# From the Interpersonal to the Environmental: Extending the Ethics of Levinas to Human Ecology

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## *Abstract*

*This paper draws on the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas (and to a lesser degree Martin Buber) for insight into the identification and preservation of authentic relations in human ecology and human communities. Borrowing from Levinas it develops the idea that an authentic relation between people and place — one that transcends a common but false dualism between ethical preservation and instrumental use — follows a pattern most readily experienced in the interhuman erotic. Borrowing from Buber the paper suggests that authentic human communities have at their foundation individuals with a mutual relation with place (or "living Center") discernible in the pattern of the erotic above. The paper connects these thinkers and justifies their application to these issues by demonstrating their presence in the fiction and poetry of agriculture written by Wendell Berry. Finally the paper suggests application of these ideas to real communities caught at decision points in their development.*

***Keywords:*** *Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber, Wendell Berry, environmental ethics, agriculture*

By now readers of this journal are accustomed to the terms of a debate about the boundaries (or lack thereof) of moral considerability. A point brought out over time in that debate is that mere inclusion within those boundaries does not exclude the possibility of a subject's instrumental use. That an ethical relationship can exist between an individual and a person or thing that is also viewed instrumentally is no longer an assertion that may be considered surprising or controversial. What is "Thou" in the "bare present," to use Martin Buber's language (1958, 34), can be made use of and later categorized as "It" in recollection. Slightly more surprising is the idea that these two categories of relation can exist *simultaneously* in the individual and at the same time between individual subjects. This is the point made by Emmanuel Levinas in his discussion of the common situation in which this occurs: erotic love. Easily overlooked in a review of Levinas' discussion, though, is that the reciprocal relation or mutualism he describes, while readily evident in the inter-human erotic, is not confined to that situation alone. In describing the characteristics of the erotic Levinas lays the groundwork for an argument that other relations also might display this complex simultaneity. In particular, another commonly understood relational situation — that between people and place most vividly expressed in agriculture — can be shown to fit the characteristics of Levinas' erotic. This paper will show that this point is made well by the use of literature of agriculture written by one prominent author, Wendell Berry.

But Berry's work is only partly a celebration of the relation of farmer to the land (and *vice-versa*). Essential also to Berry's work is the illustration and celebration of how this relation between person and place acts as the basis for an authentic relation between individuals. The individual pursuit of agriculture, in other words (*Buber's* words) creates a relation to a "living Center" (1958, 45) upon which real human community is built. In descriptions that resonate throughout Buber's theory Berry's work illustrates the evisceration of the agricultural relation, and thus community, that has accompanied the subjugation of the farm by institutionalized agri-industry. Thus Buber and Levinas, both working from the same philosophical tradition, find seemingly disparate elements of their thought productively tied together by the work of an author of fiction. This paper will examine the sequence of this reasoning from Levinas to Berry to Buber in an effort to demonstrate the validity of the pattern it reveals. Finally this paper will apply that pattern to real-life politics by suggesting the kinds of policies this reasoning would lead a community to encourage or reject when facing a developmental decision. Far from an abstraction, the theory examined in this paper will be shown to be relevant to important decisions now being made by (for example) communities built on natural resource economies in the American West.

## Background

Before beginning, some background on Emmanuel Levinas, and on the better-known Martin Buber, is in order. At his death in 1995 at the age of 93 Levinas was hailed as one of the most important ethical thinkers of our time. By then he had amassed a body of work well known and respected by prominent continental philosophers. His admirers included contemporaries like Sartre and Marcel as well as students like Derrida (Atterton 1998). Much of his work, however, has only recently been translated to English. These translations, though now reaching a growing audience, reveal a complexity of thought and uniqueness (some would argue impenetrability) of style that have kept (and likely will keep) Levinas' work more a subject of scholarly interpretation than popular reference. Partly because of the relative lateness of his work's entry into academic discussion, and partly because his work never explicitly builds on other than the foundational metaphors of interhuman relations, none prior to now have expanded on the ecological significance of his thought.

This is unfortunate, because within this constrained set of metaphoric boundaries Levinas pushes ethical thought into productive directions for environmental philosophy. When Levinas suggests (as he does perhaps most famously) that it is the "face" of the "other" that makes an essential and primary ethical claim on the "self" (1993), he is talking about the *human* face of a *human* other, infinitely capable of resisting apprehension, possession, or conquest by a *human* self. He is, however, making a more general and radical point about the primacy of ethics and relations to others within philosophy over an epistemological quest for truth and absolute understanding. When he frames that more conventional Western truth-seeking philosophical project as *autonomy* — that is, the reductive, even forceful "encompassing of all Other to Same" (1993, 91) — he is speaking of a suppression of *human* diversity or otherness.

