

# Cosmology and Wisdom: The Great Teaching Work of Thomas Berry

David Schenck

*For each thing in its nature is good, but all things together are very good, by reason of the order of the universe, which is the ultimate and noblest perfection in things.*

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 2, 45:10 (1264)<sup>1</sup>

*So you see, I do ask of you things greatly surpassing the human: the near-divine nature of your minds—that is what I am challenging you to reveal.*

Giambattista Vico, *On the Heroic Mind* (1732)<sup>2</sup>

*Biology has mistaken its mythology. It needs poetry rather than mathematics or language-as-science to think with; not an exclusive but an inclusive mythology.*

Elizabeth Sewell, *The Orphic Voice* (1960)<sup>3</sup>

- I. Cosmology: Problematizing Cosmology, Science in the Wisdom Eye, The Mode of Human Being, The Great Responsibility, Our Doubled-Coding
- II. Wisdom: Transforming Traditions, A Teaching School, The Earth, Dreaming
- III. The Legacy

- 
1. Thomas, Aquinas, Saint, *Summa Contra Gentiles – Book Two: Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press edition, 1975), 139.
  2. Vico, Giambattista, *On The Heroic Mind: An Oration*, trans. Elizabeth Sewell and Anthony C. Sirignano, in *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozza, Michael Monney, and Donald Phillip Verene (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), Pt. 2, 230.
  3. Sewell, Elizabeth *The Orphic Voice: Poetry and Natural History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 44.

*Notes on this Text:*

1. For the purposes of this essay I have placed in parentheses truncated citations for direct quotations from Berry's primary works. These abbreviations will be used for four of Berry's books:

DE = *Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988)

ET = *Evening Thoughts* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006)

GW = *Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999)

SU = *Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)

One work by Pierre Hadot, contemporary scholar of Hellenistic philosophy, is quoted often. The abbreviation for his main work is:

Hadot = Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1995)

2. All other citations appear in the footnotes.
3. Berry tended to capitalize "Earth" and "Universe" in his work in the last decades of his life. He also at times makes a distinction between "Dream" and "dream." I have tried in my text to follow his usages when working directly with his texts, and to follow more normal usage at other times.

We are best able to grasp Thomas Berry's teachings when we approach them as standing in the long lines of wisdom literatures, as found in the rich cultural traditions we commonly identify as rooted in China and India, Attica and the Middle East. Oriented in this way, I will argue, we can initiate our readings and re-readings of Berry with the intent of exploring the idea that "cosmology," in his hands, is fundamentally a "wisdom-teaching." These wisdom literatures, together with the teachers who keep them alive, constitute the schools of cultivation and transformation of the human that preserve and renew the profound cultural legacies of the world's civilizations. We can move forward, too, with the suspicion that Berry warrants recognition as a teacher of stature engaged in an effort to renew nearly defunct wisdom traditions, traditions known in our time in the Western world mostly by their absence.

In an effort to situate himself in terms both of contemporary cultural life, and in the lineage of cultural historians, Berry came to speak of himself as a "geologian." He was quite careful not to speak of himself as a philosopher or as a theologian. Why is this important? I would argue that the coining of the term "geologian" had to do with acknowledging the primordial power and significance of the earth and of the earth dreaming. No existing term could indicate the radical departure from our contemporary ways of thinking and understanding and draw attention to taking the earth and that dreaming with ultimate seriousness. For Berry cosmology is at once science and poetry, and most fundamentally, a matter of vision and myth and epic. A geologian might then fairly be considered a visionary for the earth.

Thomas Berry, in addition to being our contemporary, is both behind us and ahead—a historian preserving the living core of wisdom traditions of human cultivation—and a visionary listening towards the future cultivation of human presence on and to the earth. There is no point in pretending that we know who might be counted as a geologian or what being one might mean. We will learn most if we keep the oddness of that notion at the forefront of our minds. We have the cosmologist, a seeming holdover from the past; and the geologian coming to us out of some unknown future.

## I. Cosmology

### *Problematizing Cosmology*

There is a tendency for us as readers, beguiled by Berry's confidence and persuasiveness, to proceed as if we knew what cosmology is. But if we slow down and think about it, if we take a good look at it, we find it to be actually a very odd business. Who can tell the universe's story? Who dares? And especially, how can humans dare—how can any human given that we are the ones who have inflicted on the earth what Berry calls the “supreme pathology”—how dare *we* claim to speak for the universe?

Further, cosmology, for Berry, is clearly neither philosophy nor theology. It is not science, though it is in intimate dialogue with science. What then is it? Part of our difficulty here is that a *new cosmology is not only a new story; it is also a new or newly recovered way of thinking.*

As modern thinkers, we are trained with the methods and categories regnant in contemporary pedagogy and disciplines—the very habits of thought and perception that are, in fact, animating and justifying the devastation of the biosphere. But their logic, the logic of exclusion, “either/or” thinking, precludes the very possibility of any cosmology that is not simply a matter of mathematics or physics. Cosmology as Berry understood it is closer to poetry than it is to either philosophy, or science. Poetic thinking, mythic method, figurative language provide alternatives to the linear logic of scientists, philosophers, and theologians. What would be considered a contradiction in the latter disciplines is an indicator of what we may call *fecund recursion* in cosmology.

We need then to be continually asking what cosmology is, even as we read Berry's presentation of the new story and its significance. We need to be continually asking how cosmology can best be understood in our intellectual milieu. And we should not assume that Berry has in any one place given as clear and decisive an account of cosmology as we might wish. It is important to remember that a great thinker, and especially one standing in a wisdom tradition, drives us on more often by his questions than by his answers.

I suggest it would be helpful here to think of cosmology as having a narrow meaning—the *universe story*—and a broader one, which is the *whole range of human responses* to, as Berry puts it in *Evening Thoughts*, “being seized by an archetypal reality in the unconscious depths of the universe.” (ET 74) Wisdom literature could then be understood as a part of Cosmology in this broader sense (with a capital “C”)—alongside another part of cosmology, the telling of the new story.

We might then think of cosmology in the narrow sense of the universe story (lower-case “c”) as an invitation to Cosmology in a broader sense, as well as a significant component of it. But a new story without dance and music, without a new economy, a new agronomy, and new banking is not, cannot be a new Cosmology. To act in a way such that we dance with the earth—that is as much Cosmology as the new story.

In this frame, Berry’s Great Work was to begin the re-invention of wisdom literature. Such a renewed wisdom tradition would take its place as a component of cosmology, even while urging the importance of cosmology, in both the narrow and the broader senses, in our individual lives and in our communities. Such a literature would be composed in part by essays like Berry’s that take a direct role in making the new cosmology a part of every facet of human life. His essays show what a renewed wisdom literature adequate to our pivotal time needs to address—just as they show one way that work might be done.

We need new means of cultivating ourselves if we are to live differently on the earth. Developing and telling the new story is one component of establishing such cultivation. But the grand sweep of the longed-for cultivation is found only in Cosmology envisioned as the comprehensive presentation of the mystery of presence of the universe in myth, ritual and dream; in liturgy, poetry and music; in wisdom literature and renewed philosophies and theologies; and in the plastic arts of all kinds—painting, sculpture, architecture.

How might we think otherwise? Cosmology encompasses many ways of knowing, many ways of celebrating. Cosmologies are not just ideas and theses; not just new sets of themes or even clusters of stories. What is needed is not just new pictures and ideas, but a

range of activities we can recognize as Cosmology. Ideas and activities undertaken with clear intention and profound awareness and always honoring the primacy of the mystery—always with, as Berry would have us remember, the universe as the singular referent.

