

Critical Review

Chad Wriglesworth, ed. *Distant Neighbors: The Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder*. Counterpoint, 2014.

Distant Neighbors is an important book for many reasons, not least because it is of that increasingly rare genre, the epistolary portrait of a long, deep friendship. (Perhaps, in the dubious future of books, there will be volumes titled *The Selected Emails of . . .* but they are not likely to breathe the warmth, leisure, and rootedness of this forty-year correspondence!)

The greater importance of this record of a friendship is that Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder are both leaders in one of the most important counter-revolutions of our time. That is the growing recognition that, despite the placelessness of urbanization, globalization, commodification, and the internet, we are most fully human when we are rooted in a place. Through their many books, articles, stories, and poems, Berry and Snyder have helped many people to see that we are each members of communities that include not only people but plants, animals, soil, and weather. We have rather lamely labeled this complex set of relationships “the environment”—hence the popular name for this diverse revolution, “the environmental movement.”

The first letters in this correspondence are dated 1973, at about the time that my wife, Mary Ruth, and I began reading Berry and Snyder seriously, as guides to our own thinking about how to live wisely on the earth. “The environment” back then was a word that had only begun to be used in its current (and highly inadequate) sense, as a synonym for the great gift we call “nature” or “creation.”

We had first encountered Wendell Berry in an essay reprinted in 1969 in that venerable, counter-culture bible *The Whole Earth Catalog*. The piece was called “Think Little,” and it expressed with great clarity what we had begun vaguely to feel and try to live out. After pointing out the tendency of the recent civil rights and peace movements to degenerate into faddish posturing (mainly because they were about bad things done by other people), Berry wrote:

The Environmental Movement rises close to home. Every time we draw a breath, every time we drink a glass of water, every time we eat a bite of food, we are suffering from it. Nearly every one of us, nearly every day, is contributing to the ruin of this planet. A protest meeting on the issue of environmental abuse is not a convocation of accusers, it is a convocation of the guilty. This realization ought

to clear the smog of self-righteousness that has almost conventionally hovered over these occasions and let us see the work that is to be done.¹

The astringent words about guilt and righteousness resonated deeply with our own Christian understanding (though we have gradually come to understand, partly through Berry's writings, how much more the Christian way is about joy and gratitude than it is about guilt!).

Mary Ruth and I encountered "Think Little" again in a 1973 book called *A Continuous Harmony*, which we used as a text in an environmental studies program we started in 1974 at Seattle Pacific College. In my teaching in that program I was also helped and troubled by a book of poetry and essays by Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island*, published in 1974 (it won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for poetry). In its preface he explains the title:

Turtle Island—the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have lived here for millennia, and reapplied by some of them to North America in recent years. Also, an idea found world-wide, of the earth, or cosmos even, sustained by a great turtle or serpent-of-eternity.²

At the end of the collection in an essay titled "The Wilderness," which draws widely on North American, Hindu, and Buddhist mythology and practice, Snyder acknowledges, "The voice that speaks to me as a poet, what Westerners have called the Muse, is the voice of nature herself, whom the ancient poets called the great goddess, the Magna Mater."³ Thus there is no "god" other than nature: nature *is* god.

A native Oregonian, I found Snyder helpful first because, as one who had grown up in the Northwest, he wrote vividly, and at first-hand, of the damage done—mainly through logging—to my own place. (I was and am less familiar with Berry's strip-mined and eroded Kentucky.) But also, he began to connect me to the ancient, almost-obscured practices, traditions, and myths of "the people who have lived here for millenia." He began to make me more aware of the importance of those "old ways" (the title of a later book by Snyder).

As one who was trying to work out an ethic of care for the earth as part of the gospel (the "good news") of the Christian story—I found Snyder troubling because he clearly (along with most of the then-emerging "environmentalist" community) understood the Christian story to be part of the problem. In his view, it encouraged an ethic of human

¹ Wendell Berry, "Think Little," *The Berry Center*, <http://www.berrycenter.org/think-little-wendell-berry/>.

² Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), introductory note.