It is easier, in this latter case and with the help of a related philosopher, to imagine here a widening of Levinas' ethical realm to the non-human. This difference-suppressing *autonomy* — a term chosen by Levinas to highlight the undercurrent of Platonic solipsism within the prominent Western philosophical tradition — contrasts with an open, non-violent and experiential or participatory *heteronomy* that sees truth as fleeting and held within the moment in which "a thinker maintains a relationship with reality distinct from him" (1993, 88). Here Levinas sounds much like Martin Buber, a better-known ethical theorist and rabbinical scholar whose contrasting types of relation — I-It and I-Thou — mirror (respectively) reductive autonomy and fleeting heteronomy. The similarity is no accident. Both thinkers draw inspiration from a dialogical tradition rooted in Jewish Hasidism. It is a tradition suspicious of philosophy "and of the philosophical ideal of a conceptual mastery of reality" (Chalier 1995, 4) Both also acknowledge a debt to the path laid for them by Feuerbach in his work on relational ethics (from which Buber obtains "I-Thou") (Levinas 1994, 17). Unlike Levinas, however, Buber also borrows from Feuerbach a consideration not just for the interaction of humans, but for the body in relation to nature. Specifically, to Buber (following Feuerbach), nature or natural things retain the potential for ethical recognition comparable to that of a person (Wartofsky 1977, 39). The *Thou* can be natural as well as human.

Anyone familiar with the work of Martin Buber is familiar with that fact. Buber writes of relation to surrounding nature in which "Thou" is felt but unspoken (1958, 6 and 101) He writes of the "great languages" capable of being spoken by animal's eyes (1958, 96-97) and of the generosity of their unhypocritical response to engagement (1958, 125). Of trees Buber counsels a "will and grace" on the part of humans to allow themselves to be "bound up" in a relation with *Thou*, "seized by the power of [the tree's] exclusiveness" (1958, 7). His direct applicability as an ethical theorist to environmental issues is straightforwardly stated and, for his time and background, radical in its generosity to nonhuman otherness. Restating this point is not the objective here. The point instead is that the application of this kind of ethical thought to the environment is not so great a stretch. Others within the tradition of Levinas have done so explicitly and famously.

What Buber lacks, however, is a concept like Levinas' *erotic* — one which permits a vision of the complex relational mix that aptly characterizes an attentive and dependent connection of person to place. Levinas, consistently, did not undertake the development of this subsidiary ecological point. However, in his development of the concept of the erotic, Levinas suggests a pattern that allows this relation to be identified in more than just the obvious encounters between humans. Doing so usefully resolves a persistent duplicity in even the most sensitive depictions of relations between people and place — a duplicity of (seemingly) categorically distinct ethical and instrumental relation that even Buber's work does not seem to reconcile. How, one might ask after reading Buber, can one approach nature instrumentally as "It" without doing violence to the empathy built when experiencing nature as "Thou"? Here, as shall be seen, Levinas is helpful. Even more productively, however, the development of Levinas that follows also makes available another fruitful but more neglected concept from Buber — that of the "living Center" around which *authentic* (as opposed to "institutional") forms of community are built (Buber 1958, 43-45). Most easily attributed to a shared religion, an analysis of the relation of humans to a natural place that begins with Levinas makes possible a reading of Buber that attributes to a place

the status of *living Center*. Levinas, in other words, can be used to expand Buber's usefulness to issues of human ecology. The aptness and appropriateness of the bridge between these thinkers and their concepts, in this essay, shall be argued by bringing in themes from the poetry and fiction of Wendell Berry. The argument about these following assertions, instead of seeking justification via reference to a mutual tradition (Jewish Hasidism) or shared philosophical inspiration (Feuerbach) between Levinas and Buber, shall be supported by bringing in a body of literature that, in its resonance with both authors, provides a demonstrative justification.

## Emmanuel Levinas and the Erotic

To Emmanuel Levinas, love, or more specifically erotic love, is a uniquely "ambiguous" relation between the self and other that is at once possessive and deferential. Erotic love, though perhaps motivated by need or desire within the self for the other, is consummated only when a reciprocal need or desire for the self motivates the other (or beloved). Thus in love one experiences *simultaneously* the ambiguous sense of needing without being able to bring into possession, and the sense of being needed without surrendering to exploitation of one's self. To Levinas, "*Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into need, [a] need [that] still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the Other, of the Beloved*" (1979, 254).