### *Science in the Eye of Wisdom*

Nearly every Thomas Berry essay, in one way or another enacts the union—explores the complementarities—relishes the encounter, the doubled-reading and presence of the physical and the psychic. Despite the compelling nature of many of Berry's essays, and the great force of many passages within them, it remains, however, to be seen whether such an integrated science is in fact possible. What is certain is that we do not yet have a science that can encompass the two, the psychic and the physical, the numinous and the scientific. It is likewise the case that we are not likely to have such a science for some time to come, regardless of the hopeful signs here and there to which Berry points.

Berry's argument gets stuck here in a very difficult place—as indeed it does in relation to classical wisdom traditions. The puzzle is how much to accept and how much to reject of the cultural inheritance we have received. Berry's arguments demand that he accept and champion great discoveries made by the methods and models of that very modern science that he rightly chastises elsewhere for playing a significant role in the destruction of the biosphere. Or, to come at it from the other side, Berry's arguments include a call for an integral science that, by the standards of today's science—so central to Berry's own presentations—would not be considered science at all.

Yet we may, in spite of all this, get a science that attends to a wider range of evidence—and thus takes in as evidence, themes, topics, part of what we consider now to be matters of intuition or even poetry. We may get a science that touches on the psychic and the physical, and finds a way to speak of them in an integral language. But this will not give us a Thomas Berry reading of the universe and its myriad wonders. That science will not give us the eyes of Thomas Berry, nor the heart of Thomas Berry. What makes Berry's readings of the creativity of science—his ability to recover its wonder and

profundity—is his wisdom eye. I almost even want to say his eye of analogy. Analogy opens our awareness, and we find ourselves considering a variety of related ideas and images alongside the central movement.

We can appropriately speak of the Earth as a “Living Planet.” This term is used neither literally nor simply metaphorically but as analogy, somewhat similar in its structure to the analogy expressed when we say that we “see,” an expression used primarily for physical sight but also used to connote intellectual understanding. *A proportional relationship is expressed.* The eye is to what it experiences as the intellect is to what it experiences. (SU 110, italics added)<sup>4</sup>

Analogy accounts for much of the distinctiveness of Berry’s practice as a thinker and a writer—a practice imbued with a gift for and appreciation of analogy as method, and an appropriation of analogy

---

4. The literature on analogy is of course immense. For a delightful and expansive contemporary treatment of analogy as the essence of thinking see Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013). For a standard work on Aquinas and analogy see R. M. McInerny, *The Logic of Analogy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961). And for exploration of analogy in the light of 20th century understandings of language and philosophy, see David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

Worthy of special note, because of the extraordinary importance of the Confucian tradition in the development of Berry’s entire vision of human life on the earth, is the discussion of analogy found in Tu Weiming’s *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 67:

Analogy, in this sense, far from being an imperfect form of deductive reasoning, signifies a mode of inquiry significantly different from linear logic but no less rigorous and compelling. To think analogically is to develop self-understanding by a continuous process of appropriating insights into the human situation as a whole and one’s particular “location” in it. This involves systematic reflection and constant learning.

as a source of balance and beauty. He could hardly have put his conviction on the importance of analogy more strongly:

Analogy is the key to all human communication with the nonhuman, whether the divine or the natural world.... The effort to reduce all wisdom to a univocal language is a primary error or failure of our times. (SU 145)<sup>5</sup>

Analogy thus will be, indeed *must* be, the core method for cosmological discourse, because cosmology has as its entire subject matter the non-human and the relationship of the human to the non-human.

Berry makes relatively few detailed references to analogy as a strategy of thought, though he deploys it in nearly every essay. Most often he utilizes what would be termed the “analogy of proportionality.” In its most rudimentary form that would be: 2 is to 4 as 6 is to 12. Take this example from Berry’s treatment of the scientific enterprise:

When we inquire just why scientists devote such intense effort, such enduring dedication to research projects concerned with the story of the universe, one answer might be that scientists are answering the irresistible call of the Great Self of the universe to the Small Self of the individual. (ET 113)

Read this, as instructed, neither literally nor metaphorically. And then ask who else understands modern science this way? Effort, dedication, the universe—put these alongside one another and the mind can jump easily enough, moving analogically, to a connection between Great Self and Small Self. But this is not a move that can be made scientifically or analytically. Yet it will only be such a wisdom-

---

5. Berry’s entire intellectual effort was, in one reading, a matter of persevering in analogical inquiry in the face of the inevitable misreadings and lack of comprehension such an inquiry occasions. Analogy gives us a gestalt, where logic gives us an equation. And wisdom, in all its manifestations, arrives in configurations of habits, ideas, images, inclinations—arrives, that is to say, in gestalts.



view that can open into the Ecozoic era and guide its development. It will be such a view that informs the Great Work and calls us into a new science. Once again:

Any significant thought or speech about the universe finds its expression through such imaginative powers. Even our scientific terms have a highly mythic content—such words as *energy, life, matter, form, universe, gravitation, evolution*. Even such terms as *atom, nucleus, electron, molecule, cell, organism*. Each of these terms spills over into metaphor and mystery as soon as it is taken seriously. (DE 199)

What is suggested here is, in effect, an “archeology” of scientific terminology as its terms arise analogically. For a beautiful example of wisdom put to work on science, we can take up Berry’s interpretation of gravity.

The rate of emergence [of the universe] was such that the consequent curvature of the universe was sufficiently closed to hold the universe together within its gravitational bonds. (SU 125)

Recall that there is nothing more central in the development of modern physics—and, concomitantly, of the paradigm of modern science—than the analysis of gravity. While thinking Galileo, Newton, and Einstein, read what comes next:

This bonding of the universe, whereby every reality of the universe attracts and is attracted to every other being in the universe, was the condition for the rise of human affection. It was the comprehensive expression of the divine love that pervades the universe in its every aspect and enables the creative processes of the universe to continue. (SU 125)

So one might say, let us have an integral science that constitutes a portion of our wisdom literature, which contributes texts of subtlety and scope and wonder. But then let us also have texts that read the new science with the eye of wisdom. And among those texts, let us

have some that tell a new story of the universe as told by the new science—a story read, if you will, by wisdom's eye. Let us differentiate, that is, between scientific thinking and the mind of analogy... and then take both.

True, there are scientists who also make contributions to cosmology. Berry names a few: Lewis Thomas, David Bohm, Rachel Carson, Ira Prigogine, Freeman Dyson, and Bernard Lovell. But the vast, vast majority of our scientists are not capable of this. And most would in fact see avoiding cosmology as understood by Berry as being critical to the integrity of scientific method and to the soundness of scientific conclusions. An approach to the universe through the lens of cosmogenesis may one day issue in a science as aligned with wisdom as, say, the Islamic science of the medieval period. But that day appears to be a very long way off indeed. What we need now, and likely will for centuries, are people who can offer wisdom readings of the science we do have. And, I would argue, this is the special duty of those who, like Thomas Berry, are producing wisdom literature in our time. The issue is not how to turn science into wisdom; but rather, it is how to read the wisdom in the science we have. Being able to accomplish readings that honor both science and wisdom is a rare gift. Berry had it: "The problem of mass extinction is not a one-species problem. And humans are not alone in trying to solve it."<sup>6</sup> Who else speaks this way of the crisis of geological dimensions we find in the biosphere?

If we hope to cultivate people who can read as Berry did, then it is to the classical wisdom traditions we must turn, for they have been and remain—in spite of their egregious failures—the best examples of how to read both the inner and the outer worlds at once. Only the classical teaching traditions have access to techniques and resources sufficient to train our eyes to wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

6. From notebooks of Ann Berry-Somers. Personal communication to the author.

7. It is important to attend very carefully to the subtlety of the presentation Berry makes of the potential contribution of modern science to an emergent wisdom. Note, for instance, that each time he mentions modern science in his essay "Creative Continuity," ET 59-74, he introduces a caveat:

The new origin story, the supreme achievement of the scientific

*The Mode of Human Being*

Berry introduces a distinctive phrase to talk about the place of the human in the universe. How are we to understand what Berry means when he speaks of the human as “*a mode of being of the universe*”? He begins, as he often does, by seeking guidance from Chinese tradition:

We can see, for example, the importance of the early Chinese sense of the human as the *hsin* of the universe. The word *hsin*, written as a pictograph of the human heart, can be translated as either “mind” or “heart.” So the Chinese phrase defines the human as the heart of the universe, or as the consciousness of the universe. (SU 74)

---

effort of these centuries, *must be completed by a sense of the psychic, as well as the physical, dimensions* of the evolutionary process from the beginning. ET 69, italics added.

