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## Abrahamic Allusions and Agrarianism in Wendell Berry's "The Solemn Boy"

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Set in the fall of 1934, Wendell Berry's short story "The Solemn Boy" focuses on a brief encounter between Ptolemy and Minnie Proudfoot and a penurious father/son pair that Tol encounters on his way home for dinner. This roadside encounter and the meal the characters subsequently share are at the center of the story, but it is not the story's starting place. In fact, the solemn boy who gives the story its title does not make his first appearance until seven pages into the fifteen-page narration. Of course, all of the material that precedes the arrival of the boy is not extraneous; it establishes a rich and vibrant context for the ensuing encounter. In particular, this preliminary material gives the story biblical weight by preparing us to see Tol and Miss Minnie as refigurations of Abraham and Sarah. However, Tol and Miss Minnie's tale turns out quite differently from that of the Old Testament to which it is allied. Whereas Abraham and Sarah miraculously receive and then miraculously retain their son of promise, Tol and Miss Minnie remain childless. Yet, herein lies the real miracle of Berry's story. Though the Proudfoots are only granted a single meal with their heaven-sent son before he is taken away, the couple does not become bitter or resentful. Their good grace and kindness in the face of profound disappointment is an achievement every bit as admirable as the faith and obedience of Abraham and Sarah. By humbly recognizing and graciously accepting the natural limits that are incumbent upon them, Tol and Miss Minnie model the type of modesty that is central to Berry's thought and that comes, in his estimation, from living in connection with the soil. Tol and Miss Minnie are the salt of the earth, and they become such, Berry implies, by tilling the earth. Their saintliness is an effect of their agrarianism.

In the abundant textual material that precedes the appearance of the solemn boy, Berry layers little details to paint a picture of isolation and old age. We are told that the day is bitterly cold, with a vicious wind, and that Tol is working by himself in a "little field that was quiet and solitary," accompanied only by an ancient hound named Pokerface (181). Tol is capable of working alone, but it is not a condition to which he is naturally inclined or

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accustomed; the Proudfoots are a profoundly social people. As the narrator relates, “a Proudfoot almost never worked alone”: “They liked to work together and to be together. Often, even when a Proudfoot was at work on a job he could not be helped with, another Proudfoot would be sitting nearby to watch and talk” (185). By the time the story is set, however, the Proudfoot family has all but disappeared: “The First World War killed some of them and scattered others. Since then, the old had died and the young had gone, until by now Tol was the only one left. Tol was the last of the Proudfoots, for he and Miss Minnie had no children” (185). As Tol toils by himself in a secluded field, his physical situation suggests his genealogical one: a childless husband whose lineage is in danger of dying out.

The story’s introductory material also establishes that Tol and Miss Minnie, like Abraham and Sarah before them, are unlikely to give continuance to their family line without some sort of divine intervention because they have passed the age when people usually have children. As the narrator tells us, “Tol was sixty-two years old in 1934. He had not been young for several years, as he liked to say” (182). In fact, Tol’s age is such an insistent fact of life that it is the first thing to cross his mind when wakes up on the morning of the story: “I’m getting old,” he thought as he heaved his big self off the mattress and felt beneath the bedrail for his socks” (182). According to the narrator, this “I’m getting old” lament is one that Tol has repeated often of late, “each time with surprise and with sudden sympathy for his forebears who had got old before him” (183). Indeed, nothing in Tol’s world is even remotely young. From the lateness of the season, which already has people talking about Christmas, to the seniority of his hound (even older than Tol in dog years) everything is redolent of belatedness and old age, underscoring the idea that Tol and Miss Minnie, like Abraham and Sarah, are far removed from the abilities and opportunities of youth (182, 184).