Though sequentially second in the description of a pattern behind the erotic, understanding this relational simultaneity is primary to an appreciation of Levinas' theoretical contribution. Love bridges autonomy and heteronomy, or the seeming (at first) temporal exclusivity of Buber's primary I-Thou and I-It relations. Erotic love, as opposed to other relations, must be two unlike — even *opposed* — types of engagement. Unlike Buber's aforementioned trees, which might be sympathetically encountered as *Thou* today and instrumentally utilized as timber (that is, *It*) tomorrow, the beloved in erotic love must engage both types of relation at once. The adherent to the more classical ethical thinking of Buber is left to judge when and how to leave a "Thou" relation behind. From Levinas one gathers that the level of intersubjective connection from this primary form of relation is necessarily incomplete. Levinas here is postmodern in his insistence that distance or distinction between relational subjects can never (and should never) be overcome. At the same time his is an understanding of that irreconcilable distinction that does not see, for the particular case of the erotic, its violation in instrumentalism. The erotic, Levinas writes, is "the equivocal par excellence" (1979, 255).

The equivocal nature of erotic love is reflected in the preliminary or initial "searching" (1979, 258) gesture that precedes it, the first sequential characteristic of the pattern described by Levinas: the caress. The caress, to Levinas, is sense through contact that "transcends the sensible" (1979, 257). The caress expresses hunger and directs itself towards the sources of that hunger's satisfaction, but by itself is a gesture that results only in "deepening the hunger" (1979, 257). The caress is a necessary move towards an other — a beloved — that beckons them closer while (in its lack of *insistence*) asking them to keep their alterity or distance: "*The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly (yet necessarily) escapes its form toward a future never future enough*" (1979, 257). Were that caress to seize or to insist, its object would either be repelled or subdued — denying the unique possibility of the ambiguous erotic relation and closing off the glimpse offered to the self of the enigmatic "future never future enough."

Levinas breaks down this enigma in his description of another aspect and final pattern-characteristic of erotic love: fecundity. Through the fecund possibilities of erotic love the "child" (Levinas' tellingly anthropocentric metaphor) might be discovered (not merely *created* or *made*). Fecundity makes possible out of the erotic that which is "both mine and non-mine" (1979, 267) — undeniably familiar but at the same time inescapably other. Through fecundity the self relates to the future. That relation, however, is not of control but essential connection. The self does not and cannot command nor does it directly participate in the future. In spite of this, the self at the same time feels interest and concern for the future.

In sum, then, the erotic bears three unique and important qualities. First it transcends the philosophical isolation of autonomy while still allowing the other to be subject to use. That use, importantly though, is ambiguously reciprocal and simultaneous, dependent upon giving as it receives. Second, the erotic is initiated by the caress, beckoning but never insistent, as intent on listening and retaining alterity as it is in gaining satisfaction. Finally, fecundity comes to being through the erotic, linking the self not only to the newly discovered other, but to a future that fades in both its infinite distance and its immediate resistance to thematization and control. At first it seems unfortunate that in Levinas' choice of metaphor and descriptive technique he utilizes terms and experiences so laden with human bodily specificity. As with his earlier-mentioned use of the "face" as metaphor, the descriptive example of erotic love suppresses the possibility of conceiving that other relations might involve the mutual need and desire of eros, the eagerness/hesitancy of the caress, and the future-orientation of fecundity.

Interestingly, though, Levinas' choice of metaphor might be appreciated as commentary on the everyday experience of modern human life. The relation of people to a place through agriculture is a relation few and ever fewer people now expe-

rience — intellectuals like Levinas perhaps especially included. Modern language used to describe that agricultural relation, though, and still has obvious links to quasi-erotic concepts like fertility (land, like people can be fertile — a condition precursory to the fecund, a characteristic of the erotic). Yet beyond this fairly superficial and arguably parallel observation (fertility, as a term, seems ever more distant from eroticism and more related to potential productivity), the agricultural relation can be shown to display more directly all of the pattern-traits of the erotic described by Levinas. In so doing an examination of the agricultural points to the possibility that many other relations between humans, things and places bear within them the special and important qualities that Levinas links *metaphorically* to the erotic.