An *integral creation story* is available in the modern scientific account of the origin and development of the universe, because this account of the physical universe is *completed by an awareness of its numinous and psychic aspects* from the beginning. ET 69-70, italics added.

Hence the need for more comprehensive articulation of the epic of evolution. For there is likely no way into the future that does not take as its basis the *more integral form* of this new vision of the universe. ET 70, italics added.

The point is that the achievement of this “integral form of the epic of evolution,” this completion of science’s physical accounts with “an awareness of its numinous and psychic aspects,” cannot happen without the resources of the classical wisdom traditions. While it is true that the egregious failures of the “humanistic-religious traditions” enumerated above—and indeed, along with various others, in many of Berry’s essays—have made any effort to bring forward the disciplines of the classical traditions problematic, none of the failures exhaust the resources of those traditions. The modern scientific view, unless utterly transformed by the wisdoms of which Berry has spoken, will assuredly continue its role in the devastation of the planet. For modern science is no less ambivalent or flawed as an inheritance and guide than the classical wisdoms. The combination of the two, Berry argues, is what is essential if there is to be any way forward.

From there he moves to a more abstract presentation:

This might lead us to consider whether we should identify the human primarily as a mode of being of the universe or as a particular being in the universe. While we need to do both, *the sense of the human as a mode of being of the whole*, more than as a particular being in the whole, enables us to have a more meaningful perspective on the human and on all human activities. (ET 61, italics added)<sup>8</sup>

Beginning with an analogy we are next invited to turn to philosophical formulation and to talk about the place of the human in the universe. In the passage above, then, a “mode” is an aspect of a whole, but essentially a part of it; and a “particular being” is understood to be a discrete thing, having its own distinctive identity and meaning apart from that of the whole. Berry does here note that for some purposes and in some times, we might need to attend to the distinctiveness of the human, to study the human as a “particular being.” But what he wants to insist on here is that the human derives its meaning and purpose *entirely from the universe*. For it is just this continuity, this indwelling of the universe by the human, that stands most in need of recognition, and emphatic emphasis, in the face of the realities of catastrophic devastation of the earth by projects and priorities of those who do not recognize themselves as integral aspects of an all-compassing universe.

And yet, precisely because so much rests on understanding the relationship of the universe and the human, we must examine carefully and closely the nuances of Berry's articulation of the mode of being of the human. Is there any way in which the human has a special place, though an utterly integral one, in the universe? A place like the one the heart holds in the embodied human life? That the answer here might be “yes” is suggested by his presentation of the relationship of the human mode of being to the universe's dimension of consciousness.

---

8. See SU 74 for more on *hsin*, where Berry states: “It can be translated by a single word or by a phrase that conveys both feeling and understanding.” Berry also notes there that *hsin* could be translated as “the psyche of the universe.”

Another way of proceeding is to begin with human consciousness and to say that we are intimately aware of the human psychic mode of being. There is no way of accounting for the human mode of being and functioning other than through the prior structure and functioning of the universe itself. If the human has a psychic-spiritual mode of being, then the universe must be a psychic-spirit-producing process. (ET 65)

The affirmation of the principle of continuity for all beings, coupled with the awareness that the human being has a psychic dimension, means that the universe itself must have a psychic dimension that is shared by all beings. Next comes a critical move for understanding that mode of being called the human:

The later more complex and conscious realities of the universe give us deeper insight into the structure of the universe than do the elementary parts out of which the later wholes and modes of consciousness emerge. (ET 65)

This is to say human beings give us more understanding of the psychic dimension of the universe than subatomic particles or the first cells of life. And then there is emphasis on the point that the psychic dimension must have been present since the beginning of the universe. This is required by the principle of continuity in a universe that develops through time, out of and by its own creativity.

Indeed, since the universe is a singular reality, consciousness must, from its beginning, be a dimension of reality, even a dimension of the primordial atom that carries within itself the total destiny of the universe. (ET 65)

The lens turns now to focus on the human:

To study the universe without the human is to study an abstraction. There is no universe without the human and no human without the universe, although the revelation of the human form of the universe did not take place in any adequate

way until some two hundred thousand years ago, with the appearance of *Homo sapiens*. (ET 65)

It has taken two hundred thousand years for the full development of the human to occur. But, given that development, it is the human that now gives us our most decisive insights into the consciousness dimension of the universe.

The human might be described as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself and the deep mysteries of existence in a *special mode of conscious self-awareness*. Our human role is to enable the universe to reflect on itself in a *special mode of consciousness*. (SU 95, italics added)

And again:

In this perception the human is seen as a mode of being of the universe as well as a distinctive being in the universe. Stated somewhat differently, the human is that being in whom the universe comes to itself in a *special mode of conscious reflection*. (DE 16, italics added)

And once more:

The human needs to be seen as that being in whom the universe and especially the planet Earth becomes conscious of itself in a *special mode of reflective self-awareness*. (ET 71, italics added)

What is it about the human that makes it a special mode of being? And does being special, in whatever sense, make the human fundamentally unlike other modes of being? The blue heron and the valley are also modes of being of the universe. But is the difference between the human mode and the blue heron mode more significant than the difference between the blue heron mode and the valley mode? The reason one might be led to think this is the case lies in phrases we find throughout Berry's essays: *conscious self-awareness*,

*conscious reflection*, and *reflective self-awareness*. The human allows the universe to *reflect* on itself, to *celebrate* itself, to *come* to itself, to *become conscious* of itself.

Since, as we have already seen, there is a consciousness dimension in every aspect of the universe, it cannot be consciousness alone that distinguishes the human. That which does so would have to be that special mode of consciousness that entails “self-awareness” that is “*conscious*” and “*reflective*.” But rather than making the familiar move of modern philosophy – the move of Descartes or Kant – into an examination of human subjectivity, Berry turns *outward* to the communion of subjects to investigate human consciousness. It is in such outward movements, he argues, that we find the meaning of this self-awareness of the human that becomes the self-awareness of the universe. It is in this *activity* that “we experience the universe as a communion of subjects, not as a collection of objects.”<sup>9</sup> This is key: To understand what is special about the human mode—about “*conscious self-awareness*,” “*conscious reflection*” and “*reflective self-awareness*”—we go outside the self and outside the human towards the Earth. We enter consciously the community that is the Universe.

Our role is to be the instrument whereby the valley celebrates itself. The valley is both the object and the subject of the celebration. It is our high privilege to articulate this celebration in the stories we tell and in the songs we sing. (DE 179)

The human song celebrates the valley as object of human response of delight. This we would expect. But what is surprising is the idea that the valley is not only an “object” of human awareness, but is itself a “subject” that is able to celebrate itself *through* human song and human story. This is what is distinctive about the human mode. Which gives us, in turn, a special responsibility in and to the universe.

Humans are now involved in an effort at self-understanding of the entire universe, of the Earth, and of all living creatures. (ET 71)

---

9. SU 86.

The crux is this: That we not only think, but that in turn the universe and every mode of being within it can think through us, can celebrate through us, and can become reflexive and self-aware through us. And this in a way with humans that is not the case for other beings, including other living beings.

