Poetry and Self-Knowledge in Rural Life

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"Better than any argument
  is to rise at dawn
and pick dew-wet
  red berries in a cup."[1]

I

Critics of rural life, especially those who once lived on a farm, often complain about the drudgery of farmwork — the inescapable, repetitive, grinding nature of the work necessary for economic survival on the farm.[2] Working all of the daylight hours, almost never relieved of a single day's chores, which must be performed without exception, only to find little economic benefit when things are good and serious deprivation (or ruin) with just a few weeks bad weather, with difficulties compounded if you happen to be a certain gender or race, is the lot of the farmer. With a certain wry smile those who have left the farm alternate between sketching the details of this unrelieved toil and presenting the images and dreams of a pastoral life. Whatever fond notions of farm life still linger after these lengthy and arduous comparisons are certainly not sufficient to tempt one to abandon the ready-made comforts of the city. Who would trade work limited to the well-defined tasks of specialization, and pleasures and services limited only by the imagination, for a round of limitless responsibilities and diversions no more stimulating than animal noises and thunderstorms?

In a series of essays, and still more in a series of poems, Wendell Berry speaks of a rural life that is neither gruelling nor idyllic. Although this life requires disciplined effort, it also promises enduring satisfaction. Although it calls for immersion in the cycles of woodland and field, it also calls out the sensibilities that delight in the changes witnessed. Because Berry is a poet who has chosen life on a working farm, he is capable of giving us access to the value experienced in this life in a way few others can.

Poetry is, among other things, an articulation of felt value. It is, along with music, among the most intense forms articulation can take. Although knowledge of this kind is not objective, i.e. it is not quantifiable and verifiable, the testimony of the poet-as-insider is knowledge nevertheless. It is an index of how value can be construed and why people might want to choose a way of life or type of experience — even at the sacrifice of some other values that are commonly regarded as important.[3]

This form of knowledge becomes crucial for rural life in ways that have few parallels. Agriculture is undergoing such a dramatic and severe transformation that the nature of rural life itself is affected. The shift from the traditional, small family farm to the massive centralized operation has consequences that go far beyond gains in productivity, the factor most often cited in discussions of the change. The disappearance of the small farm, together with the rise of a factory mentality toward agricultural production is changing the nature of agricultural work,

the contours of the land, rural communities, and the quality of lived experience in rural areas.

Of course, it is always possible, in this case, as in the past, simply to resign ourselves to the massive social changes that come with industrial "progress" and to dismiss whatever feeling we may have of lost value as nostalgia. However, if we have some doubts about whether increases in the quantity of life are always increases in the quality in life, and if we believe that a balanced assessment and judgment of far-reaching social changes must include an awareness of how ways of life are affected by the changes, then we may want to compare perceptions of the value of rural life. This in turn enables us to ask whether the social changes in progress foster ways of life deeply satisfying to many who have made their lives on farms in the past. If we find something of great value is being threatened, and if we believe changes for the worse need not always be accepted, then we may also want to look at what practical steps we can take (e.g., in tax structures, pricing systems, loan programs, and other factors influencing economic viability) to insure that what we believe is valuable in a way of life is not destroyed in the rush to what may or may not be sustainable increases in productivity.

But the issue is not simply whether we should preserve something held to be valuable by those who have first-hand knowledge of it. Because the farm population is now such a small portion of society, it is conceivable that the non-farm population might object to sacrifices it would have to make in order to guarantee the economic viability of a way of life satisfying to a small percentage of citizens. In the overall calculation of utility, it just might turn out that any satisfaction gained by the farming minority could not compensate for the resources spent (and the resulting utility lost) by the majority. Indeed, in this cost-benefit analysis the case for preserving the small farm is further weakened when one considers that farmers are not unanimous in the belief that such farms deserve to be given priority. Some farmers would prefer to convert their operations to huge, centralized concerns — assuming they will be the ones to control it. If we are calculating who wants what, and how badly they want it, within present social and economic structures, and in the absence of further knowledge that might change the priorities assigned, commitment to the concept of the small farm appears to be in jeopardy — no matter how convinced we might be that many who have experienced this way of life value it highly.

Even if it turns out to be difficult to make an assessment of what farmers really want and how much the rest of us are prepared to sacrifice in order to make sure they attain it, there is still a way to arrive at judgments concerning the value of rural life and the importance of preserving the small farm. Regardless of the extent to which Wendell Berry can be said to speak for small farmers, his statements about the nature of human fulfillment in a rural setting have a broad and perhaps even universal appeal. His comments on human values and on the relationship between knowledge and value, could very well have been made by any number of classical philosophers beginning with Plato. Centuries of philosophy, centuries of dedication to a discipline that defines itself as "the love of wisdom," must surely count as a "wisdom tradition," a source to which we can turn in times such as our own when there are severe conflicts over values. Furthermore, when it is shown that this wisdom tradition offers guidance deeply consistent with what other wisdom traditions have to say about values, the case against factory farming becomes even more compelling. In "Migration and Justice,"[4] I argue that there are several points of convergence among various wisdom traditions — including the !Kung, the Aymara, Native American societies, European peasant societies, the Wicce tradition among women, and the philosophical tradition stemming from ancient Greek ethics. Although the discussion that follows is confined to the latter philosophical tradition, and related developments in poetry, the reader should keep in mind that there are several other wisdom traditions, rooted in the earth and growing out of a concern to sustain a fully human life in relation to it, leading to the same general conclusion.

By concentrating on philosophers within a European cultural context, I do not mean to suggest that this culture should be valued more highly, or should be privileged in any way, in comparison with other cultures. Nor do I mean to suggest that those who have identified themselves with this culture have behaved in ways consistent with the values under discussion. It is hard not to notice that many Europeans and many of their descendants have behaved in arrogant and predatory ways toward other people. Philosophers have, in their best moments, joined others in criticizing these practices and have called upon us to live up to the moral ideals that have been passed on and developed for two-and-a-half millenia. The point of appealing to this philosophical legacy is to show that within the terms and conceptions of the culture they know best, Europeans and their descendants have ample reason to discontinue the trend to-

ward factory farming, a trend they have both promoted among themselves and pressed on people in other parts of the world.