What really snaps the Abrahamic context into place, however, is a two-sentence description in the middle of the story. This passage, set off from the others by virtue of its archaic phrasing and biblical overtones, informs us that “Tol and Miss Minnie had married late, and time had gone by, and no child of their own had come. Now they were stricken in age, and it had long ceased to be with Miss Minnie after the manner of women” (189). The phrasing, of course, is borrowed from the book of Genesis, where it is used to describe Abraham and Sarah: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of

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women” (Gen. 18:11). The allusion authenticates all earlier invocations of Abraham and Sarah, tightly tying the aged and childless couple from Port William to the aged and childless couple from the Old Testament. The cross-textual identification encourages us to anticipate a similar outcome for Tol and Miss Minnie, raising our collective hopes that they will be gifted a son long after their day of expectation, as Abraham and Sarah were.<sup>1</sup>

The first half of the story assiduously promotes the belief that Tol and Miss Minnie are worthy of such a blessing by emphasizing those qualities that would make them ideal parents. In particular, Tol’s faithful care of his crops and fields assure us that he would be an exemplary father: “His crops were clean. His pastures were well grassed and were faithfully clipped every year. . . . His harvested corn gleamed in the crib” (182). Although grown in dirt and manure, Tol’s crops are “clean” and “gleam”—an oxymoronic claim that underscores the extent of his attentiveness. Even Tol’s shortcomings attest to his paternal aptitude. He, we are told in the story’s opening pages, is not very good at dressing himself because he cannot keep his hair combed, his shirt tucked in, or his collars turned down (183). Yet Tol’s inability to keep himself presentable does not express a distasteful slovenliness so much as an endearing altruism. His perpetual dishevelment, which might signal ill manners in another setting, here expresses an admirable lack of self-regard. Tol cares nothing for his own appearance because all of his care is directed outward, at others.

Moreover, the opening pages of the story invite us to see Tol as an apt candidate for a miracle, like Abraham, by establishing that Tol does not allow his trials or hardships to mire him in self-pity or bitterness. Even though Tol’s first waking thoughts are of the ailments of his age and the bitterness of the day, he stoutly suppresses these and begins his daily labors, dressing in the dark and building up the fires so that his wife can continue to sleep until the house is warm. This pattern recurs throughout the opening pages of the story. Time and again, Tol faces a situation that might breed dissatisfaction or despair, but he finds the good grace to get past it, losing himself in acts of compassion, service, and labor that, in turn, afford him a measure of contentment and tranquility. As the narrator observes, Tol regularly undergoes benevolent “transformations” of the kind that comes over him on his way to the field he calls the “Watch Fob”: “[H]aving eaten a good breakfast and hitched his team to the wagon, Tol experienced a transformation that he had experienced many times before. He passed through all his thoughts and

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dreads about the day, emerging at last into the day itself, and he liked it” (183). Pushing through adversity and into enjoyment is Tol’s characteristic way of being in the world.

As the story unfolds, Tol’s ability to “transform” or “pass through” his trials is poignantly tied to his status as the last of the Proudfoots, bereft of both kinfolk and offspring. Compelled to harvest by himself, Tol initially doubts that he will ever be able to fill his empty wagon box. But as is his wont, Tol shrugs aside his misgivings and forges faithfully ahead. As a result, he is blessed. The wagon box fills with corn, over and against his expectations: “For a while after Tol started that morning’s work, it seemed to him that he would never cover the bottom of the wagon box. But after he quit paying so much attention he would be surprised, when he did look, at how the corn was accumulating” (185). In the context of a story focusing on Tol and Miss Minnie’s childlessness and conspicuously calling to mind the miracle of Abraham and Sarah, this filling might have special meaning. Without straining too much, we might see the empty wagon box as a stand-in for the empty womb/nursery/home, symbolically figuring the void left by all the Proudfoot kin who have not remained and all the Proudfoot children who have not come. It is not easy to fill such a void, but Tol is rewarded for his big-hearted attempt. As he diligently presses forward, corn fills his wagon, as if by miracle. And, before long, a small boy appears, as if by miracle, to fill his home.