It is then especially tragic that we misunderstand our relationship to the earth and to the universe. If humans are called, in some very particular sense, to carry the role of the mirror of the universe, to take on the responsibility not just to be conscious of and to reflect on ourselves, but to do the same for the entire universe, then we are squandering an opportunity the enormity of which we cannot begin to fathom.

This special role in the universe is consistent with the ways in which we differ from other living beings:

As humans we function differently from other living species, which are determined in their life patterns and in their association among themselves and with other species and have much less of that psychic development we identify as human consciousness. (SU 148)

Part of our uniqueness is that we are imperfect at our inception in a way that requires the development of human culture for completion.<sup>10</sup>

In its raw, uncultivated state, the human being is not satisfactory.... It must be altered to a degree so great that it is described as a new birth, a truly human and spiritual birth.... This is the meaning of initiation rituals among indigenous peoples, of the Hindu bestowal of the sacred cord, and of Christian baptism. (SU 9)

Indeed, the uniqueness of the human is such that it takes special preparation by the earth itself for the distinctive human mode of being to be able to appear, with its capacity for the unique kind of consciousness it manifests:

---

10. See section on "Two Codings" below for fuller development of this point.



This period, the Cenozoic, the last 65 million years, has been the culmination of the most brilliant phase of life's expansion on the planet. Only at the end of this period, when the planet was at its most gorgeous expression, was it possible for humans to appear. (SU 134)

The human capacity for a special mode of consciousness is drawn out of the human by the earth's beauty.

For only in a world of such magnificence could the human mode of being be fully developed, only then could the divine be properly manifested, only in such a world could the burden of human sensitivity and responsibility be sustained, the human condition be endured, and the constant healing needed by the human soul be effected. (SU 134)<sup>11</sup>

All beings are connected to all beings. But the human capacity for reflection means it has what we may call a doubling relationship with each item in the universe. We might say that *the human relates to other beings both as a fellow-being and as a mirror in which that being looks at itself*.<sup>12</sup> It is in just this sense, as I read Berry, that the human is a mode of being of the universe—a special mode.

True, Berry also makes the argument that *every* being is at once integral and unique. Every species has a distinctive, unique place in the universe.

Everything within this curvature [of space] has not only its individual mode of being but its universe mode of being, since the universe is integral with itself throughout its entire extension in space and throughout the full sequence of its transformations in time. (SU 113)

- 
11. "We need a way of designating the Earth-human world in its continuity and identity rather than exclusively by its discontinuity and difference." SU 73.
  12. "The human emerges within the life systems of Earth as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a *special mode of conscious self-awareness*." ET 146, italics added.

Time itself is community. As is space.

Indeed, nothing can be itself without everything else. Everything exists in multiple dimensions. A tree is a physical being, a living being, an Earth being, and a universe being. (SU 113)

Each member, every individual is multi-layered and has itself distinctive and unique roles. But then, and totally without contradiction, all individual instances together constitute the single inter-subjective communion that is the universe. We have, as Thomas Aquinas taught, an extraordinary perfection.

Every mode of being is needed, for every being shares in the great community of existence. In this community of existence we discover our own fulfillment. (SU 96)

All particular beings participate in the community of beings that is the universe. But for Berry the uniqueness of the human has an extra layer, a further dimension: In the human mode of consciousness, the psychic-spiritual being of the universe receives its most distinctive expression. The human is the breakthrough point for evolution and consciousness, a break through *into* reflexive consciousness. And therefore a mode of the universe in a sense that other beings are not.<sup>13</sup>

---

13. Just as the Earth is a planet in a sense that other planets are not:

On Earth we find the fulfillment of the primordial tendency of the universe toward clearly articulated and highly differentiated entities. Earth astounds us with the vast differences between itself and the other planets. SU 110.

This provides us with the way of dealing with the special role of the Earth as revealing the deepest realms of existence with perfection unequalled in any other mode of being we know of. For in the Earth we have our most magnificent display of diversity caught up into the coherence of an unparalleled unity. SU 115.

But there is another way to approach this that does not reserve a privileged place for human beings in the expression of consciousness-dimension of the universe. Berry has taught us that the human is one living being among others, but the one being that jumps evolution, and the earth itself, indeed the universe itself, into consciousness, just as the first living beings jumped the universe to a new level, the level of a “living” universe out of the “non-living” universe. Could we not then expect that consciousness, having now manifested in the human, might continue to manifest in more and more complex forms that run as far beyond the human as the human has run beyond the first living beings?

It is not clear that Berry grants this as a possibility, or that he would welcome it. Neither is it clear that he rules it out. What we can say at this juncture is that Berry’s position on the place of human in the universe is likely to be misread in one of two different directions:

- (a) Essential continuity of the human with the universe—the human understood in terms of the theoretical framework of evolution and understood as having no more special role in the development of the universe than any other species or form of life or form of being.
- (b) Essential discontinuity between the human and the rest of the universe—the human understood as fundamentally distinguished from and/or transcending the rest of the natural order by virtue of rationality, or soul, or volition.<sup>14</sup>

And then there will be those who say that Berry is neither (a), nor (b), because he claims both are true. He claims the human is at once continuous with the rest of nature, and yet holds a distinctive responsibility for the direction of the growth of the universe. For such readers this amounts to a fundamental contradiction at the core

---

14. Compare Berry’s own version of these two directions in his essay on Teilhard de Chardin: “In its modern orientations the human mind seems to be caught between a downward reductionism of the mechanists and the upward reductionism of the spiritualists.” Thomas Berry, “Teilhard in the Ecological Age,” in *Teilhard in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Arthur Fabel and Donald St. John (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 66.

of his position and of his account of the new cosmology. And whichever camp of critics one falls into, neither projecting the coming of a whole new science, nor leaning heavily on the traditional practice of story is likely to be received as a satisfactory response.

But these critics, and we as readers trying to follow Berry here, are asking the wrong questions. Or, perhaps better, we are all looking for the wrong kind of answer. We are looking for a position on the human, established by contemporary methods of argument—induction and deduction. We expect to find marshalling of evidence, empirical and textual. We think Berry will give us a scientific account or a philosophical one. In fact he gives us neither. A Thomas Berry essay is not science and not philosophy; likewise, it is not poetry or myth. He asks us, instead, to consider his work as cosmology, whose fundamental structure is that of analogy.

I see only one way to hold together this doubled-presentation of the human in such a way that it is not experienced or understood as a fundamental contradiction, or as some fundamental, crippling ambiguity in Berry's position, or as resolvable in some new envisioned but not yet manifested science. And that is to claim that Berry has *intentionally* placed us just here in the midst of these perplexities. He is asking us to step into the "impossibility" of the human as totally unique and totally continuous and think and feel and dream and act that impossibility. It would not be the first time a wisdom-teacher assigned his students a *kōan*.

### *The Great Responsibility*

There is an immense question at the core of the Great Work: "How can humans enter the future with some responsible use of their creative freedom?" As if anticipating the very argument being made here, Berry notes that "there is a tendency to revert back to the traditional disciplines of past cultural developments." (ET 66) But, he says, "The difficulty with this solution is that these humanistic and religious traditions themselves are largely responsible for the situation that has evolved." (ET 67) He lists three critical inadequacies of these traditions:

1. “the placing of the divine as transcendent to the natural world;”
2. “the establishment of the human also as transcendent to the natural world;”
3. “the doctrine of an infrahistorical millennial age.” (ET 67)

None of these criticisms of the classical traditions are especially novel, and their applicability to developments in Indo-European cultures is not easily disputed. When the divine is not only understood but *lived* as transcendent, the natural order, its laws and its beauties, inevitably are subordinated – Berry’s word here is “diminished.” Humans, being modeled on the divine transcendent, and having a special relationship to the transcendent divine, are understood as transcending all the rest of the natural world. When this transcendence is understood as “sovereignty over,” the *lived* consequences are beyond comprehension. All nature is at the disposal of human beings without regard to the intrinsic right to being of anything humans have sovereignty over. Additionally, there is the sense that some future moment in history—the dynamics of which may be understood in terms of either a theology of history or a philosophy of history—will bring to fulfillment human being human and the natural order. All meaning, order and beauty in the present time are then to be discounted when seen in the light of this privileged time to come.