³ *Ibid.*, 107.

dominion and exploitation, stressing a transcendent God and a (correspondingly) transcendent “man” made in his image. If there was to be a way forward, Snyder argued, it lay in recovering “the old ways” of those native people, to whom the divine was resident in all things and people. A serious Buddhist, he found equivalents of Native American mythology more fully spelled out in the animism underlying Japanese and Hindu myths.

In the years that followed I have read most of the work of both writers with great interest and profit. In 1977, when I joined a group of scholars at Calvin College in a project to articulate a Christian theology of environmental ethic (later published as the book *Earthkeeping: Stewardship of Creation*), Snyder wrote a note of encouragement, saying he had been trying without much success for years to get Americans to care for the earth from a native and Buddhist starting point; maybe we would have more luck from a Christian foundation. We appreciated the encouragement.

Snyder, in important works like *The Practice of the Wild*, continues to draw on what he considers to be remnants of Neolithic wisdom, captured in Native American mythology, and in the animism he detects beneath Zen Buddhism. And Berry, in his poetry and fiction—and especially in essays like “The Gift of Good Land” and “Christianity and the Survival of Creation”—has made clear the biblical roots of his thought. These biblical dimensions have been made even clearer through more recent interpreters like Ellen Davis, in *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*, and Norman Wirzba, in *From Nature to Creation*.

I begin this review with these personal reflections not simply because they explain why this book is so important to me, but because hopefully they give some indication of why the long, friendly dialogue between these two thinkers is so important today for all who are concerned with (as Pope Francis recently put it in his great encyclical) “care for our common home.”⁴ Berry and Snyder continue to be among the most important voices influencing that movement, which is attempting to reshape and restore our relationship with the earth. Both write passionately about their commitment to the local: the need to know and be at home in our own communities.

The letters often reflect their delight in and gratitude for this deep agreement. In 1975, after reading Snyder’s newly published *Turtle Island*, Berry wrote, “Your poems offer a sort of companionship that is of the greatest importance to me. I feel the differences of

⁴Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

our origins and educations—and the similarity of our hopes and aims. That is *good*” (8). A little later (1977) Berry writes, “Your words, wherever I find them, give me the sense of being spoken not just to but *for*. What a relief!” (23). Those words appear in a letter in which Berry thanks Snyder for what he wrote when praising *Three Memorial Poems*, which Berry had just published in honour of a recently departed neighbour and mentor. Snyder’s words were

—poems that go off the
edge of the world to visit the dead:
our teachers still.

Brave poems—they send me back to my own life.
refreshed; work joyfully in impermanence!⁵

The harmony between the two men is re-enforced by their common vocation: to be both poets and farmers. Yet the two bodies of poetry that they have produced are very different from each other. Their farming is different as well. Berry is working to recover and sustain traditional agrarian life in the fertile hills of Kentucky; Snyder is trying something rather different, to homestead and “re-inhabit” the dry foothills of the Sierra Nevada, in a way consistent with the hunter/gatherer culture of the nearly vanished native people. Yet as Berry writes, after his first visit to Kitkitdizze, Snyder’s homestead in California (referring to his description of the visit in an article for *Organic Gardening*):

It’s clear from what I wrote, I hope, how much I was pleased and moved by what I saw there. I’m only sorry we couldn’t stay longer, and will hope to come back again before too long. We are neighbors—*distant* neighbors. (20)

Berry’s fine phrase “distant neighbours” gives the title to this collection, and both words are important. The “neighbourliness” is the most obvious characteristic. The letters reflect on every page the deep similarities in the way both men see the world: from their delight in the different weathers and creatures of their respective places, to their pleasure in learning to farm those places, to distress at the forces in the culture that ignore, threaten, or trivialize every attachment to place. As Snyder wrote to Berry in a 1985 letter (complaining about the claims made by a doctoral student who, writing a thesis comparing the work of the two men, argued that there were irreconcilable differences between them): “I’m not sure if anything is [‘between you and me’] except

⁵ Wendell Berry, *Three Memorial Poems* (Berkeley: Sand Dollar Books, 1977), back cover.

distance and differing plant communities and climates. That's how it feels to me anyway" (131).