Both the issues Wendell Berry raises and the conclusions he draws follow from a commitment to the value of self-knowledge, as it is understood by major classical philosophers. Because Berry's claims about the value of the small farm are very much in line with this ancient tradition of moral dialogue, they ought to be taken more seriously than any short-term calculation on productivity.

Although it would be possible to explain the nature and defend the value of self-knowledge with reference to ancient philosophers such as Plato or Aristotle, or with reference to more modern philosophers such as Leibniz or Kant, I will focus on the arguments Hegel made concerning the value of self-knowledge and the orientation that follows from it. Hegel is a good choice here for three reasons. First, he is able to state the case for self-knowledge, and against the single-minded quest for wealth and power that so often replaces self-knowledge, as convincingly as any major philosopher. Second, his goal is to arrive at philosophical formulations that comprehend what many philosophers have said about self-knowledge, rather than to come up with a formulation that is supposed to be the uniquely correct view refuting all previous philosophies. As a consequence, Hegel's philosophy is especially useful for the purposes of this discussion since he provides an account of basic values that have been perennial in the tradition within which he writes. Finally, Hegel's critique of certain modern trends related to the contemporary dilemma in rural values gives his philosophical analysis a special relevance to choices Wendell Berry is asking us to consider more carefully — and before it is too late to make them.

II

Philosophers have always, from the earliest times, held self-knowledge to be a central value, and societies have frequently appealed to this value to justify major undertakings — even when projects were of a nature that would divert attention away from this purported aim. Unfortunately, the conventional, social definitions of the task of self-knowledge have more often emphasized an aspect of knowledge, namely, how to acquire control over externalities, that has the effect of discouraging real inquiry into the nature of the human condition. Of course, it is understandable why a first crude approximation toward knowledge of the world might take this form. Hegel refers to the attitude of a "naive consciousness," a consciousness that has not yet had sufficient experience of this model of "acquiring" knowledge, or a consciousness that has not yet reflected on why this model is actually inhibiting self-knowledge. A naive consciousness continually looks for further means by which it can gain control over "the other" as a way to establish and confirm the full reality of the self. There is an initial plausibility to this notion of self-knowledge because the self imagines that if it can demonstrate what it can do in the world, then it will surely know what is more important about itself. With this basic attitude toward existence, it is easy for the naive consciousness to think of its projects in terms of control over what is outside of it. The self establishes and recognizes its capacities and powers by making more precise and exacting the control it has over its current domain and by extending the domain over which it has effective control. Thus there is a predisposition toward gaining further knowledge of the precise laws of objects with which it is already in contact because this enables it to acquire further mastery over its environment. There is also a predisposition toward conquering a new world or surpassing a previous record ("because it is there"). The desirability of the goal seems self-evident: the naive consciousness is able both to prove who it is and to reap the benefits of control.

But this idea of gaining self-knowledge by establishing control over what is outside oneself has some built-in limitations — limitations sufficiently constricting to call into question the viability of the project. Hegel speaks of the mindless ambition — and the inherent self-frustration — involved when individuals and cultures begin pursuing the "wrong (or false) infinite," the quantitative infinite of endless progression. This is, as the name would suggest, a false god, and like all false gods, it lures us into vain and fruitless endeavors that undermine our ability to live well, squandering life energies on an unreachable goal. The quest for the wrong infinite is a preoccupation with setting new records. It consists in setting quantitative goals, surpassing them, setting higher goals, striving to surpass them, etc. This is, of course, one way finite beings can relate to and deal with the other. It gives a sense of mastery and security to see the goals we have set, in an effort to come to terms with what is outside of us, exceeded again and again. We believe this "progress" shows how successful we have been in managing our affairs — pursuing our options for a better life. But Hegel's point is that a better life, on these terms, is not the same as the good life. It is a superficial way to deal with the other —

superficial because its orientation is toward quantitative management of the other by an unexamined self.

A contradiction has emerged in the pursuit of the wrong infinite — a contradiction that shows how self-defeating the task is in the end. The goal of self-knowledge is to arrive at a comprehensive idea of how various beings are related to each other and to the rest of the world so that the self can figure out how it can best relate to, and fit into, this nexus. Of course, knowledge of both self and others involves knowledge of capacities and of the ability to act. If the goal of the self is to be well-related to its world so that its experiences are fruitful and satisfying, then it will clearly benefit from discoveries about the self and others that will allow for a more thorough adjustment to and integration with the patterns in other lives. But if one strives for self-knowledge by means of a continuing effort to conquer externalities, one must interpret the lives of other beings according to the ways in which they can figure into human calculations of competition and power. When the human concern with other beings is reduced to calculating their relative combativeness and susceptibility to manipulation, we limit both what we can know of their lives and what we can know of ourselves because the investigation has been narrowed to the terms of knowledge of abilities exercised in competition. Thus the orientation that was supposed to put us in touch with life and deliver the ultimate in self-knowledge actually serves to limit knowledge of the self and others.

Such contradictions have a special significance for Hegel, and in this regard he both accepts and develops an attitude toward criticism that is squarely in the tradition of Socrates and Plato. He believes that internal criticism, viz. looking for contradictions in a position, is the strongest and most decisive test of theoretical adequacy because it is not necessary to accept any doctrines or methods outside of the position in order to criticize it. Just as Socrates is always most interested in where an argument will take us and whether it is free of inconsistencies, Hegel always looks for any differences that might emerge between what a position claims to be true as opposed to what the position actually entails. Hegel's refinement of this approach lies in his focus on the subject of experience, and on what the position on (or orientation toward) experience claims to do for that subject, as contrasted with what it actually does. An inadequate world-view will always be essentially self-contradictory (self-frustrating) because it will claim to comprehend (encompass, take in, open up) all of life for the subject of experience but will fail to explain, or will preclude explaining, some things. Hegel is interested in determining whether a framework designed to enhance the goal of knowledge will actually serve to undercut realization of the goal, and if so, how we might frame a more comprehensive interpretation, avoiding these limitations. In general, a framework or orientation is supposed to enhance the life of the subject. Hegel is interested in whether a framework really does this, or whether it deadens the process of interacting with the world and in effect proposes a self-frustrating task.

