets the countless shingles ready for his roof, my work is of the same sort. It is intimately rooted in and related to the life of the peasants. (2006, 16-7)

As the theorist of the ready-to-hand, Heidegger had found the philosophical analog of the physicality of habitual praxis, and thus of Being itself. He had crafted a special layer of thought that could be superimposed without adulteration onto the gestures and habits that are “nearest” to human existence. It would be the thought *closest* to praxis--*Zuhandenheit* 2.0--praxis itself philosophized. As such, Heideggerian phenomenology is itself an environmental technique of

the self, or a technique of the environmental self.¹⁴ It is a path of thinking that is ultimately meant to cultivate a profound sinking-into-place--a means of truly and deeply apprehending the existence of the physicality that is all around us.

The fact that Heidegger's ideal of dwelling in place is embedded in one of the most influential philosophical projects of the modern era is circumstantial evidence of the powerful allure of the modern notion that we might somehow, through a certain mode of thought or practice, make truer, more profound, or more vital contact with the physical environment. And because Heidegger's philosophical project is so carefully and insightfully comprehensive, it helps explicate the essentialism to which agrarian localism is prone. It is an essentialism of the metabolic body--the body as the site of basic life processes of birth, growth, and subsistence--which tends to be defined in the negative by death as its essential and ever-present possibility. It is an essentialism that tends to imagine a timeless, or very slowly evolving natural setting, and a peaceful, quiet, often solitary life. It tends to imagine harmonious inhabitants who merge with the surrounding world while also lending to it a coherent system of meaning.

undoing Heidegger's work-world

Does this hermeneutics of subsistence, then, serve the very metaphysical desire for true seeing and "pure presence" that Heidegger believed Western philosophy had been mistakenly pursuing? Does our analysis of a certain image of *work* catch Heideggerian environmentalism falling short of Heidegger's own philosophical goals? Have we shown how Heidegger struggles against himself within a metaphysical arena but is ultimately overcome? Do we find his extraordinary

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty is perhaps more candid about this normative project of phenomenology. In his Heidegger-inspired *Phenomenology of Perception* he explicitly says that phenomenology functions as a means of "relearning to look at the world" (1989, xxii) and recovering a sense of "wonder in the face of the world." (1989, xv)

excavations undermining the original foundation on which his philosophy of Being is built? If so, then our analysis maps closely the outlines of Derridean deconstruction.

Derrida, who was Heidegger's most critical disciple and most devoted critic, explored from numerous angles what he portrayed as Heidegger's nuanced record of eventual failure on his own terms--his eventual failure, that is, in this most important and most fundamental aim of his philosophical project--the overcoming of the Western "metaphysics of presence." In the reading of *Being and Time* I have offered, a specific kind of human-centeredness in Heidegger's thought is implicated in this inability to escape the allure of "presence." That is, the essentially human concern with life and death, and the work that most nearly enacts that concern, reproduce, so to speak, the "effect" of presence. And yet, Derrida points out that to charge Heidegger with anthropocentrism is, if not exactly wrong, at least imprecise, and at worst naively simplistic. The anthropocentrism we detect in Heidegger is not the result of a naive narrowness of thinking. It is far more "unuprootable" than that. It lies, Derrida asserts, in the stubborn link between the humanistic "we" of philosophical discourse and the very enigma of "Being" with which philosophy, not excluding Heideggerian philosophy, is concerned. That is, it is a result of "the hold which the 'humanity' of man and the thought of Being, a certain humanism and the truth of Being, have over one another." (Derrida 1969, 44-5) It was, Derrida avows, never exclusively, nor even principally "Man" that Heidegger--or Husserl, Hegel, or Kant before him--sought to elucidate. Rather, for Heidegger, as he himself tells us in the opening of *Being and Time*, the question of Being [*Seinsfrage*] is the formal question of the book. The goal is to think Being itself, the is-ness of what exists. *Dasein*, human being, is taken up as a mere expedient--as that "exemplary being" (*exemplarische Seiende*) which will constitute the privileged text for a

reading of the sense of Being.” (Derrida 1969, 46). Dasein is privileged because, if we would know being, it is necessary to inquire about the being that is closest to hand--the being of *that being that inquires about being*, which is thus the site of the absolute *proximity* of being to its own questioning: *Dasein*.