## Wendell Berry: The Agricultural as the Erotic

Perhaps no other modern writer is as known for capturing the essence (and the problem) of American agriculture as Wendell Berry. Well recognized for his essays, Berry is also a prolific poet and novelist. It is through examples of his poetry and fiction — in which the assertions of truth found in essays are replaced by a more compelling standard of *truthfulness* of description — that he offers the clearest and most convincing glimpse of the multiple dimensions of the erotic in agriculture. One need not look hard for examples. His poems describe individuals as having "married" a surrounding country (Berry 1973, 51). The good farmer and his[1] land are described as "two halves of the same thing" (1983, 202). The death of a good farmer puts his land into "a kind of widowhood" (1986, 54), or of mourning at the loss of a "beloved" (1973, 51). Such examples, however, are less explicit in their fit with the pattern of the erotic described by Levinas. Better still are descriptions found in the many stories Berry has written about the people and farms of the countryside surrounding the fictional town of Port William, Kentucky.

In *The Memory of Old Jack*, Berry tells a story of the recollections and death of a 92-year-old Port William farmer. The story is one that traces relations with people and place, but stands out at times in its resonance with the theoretical writings of Levinas. Berry, for example, vividly and concisely captures the essence of the caress in his description of (then young) Jack's approach to a neighboring farm gone fallow and now up for sale: "*A number of times he walked over to it, looking at it, loosening the earth in the rows of the crop ground with his heel, picking it up and crumbling it in his fingers... He drank from the well and the spring and lingered by the waterholes along the creek... He learned a new desire, the subtlety and power of which surprised him*" (1974, 67). Elsewhere another farmer impulsively walks a place he proposes to buy in darkness, developing a "longing" unfelt before that moment (1988, 90-91). Practical or skilled farmers, in Berry's writing, regularly walk a farm first to see if the place "is in good heart" (1981, 107). These initial encounters, as described by Berry, are inescapably *mutual* (drinking from a spring and "lingering" by waterholes are not activities that *take* from another — rather they are descriptions of farmers like Jack "searching" or offering themselves over to listening and experience). The encounters too, while expressing Jack's "hunger", serve further to enhance that hunger's "subtlety and power" — to build it into "longing," as might a freely returned caress. Indeed that freely returned response by *the land* to a farmer is crucial: farms, to Berry, "choose" (1986, 58) and "deserve" (1986, 68) certain farmers.

As Jack approaches the point of purchase (a commitment Berry likens to "betrothal"), Jack's stance to the neighboring farm begins to show a second trait of the erotic, treading the line of relational "ambiguity" Levinas describes:

> *This new place claimed an ample space in his mind, which it implanted with its impulse and will. It possessed as much of his consciousness as might stray from his work; it kept him awake at night. He wanted to see that place respond to him* (1974, 67).

It is easy to read these passages and charge Jack with a desire merely to possess and to extort profit from the neighboring land. But Berry is careful with language. *The place* implants *its* impulses and will in Jack's mind. *The place* possesses Jack's consciousness. He wants to see it *respond* to him, not *perform for* or *submit to* him. The place, in other words, retains its otherness or alterity as it fulfills desire.

It is, in fact, difficult to discern a role of dominance in the simultaneous exchange of giving/getting and probing/listening described by Berry. Clearly at times the soil of a farm submits: it lies "waiting," later "welcoming" the farmer "everywhere he puts down his hand or his foot or his seed" (1983, 24-25). Yet a farmer like Jack — perhaps Berry's best character example of this Levinasian pattern — also submits:

> "*He (Jack) learned to what his place asked him. He became the man it asked him to be... he knew he'd become his farm's belonging, necessary to it...*" (1986, 54)

Elsewhere in an essay Berry is more explicit about the nature of the farmer/farmland exchange:

> *(The farmer) attends carefully to her (the farm's) response. The use of the place would necessarily change the user. The conversation itself would thus assume a kind of creaturely life, binding the place and its inhabitants together changing and growing to no end, no final accomplishment that can be conceived or foreseen...*

*Farming in this way ...proceeds by desire* (1990, 209)

The description is of partners in an active and wordless exchange.

Lastly, filling out the pattern of the Levinasian erotic, the relation is unmistakably *fecund*. Both farmer and farm pursue their end of the exchange toward an end neither can foresee. The mutual effort of farming is oriented toward an end not in salable crops, but in connection with an ever-receding future (a "future never future enough"). The goal of farming, aside from the moment of connection itself, becomes a "giving... for the future, for which there is no evidence" (1988, 110). By the end of his life Jack's character is described as "faithful unto death to the life of his fields, to no end that he will ever know in this world" (1974, 106).

It would be easy to dismiss this kind of writing as artistic flourish: the "conversation" of the land is just a farmer's trial and error with an ecologically complex but *inert* climate and soil. Likewise the goal of the project is abundantly foreseeable: profitable food production. However, to do so, one would have to dismiss the way in which Berry carefully develops his message — to dismiss the language he uses as imaginary and overworked, and his parallel with Levinas as coincidental. From a reading of Berry it is unmistakable that the good farmer develops a relation with the land that caresses, is an active exchange of desires, and that yields towards but does not foresee or control the future. The doubter or skeptic takes on the burden of proof of explaining those Levinasian similarities.