That the solemn boy could use a home like Tol and Miss Minnie’s is painfully clear. He is “just a little, skinny, peaked boy, who might not have had much breakfast,” while the Proudfoots’ kitchen is “warm, well lit . . . and filled with the smells of things cooking” (188, 189). Tol and Miss Minnie’s dinnertime bounty is more than enough to answer the boy’s evident need: “There was plenty of everything: a platter of sausage, and more already in the skillet on the stove; biscuits brown and light, and more in the oven; a big bowl of navy beans, and more in the kettle on the stove, a big bowl of applesauce and one of mashed potatoes. There was a pitcher of milk and one of buttermilk” (190). The surplus is staggering—a fully laden table with “more,” “more,” and “more” already in the skillet, oven, and stove. Miss Minnie seems to multiply sausages and biscuits as readily as Jesus multiplied fishes and loaves, giving ample evidence of the couple’s capacity to care for the hungry child.

Moreover, by ushering into their home the unknown father and

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son and loading food on the table for them, Tol and Miss Minnie manifest yet another correspondence with Abraham and Sarah, who offer similar hospitality to strangers in Genesis 18. In this chapter, Abraham spies three unfamiliar men and immediately undertakes to feed them:

And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. / And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetched a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hastened to dress it. / And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. (Gen. 18:6-8)

As they repeat this role in Berry's story, Tol and Miss Minnie are just as quick, just as generous. Their altruism resembles Abraham and Sarah's in being instantaneous, enthusiastic, and utterly unselfconscious. Additionally, each couple essays more than just the quelling of hunger. When Abraham entreats the three strangers to stop over, he offers them "rest" and "comfort" as well as bread: "Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: / And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant" (Gen. 18:4-5). Similarly, when Tol and Miss Minnie wait on the "skinny, peaked boy," they do more than just fill his belly; they also put a smile on his face.

As the title suggests, smiles do not come easily to the solemn boy. "He was a nice-looking little boy," the narrator notes, "but he never smiled" (191). From the moment they set eyes on him, Miss Minnie and Tol hope to alter this condition, injecting a little levity into the boy's hard life: "She longed to see him smile, and so did Tol" (191). Tol would seem to be good for a grin, on the basis of his physical appearance alone. As the narrator remarks, the little boy "must at least have wanted to smile at the way Tol's stiff gray hair stuck out hither and yon after Tol combed it, as indifferent to the comb as if the comb had been merely fingers or a stick" (190). Nevertheless, the boy does not break: "[he] had not smiled, at least not where Tol or Miss Minnie could see him" (190). When the small company takes their seats at the table, Tol steps up his efforts, joking that the boy's mouth is operated by his elbow: "Why, I wish you would look. Every time that boy's elbow bends, his mouth flies open." However, the jest falls flat, and "the boy did not smile" (191). After a second joke also fails, Tol pulls out all the stops and offers the boy

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a lesson in less-than-effective ways of drinking buttermilk. Applying his lips to the far side of his glass instead of the near side, Tol proceeds to dump its creamy contents down the front of his shirt. It is an act both surprising and silly—in the end, it is enough. For a moment, no one says a thing, sitting in stunned silence, but then the boy breaks up:

At first it sounded like he had an obstruction in his throat that he worked at with a sort of strangling. And then he laughed.

He laughed with a free, strong laugh that seemed to open his throat as wide as a stovepipe. It was the laugh of a boy who was completely tickled. It transformed everything. Miss Minnie smiled. And then Tol laughed his big hollering laugh. And then Miss Minnie laughed. And then the boy's father laughed. The man and the boy looked up, they all looked full into one another's eyes, and they laughed. (192)

By giving his all, including his buttermilk, his shirtfront, and his dignity, Tol clears away the obstructions that have restrained the boy's mirth and paves the way for a moment of supreme joy and complete communion. As the narrator explains, the boy's laughter pulls aside the veil: "It was the laugh of a boy who was completely tickled. It transformed everything" (192).