Thus, perhaps not “presence” precisely, but “proximity,” according to Derrida’s reading, is the true name of Heidegger’s perhaps reluctant, though not unwitting, anthropocentrism.¹⁵ Ultimately though, as I have tried to show, this philosophically irresistible enigma of proximity draws Heidegger in, not only toward the question of “Being,” but ultimately also towards a centering of the question of Being in the human, mortality, and the laboring body. This was recognized by Hannah Arendt, another of Heidegger’s devoted critics, who likened Heidegger to a fox caught all alone in his own beautiful trap.¹⁶ Arendt, moreover, recognized Heidegger’s onto-aesthetics of labor, life and death--what I am calling his hermeneutic of the metabolic body--as a hostility to politics in his thinking. Heideggerian environmentalism functions to suggest a way out of politics through a privileged subject position with authentic access to environmental truth. It functions in this sense rather like the scientific naturalism critiqued by Bruno Latour (2004), which pretends or expects empirical study of natural systems can settle environmental-political debates,. Arendt’s solution to the Heideggerian allergy to politics was essentially to consign Being-towards-death to the private realm of labor, raw-nature, earth, and

¹⁵ “It is within the enigma of a certain proximity, a proximity to itself and a proximity to Being that we shall see [in Heidegger’s work] constituting itself against humanism and against metaphysical anthropologism, another instance and another insistence of man, relaying, ‘relevant,’ replacing that which it destroys according to the channels in which we are, from which we will no doubt emerge and which remain to be questioned.” (1969, 45) Derrida’s expression here about the prospect of “emerging” from the metaphysical “channels” of Heideggerian thought is notably optimistic when set against the rest of Derrida’s work, which insists upon and demonstrates the great difficulty of doing so.

¹⁶ “Heidegger the Fox” was published in English in *Essays In Understanding* (Arendt 1994).

the *oikos*, and then to rigidly delineate this private realm from politics. (Arendt 1998) In the context of the present ecological age, however, Arendt's purifying distinction may not be tenable, if indeed it ever was. What we used to call "natural" has forcefully intruded into the public and the political, and increasingly has mixed itself with the technological. This suggests it may be necessary to question the centrality of the environmental hermeneutic of the metabolic body, rather than ghettoize it as Arendt tried to do.¹⁷

Heidegger himself, in *Being and Time*, offers glimpses of certain "ec-centric" movements of human being-in-the-world, wherein meetings of human and nonhuman are not beholden to a hermeneutic of human temporality centered on the subsisting body. The "mere staring" that takes things as present-at-hand is one example of this. Another is "curiosity." As the philosopher of work par excellence, Heidegger has little to say about play. But in his treatment of curiosity we get a glimpse of it. "Curiosity," for Heidegger, suggests a close proximity between a kind of playful perceptual encounter and presence-at-hand. The first step towards curiosity, in any case, is to stop working, to take a rest. "In rest," Heidegger writes, "concern does not disappear; circumspection, however, becomes free and is no longer bound to the world of work. When we take a rest, care subsides into *circumspection which has been set free*. ...Care becomes concern with the possibilities of seeing the 'world' merely as it *looks* while one tarries and takes a rest." (1962, 216)

In the language Heidegger uses to characterize curiosity, we can perhaps recognize something of the attitude of the wilderness walker, striking out across the open country to see nature truly with the chaste eye of an ascetic wanderer. "...When curiosity has become free,"

¹⁷ I explore the environmental political implications of Arendt's encompassing distinction between public and private in an essay titled "Hannah Arendt and the Geopolitics of Ecology," forthcoming in Nelson and Soguk 2013.

Heidegger writes, “it concerns itself with seeing... *just* in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty.” But this freeing of environmental perception from the practical concerns of subsistence is cast in a decidedly negative light, as false and inauthentic. “In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world.” (1962, 217 *some italics added*) Heidegger does not even accord this “freed” mode of perception the dignity of a traditionally philosophical desire for true seeing: “Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marveling at them--[*Thaumazein*]. To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest.” (1962, 217) For Heidegger, any such escape from work-bound circumspection is rather a first step toward the “falling” of *Dasein* away from itself and into the “they”-world--a kind of inauthentic, hyper-social, shallow pop-consciousness. (1962, 210-224) “...Curiosity is everywhere and nowhere. This mode of Being-in-the-world reveals a new kind of Being of everyday *Dasein*--a kind in which *Dasein* is constantly uprooting itself.” (1962, 217) In other words, “curiosity” in *Being and Time* is the provenance of window shoppers, vacationers, and tourists--those modernized crowds who are placeless in the sense that they do not work, and who do not truly *work* because they are fundamentally placeless.