But then, in one of those characteristic turns that mark Berry’s essays, he transforms this relatively academic-sounding list into deeply-piercing insight into the inadequacy not just of our moral thinking, but of our very moral perception:

The inadequacy of the humanistic and religious past can be seen quite clearly from the ethical issue in its traditional context, where we perceive the evil of suicide and homicide, and especially the horror of genocide. Yet we have little objection to biocide or geocide. The very magnitude of such activities escapes us. (ET 67-68)

We do not have enough imagination to even begin to grasp how

dire our situation is—and just *that* is how dire it is. And only the new universe story, Berry is arguing, can offer the breadth of vision and the sense of the enormity of time necessary for re-imagining the moral life.

Berry next goes on to indicate that these failures of imagination and vision are to be found not only in the “humanistic-religious traditions,” but also in the practices and policies of our major institutions and professions.

All four—the political, religious, intellectual, and economic establishments—are failing in their basic purposes for the same reason. They all presume a radical discontinuity between the nonhuman and the human modes of being, with all the rights and all inherent values given to the human. (GW 72)

Laid out here is the fundamental link Berry sees between our current political and economic situation and the major failures of our received wisdom traditions. The partitioning of the universe, the structures of transcendence and hierarchy that Berry sees as characteristic of the “humanistic-religious traditions,” unfolds in this reading of the history of the modern world into a lived order that prizes the human above all else, to the point of being willing to sacrifice all else for the sake of the human.

He summarizes his critique of our past and present resources and practices by speaking to the “demonic aspect” of and the “cunning” behind all our furious efforts to re-make the earth for ourselves (ET 69). The dramatic term “demonic” urges us to recognize that the human is just now in the thrall of enormous powers well beyond ready comprehension, and well beyond the scope of any moral, social, or imaginative resources we have readily at hand. Or, in other words, it is because this distorted vision of the human in the world is the *root dream of our modern culture* that it has such overweening power. Which, in turn, means the only commensurate power will be that of a vision rooted in, and nourished by, dream—not analysis, not policy, not wisdom literature, but dream (ET 68-69).<sup>15</sup>

Take it as given that human beings stand now as the major threat

---

15. See also DE 202-11.

to the balance and order and survival of many dimensions of life and beauty on the earth. How and where, then, can we see the earth moving to heal itself in relation to human beings, and to heal human being as well? Or, put differently, what are the processes, agents, “mechanisms” involved in human efforts to heal the human community and to heal the community that is the earth? Another way of asking this question may be useful: If the new story, the new cosmology, is itself one creative manifestation of the human, how is the new story itself related to the earth’s creativity? Or, in very short form: How is cosmology renewed?

### *Our Doubled-Coding*

According to Berry, every activity of every human being at every turn has been and will be the result of a two-fold coding: genetic DNA coding and transgenetic cultural coding.

The creative genius of the earlier life processes of the Earth, as well as its principal instrument of education, is genetic coding.... The ultimate creative genius of the Earth at this level is the emergence of the total biospheric interaction of genetic coding and the mutation processes whereby new codes are developed. (ET 71)

Our genetic coding, Berry claims, provides the basis for the development of our transgenetic—that is, linguistic and cultural—coding. It is the ongoing and radical creative potential carried in our DNA that underwrites the creative potential and possibilities of human culture.

With the emergence of hominoid life the Earth community brought forth a genetic coding for the transgenetic processes that identify the human level of cultural development. The human being is genetically coded for speech.... The entire complex of human culture is genetically coded. (ET 72)

The genetic coding thus provides the “infrastructure” of the cul-

tural coding, if you will. And that “transgenetic coding” in turn governs the entire progression of human culture:

Over the centuries this cultural coding of human communities has been articulated in its early Paleolithic tribal phase, in its Neolithic village phase, then in its classical civilizational phase, when the more populous centers arose with their more spacious architecture, their written literatures, their more elaborate religious, political, and economic establishments. (DE 201)

Yet, like all things temporal, even the grandest of articulations and manifestations of the possibilities open by and to the cultural coding lose their force and cogency.

These achievements, which are sometimes designated as the full realization of the human mode of being, have a certain tendency to disintegrate in the manner that we are presently experiencing. (DE 201)

When the transgenetic coding is at a dead end, human beings can go back under and behind that coding and access a whole new dimension of creativity, the creativity of the earth itself as that manifests in our genetic make-up, our DNA. That then is the answer to the question of how human consciousness can get outside itself to (re-)create itself, to renew its cosmology, in the deepest and broadest understanding we can muster of that term.<sup>16</sup>

- 
16. The key move in this sequence is rooted oddly enough not in any science, but in the writings of a historian and philosopher of culture, one who was a careful student of the wisdom texts of western culture. And one known quite well to Berry, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on him:

Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century Neapolitan interpreter of human history, considered that the eighteenth century was the period when a second barbarism, a barbarism of refinement, erupted in the civilizational enterprise. A new descent into a more primitive state must then come about, a reimmersion in the natural forces out of which our cultural achievements came about originally. (DE 201)



Our cultural resources have lost their integrity. They cannot be trusted. What is needed is not transcendence but “inscendence,” *not the brain but the gene*. (DE 208, italics added)

Most fundamentally then: *The knowledge of how to be on the earth lies already and always in our DNA—which is to say, in our bodies.*

How, in a time dominated by demonic permutations of transgenetic cultural coding, are we to restore the balance with the genetic, with our bodies?

As all creativity involves being seized by an archetypal reality in the unconscious depths of the universe, as creative religious personalities were seized by revelatory experiences of the divine whereby they created the religious cultures of the past, so now we are being seized by a new revelatory experience that is coming to us in the new origin story and its fulfillment in this latest communion phase of the universe. (ET 74)

Berry’s hopefulness, which he would convey to us, rests in large part upon the conviction that at just this historical juncture in the life of the human species and of the planet Earth, “we are being seized by a new revelatory experience.” The moments, the periods when human communities and individuals are “seized by an archetypal reality in the unconscious depths of the universe” can usher in new worlds, new eras. He speaks of the “emerging ecological phase,” the fundamental characteristic of which will be the “conscious integration of the entire range of all those codings that govern the living and the nonliving systems of the universe.” (ET 72) This is the decisive moment in the human venture in which we stand and act and hope. But we do this with the awareness that we do not face this immense prospect alone:

We are an immediate concern of every other being in the universe. Ultimately our guidance on any significant issue must emerge from this comprehensive source. (DE 195)

And the community—the communion of subjects that Berry says the universe is—is right at hand: “Nor is this source distant

from us. The universe is so immediate to us, is such an intimate presence, that it escapes our notice.” (DE 195) We are, in short, that communion—our bodies themselves are communions of billions of beings. We ourselves are composed of cells of more beings than we can possibly imagine. This is the wonder; this is the mystery; this is the universe.

## II. Wisdom

### *Transforming Traditions*

What would it mean to say that Berry's essays are best understood as wisdom teaching? To proceed, it will be helpful to make some provisional distinctions. I will take “classical tradition,” “wisdom tradition,” and “wisdom teaching tradition” as referring to the same phenomenon. And that would be, as Berry explains very carefully, collections of texts and disciplines—deeply interrelated and mutually re-enforcing—passed on from generation-to-generation within a given culture.