Challenging Wendell Berry's way of writing about a relation to the land, however, would be pointless. Too many others have written similarly about farming.[2] What is more interesting is that in Wendell Berry's work the agricultural — that is, the erotic relation with place — takes on the role of the source, or "living Center" of human community life. One sees, in other words, via a reading of Berry, the fruitful linkage (backward this time) from Levinas to Buber of two heretofore never related concepts between these two very related ethical thinkers. An explanation requires a small background digression into Buber's work.

## Berry and Buber: Agriculture as the Living Center of the Community

In *I and Thou* Martin Buber describes the development of a true community. To Buber, and unlike proponents of "virtual" or "professional" ones, that community does not come merely from the sharing of feelings or interests generated individually. Rather Buber's community comes "*first, through (people) taking their stand in living mutual relation with a living Center, and second, their being in living mutual relation with one another*" (Buber 1958, 45). Any other form or foundation of community is likely "inauthentic" (1958, 115). It is in fact likely only to be a shadow of community — an *institution*, "well ordered and harmonious" (1958, 45) but lacking an event of relation by individuals to that Center. Within institutional forms the reigning relation is the instrumental and reductionist I-It. Institutions "yield no public life," and none of the mutualism of I-Thou. Buber's development of living Center as the relational base of community, though important, is easily and often overlooked in discussions that focus on his more famous contrast between I-It and I-Thou. Given the religious emphasis in his work the concept might easily be read as a reference to God or (at the very least) a common faith. Such a reading is too narrow. Buber permits more latitude in the identification of living Center,[3] and as further examples from Wendell Berry's work show, his concept is well demonstrated by describing a community that is centered in a "living mutual" (and by Levinas' terms, erotic) agricultural relation with their surroundings.

The most obvious example of such a community in Berry's writing is the collection of people around Port William that recur as characters in his novels and short stories. All have different backgrounds and life stories. Any shared religion is little mentioned, and their living (or not) in immediate proximity to one another is only incidental. What ties this collection of characters together into a community — or "membership" as Berry calls it — is the relation each feels to the land or place: an anticipating, mutual and fecund relation. A character describes the membership as "the line of people who know" that "the land expects something from us" (1986a, 68). Name or heredity is not part of belonging in the community of a membership (1986b, 135).

There is nothing necessarily mystical about this centrality — no conscious attempt is made to invoke the otherworldly or deific. The centrality Berry intends is a much more direct bond of community that comes from shared experience of labor and life in the "good work" (defined as "the *enactment* of connections" (1977, 139)) of tending crops and land. There is a sense of that notion of connections developed in Berry's description of a team of workers — relatives and neighbors from the Port William "membership" — in for lunch from a morning of harvest work:

> *They stand or squat in the yard ... waiting their turns (at the wash basin). Their shirts are wet with sweat. They smell of sweat and tobacco and the earth of the field. In the stance of all of them there is relish of the stillness that comes after heavy labor. They have come to rest, and their stillness now, because of the long afternoon's work yet ahead of them is more intense, more deeply felt, and more carefully enjoyed, than that which will come at day's end* (1974, 107)

The labor that preceded it, the above brief period of rest, and the meal that followed are each described by Berry as unique events following an honored sequence that is as much a ritual as any organized church service. The conversation is spare, predictable, and perhaps even bland — devoid of any forced attentiveness to "feelings." Nevertheless the event is filled with a meaning that escapes none and a depth that reflects the ties of these people to each other. The meal sets relationships between people that last past the harvest, and that orders the human community in bonds stretching through the rest of the year when the work returns again to a more solitary exchange between an individual and the land.

The mid-day meal described by Berry would have done little to create community if it had not been bracketed by good work, or the enactment of connections, with a living Center. If the array of people described had gathered together from the individual pursuit of bad work (that is: "isolating, harsh, destructive, specialized, or trivialized into meaninglessness") then try as they might over lunch to express the depth of their feelings for one another, community would have remained elusive. The meal Berry describes is punctuated more by the sounds of dishes and eating than by banter. What talk that does transpire concerns itself with predictable compliments and ritual commentary (the weather, the upcoming school year) than with heartfelt but failure-bound attempts to express inner emotion. The work of the harvest to Berry's characters is what Buber would label "a living and continually renewed relational event" (Buber 1958, 54), without which culture risks *institutionalization*, or the "hardening into the world of It" (1958, 54).