This type of delight is also a characteristic component of the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham first hears God's promise to send a son, he responds with joyful laughter: "And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarah thy wife, . . . I will bless her and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face and laughed. . . ." (Gen. 17:15-17). On a later occasion, Sarah similarly responds upon hearing the promise repeated by a divine messenger: "And he said, . . . lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. . . . Therefore Sarah laughed within herself. . . ." (Gen. 18:10, 12). At the child's birth, Sarah once again laughs for joy: "And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me" (Gen. 21:5-6). Fittingly, the name God instructs Abraham to give to his son is indicative of the joy he has brought: the Hebrew name "Isaac" literally means "laughter" or "he laughs."

When Tol spills his buttermilk, the laughter that resonates throughout the kitchen calls to mind the laughter of Abraham and Sarah upon learning about and giving welcome to their heaven-sent son. Their hilarity has biblical

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heft; it is the kind of ebullience that accompanies the fulfillment of outlandish hope, like the gifting of a son to those who are stricken in age. Moreover, by getting the boy to laugh, Tol demonstrates the depth of his deserving. By way of his jest, Tol peels away the pain of impoverishment and discovers the boy's true identity, transforming him from a solemn boy into a laughing boy, a bona fide "Isaac." This newly made Isaac appears to be the appropriate reward for Tol and Miss Minnie's patient fidelity. A miracle appears to be imminent.

Yet Tol and Miss Minnie, like Abraham and Sarah before them, are asked to surrender their blessed son almost as soon as he has arrived. Dinner cannot last forever, and they must eventually say farewell. After solicitously tucking the boy into one of Miss Minnie's coats and cramming his pockets with food, they are compelled to walk him to the threshold. With their hearts fairly breaking, "they lifted their hands and allowed the boy to go with his father out the door" (194). At this point in the narrative, we clamor for an angel to intervene, as it happened on the Old Testament mountaintop when Abraham was enjoined to put Isaac upon the altar. However, Tol and Miss Minnie's sacrifice is not stopped short. Unlike Abraham, they are not spared the task of relinquishing their son of promise. It is utterly heartbreaking, and Tol cannot help but flinch. Although it is too forthright, too needy, Tol comes right out and asks for the Abrahamic miracle that we all want. "You might as well leave that boy with us," Tol said. He was joking, and yet he meant it with his whole heart. "We could use a boy like that" (194). The father's polite demurrer dashes all hope, leaving Tol and Miss Minnie to deal with the emotional fallout of seeing their miracle materialize, only to have it walk away. "Tol and Miss Minnie watched them go, and then they went back into the house. Tol put on the clean shirt and his jacket and cap and gloves. Miss Minnie began to clear the table. For the rest of that day, they did not look at each other" (194).

Were the story to conclude at this point, the calamity would be complete, the beatific vision of the midday meal where "they all looked full into one another's eyes," supplanted by the sorrow and isolation of the infertile couple who cannot bring themselves to look at each another. But the story does not end just yet. A brief, two-paragraph coda transports us ten years or more into the future, to a time after Tol's passing, when the widowed Miss Minnie tells the story of the solemn boy to Andy Catlett. After closing her narration with Tol's plaintive "We could use a boy like that,"

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Miss Minnie takes a moment to compose herself, showing that the pain still persists. But then she quietly remarks that Tol never said anything about their childlessness, curbing his tongue out of consideration:

When they spoke of the Depression, Miss Minnie was reminded of the story of the solemn boy, and she told it again, stopping with Tol's words, "We could use a boy like that."

And I remember how she sat, looking down at her apron and smoothing it with her hands. "Mr. Proudfoot always wished we'd had some children," she said. "He never said so, but I know he did."