Yet the *distance* is real, and both men recognize it. Appreciating that distance is one of the challenges—and pleasures—of reading this collection. In his introduction, Chad Wriglesworth, whose thorough, scholarly, but unobtrusive editing wonderfully honours the letters, matches Snyder's words about their closeness with another quote from a 1987 letter:

Dear Gary,

I think it would be both surprising and disappointing if we agreed more than we do. If we agreed about everything, what would we have to say to each other? I'm for conversation. (154)

In a footnote expanding that quote Wriglesworth cites Berry's words from an interview: "Gary Snyder and I agree on a lot of things, but his point of view is different from mine and it has been immensely useful to me. Some differences make for binocular vision" (249n).

Some of the distance (like the spatial distance between Kentucky and California) is ultimately superficial. Snyder is the more obviously "counter-cultural" figure. Slightly older than Berry, he is often associated with the "Beat Generation" and the "San Francisco Renaissance." Along with Allen Ginsberg and others he participated in the "Six Gallery" reading that heralded a new style of counter-cultural poetry; he is the figure on whom "Japhy Ryder," the hero of Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, is modeled. His experience in a Japanese Zen monastery, in India, and in various communal living arrangements mark him as an early hippy. These early years are in distinct contrast to Berry's more conventional path, from his many-generation-rooted Kentucky childhood, through college, graduate school (he studied with Wallace Stegner at Stanford, in a program that included Ken Kesey), his life-long marriage to Tanya, his university teaching, and his return to the farming community where he grew up.

In his very helpful introduction to the letters, Wriglesworth includes two photos from a poster advertising the event in San Francisco where they first read their poetry together. His words on the two photos are revealing:

Berry is shown smiling in the afternoon sun of Frankfort, Kentucky, where local citizens have rallied to oppose the construction of a dam on the Red River. He is a clean-cut protestor. He wears a sweater and has a blade of Kentucky blue-grass leisurely resting on his lower lip. The other

photograph, taken at roughly the same time, shows Snyder working at Kitkitdizze. He is a long-haired voice of the counterculture. He wears a denim workshirt, an earring, and a goatee. He looks directly into the camera and—like Berry—is connected to place by a blade of grass held between his lips. The two men speak from different regions and backgrounds, yet the placement and content of the two photos illustrate their common bond. (xix)

One of the differences between Snyder and Berry is more significant—but still not fundamental. Berry is champion of what could be called a new agrarianism: a way of life which recognizes that for all people “eating is an agricultural act,” whether they recognize it or not. Thus he is deeply critical of the “industrialization” of our food production, a trend that results in the double tragedy of, in the city, both alienating most urban dwellers from connection with their food and condemning them to inferior food and, in the country, destroying, through capital-intensive, technologized agriculture the knowledge of sustainable mixed farming and the communities able to support it. This defense of an older style of farming is central to all his work, from the extended argument of *The Unsettling of America* to the laments of his novels, which tell the story of the declining vigour of the fictionalized “Port William” of his home region in Kentucky.

Snyder, on the other hand, while agreeing with Berry’s critique of modernity, is convinced that it does not go deep enough, or back far enough in time. If the ideal relation to the land in Berry’s work is represented in small agricultural communities, in Snyder it is in the hunting/gathering communities that preceded agriculture and from which it emerged. The primary value for Snyder is not well-tended agricultural land but wilderness: the infinitely rich complex of naturally occurring systems that sustain soil and forests in their fertility. Thus, if Berry has become the spokesman for agrarianism, Snyder is the spokesman instead for bioregionalism: the health of wild ecosystems before they were “tamed” by agriculture. His thought is clearly set out in an article titled “Good, Wild, Sacred,” published in *Practice of the Wild*:

Our idea of good land comes from agriculture. Here “good” (as in good soil) is narrowed to mean land productive of a small range of favoured cultivars, and thus it favours the opposite of “wild”: the cultivated. To raise a crop you fight the bugs, shoo the birds, and pull the weeds. The wild that keeps flying, creeping, burrowing in—is sheer frustration. Yet wild nature cannot be called unproductive, and no plant in the almost endless mosaics of micro and macro communities is ever out of place.