The most primordial intuitions of humankind, as expressed in myths and spiritual disciplines, communicate to us across the ages—at least in outline—this cosmological context for cultural development. (SU 22)

These texts and disciplines address fundamental questions and agonies of human beings, questions of how as humans we are to live and act and see—on the earth, in the universe. These spiritual disciplines will include ritual, meditation, and prayer practices, spiritual exercises, social duties, and scholarly disciplines. Texts will typically include sacred scriptures, canonical teaching texts, and interpretations and commentaries on these core texts.

Berry spells out the development of such tradition as that process is widely understood. First we have the formation of the sacred scriptures—or, perhaps more accurately their “reception”:

These visionary experiences that took place in mythic arche-

typal modes were articulated into mythic and historical narratives, in ritual, and in wisdom reflections. (SU 191)

Note that the shamanic encounters with the cosmos are understood to have come before scripture and commentary. What we may think of as canonical texts are generated at this time. And next there is wisdom literature:

Then came the more explanatory works, the commentaries on the sacred revelations, and the mystical disciples. (SU 191)

Such texts mediate between those who would be shaped by them and the sacred texts themselves, which are often cryptic, elusive, mysterious, demanding, and thus in need of commentary.

Ever since that time [of the composition of scriptural texts], humans have sustained and developed the greater cultures by constant reinterpretation of these ancient written scriptures in the light of new historical experiences. The constant renewal of civilizations, their very life process, has been associated with, and largely governed by, reinterpretation of these same texts. (SU 22-23)

It is to be emphasized that the role of these “reinterpretations” is by no means a passive one in relation to sacred and canonical texts. To some degree, *every piece of wisdom literature defines anew the tradition in which it lies.*

Given that ours is a time that human cultures stand in desperate need of renewal, we would expect to find that a critical component in the Great Work would be “constant reinterpretation” of such wisdom as we received, reinterpretation “in the light of new historical experiences.” My argument here is that Berry’s essays are themselves exemplars of such reinterpretations—as well as a call for massive efforts of reinterpretation on the part of communities all over the planet.

We need now to look at the components of classical wisdom traditions, and the roles and types of wisdom literatures within them.

To do this, we will take as brief “case studies” two traditions Berry knew well: Hellenistic philosophy and Confucianism. We will rely on Pierre Hadot’s account of Hellenistic philosophy and Berry’s own account of Confucianism. Both traditions sought to pass on from generation-to-generation teaching that explains the place of the human in the universe, and training in the practices and disciplines of cultivation needed to hold that place properly and fruitfully. The schools that arose in these traditions around their central texts were places for learning how to live. And this training was not just for the living of one’s own life but, especially in the Stoic and Confucian schools, for living in community—that is, an education for politics, for family, for teaching.

Pierre Hadot, the French scholar who has done so much to revolutionize our approach to Hellenistic philosophy, puts it this way:

The Stoics, for instance, declared explicitly that philosophy, for them, was an exercise. In their view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory—much less in the exegesis of texts—but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle which engages the whole of existence. (Hadot 82-83)

Considering Chinese tradition, Berry put the same point this way:

Thus the entire Confucian teaching can be considered as a tradition of personal self-cultivation, as the art of self-awareness, as a mode of self-discipline. The purpose of all this was to become one who immediately and instinctively, without hesitation or reasoning, spontaneously manifests in his or her actions an authentic human personality.<sup>17</sup>

The unshaped, uncultivated human life is one subject to violent reversals, sharp pivots in mood and behavior. The person living

---

17. Thomas Berry, “Affectivity in Classical Confucian Tradition,” in Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003) 1:107.

such a life remains unprotected against the whims of the fates. Whether that state is spoken of somewhat benignly as the gyrations of “monkey mind,” or more stringently as ignorance, or more direly as the fundamental illness, the unformed state is understood in wisdom teaching to be a matter of extraordinary and unnecessary suffering, both for the individual and the communities, on all levels, in which they live. In wisdom schools one finds students who seek cultivation and freedom; and one finds teachers who are masters of the disciplines for living and models of the cultivated life. Teachers in these traditions offer their students what generations upon generations have found curative.

Hadot makes this observation:

The exercise of meditation allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected—and perhaps dramatic—circumstance occurs. In the exercise called *praemeditatio malorum*, we are to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death. (Hadot 85)

First there is the matter of preparation of mind and of spirit. Next an interpretive frame is to be learned.

We must confront life’s difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us. (Hadot 85)

And this interpretation is most readily absorbed, takes the most direct role in formation, when it is taken on not in treatises or essays, but in maxims or slogans.

This is why we must engrave striking maxims in our memory, so that, when the time comes, they can help us accept such events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature; we will thus have these maxims and sentences “at hand.” What we need are persuasive formulae or arguments (*epilogismoi*) which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness. (Hadot 85)

We need striking maxims so we can recall them in times of great stress and danger, and persuasive maxims so they will remain convincing to us in the face of the worst perils of living.

Moreover, each commentary was considered a spiritual exercise—not only because the search for the meaning of a text really does demand the moral qualities of modesty and love for the truth, but also because the reading of each philosophical text was supposed to produce a transformation in the person reading or listening to the commentary.<sup>18</sup>

And in what context are these commentaries, these specimens of wisdom literature, produced?

They [a philosopher's works] are the products of a philosophical school, in the most concrete sense of the term, in which a master forms his disciples, trying to guide them to self-transformation and -realization. (Hadot 104-05)

Again, we tend to think of philosophy as either the complex metaphysical systems that constitute the reading lists in most introductions to philosophy, or the close analysis of problems or statements. What we have to recognize is that in a wisdom tradition the

---

18. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 155. Texts are thus sources of sustenance and rejuvenation, when approached properly:

The exercise of meditation and memorization requires nourishment. This is where the more specifically intellectual exercises, as enumerated by Philo, come in: reading, listening, research, and investigation. It is a relatively simple matter to provide food for meditation: one could read the sayings of the poets and philosophers, for instance, or the *apophthegmata*.

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford, UK : Blackwell Publishing 1995), 86.

methods utilized depart as much if not more from modern methods as the contents of the teachings do from the themes that have dominated philosophical work for the last 250 years. Hadot again:

Such a [philosophical] method, consisting not in setting forth a system, but in giving precise responses to precisely limited questions, is the heritage—lasting throughout antiquity—of the dialectical method; that is to say, of the dialectical *exercise*. (Hadot 106)

Dialectic and analysis take a central place in these schools not as methods for securing epistemological foundations, but as exercises oriented to right action, to the development of character and virtue. This last is the dominant activity, the whole focus of all the disciplines, the teachings, the schools in Hellenistic philosophy.

Berry provides a similar approach to Chinese tradition:

The basic solution offered was to establish, first, a ritual order of life in which the basic virtues would be cultivated according to an established style of conduct...by providing specific training in these disciplines of individual, family and social living in a meaningful ceremonial context; second, to establish a humanistic tradition for education of the young that would center on the understanding of humans and the manner in which their special qualities are developed in an overall scheme of reality.<sup>19</sup>

There is training to develop habits and norms, and there is education to cultivate the gifts of mind and heart. Without these, human beings face chaos within themselves, social chaos, and chaos in their relationships with Heaven and Earth.

The Chinese were quite conscious of the experience that we describe as self-alienation. Recovery of the self was the fundamental object of human cultivation and all spiritual discipline. (SU 41)

---

19. Berry, "Affectivity," 110-111.

Schools and scholars preserve traditional texts and teachings, carrying them forward to new generations, but with the singular goal always of formation, of the development of human beings towards responsible, creative action in the social world, the natural order, and the cosmic order.