To appreciate how thoroughly self-frustrating it is to try to control the external world it is instructive to consider this idea in two of its most common forms, viz. the effort to "master" nature and the effort to dominate other societies and cultures. The self-destructive consequences of seeking human control over the natural world, conceived of as separate from and unlike us, an instrument to be used for our purposes, is evident from recent ecological studies. We are sufficiently implicated in the life cycles occuring around us that destructive uses of them turn out to be acts of self-destruction as well. The identity and vitality of the self are thoroughly connected with this very same nature that initially appears to be wholly outside us and merely instrumental in value. Consequently efforts to conquer and subdue nature have the effect of being attacks on the viability of the human world.

Similarly, the effort of some societies and cultures to dominate the development of others is also a self-destructive act. The scheming and manipulation required to dominate inevitably reduce cultural interaction to the level of hostility and preclude the learning process that could otherwise occur. Such domination turns out to be an act of self-destruction, at the same time as it is an act of destruction to the integrity of the other, because it inhibits the process of discovering ways in which others are human and consequently ways in which one might know something about oneself (as human) under different conditions (at other places and times). It is self-frustrating to attempt to conquer either nature or other societies because our identity and fate are so thoroughly bound up with theirs that a defeat of the other necessarily brings about a defeat of the self.

Nevertheless, the alternative to conquest of externalities is not simply to take up introspection. To be sure, when we hear criticism of efforts to gain control over the world or prove human superiority — a criticism usually accom-

panied by other criticisms of a materialistic life and of the shallow quest for fame and reputation — we are accustomed to hearing advice that we "look within" ourselves instead. It is as if the only alternative to seeking control over externalities is to look for satisfaction through some kind of inspection of the interior. Thus we are supposed to find authentic self-knowledge only when we are able to get in touch with our true inner states or feelings — assuming we have already (for good reasons) abandoned the search for self-knowledge centered around proving what we can do in the world. On this account of self-knowledge the theater of human activity shifts from exteriority to interiority, and we are presented with the injunction 'know thyself' in the form of 'get in touch with yourself' or 'get in touch with your feelings'.

When the options are hardened into exteriority vs. interiority, the terms of the debate over authentic self-knowledge are reduced to the comparative value of objective and subjective truth. In the sphere of the exterior are modes of knowledge reflecting events that are repeatable, testable, and subject to falsification. There is a certification process guaranteeing that we do indeed "have" knowledge. Those who prefer this form of knowledge — rigorously methodical, verifiable, public knowledge — believe that self-knowledge involves demonstration of control over the world (proving what the human species can do in the world). They cite the advantages of knowledge that can be confirmed over the so-called "knowledge" of subjective states which is indeterminate and highly variable — more subject to the vicissitudes of personal taste than to the real criteria for evidence characteristic of science. On the other hand, those more disposed toward witnessing the life of the interior question the motives of those who need to look outside of themselves for knowledge — wondering out loud why such people have such a strong need for diversion and why they cannot honestly face who they are as revealed in their private, inward moments. Much 19th-century poetry seems to be based on the latter model of self-knowledge as a form of subjective truth. Here success is measured in terms of the ability to give outsiders just enough of a glimpse of this intensely-experienced, private world that they can say they have seen something out of the ordinary. This trend in late modern poetry stems from an acceptance of the objective/subjective and outer/inner dichotomies (even where the status of the objectives and outer is called into question) and takes poetry to be a construal of the state of the interior.

Hegel's idea of self-knowledge is based on a rejection of the terms in which this debate is posed. Self-knowledge is not a preoccupation with mastery over the external world nor is it sustained inspection of interior landscapes. It is not even some simple combination of the two. The pursuit of the wrong infinite cannot give us a genuine self-knowledge; quantitative management of the other by an unexamined self is not the path toward revealing experiences about the nature of the self. But this does not mean that we will find self-knowledge through intense inwardness either — however much some poets and philosophers might believe this to be the only alternative to the objective, manipulative approach. Among other things, the reactions found in the state of the interior will be a reflection of the conditions in the exterior world and will not reveal to us very much about possible experience, or possible self-knowledge. Poetry falling into this category, a category of alienation, will necessarily reflect, both in its emotional responses and in the structure of the sensorium that takes in the world, the impoverished world it rejects. "In fleeing one is still conditioned by that from which one flees."[5]

Although it is always possible to flee, it is not possible to flee successfully because the terms and conditions of flight are dictated by that from which one is fleeing. The effort to be free of it by fleeing will itself be a self-frustrating experience because one must define the whole effort of flight in terms of that from which one wishes to be free. Does this mean there is "no exit"? Are we forced into an essentially self-frustrating experience no matter what? If we are frustrated whether we turn outward or inward, what is left of the promise of life? Are we forced always to work against ourselves and to admit that all victories are necessarily Pyrrhic?

Like many classical philosophers Hegel believes the path to overcoming alienation (an enforced separation from one's nature and a thwarting of fulfillment) lies in becoming self-conscious about the nature of the frustrating experience and in constructing an alternative to avoid the dilemma. Both the naive proposal of mastering the world and the equally naive proposal of escaping the world presuppose a hostile and essentially combative relationship with the rest of the world (which must be either conquered or fended off). In keeping with the classical tradition in philosophy Hegel argues on the contrary that the most beneficial relationship involves giving up egoistic claims to either victory over the other or self-definition in opposition to the other, affirming instead the essential connection with the rest of life, and seeking integration into the network of relationships

with other living beings. A genuine alternative for self-knowledge, Hegel believes, is to understand knowledge as a matter of finding one's way into a self-conscious, satisfying relation — a relation of identity — with the other. In contrast with the pursuit of the wrong infinite, the process of seeking the genuine infinite involves affirming a shared identity. To the extent that we discover and experience this we are dwelling in the genuine infinite, which "consists in being at home with itself in its other."