For hunting and gathering peoples for whom the whole spread of richness, the wild natural system is also their economy, a cultivated patch of land might seem bizarre, and definitely not good, at least at first. Gathering people draw on the whole field, ranging widely daily. Agricultural people live by a map constructed of highly productive nodes (cleared fields) connected by lines (trails through the scary forest)—a beginning of linear.⁶

Both men are aware of this substantial difference. Thus, when Berry writes to Snyder in 1983, asking for his permission to dedicate to Snyder his own book on poets and poetry, *Standing by Words*, he does so apologetically:

My *worry* about the dedication is that it might make the book an embarrassment to you. . . . Because we have a good deal in common, our differences are instructive and clarifying and useful to me. Sometimes my awareness of where you are standing gives me a sort of binocular vision. Because, for instance, my point of view is pretty much that of a Christian—a forest Christian—it seems likely that you will want or need to disagree to some extent with my book. If by dedicating the book to you, I made you feel that you should not disagree, I would look on that as a deprivation. (106–7)

In his reply Snyder passes over Berry's reference to his Christian perspective (which constitutes the most substantial difference, which we will shortly consider). He focuses instead on their differing understandings of their preferred relationship of people and land:

Good grief, I'd be delighted and honoured to have such a book dedicated to me. I never thought we would have to agree about everything anyway—clearly you are pro-agrarian, and I am pro-hunting and gathering, which only shows I am even less credible, in the twentieth century, than you are. (107)

This difference between agrarian and hunter/gatherer occurs early in the correspondence and touches on the deeper philosophical and theological differences. Thus in 1977, after having finished reading what remains Berry's most in-depth defense of the agrarian, *The Unsettling of America*, Snyder writes:

I think your points are clear and well-taken. The question I ask myself is: what next? . . . The best intentions in the world will not stop the inertia of a heavy

⁶ Gary Snyder, "Good, Wild, Sacred," in *The Practice of the Sacred* (New York: North Point, 1990), 79.

civilization that is rolling on its way. As poets, our politics mostly stand back from that flow of topical events; and the place where we do our best work is in the unconscious, or myth-consciousness of the culture. . . . What you and I are really talking about, is reviving the value system and integrity and authenticity that belongs to the neolithic. The neolithic mind-set has been struggling to retain itself—in terms of what has been called “folk-culture”—against the taxing powers of governments ever since. (25–26)

In a return letter Berry cautiously agrees with Snyder’s argument that for the best models of right relationship to place, we must go back to pre-civilizational times. But in so doing, he introduces the more fundamental difference between them, one which they never really resolve: the difference between Hebrew/Christian and animist or Neolithic sources for their thought.

I think you’re right about the Neolithic. We may have had a few chances since then to recover that integrity and authenticity on somewhat different terms, but each time we blundered—maybe, each time, by failing to see which way technical innovation would take us, hence *never* limiting that. And so we must go to the Neolithic for examples. Of course, innovation was slow then and they didn’t have to deal with it. For dealing with it we have to consider the Amish, not so much for anything they have achieved but for their uncanny instinct about limits, about the connection between spirit and tools. Where did they get it? I wish I understood. I’m sure the Bible can get you to where the Amish are, but why didn’t it get the rest of us there? (28)

Berry’s interest in the Amish continues. A few months later (September 1979) he writes to Snyder, after spending a day with an Amish convert, “I now have a list of Amish social principles which I want to give you” (47). Berry sums up the most important of these several years later in an essay subtitled “Twenty-Seven Propositions about Global Thinking and the Sustainability of Cities”:

If we could think locally, we would take far better care of things than we do now. The right local questions and answers will be the right global ones. The Amish question “What will this do to our community” tends toward the right answer for the world.”⁷

⁷ Wendell Berry, “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse: Twenty-seven Propositions about Global Thinking and the Sustainability of Cities”, in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 20.