In Berry's story, the spectacular miracle of Abraham and Sarah gives way to another sort of miracle altogether. This one is not otherworldly, but it is holy in its own way. It is not produced by angelic visitors and divine reprieves, but rather by a lifetime of patient forbearance and quiet compassion. Unlike Abraham and Sarah, Tol and Miss Minnie are asked to live with lack to the end of their days. Their Isaac appears for one afternoon only, a tantalizing interaction that only compounds the couple's bereavement. Yet cruel as this might be, they do not become bitter. Tol overcomes his emotions to avoid hurting his wife, who never hears from him a single unguarded complaint; she shoulders her sorrows with serene strength, meekly supporting the weight of the world, like an apron-wearing Atlas. Abraham and Sarah may have been visited by angels, but Tol and Miss Minnie, by way of their kindness and commitment, seem angelic in their own right.

In other words, Berry's short story reimagines the tale of Abraham and Sarah without any of the divine interventions that direct the original story to its blessed end. Berry limits the scope of "The Solemn Boy" to mortal agents and natural effects, but what ensues is no less moving. The Proudfoots's care and devotion is profoundly poignant, even as it is altogether earthy. Berry's biblical allusions may prompt us readers to anticipate a supernatural solution to the Proudfoots's plight, but Tol and Miss Minnie have no such expectation. Their gaze is not directed upward, but downward and outward. Instead of looking to the high heavens, they look to their crops, their livestock, their neighbors, and each other. They are absorbed with earthly affairs, yet these appear to sanctify them as certainly as a visit from an angel. Assuredly, their generosity of spirit does not come from rising above this fallen world, but from digging down into it—the sort of action to be expected from an author who professes to be a "bottom up" religious thinker, one who feels that God is more frequently found in the furrows of



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a field than in the pews of a church (qtd in Grubbs 139).

Indeed, Berry is highly critical of religious adherents who turn away from this world, waiting and wishing for the world to come. To his great dismay, Berry believes that his native Christianity has encouraged this very action by promulgating a Gnostic viewpoint that elevates the spiritual over the material, the celestial over the terrestrial. Describing this viewpoint as “a fracture that runs through the mentality of institutional religion like a geologic fault” (*The Unsettling of America* 112-13), Berry energetically opposes it at every turn, demonstrating how it promotes a dangerous disregard for the land on which we live. Why should we care for this world if it is no more than a drossy container, destined to be discarded? Why should we learn to live well in it, if our real abode is a celestial mansion on high? Throughout his writings, Berry stridently asserts the importance of attending to our material situation.<sup>2</sup> Yet Berry’s interests in this regard are not exclusively or narrowly “environmental”: he believes that by caring for our terrestrial world, we not only improve it, but also improve ourselves. In other words, Berry imagines the act of cultivation to have a profoundly ethical effect, transforming and ennobling those, like Tol and Miss Minnie, who engage in it.

This belief informs “The Solemn Boy” throughout. To be sure, the short story closely connects Tol’s greatness of character to his work as a farmer, emphasizing both from the very beginning. The story’s first sentence tells of Tol’s farm, and the subsequent paragraphs tell of the conscientious manner in which he cares for it. This material assures readers that Tol is a hard worker, but it also prompts them to see his work in an ethico-religious light. This, at least, is how Tol looks at it. For him, farming is sufficiently holy that “It would have seemed to him a kind of sacrilege to rush through his work without getting the good of it” (182). By laboring patiently in his fields, Tol becomes a type of earthly minister, officiating in sacred rites that nourish both body and spirit.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, Tol exemplifies Berry’s belief that farming is “a practical religion, a practice of religion, a rite”:

By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness. In the cycles of farming, which carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within the reach of the imagination. . . . [Through farming] we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them. (*The Unsettling of America* 91)

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Unlike the nomadic Abraham, Tol is tied to the earth, and this agricultural connection prepares him to persist in his decency and devotion even when God elects not to extend his hand.