Instead of thinking of the other as an instrument for the enhancement of the self, or as a playing field (for victories and record-breaking scores for which we can congratulate ourselves and remark on how well we are doing with the human condition), we should think of the other as part of the same reality in which we ourselves are implicated. Our own involvement in the reality of the other implies that it can be neither purely instrumental in value nor purely a barrier to be exceeded. In so regarding it, we would thereby treat ourselves as instruments and defeat ourselves in the process of winning victories.

The alternative is to grow in self-consciousness in our encounters with the other. We can search for the connecting threads that run through all life and find ourselves in the other. One way of putting this is that we can be at home with ourselves in the other because it is no longer alien. Another way of putting this is that we can come to ourselves in the other, that is, we can discover something about ourselves in the process of interacting with and coming to terms with the uncoerced identity of the other. Thus human beings and the other are not antagonists in a contest of endless progression. They are coinhabitants of the earth and can find themselves at home with the world and with themselves — at home in the sense of discovering an identity as well as in the sense of finding a deeply satisfying place to dwell.

Hegel's emphasis on a shared identity as a basis for overcoming alienation and finding oneself at home in the world should not be taken as an anti-intellectual, mystical doctrine that "everything is one," and differences are not significant. While it is true that in a fundamental sense everything is one, this does not mean life is nothing but a mystical unity — an idea Hegel often ridiculed. Differences are highly significant and should be celebrated. Indeed, it is not too much to say that one cannot appreciate the nature and depth of the unity without appreciating the nature and significance of the differences. Both species and individuals differentiate themselves in relation to a single life-world. The path to awareness of the nature of the shared identity among living beings is to become aware of the various ways these beings have differentiated themselves in relation to this shared world and how the shared identity is lived out or articulated in their diverse lives.

To become aware of the relationship between differentiation and the unitary life process is to become aware of how diverse beings fit into an organic unity. Hegel's well-known formulas, "the true is the whole," neatly sums up several aspects of the relationship between diverse beings and organic unity. First, nothing can be understood outside of its context, and the overall context is the organic matrix of life processes. Anything that is truly known is known in relation to "the whole." Second, an awareness and comprehension of any particular life form requires understanding how it sustains itself in the overall life context and what it contributes to the life process. Third, Hegel wants to develop an awareness and offer an account of the world that is "true to life" — as opposed to describing or outlining a certifiable "Truth" that is "out there." Thus he is interested in the process of adaptation to life as a mode of access to the whole; that version of things is truest that shows how different beings integrate themselves into the overall network and movement of beings. Awareness of differences becomes awareness of the different paths to unity and of the breadth and depth of the unity thereby achieved. Finally, self-knowledge is a process of coming to terms with one's background, nature, and potential in order to determine how best to adapt these distinctive qualities, talents, and affinities to the ongoing life process of which one is a part.

Hegel is very much in keeping with the classical tradition in philosophy in his insistence that self-knowledge and satisfaction are intimately related. The desire for self-knowledge derives from a desire for orientation in the world. Finite beings who find themselves placed in a vast network of other beings, relationships, and worldly patterns will desire to know the character and nature of what is around them so that they can be related in satisfactory ways to the world encompassing them. To the extent that we are self-conscious and self-determining we can become well-related to the totality, to that which encompasses human existence. After Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy this project is no longer so mind-boggling. The totality is no longer a world beyond experience. Totality cannot be anything for us except the totality of what can be experienced. The totality is redefined in terms of the world of possible

experience. The search for self-knowledge becomes a search for knowledge about the quality of possible interactions between self and others within this redefined totality. Hegel's achievement is to show that progress in advancing the quality of experience depends upon recognizing that one's own identity is linked to the identity of others. The appreciation one has of this is dependent upon appreciation of the ways a common identity has been differentiated and developed in the existence of others. Appreciating likeness, i.e. knowing what one's life is like, is dependent upon appreciating unlikeness, i.e. ways in which an identity can take other forms. The delight one takes in life involves experiencing the life-identity articulated in these diverse forms.

Knowledge of one's identity, of the self to be found in the other, must have implications for the satisfaction one takes in life and for the extent to which one can find oneself at home in the world. What is learned of the experiences of others broadens and deepens the appreciation of the identity of the self and provides a basis for adjusting to and delighting in the lives of the beings around us. This is the real infinite, the fullness of activity possible when satisfaction is taken in the lives of others (including other species) instead of at the expense of others. It is unlimited activity because others are not essentially obstacles to the will. Appreciation of their experience and activity is satisfaction *with* life.

III

In the classical conception of self-knowledge, as Hegel has interpreted it, there is a potential for poetry to have a distinct function as a mode of self-knowledge. Unfortunately, this function of poetry has not been adequately recognized because there has been a persistent, and mistaken, effort to assign art an imitative function. The notion that art must imitate life has the same curious history as the notion that knowledge must represent reality. In each case the outcome is the same: an insistence that a human creation must reflect things as they are in themselves results in skepticism and nihilism when one faces up to doubts about whether the representation is accurate. If knowledge must represent reality or if art must imitate life, there is implicitly a distance between the subject who creates the representation and the object represented. That very distance, however small it might be, is all the room the skeptic needs for pointed questions: How do you know the object is not an illusion? How do you know the distance or "medium" between subject and object does not distort the reality sought? Or, if knowledge is an instrument for digging out the real essences inherent in things, how do you know you have not changed the reality in the process of digging it out? Do you really believe the use of instruments has no effect on that to which you apply the instruments? These skeptical questions have much the same result when directed toward art as imitation: How do you know art is not dealing in illusions or that it does not have the effect of changing the life it is supposed to represent?