Berry's words, "I'm sure the Bible can get you to where the Amish are, but why didn't it get the rest of us there?" reflect an emerging theme in Berry's work: the roots of his agrarian philosophy in biblical principles. And discussion of those roots—in comparison with Snyder's Neolithic roots—evoke the longest and most substantial letters of the whole collection.

The theme appears first as Berry thanks Snyder for his explication of "right occupation," a part of the Buddhist Eightfold Path, early in 1979:

Thanks for your note on right occupation. Did I tell you what I wanted it for? I'm to speak in April at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, and I'm going to argue that a *Christian* doctrine of right occupation is implicit in the Bible—that in fact it is almost explicit there, in passages that I have been quite a while locating and connecting. My argument will begin with the conditions surrounding the gift of the Promised Land in the Pentateuch and wind up with a passage in Romans where Paul says that not just mankind but all creation awaits a resurrection by which it will be delivered from corruption and glorified. If I can make it all stick together, it will be an argument against the otherworldly values that have caused or allowed so much Christian abuse of "nature." (40)

Berry's address to the Baptists is later published as "The Gift of Good Land" in *The Sierra Club Journal*. When Snyder read it, he wrote:

I found the article very useful, re-opened my thinking—jumping over and beyond Genesis—(too bad Jehovah seemed to overlook the fact that people were already there living in the promised land, though—). (50)

The criticism implicit in Snyder's sarcastic comment on "the promised land" is passed over for the time being. But Snyder's discomfort with Christianity emerges directly the following spring (April 3, 1980) in his response to a draft of the first of Berry's "Sabbath" poems. (Berry has elsewhere said that he wrote these from the discipline of walking in the woods on Sundays instead of going to church, where he was never comfortable. In a later letter Berry admits, "I still see no church I could be at home in. I am a solitary Christian—a most paradoxical creature" (65).

The "Sabbath" poems often draw on the language of Christian worship; some are almost prayers, and address "the Lord." Snyder wrote in response:

Reading *Sabbaths*. I can enjoy the poems, but not the theology—I am truly convinced both from study and personal practice that there is no one central informing and organizing "Lord" to invoke—and that the center is everywhere,

simultaneously, and, also, that Human and non-human are not qualitatively removed. (54–55)

After some positive and negative comments on individual poems, and a warning to avoid “hymnal language-tone,” Snyder closes:

Yr [*sic*] old Buddhist Buddy

Gary

Snyder thus lays out the three parts of his “a-theology” succinctly: 1) *atheism*: there is nothing that can meaningfully be called “God”; 2) *monism*: there is no difference between centre and circumference: “the center is everywhere”; and *naturalism*: we are simply part of nature: there is no special place for the human.

Berry’s response sets up a pattern that he follows in his other letters on this crucial subject. First, he tries to define his own position in a way to include and welcome Snyder’s Buddhism—indeed he signs *his* letter

Your friend,

Wendell (buddhist) [*sic*] (57)

More directly he writes:

I wonder if it might not be possible to define a Western theology sufficiently responsive to Biblical tradition that would not alienate a Buddhist such as yourself. The question may be merely naïve, yet I think Thomas Merton had it much in mind. (56)

After this suggestion that it might be possible to get beyond their differences, Berry continues, as he does in other letters, with the more pointed part of his response. He points out that the Christianity that Snyder is rejecting is a caricature: it overlooks the richness of the Christian view: “I too believe that ‘the center is everywhere simultaneously.’ . . . You can find good Biblical support for an argument—for instance—that God is at once transcendent and immanent” (56).

After a six-week delay, Snyder writes an extended response, in which he makes his criticism of Christianity more explicit:

My problems with Christianity are two: One is basically theological, the place in the Bible where the Lord says the living creatures of the earth are “meat” for our use and the distinction from the beginning which is hardened into dogma by the church between creator and creation. It is heretical for a Christian to aspire to be completely one with the maker. (June 5, 1980, pp. 58–61)

He suggests too that he could “get along with Christianity”—but that “my mother, being raised in a strict southern town, gave me more than my share of atheist hostility, I know, and my Marxist leanings of my twenties reinforced it.” He continues by referring to some of his own experience of rapprochement between Zen and Christianity, especially in his own Zen teacher, Robert Aitken.