According to Berry, husbandry promotes in its practitioners a pious humility by impressing upon them just how much they depend upon God's beneficence for their milk, meat, and grain. They can plant, water, and manure, but only God can make things grow—the point St. Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 3, and which is the point that the Proudfoots's labors continually drive home to them.<sup>4</sup> Those who practice husbandry, Berry says, inevitably come to understand that “what is husbanded is ultimately a mystery.” Unlike the “manager” or “the would-be objective scientist,” the husband “belongs inherently to the complexity and the mystery that is to be husbanded, and so the husbanding mind is both careful and humble” (*The Way of Ignorance* 99). Such would seem to be the case with Tol and Miss Minnie.<sup>5</sup> By virtue of their vocation, they are brought to recognize their reliance upon organic processes that they cannot comprehend and natural elements that they cannot control. Everything is in the hands of God, who thus gives a particular gift each time a seed sprouts or a grain ripens. This earthy knowledge, along with the gratitude it engenders, informs Tol's faithful resilience, as the structure of “The Solemn Boy” suggests. The story plays out in two acts: the first one focusing on Tol's work in the field and the second one attending to Tol's encounter with the solemn boy. The pairing of these two acts implies that Tol's ability to keep from turning against God in the second half of the story is tied to his tilling of the earth in the first half of the story. He is disinclined to find fault with God in the end because, as a careful and humble husband, Tol has seen signs of God's munificence on daily display in his fields, barn, corn crib, pantry, and kitchen.

In this respect, Tol and Miss Minnie's agrarianism effectively immunizes them, as it were, against the ingratitude that Berry associates with modern consumerism. As he sees it, today's consumerist culture fosters a keen sense of entitlement and a correlative amount of ingratitude. The sense of entitlement takes hold as we subscribe to the idea that consumers have rights (e.g., the right to choose) and as we buy into adages like “the customer is always right.” The sense of ingratitude sets in as we internalize the precept that self-worth is established and expressed by the objects we own. Such a belief makes the poor resentful (they cannot afford the things that would make their lives truly meaningful) and makes the rich anxious (they must

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fearfully protect against the loss or theft of their all-important possessions). Moreover, it causes rich and poor alike to think constantly of their next purchase, the one that will finally and fully satisfy and validate them. Of course, none of the things we covet can ever deliver on this promise because they are constantly being outmoded and exceeded by the new and improved product. Consequently, no consumer feels grateful for long or for much. It is difficult, after all, to be thankful for things that end up having so little intrinsic or abiding value.<sup>6</sup> Tol and Miss Minnie's agrarian outlook, on the other hand, moves in a different direction altogether. According to Berry, agrarian activities keep ingratitude at bay by impressing upon us the goodness of God, harvest by harvest. In "The Solemn Boy," Berry affirms this in the Proudfoots's remarkable ability to remain grateful even when their Isaac is swept away. The couple is able to endure their deprivation without becoming despondent because their occupations have implanted within them a deep and abiding attitude of thankfulness.

Another way that the Proudfoots's husbandry helps to redeem their situation is by accustoming them to live within natural limits or boundaries. Even though the Watch Fob is the most fertile of Tol's fields, he only plants it every three or four years to avoid depleting the soil (181). Similarly, Tol's team of horses is a wonder to behold, but he makes sure to breathe them on the way back to the house lest the heavy load exhaust their energies (186). And, though Tol himself is strong as an ox, he habitually interrupts his labors to hunt, fish, or rest in the shade so as to save his strength (182). Tol's work is "leisurely," but it is said to be "good" for this very reason (182). By recognizing and respecting the limits of creation, Tol farms responsibly and well. Were he to push harder or think bigger, his farming would lose its measure, proportion, and balance, listing toward the destructive and unsustainable practices that are the hallmarks of modern agribusiness. Berry rejects the modernist mantra that "bigger is better" by insisting that natural limits are a blessing on account that they save us from ourselves. As Matthew Bonzo and Michael Stevens explain, Berry believes that "The limits of our creatureliness . . . constitute appropriate boundaries, built into the structure of creation, and recognizing them is necessary for healthy self-understanding and connection with both God and others" (78). Or, as Berry himself writes, "limits are not only inescapable but indispensable" (*The Way of Ignorance* 95). Thus, the great challenge is not to learn how to surpass our limits, but how to live contentedly within them. Doing so requires humility and sacrifice;

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however, Berry maintains that this is the only pathway to health, happiness, and wholeness. Instead of embracing a slew of scientific “miracles” that exponentially increase our productivity by ruining our resources at an analogous rate, Berry would instead have us embrace a virtuous restraint that keeps us comfortably and sustainably within the scope of the created world’s natural limits. He is adamant that “knowledge of [our] limits and how to live within them is the most comely and graceful knowledge that we have, the most healing and the most whole” (*The Unsettling of America* 98).