What does it mean to propose this risk of institutionalized culture? Here the example of erotically-patterned agriculture is especially useful. For the past hundred years (but especially in the past half century) farmland and farm communities have undergone an economically justified but socially and ecologically disastrous consolidation and industrialization. Diverse family farms are now unified in an efficient and scientifically managed monoculture. Family farmsteads are either emptied, razed, or rented to tenant workers whose managing owners may or may not live nearby. Their loss, to Berry, is "veiled" by the shrilly-proclaimed story of American agricultural success, a story that has "obscured the countryside. All lives, creatures, connections are hidden in it" (Berry 1988, 98). The engaging but *inefficient* (and to the mind of scientific management *impossible*) relation of eroticism described earlier is eradicated. If Old Jack were to walk through a "potential acquisition" for a corporate investment group the event would not be indicative of a beckoning caress. Jack's character would be quicker to forget the boots and cup he used to kick the soil and taste the water than the soil test kit and water sample bottle that — when analyzed — will tell him "what's really going on."

Likely Jack would not be there at all, for Berry describes the neighboring farm as irregular and sloped — poorly suited for the use of modern agricultural machinery. The farm, like others subsumed into the workings of industrialized agricultural machinery would, in other words, have become "institutionalized" — an "It." The farm would be a place to conduct business, trimmed of idiosyncrasy, a "tolerably well-ordered" setting within which (to use Buber's slightly sardonic terms), "with the manifold help of men's brains and hands, the process of affairs is fulfilled" (1958, 43). The erotic possibility of the land and thus of mutual relation with it, would have become shut out. With the departure of that possibility goes the departure of good work — and the departure of holding the land as living Center and source of community.

What is left is the hollow remains of community and culture — itself rendered institutional and without centering force. Think, for example, of the previously described farmers' meal in its modern institutionalized form. Each worker has radioed their progress and arrival time ahead from the air-conditioned cab of the combine they have driven since morning. None needs to stand still to rest from labor or to wait a turn at a common washbasin. The meal is much more likely to be store-bought and much less likely to consist of foods from the neighborhood farms, as the efficiency of monoculture and the transience of tenancy (an I-It relation of utility disparaged in numerous places by Berry (see for example 1983, 106)) discourage investment in vegetables and livestock raised privately on the side. It is, in fact, more likely to be eaten in town at a restaurant, driven to by a pick-up full of workers collected from their scattered tasks around the countryside.

Gone, then, is the very real but uncharismatic "relational event" of the noon harvest meal. No longer is it an event that builds community among those attached to a living Center. Pursued in its absence with ever-increasing fervor and desperation are high-profile substitutes like the organized fair, the Fourth of July "social", and the harvest festival — often rendered vacuous institutional events without their more subtle real-life counterparts — filled with mechanical rides, glitzy entertainment attractions, for-profit (often commercial) hawkers of food and games, and the beery promise of *real* fun after dark when the lights come up and the games, rides and shows cater to adults. A trip now to the county fair is often a bizarre and schizoid mix of the brazenly commercial and exploitative and the sadly out-of-place (though *essential*) agricultural and domestic. Evening strollers through the animal exhibits gaze with as much wonder at the dozing farm children on the hay next to prize cows as at the

cows themselves. A trip through the prize vegetables and preserved foods is often the price paid for a wrong turn on the way to the restroom.

The institutionalization of the county fair — once a celebration of common activity individually pursued, now an increasingly superficial relic — is indicative of the decline of farm communities. Throughout the country agricultural communities are seeing farms like Old Jack's neighboring place — *pretty* perhaps but unsuited for incorporation into a large scale operation — turned over to country getaways for harried urbanites. These urbanites arrive with definite ideas of the farm they wish to protect, but little idea of the engagement and active effort required to bring that preservation about. Writes Berry (quoting a letter from a Vermont friend David Budbill):

> *They treat the land like any other possession, or object they own. Set it aside, watch it, passively not wanting to, nay! thinking it abhorrent to engage in a living relationship with it... In a couple of years the meadow is full of hardhack and berries and young birch and maple. Pretty soon they can't even walk through the brush it's so thick* (1977, 28)