Doubts about the legitimate function of art should cause us to re-examine metaphor, which is at the heart of a poem, and what it can accomplish. Because metaphor deals with likeness, skepticism concerning whether likenesses can be established will affect the confidence with which we use metaphor and what we attempt to do with it. Depending upon how we understand the use of metaphor, poetry becomes more or less relevant, and in very different ways, to other things that are happening in life.

What is the nature of the likeness established through metaphor? The answer most often given is that metaphor trades on a similarity found in two ostensibly dissimilar objects and highlights some feature of one object through the use of a figure of speech ordinarily referring to the other. Etymologically, 'metaphor' carries the root meanings in Greek of META (across) and PHEREIN (to bear). In other words, it is a linguistic device bearing a change. Exactly what this change involves is a matter open to interpretation. Since metaphor enables us to transfer what is designated in one object to what can be designated in another, it must at least involve a change in the meaning a term or phrase ordinarily bears. To the meaning it ordinarily carries, there is added, as it were, a new meaning, an increased awareness of some dimension of an object of consciousness to which the term or phrase does not ordinarily refer. Thus we have both an expansion in the flexibility of the meaning of the term and a new awareness of the flexibility of the meaning of the term and a new awareness of the dimensions of an object not ordinarily described by the term. But whether or not there are further changes depends on one's assessment of the nature of the likeness established through metaphor. If the likeness established is merely a static symmetry, with the metaphor functioning as a mirror to reflect a certain likeness found in both objects, then we should also be conscious of what a metaphor does not do, what it cannot establish, the change that will not occur. Although metaphor will, on this model of it, enable us to draw attention to some feature of the new ob-

ject, metaphor is essentially limiting because the dissimilarities residing in the object to which the term originally referred will limit what can be said about the new object described by the term metaphor. The metaphor will be at best a partial mirror for reflecting the object to be illuminated. On this account metaphor will give us an ability to expand and change, through seeing likenesses and identifying new dimensions of objects, but from the beginning we must be aware that this is an extremely limited ability to see "through a glass darkly" — the dissimilarities in objects serving only to cloud the mirror. The dissimilarities will inhibit the potential effectiveness of metaphor in establishing likeness.

In this view metaphor can only highlight a perceived similarity against a background of differences. The result is that although we are aware of a previously undetected parallel or symmetry, this does not change the background assumption that life is a multiplicity of discrete differences, with metaphor occasionally intruding to construct analogues.

An alternative account of metaphor, related to an alternative understanding of life as a *process* of experience, yields a different notion of the potential power of metaphor to create an awareness and change us. This alternative conception of metaphor is clearly evident in the poems of Pablo Neruda. It is instructive to turn to some examples from his work to see ways in which metaphor can function as a power of appreciating human identity. Neruda proposes a use of poetic language that closes the distance between figure of speech and object of cognition. In "La Palabra" he says:

The word
was born in the blood,
grew in the dark body, beating,
and flew through the lips and the mouth.

Farther away and nearer
still, still it came
from dead forebears and from wandering
races
from lands that had returned to stone
weary of their poor tribes,
because when pain took to the roads
the settlements set out and arrived
and new lands and water reunited
to sow their word anew.

And so, this is the inheritance —
this is the wavelength which connects us
with the human and the dawn
of new beings not yet come to light.[6]

The word is not part of a construct over against reality; it is not an analogue. Its origins are in human beings — beings who are themselves in the world and continue to be essentially related to it. Even the cultural modifications of it are born from the earth. The word speaks of the symbiosis among settlements and land and water. This word is the seed sown into the land in anticipation of a harvest of adaptive rhythms through the generations. Even in those cases in which the land wearies of human tribes, the word speaks the truth of the land's "return to stone," and tribes take on the truth of these ways and are reunited with the land. The word is itself a "wavelength" connecting generations — bonding them to each other and to the earth.

Can the word touch essences in the real world? Because words are shaped along the contours of the world, they bear its marks directly. Words born of creatures born of earth must show essential traces of lineage. But the connection is even more intimate than that. Words are not simply artifacts bearing traces of ancient formations. The word acts. It "fills with" — becomes pregnant with — meaning as it "fills up with lives." The word acts because it is filled with life and fully desires to give birth. "Everything had to do with birth and sounds." The word is a power "blending existence with essence/in the electricity of beauty." Can the word touch essences? It more than touches them; it blends existence with them. This happens because the human word is a finely crafted "hereditary goblet which gathers up the communications of the blood," and "in the completeness of the human word" gathers up silence as well. Language extends to all parts of our bodies, speaks through our gestures, and gathers up our existence in spoken (and unspoken) essences. Because "for human beings, not to speak is to die," and because words permeate and shape all of life, and

because the verb is the source
and vivid life — it is blood,
blood which expresses its substance
and so implies its own unwinding —
words give glass-quality to glass,
blood to blood,
and life to life itself.[6]

The inexhaustibility and completeness of language mean that this blood of our lives will "express its substance" and give to life the very essences and qualities of life.

The use of metaphor progressively attunes us to the rhythms of nature. The word is a "wavelength," and the poet "broadcasts, saying nothing, the starry echoes of the wave." Language both originates from and continually adjusts to nature. It is so highly evolved that its nuances settle into the interstices of nature. The "wavelength" of the word is the length of the star's

echo in the wave. Nature calls to us through metaphor — progressively enabling us to realize our natural affinities with the world. Hence metaphor is the path in the poetic consciousness that leads to completeness. It fills with life experiences and gives birth to new life, filling the silences and giving to human life its vivid qualities.