(Part of the charm of this whole collection is illustrated in the fact that Snyder can move easily from this deep discussion of Zen and Christianity to asking Berry’s advice about tractors versus horses, “wondering if what we can do with a good heavy duty rototiller is hold the line between horses and a tractor for a while and make it do until we can enlarge our grass-growing capacity without a tractor. . . . Can a somewhat larger, sturdier rototiller do useful work around the place beyond just small gardens [June 5, 1980, p. 61]?”)

Berry’s response, three weeks later, is extensive—the second longest letter of the whole correspondence (June 29, 1980; pp. 62–68). Beginning by answering Snyder’s question about rototillers, he moves into the argument. As in the earlier exchange, he goes far in agreeing with Snyder—saying for example that like himself Snyder reads the Bible “as the outcropping of something timeless, unhuman and true—all encrusted with shards, artifacts and fossils of what you call ‘civilization.’” But he adds that he does not seek explanations for wonders. “I believe wonders have happened because I see that they happen.”

But he is quite critical over what he considers to be Snyder’s shallow reading of both the Bible and the whole Christian tradition. He points out that the Genesis giving of meat for food is in the context of a covenant God makes with all creatures; that “the book of Job is a ferocious indictment of the assumption that the world is man’s meat,” and argues that the idea of “atonement” suggests that it is not heretical to imply a unity between the Christian and the Maker.

The discussion continues, interspersed with many other topics, over several letters and years. Ultimately, the two men seem to agree to disagree, and don’t dwell any more on the differences, which is probably a good thing. The last significant appearance of the animism/theism argument is in Berry’s response (August 12, 1990, pp. 174–75) to Snyder’s 1990 book, *The Practice of the Wild*. Berry praises the book, but has two substantial criticisms, which highlight the abiding difference in their approach. The first is to the essay “Good, Wild, Sacred,” in which Snyder says that agriculture is the beginning of a “linear” kind of thinking which distances us from nature. To this Berry

complains, “I think you see agriculture too exclusive of wildness” and proceeds to give some examples of the harmonious relationship of the two.

Berry’s second criticism is more substantial, and echoes his earlier complaint that the Christianity that Snyder dismisses is a simplistic caricature:

Your definition of “the ideology of monotheism” strikes me as not only far too general and simple, but improbable too. The allegation of uniformity becomes uncomfortable, it seems to me, in the presence of almost any pair of examples you can name.

He proceeds to name several such pairs of “monotheist” thinkers: Dante and Chaucer, Billy Graham and E. F. Schumacher, Dorothy Day and Jerry Falwell, Thomas Merton and the pope. “Also,” he continues, “it is impossible to reconcile the idea of centralization with the anti-state principles of the Anabaptists and other sects, or with the Baptist doctrines of “the priesthood of all believers.”

Berry concludes his response by saying,

The theological parts of your book brought me to a question that I would like to know your answer to. Doesn’t polytheism (which you seem to allow) finally imply monotheism? Or, to put it a different way, could a uni-verse (a coherent or integrated nature) have been created by a committee of deities of limited and contending powers?

He then refers to a section of Spencer’s *Faerie Queen* in which Spencer speaks of the Christian creator in terms of “the greatest goddess,” which accomplishes, he says, “both a profound criticism of classical polytheism and a very significant elaboration of Christian monotheism.”

The points Berry raises here are substantial. If Snyder responds to them, this collection does not reflect it. When one looks back over the long exchange, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Snyder cannot easily answer Berry’s criticisms. So to preserve the friendship they abandon the argument. Nevertheless—it is sad that despite his long conversation with Berry on this crucial topic, Snyder (as at least one recent poem, “Stories in the Night” makes clear) has not moved from his earlier simplistic understanding of the Biblical picture of Creation and our place in it. I will not be the only reader who hopes this conversation between them continues.