If the people are relatively poor and only loosely attached to their new farm it will continue to become overgrown (and thus less of a farm). If the people are well-off and determined they may have their field mowed and aesthetically maintained. Visitors to former agricultural communities close to wealthy cities will easily recognize the pattern: The farm survives in appearance but not in function. Roadside vegetable stands now sit in front of fields of low maintenance ornamental crops (like pumpkins) and sell produce flown in from out-of-state (see Doheny-Farina 1996). The county fair and country-town storefronts of these farming-communities-gone-second-home-residential retain the idealized look of a community close to the land. But the living Center is gone. To this reading of Buber the fair, the mowed lawn, the vegetable stand, and the propped-up downtown all are doomed attempts at preservation by the people of communities that commit the error of looking away from (sometimes even at *each other*, hoping in vain for feelings of community to materialize) instead of toward the Center. He describes a complex metaphor in which individuals, related, sit as if at the rim of a wheel:

> *It is not the periphery, the community, that comes first, but the radii, the common quality of relation with the Center. This alone guarantees the existence of the community* (Buber 1958, 115)

An agricultural region with agribusiness and second homes and few or no real farmers, where the work that sustains it takes place elsewhere in distant cities, is Buber's unanchored, spokeless wheel — liable to spin off and break apart at the slightest disturbance. The essential ingredient of individuals relating with Levinasian eroticism to the land has been removed. The culture has exchanged its living Center for institution and is at a tragic loss in its search for real community.

## Implications and Extension to Other Relations

The foregoing discussion has varied implications for people and situations found almost anywhere. One broad thematic example, however, shows its potential applicability to a set of contemporary issues in this country. Across the American West right now towns built around extractive industries (like mining) and wastefully managed but potentially sustainable industries (like timber-cutting, ranching, and irrigated farming) are on the decline. In their place quite often a new service economy has arisen built on retirement incomes, recreation and tourist amenities, telecommuting, and outside wealth attracted to scenery. Laudatory economic justifications for this trend are being written and refined (see for example Power 1996). Good riddance, they say, to an anachronistic, abusive, and mythically-propped way of community life (or "economic base" in the terms of the discipline's analysis). The reading of Levinas, Berry, and Buber just undertaken would question such a stance.

Certainly it is difficult to imagine a mining operation plausibly described in a sequence from beckoning caress to mutually desirous exchange to (perhaps most absurd) fecundity. Further, felt economic "imperatives" too often motivate extensive clearcutting, denuding of riparian areas by poorly managed cattle, and irrigation that ends only in prohibitive soil salinity above or depleted aquifers below. Any erotic characteristics of the human relation to these places seems overwhelmed (as it so often is in the inter-human erotic) by abuse. None of these activities relate the individuals engaged in them with consideration for mutuality (that is, *erotically*) to the living Center or landscape in which they take place. A look at the communities built around them shows the price paid for that fact. Few places are more temporary, utilitarian, or sterile — that is, in Buber's term, *institutional* — than a company mining town. Towns where tree-cutters and mills now process the last of the profitable timber stands might seem to be full of active bustle, but are devoid of long-term fiscal or human investment. The generation now living in these and other similarly situated towns knows that they are likely to be the last. Grown children give in to a justified rationale that tells them to seek a life elsewhere. Nevertheless, all of the latter activities (forestry, ranching, irrigated farming) might, under other conditions, convincing-

ly be described as a means of obtaining an erotic working relation to place. Forestry, ranching, dry-land farming, envisioned with evolving sustainability via an ongoing conversation between people and their surroundings, might easily warrant the kind of narrative that Berry builds around his Kentucky tobacco farms and their occupants: a relation of individuals to land that suggests Levinasian characteristics and that offers a living Center for an authentic human community.

The same cannot easily be said for the arguably revitalized towns of the new service and amenity-oriented West. The flagship success stories — ski-revitalized mining towns like Aspen, Telluride and Park City; silicon-technology revitalized cattle towns like Boise; diverse small villages gone tourist-income big like Moab or Sante Fe — all conceal stories of economic division and ecological abuse beneath the glitter of their newfound resurgence. Though scenically *em*placed, erotically-describable working connection *to* these places seems more distant than ever. Communities so situated, like their Eastern metropolis-adjacent counterparts, preoccupy themselves with maintaining the look and feel of connection (cow-town western storefronts, mining-evocative restaurants), but the "spokes" radiating from a living Center are broken. A downturn in the outside economy severe enough to discourage discretionary expenditure would threaten to fracture many of these communities so loosely-joined at the Buberian "periphery."

It should be stressed that this is not an economic argument. It is an assertion about the health of communities that neglect a chance for a certain type of ethical relation to place. Nor is it, exclusively, an endorsement of a community-building strategy of preserving productive sustainable work. Rather, hope lies with a more aggressive and active strategy: sources of real relation — mutual erotic relation to a living center — need to be identified or remembered; and institutions must be refused or eliminated when they threaten those relations. This does not necessarily mean that each person must seek and maintain an individual life-sustaining relation with a piece of land.