Because metaphor is the eliciting, the calling forth, of natural affinities, it progressively attunes us to our likeness to and symbiosis with the rest of the world. What metaphor is and does in Neruda's poetry differs significantly from what we ordinarily find. Previously metaphor was a term said to change in the designation it bears — highlighting a new object in some respect through a meaning imported from the old object. But in Neruda we find that an identity with the world is established through metaphor. Differences lose their alienating quality when, through a sustained use of metaphor, they are seen as the basis for a continuity and vibrant harmony among all living things. Through a single use of metaphor we are left at the level of a world essentially different from the characterization of it, and by implication, from those who characterize it. But a continuous use of metaphor opens up the possibility of poetry as a weaving process in which human emotions, needs, and aspirations are linked to cycles in land, sea, and sky.

Metaphor is the linguistic basis for the appreciation of likeness. It progressively uncovers the bond between the human world and the larger life world and as a consequence is itself a bonding process. Neruda replaces the anthropocentric model of metaphor — at best a fascination with mirrors of human construction — with a use of metaphor that increasingly enlivens us with the rhythms of cosmic movement and thereby moves us, as we move ourselves, into the world. Form does not represent content or simply express emotion or fashion a world of its own. Form is progressively identified with content because it is the human path to kinship with the world. Metaphor "bears a change" not simply from a transference of designation, but because it is the bonding agent that through a sustained use allows us to create the affinities we seek.[8] It would be odd to describe any account of life as "too metaphorical" when metaphor fuses existence and essence and draws us ever closer to the world.

If human life is a process of exploring differences and discovering the identity that runs through them, and of further appreciating the differences as we deepen our understanding of the identity thus developed, then metaphor is potentially consciousness of the identity running through the sensible world. Because metaphor establishes this identity through development of the relationships among sense particulars — development on the basis of a shared identity — it progressively attunes us to the rhythms of nature. Because human beings are natural creatures, too, this progressive attunement can establish our likeness to and symbiosis with the rest of the world. Thus an identity with the world can be established through metaphor. This means that poetry, as a form in which experience is presented, can be a human path to recognizing kinship with the world. It holds the potential of increasingly animating us with the rhythms of cosmic movement. It moves us, as we move ourselves through it, into the world. As a process of drawing out the likenesses in the world, poetry draws us into the world.

Of course, there are many other sorts of things that poetry does and many other functions it can serve. But we should not underestimate the ways in which poetry can sensitize us to the identity that moves through the differences in the world, engaging us with life as it shows us the continuities in human experience and the connections with other life forms. We become aware of a human identity both through the access poetry gives us to the distinct experiences of others, ourselves at other places and times, and through the uncovering of a unity among the life forms implicated in the seasons and cycles we share with them.

If we now turn to the question of whether there is anything important for human beings to learn about themselves in rural life, and whether it is sufficiently important for us that we might want to affirm and protect the conditions under which this experience takes place, we should look at this experience through the eyes of a poet who lives in and writes about this kind of setting. As it happens, we have, in Wendell Berry, someone who is a poet and also appreciative of this form of life.

IV

Both the content of Wendell Berry's philosophy of agriculture and the poetic form he sometimes uses to express his feeling for the practice of farming are "grounded" in the classical traditions of philosophy and poetry respectively. His ecological conception of agriculture, with diverse beings living in organic relations, and his idea of regionalism, with local knowledge assuming a fundamental role in the quest for self-knowledge, are obvious extensions of the classical concern for self-knowledge. Just as his explanations of knowledge and value gain cogency from noticing that they are "rooted" in a

classical philosophical orientation, so too is an appreciation of his poetry enhanced by noticing that it fulfills classical expectations about what poetic form can do. If we then ask how seriously we should take Berry's critique of contemporary agricultural practice and his proposal for a sustainable and satisfying agriculture, the answer is that we should take it as seriously as we take the most fundamental and enduring effort to come to terms with the nature and meaning of human life itself — and as seriously as we take the most ancient and enduring desire to awaken a sensitivity to our kinship with the world. Exactly how and why Berry's philosophy and poetry draw strength from these classical traditions will become more clear after we have examined both the essentials of his position and some characteristic ways in which a consciousness of the content of his position is infused with poetic form. This in turn will enable us to draw some conclusions about the meaning and value of rural life that give us a critical perspective for assessing current trends in agriculture.

For Wendell Berry agriculture is a science of ecology, the study and practice of a sustainable human relationship with the land and the creatures that dwell there. It is a system of cultivation designed to draw nourishment from a specific place for generations of human beings to come, as well as for those who live there today. The attitude appropriate to this task, Berry believes, is an attitude of reverence toward the land, of caring about and for a particular place, and of making oneself "at home in the world" by "aligning oneself with the creation and drawing on its energy" rather than by attempting to convert the earth into a human product.[9] Like others who have written from the point of view of an ecological sensitivity, he believes that the diversification of life forms in a region is highly desirable. Diversification contributes to environmental stability because a pluralistic, mutually-adapted network of creatures can readily adjust to a disease (or some other form of disruption) that happens to afflict any one particular species. On the other hand, reduction of diversity means that a setback for any one of a few mutually-dependent species can be a disaster.[10] Diversification also has a beneficial effect on the development of creatures within the system. Creatures that are more fully adapted to a wide range of interactions are more subtle, more spontaneous, and less pathological in their behaviors. In the case of human beings this means their behavior will be more adaptive and intricate, giving rise to local variations and diverse individual characteristics.