For an author of this opinion, a revision to the story of Abraham and Sarah would seem to be in order. In its original, biblical iteration, the story of Abraham and Sarah tells a tale of miraculous fertility: an elderly couple overleaping the mortal barriers of age and barrenness to conceive a son. In Berry’s story, these barriers are not overleaped; rather, they are made more apparent, more imposing. Instead of indulging us in our desire to go beyond our natural abilities, Berry asks us to celebrate something else altogether, namely, Tol and Miss Minnie’s willingness to humbly recognize and gracefully accept the limits within which they are asked to live. Whereas the Genesis story gives us a fantastic, metaphysical miracle, Berry offers us something more modest. The miracle in “The Solemn Boy” does not occur in a single moment, but rather plays itself out over a lifetime, as Tol and Miss Minnie discipline themselves to fit the measure of their existence. Though their desires for offspring come to naught, they do not become bitter. To the contrary, they remain compassionate, considerate, and loving, both to one another and to the stranger at their door. For Berry, this is miracle enough.

When Berry sets out to retell the Old Testament tale of Abraham and Sarah, he then omits its metaphysical elements. Consonant with his “bottom up” religiosity that favors this-worldly operations over other-worldly ones, he strips the story of its supernaturalism. Moreover, he snatches away the son who seemed to be an answer to prayer, preventing Tol and Miss Minnie from being blessed in a manner commensurate with Abraham and Sarah. But if Tol and Miss Minnie are not blessed with a son, they are still blessed because they find the grace to accept their deprivation and disappointment without turning against God or each other. This is a miracle in its own right, a triumph to equal that of Abraham and Sarah. Yet it is important to note that it is achieved through entirely ordinary means. In “The Solemn Boy,” there are no angelic visitations or marvelous conceptions; instead, just simple acts of responsible husbandry, heartfelt hospitality, and quiet consideration prove

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no less salvific, no less wonderful. In this story, the saving grace is not the unexpected boon that comes from heaven, but the quiet humility that comes from tilling the earth.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of Berry's use of literary allusion, see Helen Maxson. She claims that Berry frequently refers to other texts so as to assert his membership in a literary community and to emphasize the importance of communities in general. She believes that Berry alludes to other authors to show how each of us is reliant upon and completed by the communities to which we belong, whether they be literary or local. Maxson notes, however, that Berry's literary allusions rarely square with the text. Most of the time, he revises or rewrites. It is this that I see him doing in this story with the Book of Genesis.

<sup>2</sup> For a helpful summation of Berry's anti-dualism, see Jason Peters.

<sup>3</sup> It is not coincidental that the homegrown meal Tol and Miss Minnie share with the nameless father and son feels like an eucharistic feast, culminating as it does in a moment of complete communion: "The man and the boy looked up, they all looked full into one another's eyes, and they laughed" (192).

<sup>4</sup> "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

<sup>5</sup> Though the term "husband" might elicit a gendered understanding, Berry uses the term non-exclusively, to encompass the work of both men and women, whether inside the home or outside in the fields. For Berry, "Husbandry is the name of all the practices that sustain life by connecting us conservingly to our places and our world; it is the art of keeping tied all the strands in the living network that sustains us" (*The Way of Ignorance* 97).

<sup>6</sup> In outlining Berry's thoughts on consumerism and ingratitude, I have leaned heavily on Norman Wirzba's fine essay, especially pages 146-47.

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