Tu Weiming, an important contemporary scholar of Confucianism, presents the centrality of the text and the formation of the individual in similar fashion:

By implication, the centrality of learning (*hsüeh*) in the *Analects* must also be interpreted as a process of training the self to be responsive to the world and culture at large. Thus, one studies *Poetry* (*Shih*) in order to acquire “language” (*yen*) as a necessary means of communication in the civilized world, and *Ritual* (*Li*) in order to internalize the “form of life” characteristic of one’s own community. Accordingly, learning is a way to be human and not simply a program of making oneself empirically knowledgeable.<sup>20</sup>

---

20. Tu Weiming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 68. Further:

To turn the mode of questioning from the impersonal self to the personal I requires intellectual sophistication as well as existential commitment. The safe distance between what I as a person speculate about in propositional language and what I speak as a concrete human being is no longer there. I am exposed, for what I think I know is now inevitably intertwined with what I do know. If I am wrong, it is not simply because what I have proposed is untenable but also because of a defect in the way I live.

Ibid., 57.

And again:

The whole process seeks to enrich the self, to enhance its strength and to refine its wisdom so that one can be considerate to others and honest with oneself.

Ibid.



Scholarship then meant something different from the scholarly study of texts currently dominant in the academy. In ancient wisdom there is no pretense of objectivity or of not being engaged. Indeed, both Hellenistic and Chinese traditions were all about engagement, all about action. They were paradoxically thus also about detachment and contemplation, about not being ruled by reactivity and near-sighted responses. Detachment was needed, not in favor of some value-neutral ideal, but in order to effect true transformation of self and world. This is a scholarship aimed at preserving the memory of great texts in a given tradition, because these texts are basis for cultivation, which cultivation is in turn the foundation of right action.<sup>21</sup>

### *A Teaching School*

So what have we learned from these two very brief case studies of wisdom traditions that is relevant to the Great Work?

*First:* We must be mindful of the fact that the processes of cultural foundation and transmission of the major civilizational centers arc over millennia. The classic example of this, in addition to the evolution of Chinese cosmology that Berry so often cites with particular approbation, is the development of the Upanishads out of Vedic hymns, and out of the Upanishads, the development of the major branches of Indian philosophy.

If in thinking this way, we were called on to give classic examples of traditions undergoing massive transformation in the face of enormous, catastrophic political and social conditions, we could turn to the development of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and throughout the Diaspora. We might also think of the creative transformations of classical Greek philosophy in the hands of Epicurus, Epictetus, and Plotinus as the Athenian Empire gradually gave way to the dominance of Rome.

Likewise, we should recall those enormously fruitful encounters

---

21. Needless to say, learning in the Confucian perspective is basically a moral self-cultivation. It is a gradual process of building up one's character by making oneself receptive to the symbolic resources of one's own culture and responsive to the sharable values of one's own society. *Ibid.*, 68.

in the medieval period in the West of the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with the scientific and medical traditions stemming from Greek natural philosophy. Maimonides, Ibn Rushd, and Al-Farabi, as well as Aquinas, all come immediately to mind.

These are the models and this is the scale we should have in mind when thinking in our time of the renewal of the possibilities for human culture and human being. This is the level of transformation Berry says those engaged in the Great Work should hope for and believe in, in the face of the rapidly changing political, religious, and scientific realities we face.

*Second:* What we will need to go forward will be schools where disciplines and texts aimed at cultivation (Confucian) and formation (Hellenistic) can take place. And we will need teachers for such schools. What we do have is a sense of the general frame of the teachings needed—for balance and detachment; for engagement and compassion; and for seeing ourselves as part of the larger whole. We remember in particular that for Stoics and well as for Confucians, social action was a key discipline. It was something to be practiced just as the breathing exercises of the yogis, the awareness meditations of the Buddhists, and the spiritual exercises taught by the Jesuits.

Though daunting, this task is by no means impossible. As Berry notes:

Whatever the magnitude of the task and however vast the required imaginative range [in our current crisis] we cannot really say that the work is proportionally so much greater or its objectives so different from the objectives sought and mission fulfilled during the early history of the classical civilizations. There was then, as now, the challenge of awakening to human meaning and purpose within a large and encompassing universe. (SU 21-22)

Yet this stark truth remains: We have as yet no living tradition capable of cultivating people who can live on the earth in our time. And, tragically, Berry argues, in large part because of this, we are now approaching rapidly one of those decisive, pivotal moments,

not just in human history but *in geology*. If the pivot is reached, then nothing enormous enough can be done to reconcile human beings as a dominant species with the earth, or to prevent the crashing culmination of the great extinction already well under way.

With this in mind one might then say that Berry's *own* "Great Work" was the effort to found a new wisdom tradition drawing on the "Four Wisdoms" he expects to guide humanity in 21st century: "the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science." (GW 176).<sup>22</sup> Recall a critical piece of the argument above: *every piece of wisdom literature defines anew the tradition in which it lies*. Thus we may see that Berry's essays at once identify—and *call into being*—the tradition into which they (will) fall. This sounds paradoxical, but is actually the situation of all wisdom literature. It is just far more difficult to grasp in Berry's case.

And what might be most distinctive about such a "new wisdom school?" A key passage here is one where Berry is talking about what he calls "the three scriptures"—the cosmic, the written, and the inner awareness "imprinted within our own being":

This [inner] awareness, however, can come to life only through vital contact with the other two scriptures. Thus the period prior to the composition of early verbal and written scriptures is the period of unarticulated but deeply felt human response to the scripture of the cosmos. From it came the verbal scriptures so familiar to us over the last three millennia. (SU 23-24)

Those verbal scriptures include *ur*-texts like the Vedas and the Torah, and also the wisdom literature that come after them.

And the role of science in relation to the three scriptures?

Now we are in the third period, the period of inner awareness that reads the verbal scriptures within new scientific realizations of their context, in an evolving world and among diverse societies but without losing the older humanist and religious

---

22. This entire essay is of the utmost importance for the argument: Thomas Berry "The Fourfold Wisdom," GW 176-95.

insights and values. (SU 24)

The new scientific realizations provide a new context, a new impetus, a series of new perspectives for receiving, reading, and interpreting the verbal and the cosmic scriptures mediated through the scripture of inner awareness. The new scientific realizations, however, are not to displace the older verbal and written scriptures or the older classical religious and humanistic teachings.

The classical humanistic and religious traditions, the wisdom traditions as I have been calling them, were foundational and central throughout Berry's intellectual career.

This story of the universe is at once scientific, mythic, and mystical. Most elaborated in its scientific statement, it is among the simplest of creation stories.... If until recently we were insensitive in relation to its more spiritual communication, this is no longer entirely true. (SU 121-22)

The first part of the task of working with "scientific statement" is to discern and bring forward its "spiritual communication." This is work that is really just now beginning. I would argue, of course, that the essential criteria and guidance for this discerning and bringing forward are those found in the wisdom traditions. But if that is so, what specifically does the "spiritual communication" from science have to offer?

In this [scientific] understanding, we have an additional context for understanding all the religious traditions, just as our more recent cosmologies do not negate but add to the Newtonian worldview and enable us to deal with questions that could not be dealt with in the Newtonian context. (SU 122)

Science gives us new ways of understanding, reading, and teaching the inherited traditions without negating them.

Wisdom traditions, as noted earlier, have always had a place for the science of their day. Indeed, *it is only modern science that has*

*defined itself by differentiating itself from its contemporary wisdom traditions* and using that very set of boundaries and distinctions to argue for its own superiority. It is not that science does not and should not belong to wisdom teaching. The argument is that our distinctively modern science must have a subordinate role, one determined by a wisdom reading that elicits spiritual understanding. That said, it is a central aspect of Berry's teaching that there can be, in effect, a science-reading of wisdom traditions, as well as a wisdom-reading of science.

Now we have additional depth of spiritual understanding through our listening to the universe in ways that were not available through our traditional insights. (SU 122)

Working from just that insight, I would argue that the universe story itself is best understood not as something derived primarily from science, but as a vision derived from this doubled-reading made possible by the contemporary conjunction of "new scientific realizations" and the traditional wisdoms.