Berry's emphasis on regionalism as a frame of reference is consistent with these ecological considerations. 'Regionalism' is the term he has used to refer to the attitude and practice of respect for the land because he wants to stress the importance of commitment to a particular place and the ecologically sensitive way of life necessary to sustain the human species there indefinitely. It must seem paradoxical at first to find someone who believes in the ecological principle of the interdependence of all life forms identifying that position as regionalism — especially when the theme of interdependence is so prominent in his writing. In his journal notes he writes:

> I come more and more to look on each creature as living and moving always at the center — one of the infinite number of centers — of an arrangement of processes that reaches through the universe. The interlocking lives of the creatures is like a coat of chain mail by which the creation saves itself from death.[11]

Implicit in this view is the notion that life itself is sustained through processes of interdependence, which can occur only if there are diverse beings available for this mode of interaction. "The creation saves itself from death" by multiplying the species capable of "interlocking" and thus establishes a living web of beings that, through tightly-knitted mutual support, fends off threats. While these lateral linkages, centered in diverse beings, create a defense against the death of the econetwork, natural cycles implicate all living beings in temporal patterns, patterns of renewal, that give another kind of continuity to life. Creation occurs "by the continuous ramification and metamorphosis of formal energy, as the life forms keep rising out of and falling back into the earth."[12] These cycles connect us with the rest of nature, and although their sources are necessarily incomprehensible to finite beings, they sustain us when we identify with their rhythms:

> Though the river floods and the spring
> is cold,
> my heart goes on, faithful to a mystery in a
> cloud, and the summer's garden continues
> its
> descent through me, toward the ground.[13]

This metamorphosis sustains us yearly as other lives enter cycles through us. Indeed, our very bodies derive from these cycles:

> This blood has turned to dust and liquified
> again in stem and vein ten thousand
> times.[14]

The entire creation reverberates with the rhythms of this metamorphosis, and as one ap-

proaches nature, and looks across its many dimensions, these rhythms show themselves:

The days arc into vision like fish leaping,
their shining caught in the stream.[15]

But if the interdependence of all life forms is a prominent theme in Berry's writing, so is the need to make respect for this interdependence a concrete and practical act. It makes no sense to assert a pious belief in respect for the intricate web of nature and then carry on a style of life that contributes to the ravishing of nature. Living in harmony with nature requires both having a sense of the limits of human ability and a particular knowledge of a region.

A man always overshadows what he sees,
his presence belonging to its mystery. So all
his ideas fall short.[16]

There is no privileged spectator's position in the world of created beings from which one might see all entities and relations in their unimpeached natures. The very act of seeing casts a shadow on the seen and consequently limits the human knowledge claims of the greatest generality. The acknowledgement of this limitation calls for humility in the sphere of action as well as in the sphere of knowledge claims. The arrogant manipulator, who claims sufficient insight to rearrange ("develop," as they say) the creation, does not realize that these clumsy acts of rearrangement intrude on the processes supposedly understood and necessarily bring about a different (and less desirable) result than was anticipated.

Berry believes that becoming self-conscious about this process means re-orienting ourselves to knowledge and action — with significant implications for the vitality of the environment, and ultimately, for ourselves. He is, in effect, calling us back from a vain pursuit of the wrong infinite, from a mindless attempt to master the environment, from the attempt to control all outcomes and surpass all previous records of demonstrating mastery. The alternative is to know so thoroughly the life of a particular place that one can adapt to the rhythms, and benefit from the results, that naturally occur when one is aligned with the creation. This does not mean one never intervenes under any conditions in what is occurring in the non-human world. It means human beings come to terms with their own limitations positively to affect outcomes and realize that their own identity is at stake in making this basic shift in orientation from domination of the other to a symbiotic relationship with a diversified other. This shift means turning away from attempts to transform nature on a massive scale for the sake of increases in quantities of products (even as the quality of those products and of the environment producing them declines). This shift also means attempting to know a particular area so well that one acts in concert with the energies of the creation. Thus, a shift to respect for the interdependence of all things calls for a distinctly regional consciousness.

Berry makes this argument in social, as well as in epistemological, terms. If land is to be passed on in a condition suitable for the continuance of human life, then a given group of people must continue to live on that land — knowing enough about its cycles that they care about it and refuse to entertain plans for massive interruptions. In other words, human beings must establish "a decent and preserving community, aware of its complex dependence on and obligation to the land."[17] Those who have no continuing connection to a particular place are much less inclined to defend the integrity of its ecosystem and much more likely to seek quick "killings" that trade long term sustenance for short term economic gains. At a minimum, then, regionalism must involve an "awareness that social life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge." It is only "by memory and association" that local knowledge is possible and only by continual inhabitance that memory and association can create the bonds with a particular place making a people "fit to inhabit the land."[18]

If respect for the interdependence of life forms entails a regional consciousness, and if this consciousness requires memory and association as preconditions for local knowledge, what is the nature of this local knowledge that is achieved through "a continuous harmony"? Ultimately, the answer depends on the extent to which, and the manner in which, local knowledge is connected with self-knowledge. It is apparent that local knowledge is not to be interpreted in terms of the model of self-knowledge proposed by the naive consciousness. Local knowledge is first and foremost an alternative to knowledge understood as mastery of the environment and pursuit of the wrong infinite. Local knowledge is also not to be interpreted simply as familiarity with subjective states. If self-knowledge as inwardness is understood as a rejection of, and reaction against, the condition of the exterior, then local knowledge would have to be worthless, except insofar as it could sharpen our awareness of alienation from the environment in which we find ourselves. But local knowledge is precisely the affirmation of a connection with this environment. When Berry describes regionalism as "local life aware of itself,"[19] he is not referring to human beings aware of how alien their local-

ity is to them; he is referring to people who have grown up with, and fully identify with, the local environment.

Local knowledge is knowledge of the identity between self and other, an identity shared by creatures living and developing in the same region. Local knowledge reveals an interdependence of life forms. It uncovers an organic unity that figures into the very constitution and vital movement of these various life forms — sustaining and quickening their development. Thus "local life aware of itself" is an awareness of the bonds that link diverse beings to each other and support a network of life activity. Organic unity (the common life supporting diverse forms) is the basis for the identity between self and other. Self and other are not radically separate; they are ingredients in the same life network. The self can only learn of its nature when it seeks out the patterns that run through all of the diverse natures with which it is locally involved.