In his later work, Heidegger does begin to resist the over-coding gravitational pull of human being-towards-death, which I have argued is at the root of the agrarian themes and the centrality of “work” in *Being and Time*. Jeff Malpas points out in a study of “Heidegger’s Topology” (2006) that Heidegger’s “turn” post-*Being and Time*, was, among other things, an abandonment of the earlier privileging of *time* as a transcendent organizing dimension of being

(which he had posed against space as the Cartesian bogeyman of presence-at-hand). For this reason, *Being and Time*, Malpas observes, “seems to make spatiality...dependent on the projective activity, ultimately grounded in temporality, of individual being-there [Dasein].” (Malpas 2006, 156) In the later work, on the other hand, the particularity of place becomes an important theme and temporality is less central. In *On Time and Being*, Heidegger acknowledges that his earlier prioritizing of temporality is problematic, writing, “the attempt in *Being and Time*, section 70, to derive human spatiality from temporality was untenable.” (1972, 23) Malpas argues, moreover, that the increasing attention to place in the later work is part and parcel of Heidegger’s conscious attempt to pivot away from the aspects of *Being and Time* that Heidegger came to see as dangerously close to a subjectivist ontology.¹⁸ Heidegger seems to have been concerned throughout his later work to express the subtleties of “the relationship between human being and Being, and to forestall the idea that humans *produce* existence itself--an idea that he feared the language of *Being and Time* had made “all too possible,” (Heidegger 2003, 40). What ties together the concepts Heidegger develops in the later work--“the event,” “Being,” “the thing,” “earth,” “language,” etc.--is what we might call a general ec-static movement or a reaching-outward-beyond-the-human. With these concepts, Heidegger seems to start down a path toward conceptualizations of place that would go beyond the hermeneutic of the metabolic body, and thus beyond an imagery of the environment as the unified, enfolding work-world. However, if Heidegger came to view human temporality--which he anchored specifically in human finitude, or *Dasein*’s being-towards-death--as not ontologically primary, the fourfold essays suggest that this insight was not carried forward in a way that would

¹⁸ Chapter four of Malpas (2006) contains a good discussion this self-critique implied in Heidegger’s later work.

fundamentally challenge the Heideggerian imagery of dwelling and the centrality of agrarian subsistence work as the privileged mode of environmental *alethurgic* practice.¹⁹

The politics of eco-critical practice

Let us return to Heidegger's peculiar question: "A distant mountain range under a vast sky--such a thing 'is.' ...When and to whom does it reveal itself? To the hiker who enjoys the landscape, or to the peasant who makes his daily living from it and in it, or to the meteorologist who has to give a weather report? Who among them lay's hold of Being?" (1961, 37) Heidegger's philosophical concerns may often seem to be situated miles above and beyond the pressing practical questions of everyday life, thus having little to do with actual politics. However, the question of who authentically 'sees' nature, and thus who rightly *speaks for* nature, is prominently featured in the contentious rhetoric of environmental politics. A good example can be found in the forest politics of Northern New Mexico, where contention over the fate of National Forest lands over recent decades has pitted local firewood collectors, timber company employees, wilderness enthusiasts, government scientists, and state bureaucrats against one another. Jake Kosek's excellent book on this controversy (2006) shows a diversity of voices, each claiming the moral high ground of an authentic environmental subject position based on their own particular ways of interacting with the Forest. In such situations, we are never far from Heidegger's question, "who lays hold of being?" Who really sees the forest for its true

¹⁹ In other words, even though the Heideggerian environment, conceived as a firmly emplaced work-world, is most explicitly rendered in Heidegger's later work, it may actually be understood as an aspect of his thought that is rooted in his earlier thought and persists *in spite of* and remains largely unchanged by the broader "turn" in his thought. In this sense, if it is a turn *to space*, it is perhaps fundamentally incomplete.

significance? Which techniques of the ecological self are more authentically edifying, or which mode of environmental practice more surely reveals and enacts environmental truth?

Perhaps environmental politics cannot avoid asking such questions. However, this analysis of the agrarian environmentalism of Berry and Heidegger, and of emplaced subsistence work as an environmental technique of the self, is an attempt to pause and think before rushing to choose sides in such environmental controversies. It is an attempt, moreover, to call into question a certain essentialism to which not only agrarian environmental techniques of the self, but eco-critical practices in general may be drawn--whether they are the epistemic practices of scientists, the peripatetic asceticism of wilderness walkers, the cyclical labors of traditional farmers, or other ways of performing a true and right relationship to the natural world.