The agricultural is only the most obvious example of a mutual or erotic relation between humans and place. Even an expanded list, however, of occupations pursued in living relation with nature is too constrained. Agriculture, or fishing, or forestry, and all other pursuits of the satisfaction of readily-identified human physiological need are only part of a much longer list of needs and desire associated with nature. No one, for example, is unfamiliar (if they are honest with themselves) with the desire for a trip into wild nature. The trick (in a society that strives to deny that desire by labeling it *purposefully* as "exercise," "birdwatching," or "mountain climbing") is to identify the free-standing nature of that desire — and to confidently assert that it is *mutual*. Here again, where Wendell Berry helpfully demonstrated the erotic mutuality of agriculture, he demonstrates in (this time in poem) the mutuality of a "mere" visit to a natural setting:

> *I go among the trees and sit still.*
> *All my stirring becomes quiet*
> *around me like circles on water.*
> *My tasks lie in their places*
> *where I left them, asleep like cattle.*
>
> *Then what is afraid of me comes*
> *and lives for a while in my sight.*
> *What it fears in me leaves me,*
> *and the fear of me leaves it.*
> *It sings and I hear its song.*
>
> *Then what I am afraid of comes.*
> *I live for a while in its sight.*
> *What I fear in it leaves it,*
> *and the fear of it leaves me.*
> *It sings and I hear its song.*
>
> *After days of labor,*
> *mute in my consternations,*
> *I hear my song at last,*
> *and I sing it. As we sing*
> *the day turns, the trees move* (1987, 6-7)

Clearly in the unassuming, uninsistent, even vulnerable ("...what I am afraid of comes. I live for a while in its sight...") approach to the forest in Berry's poem there is parallel to the beckoning caress. Further, the entry of the individual into the forest for a conversation with that forest very explicitly is a cause for *mutual* enjoyment and celebration between human and nature. Berry here is not saying that wild nature particularly needs man. Nature's "song" does not wait for the special voice of man. Rather he is saying the forest — and man — desire the relation that this unassuming entry, open to conversation, makes possible. Both welcome the "song" that this relation brings forth.

But, it could be asked, is this encounter rightly deemed erotic? Would Levinas, who never explicitly asserted the eroticism of agriculture, agree that listening to and being listened to by nature is an erotic event? Perhaps (one answer might go) if it can be seen as *fecund*. Obviously the encounter of a person with wild nature produces no offspring or crop. It does, however, produce something hinted at by Levinas: desire itself. This, as Levinas writes, is an original type of desire that "is accomplished" — not in being satisfied and in thus acknowledging that it was a need, but in transcending itself, in engendering desire[4] (Levinas 1979, 269). The solo journey into the woods, in other words, reproduced the pure

desire to retake that journey for *itself*. That desire may be individual, but is likely to be shared — subject perhaps to celebration — and in doing so take on a life stretching further than any individual's participation.

If one has, upon leaving nature, the desire for return, then the possibility of that return is predicated on the safeguarding of nature, just as the possibility of a continuing *erotic* return to emplaced agriculture is predicated on the safeguarding of the farm. The latter is an argument more easily made — allowing for an easier development of the case for an agricultural living Center. The lessons for community, however, and for the local politics of development are not so different when the human relation to a particular place under consideration is a less conspicuous or materially productive form of attachment.

## Endnotes

1. Farmers themselves are almost invariably male in Berry's work, who love their place "as they would love a woman" (Berry 1988, 69).
2. An interesting example is essayist Michael Pollan, whose writing at times refers to an eros of gardening, though he does not trace in his description of gardening the Levinasian pattern of caress, mutuality, fecundity seen more easily in Berry. Pollan's writing is important and germane, however, in his explicit consideration of the subjectivity of nature, the ongoing and neverending character of the dialogue (or even "quarrel" as he labels it) between man (as gardener) and nature (and within this the understanding that nature necessarily remains irreconcilably other), and a pragmatist-oriented doctrine of environmental decision-making that involves equal parts listening to "genius of place" and flexible trial and error (Pollan 1991, 209-238).
3. The point, of course, could be debated. More explicitly a description of God than the living Center, however, is his description of the "Eternal Thou" (1958, 75).
4. Note that if it is objected that this allowance for reproduction of desire as. fecundity is overly broad, that it can then be counter-argued that the exclusion of all but the fecund as physically productive is overly narrow and restrictive. Non-sexually reproductive encounters exemplary of both I-Thou and I-It are easily envisioned as relations too strongly suggestive of eros to be ignored.

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