A recognition of the connection between local knowledge and self-knowledge brings us to the point of contact between Wendell Berry's philosophy of agriculture and the classical tradition in philosophy. The classical imperative to know oneself, dating back to inscriptions on ancient temples, has met its most serious challenge from the distinctly modern tendency to consider consciousness as a pleasure center that can only be satiated when it has surpassed previous levels of acquisition and prestige. Hegel's contribution is both to deepen our understanding of what the quest for self-knowledge involves and to alert us to the seriousness of the modern challenge to it. Moreover, his analysis of the futility of the modern desire for the wrong infinite gives us a critical awareness of the self-contradictory and self-frustrating nature of the modern project of mastery over the other. There can be no definitive accomplishment that once-and-for-all provides confirmation of the mastery that the self has acquired. The pursuit of the wrong infinite, and the bravado over the latest achievement, conceals within itself a profound uneasiness and restlessness over what is necessarily only a temporary and hollow (unfulfilling) victory over the other. The assertion of the importance of a narrowly-construed self over the rest of creation actually turns out to defeat the desire for knowledge of the self. The self has destroyed the conditions for discovering the extent to which it is implicated in and identified with the patterns of the other. The very success of the modern ambition for mastery is a defeat for a recognition of the breadth and depth of the self that can only be gained through noticing and developing bonds with an uncoerced other. Only an identity established through these bonds can satisfy the desire of human life for universality. The self that is known in this manner is not limited enough, not narrow enough to be frustrated. It discovers itself in the identification with the spontaneous life patterns of the other, brought to self-patterns of the other brought to self-consciousness through immersion in nature or through human cultural celebrations of this evolved identity. The self thus known is not frustrated by its own inability to exceed boundaries. Indeed, it no longer makes sense to talk about boundaries of this kind.

The classical insight into self-knowledge that is preserved and amplified by Hegel is extended to culture and agriculture by Wendell Berry. Where Hegel formulates the contradictions of modern consciousness in general terms, Berry sharpens awareness of the self-frustrating and self-defeating ambitions of the modern self in the sphere of agricultural activity.

An awareness of the classical insight into self-knowledge preserved and amplified by Hegel lends credibility to Wendell Berry's assessment of the relationship between culture and agriculture. If the development of self-knowledge rests on an appreciation and development of bonds with other beings in the life world around us, then Berry's affirmations of the interdependence of life forms, of diversification as the extension of the life principle, and of regionalism and local knowledge are all firmly based on the wisdom about self-knowledge that has been kept alive in this tradition. Moreover, the difficulties inherent in the modern consciousness concerning the nature of the self, which are explained in Hegel's analysis of the contradiction in the quest for the wrong infinite, are problems Berry notices in his discussions of what is wrong with contemporary agriculture. What is in Hegelian terms a mindless pursuit of the wrong infinite, seeking ever new victories over the other as proof that we have fashioned and produced "more" of life than ever before, becomes in Berry's terms the promotion of "so-called efficiency at the expense of community (and of real efficiency), and quantity at the expense of quality."[20] This soul-destroying, culture-destroying trend in modern society undermines the real work of a healthy culture and a healthy agriculture.

> A healthy culture is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other. It assures that the necessary restraints are observed, that the necessary work is done, and that it is done well. A healthy farm culture can be based only

> upon familiarity and can grow only among
> a people soundly established upon the land;
> it nourishes and safeguards a human intelligence of the earth that no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace.[21]

With such a culture it is possible to develop a sense of place, a sense of ecological connection and a sense of direction in life that opens up the potential for self-knowledge. Without such a culture, and driven primarily by a desire for quantitative mastery by a self whose life remains unexamined, we destroy the soil in the name of growth and destroy the productive capacity of the land in the name of productivity. The "harvest" of this modern trend is a contradiction in which the self defeats itself in the process of trying to realize its narrowly conceived goals. In his essays Wendell Berry has given us a cultural analysis that shows what this contradiction has meant for agricultural life. In his poetry he has given us the vivid sense of connection and organic unity with other life forms that is at the heart of the aspiration toward a healthy culture and is indeed the basis for a shift from farm work as mere drudgery to farm life as the nurturing and quickening of what is alive in the world. A poetry that celebrates this life and creates an ecological sensibility for farm communities is at the same time pointing the way toward self-knowledge in rural life.

Notes

1. Wendell Berry, "A Standing Ground," *Farming: A Handbook,* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich; 1967), p. 37.
2. I would like to thank Annette Baier, J. Baird Callicott, Jan Elliott, Suzy Fulton, Ellen Haring, Richard Haynes, Pablo Iannone, Ray Lanier, Melvyn New, Sandra Powers, Pete Self, and Frank Taylor for criticisms and suggestions that were very helpful to me as I worked on revisions of this essay. An earlier version of the essay was given as a paper at the Conference of Agriculture and Human Values at the University of Florida in November, 1982. In the final version I have incorporated a section from "Pablo Neruda and the Poetry of Liberation," a paper presented at the Conference on Literature and Social Criticism, University of Georgia, April, 1981.
3. At this point I will merely contend that poetry is a form of knowledge. Later, I will develop the idea. See also, Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 241–49.
4. Interamerican Congress of Philosophy. Guadalajara, November, 1985.
5. G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopadie* (Logik), 94. Edited by Nicolin-Poggeler (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1969); translation by William Wallace in *Hegel's Logic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 138.
6. Pablo Neruda, "La Palabra," *Plenos Poderes* (1962), trans. by Alastair Reid in *Selected Poems,* ed. Nathaniel Tarn, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972), p. 430. I have made slight changes in the translation.
7. *Ibid.*
8. For other, recent discussions of metaphor see Mark Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor;* Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); and the *Critical Inquiry* "Special Issue on Metaphor," Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn 1978).
9. Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), p. 37.
10. See William Ophuls, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity.*
11. *Op. cit.,* p. 49.
12. *Op. cit.,* p. 37.
13. Wendell Berry, *Farming: A Handbook, op. cit.,* p. 20.
14. *Clearing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), p. 6.
15. *Farming: A Handbook, op. cit.,* p. 9.
16. *Ibid.,* p. 104.
17. Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony, op. cit.,* p. 66.
18. *Ibid.,* p. 67.
19. *Ibid.,* p. 68.
20. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), p. 42.
21. *Ibid.,* p. 43.