What is arising in human awareness is our nature as a species, which has emerged out of planetary processes. This awareness is beginning to reshape our religious imagination. This concept *implies a prior sense of the religious dimension* of the natural world. (SU 128, italics added)

The reading of the science rests on prior appreciation of the religious dimension. And this appreciation of the religious dimension comes to us both through internal awareness but also, at this point in our history, from the classical traditions. Then science can expand religion. But which comes first? Religious awareness comes first. Berry next goes on to point out that it is critical how we hold this religious awareness:

In general, we think of the universe as joining in the religious expression of the human rather than the human joining in the religious expression of the universe.... We consistently think

of the human as primary and the universe as derivative rather than thinking of the universe as primary and the human as derivative. (SU 128)

One may indeed challenge the idea that religious awareness in general is structured around the priority of the human—there are just too many exceptions here for us to conclude otherwise. But as wisdom teaching, what is here is compelling: We humans have a tendency to make religion serve our needs—to use religion to amplify or inflate the importance, within the span of the universe, of our own dramas, and indeed of the ongoing drama of human life. In Buddhism results of such distortion is sometimes referred to as “spiritual materialism.” In Western prophetic traditions, this phenomenon is known as idolatry. And throughout Western religious history, prophets have called on their communities to break away from an exclusive focus the human and turn their attention back to the divine. So we might say that Berry stands in this prophetic line, but with the huge difference of seeing the earth itself as the fullest expression and fullest presence of the divine. The cry to subordinate the human to the divine becomes in Berry the cry to subordinate the human to the earth. “What is needed is not transcendence but ‘inscendence.’” (DE 208) This is at once extraordinarily radical—and extraordinarily traditional. Which is just what the prophetic has always been in Western religious life and imagination. And prophetic literature, it should be recalled, is a significant part of the body of wisdom literature of the religious traditions of the West.

### *The Earth, Dreaming*

There has been tremendous emphasis on the importance of story in the presentation of the emergent cosmology in much of Berry's writing. But story, cosmology as story, and indeed any and all forms of cosmology are cultural products that themselves result from the fantastic explosiveness at the point where culture meets gene, where gene spawns culture. As we have seen, Berry steadily insisted that all received wisdoms stand in need of a total renewal that can come about only by re-immersion in our genetic coding, the coding that

lies under our cultural coding and brings it into being. We need something even deeper than cultural renewal—we need a renewal at the species level. This is the wildly radical Berry.

But there is one more decisive point lurking here: *Human dream-space is where the gene talks to the brain*. Or: Human dream-space ought to be considered the crossover point from DNA to culture—from genetic coding to cultural coding.

We need to remember that this process whereby we invent ourselves in these cultural modes is guided by visionary experiences that come to us in some transrational process from the inner shaping tendencies that we carry within us, often in revelatory dream experience. (DE 201)

Consider then that the process of assimilating the Dream (with a capital “D”) of the earth, of fully receiving it into human being, will certainly include telling stories about the universe. Once the Dream is moving into culture, it is birthing cosmology—story, dance, ritual, poetry, pottery, and painting. Cultural coding is rooted in genetic coding; culture is rooted in dream. And the latter is so because it is in dream that genetic coding is shown to the conscious mind. It is the body that presents the earth to the mind in dreams.

Whales are the Dream of the earth; maggots are; molten lava, coral reefs. We are but one part of the Dream and our cultural coding but a very small part of that Dreaming. But we receive as best we can, we open as much as we can—and we respond as best we can. This is what we do—like cheetahs run and bees buzz. And so, yes, receive the Dream and be Dreamt.

In [the “Dream of the Earth” essay] I am concerned with the earth not as the object of some human dream, but with the earth itself and its inherent powers in bringing forth this marvelous display of beauty in such unending profusion, a display so overwhelming to human consciousness that we might very well speak of it as *being dreamed into existence*. (DE xiv-v, italics added)

We are ourselves part of what the earth dreams—along with all

else that lives and moves and stands and is. And next we have the human dreaming.

Our own dreams of a more viable mode of being for ourselves and for the planet Earth can only be distant expressions of this primordial source of the universe itself in its full extent in space and in the long sequence of its transformations in time.  
(DE xv)

Our dreams are the dreams of a species, of individuals being themselves dreamt well on back, time-into-time, space-into-space. We then access and receive and are part of earth's dreaming.

Dreams, it is worth emphasizing are received. They are not written or created. They can be invited; we can learn to take on stances or postures or practices that human experience through millennia have shown will open us—communities or individuals—to large dreams. Ultimately, though, it is a matter of receiving, which is to say a gifting.

What then is the universe but a dreaming infused with poetry? And a dreaming infinitely deeper than the human. And we bow to that. We must. And if we are true students of Thomas Berry it is this above all that we must learn.

### III. The Legacy

The primary conclusions of the interpretation of Thomas Berry's writings offered in this essay may be stated succinctly:

1. *We are best able to grasp Thomas Berry's teachings when we approach them as standing in the long lines of wisdom literatures, as found in the rich cultural traditions we commonly identify as rooted in China and India, in Athens and Jerusalem.*
2. *"Cosmology," in his hands, is fundamentally a "wisdom-teaching."*
3. *Berry warrants recognition as a teacher of great stature engaged in an effort to renew nearly defunct wisdom traditions, traditions known in our time in the Western world mostly by their absence.*



A new wisdom school is just now only a possibility. No one can begin to predict the parameters of such a school, if it were to come into being—its texts, teachings, disciplines. Berry clearly felt the integration of the four wisdoms was a process already underway. But, truthfully, we have no idea as yet what a wisdom tradition developed to guide the transition into the Ecozoic era might be. What we do have before us, as resource and as challenge, is Thomas Berry's remarkable effort to both define such a school and produce works of wisdom worthy of standing within it.

But, finally, mustn't we ask: What if the call for the Great Work is answered all over the world, and all that can be done is done, and there is, after all, no Ecozoic era? What if the centuries that come after ours simply play out the endgame of the human species? Does this mean the Great Work would be but a failure and the Dream of the earth but an illusion, a great untruth? Here we must, in spite of all, answer "No," for two reasons. *First*: the Great Work is fundamentally a work of formation. And if it succeeds in shaping the lives of thousands or hundreds of thousands into true living with the Earth—that is success. *Second*: the deep reality is that certain dreams are of such power and beauty as always to be true—and the Dream of the earth is one of those.

The universe, Berry tells us, is violent and creative—and profligate. Much must always be destroyed before the truly new can emerge. This hard teaching he repeats again and again. If we are to be true to Berry's own teaching, we must entertain the idea that the earth may need to end decisively the dominance of human beings to unfold into her next era.<sup>23</sup> In that case, indeed in *every* case no

---

23 Berry himself clearly entertained this possibility. See the following from DE 209:

In this disintegrating phase of our industrial society, we now see ourselves not as the splendor of creation, but the most pernicious mode of earthly being. We are the termination, not the fulfillment of the earth process. If there were a parliament of creatures, its first decision might well be to vote the humans out of the community, too deadly a presence to tolerate any further. We are the affliction of the world, its demonic presence. We are the violation of the earth's most sacred aspects.

matter how unimaginable, Berry would have us have confidence in that creative process that is the iniverse, in its pulse of creation and destruction. If we are true students we go forward aware that there is no guarantee of Ecozoic era for the human and the earth, but trusting in the creativity that has produced the splendor all around us, the splendor we live here on earth.

Finally we come to this: The most startling thing about the work of Thomas Berry is the power that manifests through it of his unconditional love of the universe. As ecologist, Berry comes to be an amanuensis of the new cosmology, one who receives the Dream of the earth. Cuing off Aquinas and Dante, Thomas Berry shows us that the unconditional love of the universe is the deepest wisdom.

---

But then, also, the tempering movement: "The universe has a violent as well as a harmonious aspect, but it is creative in the larger arc of its development." ET 145.