In any case—it is misleading to write an article on this fine book that dwells on ideas and disagreements. What comes through most clearly—despite their disagreements, and their pain of living in an unwise time and culture—is delight in the sheer gift of the

world, however they understand the mystery of what it is. The delight comes first. Two excerpts from near the end of the correspondence make the point. In September of 2000 Snyder tells Berry this story:

How do you like this: a grey squirrel which has now for ten days been regularly climbing into our apple trees, first the Gravenstein, then the Jonathan, now the Pippin so that they fall on the ground and then immediately a four-point buck comes along and eats some of the apples. And the rest of the time he lounges in the shade of the trees. What a deal! (214)

To which Berry replies a few days later, “I love your story of the squirrel and the deer. Long live interracial cooperation!” (215)

And in the final exchange of the correspondence, responding to a picture on the cover of *Farming* magazine with Berry, a horse, and a mule, Snyder responds with the single question: “But why is it horses have small ears and big feet & mules have big ears & small feet—?” (247). Berry dutifully answers with a brief lesson in mule genetics. Then he concludes with his own squirrel story, about a birdhouse taken over by flying squirrels. “Sometimes one of the squirrels comes to the opening and regards me, and I regard him or her back. I am unsure how either of us is affected by this” (247). Those are the last words in the collection.

Presumably these two friends are still writing such things to each other. The correspondence is packed not only with deep thinking, but also with keen seeing, good humour—and genuine friendship. Long may it continue!

I return in conclusion to reflect on the larger significance of this collection of letters. Speaking as one who has been reading and appreciating both writers since before the correspondence began, I can attest to the way in which it provides a kind of overview of the history of two wings of the environmental movement, agrarianism and bioregionalism, from two of its most important voices. To illustrate the deeper importance of the disagreements at the centre of the correspondence, I conclude with two brief examples. When, in a reflective retreat the leaders of a local environmental organization were asked to identify what story or stories they understood their work to be a part of, most found the question difficult to answer. “That we are a part of nature” was the clearest answer. But, unable to define nature as anything more than “what is happening in the universe” they found it difficult, when challenged, to find in this a basis for action or education.

For if humanity—whether destructive or conserving—is simply the latest thing the random action of nature has produced, then there is no reason to be concerned about

the consequences of any human action such as global warming, habitat destruction, and species extinction. These are just what nature is doing. Yet that view of nature—as a purposeless, impersonal process that has by chance produced intelligence, consciousness, and conscience—seems to be the one within which they are operating.

There is little room for hope in such a vision. Despair is a common environmentalist problem. But the idea that nature could be better understood as *creation*, in which human creatures have a special role of relationship and responsibility to both the earth and its Creator—was unpalatable to this group of environmentalist leaders, as it is (as these letters show) to Snyder.

A second instance of the relevance of these letters comes from conversation with a university professor of environmental studies who is an expert in ecological restoration. But in conversation and in his published work he acknowledges a deep problem. We have a good handle on the science of climate change and ecological degradation. But no science can tell us what “restoration” means, especially when it is now impossible to restore what has been destroyed. Thus there is a kind of philosophical vacuum at the centre of the environmental movement: the situation seems to require a larger narrative. “Environmentalism” is an ethic in search of a religion, a larger story in which our actions are coherent, meaningful, and *right*.

There really are only two larger narratives available. One is the monist one, which Snyder finds in Neolithic hunter-gatherer cultures: in this view nature is nothing more than what has been purposelessly happening. The other is the Christian one which underlies Berry’s work: the premise that we live in a universe in which personality and responsibility are real, rooted in a Creator who is both other than the universe and intimately present to it, and whose character underlies, justifies, and invites human love, care, and stewardship.

The gift of these letters is that both Berry and Snyder, beginning where all humans begin, with the miraculous given of the world—whether we call it “nature” or “creation”—have lived such thoughtful, articulate lives, though motivated by different narratives. Thus they are indeed “distant neighbors.” Their rich body of writing, from within these different narratives, invites us into that neighbourliness, and these letters invite us into their work.

Loren Wilkinson