Such practices seem to take on this particular philosophical weight in response to a pressing suspicion of the techno-ecological age. We suspect ourselves or others--ourselves and thus others--of a certain blindness to the environment. A blindness for which we are at fault--a blindness that is at once a disability and also a moral failing. Environmentalism is troubled by a failure of sense--of sensation and sensibility. It is a failure that demands corrective action, *practice*. Surely there are things we shall do, and things we shall not do--modes of material life and regimes of bodily comportment that are right for reasons that are more than instrumental--practices that not only accomplish something worthwhile, or achieve some good end, but are also and at once enactments and revelations of a higher truth--of nature itself. As such, environmental techniques of the self may well be crucial to generating awareness and a sense of connection to the natural world, marshalling ethical energies to environmental causes, and generating more sane, careful, and fulfilling ways of living within ecological systems. And yet,

the puzzle for environmental politics that this paper seeks to explicate, is that when we dig deeply enough we find that such active and creative responses often reproduce or replace all too faithfully the politically problematic belief that we can eventually, or at least could in an ideal world, gain the one true perspective, divine the true will of nature, and thus settle environmentalism's debates once and for all.

Epilogue: tinkering as an alternative environmental technique of the self

Perhaps digging deeply is precisely where we go wrong, though, not only in critical thought and discourse, but also in critical philosophical practice. One way to think of *alethurgic* environmental practices of the self would be as practical analogs of the metaphysics of presence, rising above which, was, as we have pointed out above, Derrida's primary aim. And for Derrida, rising above in this sense meant rising to the surface, the outside--avoiding the allure of depth, and the call of a secure center, a ground, or a "transcendental signified." And yet for Derrida this surface was primarily the surface of the text, as the site of the infinite play of signification and *differance*. "There is nothing outside the text," Derrida infamously asserted. The "strong" reading of this statement, as a denial of the real, refutes itself. What Derrida means is that what characterizes the text as a site of the infinite play of differences, deferrals, and mediations also characterizes the world, experience, and practice. Thus there is no *deus ex machina* that can resolve the indeterminacy of language. But it becomes important here to note that as the text has no outside, it also, as Wittgenstein showed, has no inside. Language is always mixed up with embodiment, materiality, and practice. If we cannot escape from language, neither can we retreat within it.

We might, then, try the experiment of remaining *within* critical practice--critiquing eco-critical practice practically--rather than returning to doctrine. But will we not, in doing so, be engaged in our own recursion and reiteration of the oldest philosophical trick--trying to escape from philosophy's difficulties into the solid ground of matter, action, and *praxis*? Perhaps we can hedge against this kind of futility by keeping in view the status of experience itself as a

surface effect--a site of the play of differences and meaningful deferrals of meanings--and seeking a mode of practice that suggest the limitations of its own *alethurgic* potentials. The practice of *bricolage*, as theorized by Claude Levi-Strauss, has much to recommend it here. Derrida found Levi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage* very useful, famously deploying it in a critique of Levi-Strauss's own structural anthropology. (Derrida 1978, 278-94) "[I]t must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*," wrote Derrida, "if one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage that is more or less coherent or ruined." (1978, 285) However, if "*bricolage*" characterizes mythopoesis, speaking and hearing, reading and writing, as Derrida finds, it does so because the usage the term has itself been repurposed from its previous reference to a set of somewhat playfully productive practices, which in English are perhaps best rendered as "tinkering."

What if agrarian environmentalism described and approached the subsistence practices that perform our metabolic connections to the earth might as a kind of tinkering, an ongoing experiment carried on within an environment "more or less coherent or ruined"--that is, within a biosphere that does not progress towards a telos, and within an environment that does not comprise a unified whole either ecologically or phenomenologically, but rather makes up a loose collection of re-assembled parts that can be more or less beautifully, sustainably, and productively arranged? Such a mode of practice may take inspiration from Aldo Leopold's cautionary principle that "to keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering." (Leopold 1989, 190) An environmentalism that took tinkering as its mode of eco-critical practice could be understood as an attempt to take the Derridean project beyond the activities of speaking, reading, and writing. It would look to a genus of practices, or a mode of

practice--which would also be an *approach* to eco-critical practices--faithful to the hope of eschewing the temptation of profundity and the gravitational pull of center and ground. In tinkering, perhaps environmentalism could find an “*alethurgic*” mode of practice that would acknowledge, perform, or even celebrate the fugitive multiplicity of truth--from which experience itself never quite achieves the gravity or the escape velocity it would need to pull away and purify itself.

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