

More Real than Real: The Weird Localism of Ralph Eugene Meatyard and Wendell Berry

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Upon first glance, the strikingly uncanny work of photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972) seems to bear little resemblance to the homely pastoral cast that many critics have used to describe the work of Kentucky essayist, poet, and novelist, Wendell Berry (1934-).¹ Berry's fans often view his thought as a path to comfortable familiarity with place, while critics tend to lump Berry along with other 'white, male, middle-class environmentalists' (Heise, *Sense of Place*, 31) who desire a naturalising familiarity with a place by 'building one's own house or working one's own farm' (Heise, *Local Rock*, 131). This essay argues, however, that Berry's sense of place is neither a rehashing of the well-worn familiar, nor a simple encounter with alterity. Rather, like the photography of Berry's friend and fellow Kentuckian 'Gene' Meatyard, Berry's work calls neat distinctions between the familiar and the strange into question. On one hand, residence and habitual modes of perception tend to make beings and places more familiar. On the other hand, for Berry, increased intimacy unsettles habitual perception and reveals surprising and often monstrous aspects of familiar beings and places. This 'fundamental disturbance', which Berry refers to as a perceptual 'quake', surprises and often horrifies.

Berry rattles routinised perception and experience of particular places and works to destabilise binary notions of place such as regionalism versus cosmopolitanism or familiarity and strangeness. The result is what I term 'weird localism'. Weird localism grounds itself in particular places; yet, rather than settling upon naturalising discourse through which places seem progressively more familiar and known, places come to be seen as inhabited by a myriad of 'remarkably unfathomable' beings that resist ready naturalisation.² Weird localism also highlights the role of cultural frameworks in mediating perception. But rather than attempting to step outside of these frameworks altogether, weird localism resists habitual perception and continually brings aspects that disturb comfortable views of place to the perceptual forefront. In this role, Berry describes Meatyard as a 'wizard' who through his work reveals aspects of the seemingly banal, thereby 'invit[ing] us to live on the verge of surprise, where fear accompanies delight' (Meatyard *Introduction*).

This essay begins by providing a brief introduction to Meatyard and his photography. Next, the essay highlights aspects of Meatyard's photography that resonate with Berry's own work. Finally, the discussion moves to specific examples of Berry's unsettling of routinised perception of the local. First, Berry's account of a trip with Meatyard down Kentucky's Red River George, documented in *The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky's Red River George* (1971) provides an example of a landscape in which Berry's initial sense of displacement and alienation gradually gives way to a familiarity, tempered by a sense of the place's inherent mystery. Second, Berry's meditations on the Kentucky River

near his home in his essay 'The Rise' (1965) destabilise his perception of a familiar landscape. Berry highlights the river's monstrous qualities and claims that common perceptions of it are radical simplifications. *The Unforeseen Wilderness* deconstructs stable notions of alterity by showing the familiar in the strange while 'The Rise' deconstructs stable notions of familiarity by showing the strange in the familiar.

In order to develop the theoretical aspects of weird localism, this essay draws on the work of Timothy Morton and Jean-Luc Marion. Against the naturalising grain of 'dwelling', in which home places become progressively more familiar and thereby naturalised, Morton's work highlights the intrinsically strange nature of beings and poses that increased intimacy results in an increased sense of strangeness. Morton's sense of interconnectedness with 'nature' is 'a sticky mess', more disorienting and uncertain than tidy and definitively knowable. His work also highlights the crucial role of cultural mediation, specifically aesthetics, in perception of the world. Marion's theory of saturated phenomenon sheds light on the richness and irreducibility of ostensibly banal perceptual/experiential 'events'. Like Berry, Marion argues that phenomena exceed conceptual containment and that perception itself is an inherently simplifying hermeneutic. Finally, Marion's writings on the idol are useful to a discussion of perceptual mediation of nature and the local in that he explores the tendency to view objects and beings in the world as mirrors that reflect human desires.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard

Photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard lived an unassuming life. An optician by trade, Meatyard was born in Normal, Illinois in 1925. In 1950 he moved to Lexington, Kentucky where he lived with his wife Madelyn and their three children until his untimely death from cancer in 1972. President of the local Parent-Teacher Association and a youth baseball coach, Meatyard produced photography for twenty years, 'working at night and on weekends in a makeshift darkroom'. Despite his ostensibly modest life, however, he produced 'some of the most original and curious pictures made during the 1960s and early 1970s' (Young 6).

Meatyard insisted that it was not necessary for him to travel to exotic locales to produce compelling photography. Rarely making any images outside of Lexington, Meatyard believed that 'one is surrounded with interesting subject matter and it is not necessary to travel far to make strong photographs' (9). Despite the circumscribed geography of his subjects, Meatyard dabbled in a variety of styles and subject materials, 'startling in their directness and, at the same time, infused with surprising tenderness. Some images are bizarre and even haunting, while others are overtly romantic' (8).³

Meatyard's most well known work mingles familiar elements such as children, dolls, landscapes, and homes with 'anomalies', most famously masks, that jar perception of the familiar. This unsettling fosters a disturbing sense of the uncanny: 'Each photograph emphasizes a certain normalcy within which lives an anomaly. Using masks as props, he transformed the everyday nature of the family photograph into an unexpected moment' (11). Meatyard's masks function, paradoxically, not to hide or conceal, but as catalysts to reveal intrinsic unsettling qualities that underlie the scenes he captures and the world generally. 'Once the masks are noticed ... the tenor of the entire picture changes. The viewer oscillates between the day-to-day and a darker, more inexplicable presence ... a vehicle for transformation' (Shields 87). Bereft of the perceptual moorings of the subjects' faces (who were most often Meatyard's own family) familiar and even folksy photos are transformed into perceptual quakes that disturb and highlight the intrinsic strangeness of the familiar.



Fig. 1 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Lucybelle Crater and 20 year old son's 3 year old son, in Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1969) (Source: New York: International Center of Photography, 2004: 262. Print)



Fig. 2 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled* (1964) (Source: Lexington: Gnomon Press, 1970: 18. Print)

Rather than obscuring a 'true' self with a false *persona*, Meatyard's masks work to uncover facets of reality normally glossed over. Instead of concealing, the masks make naked and completely reveal (Zax 10). Meatyard's work reveals that what was previously deemed the bedrock of the 'real', is a distorted glimpse of irreducible and often unsettling phenomena. Rather than photography as feigning a mimetic reproduction of reality, Meatyard's work plays with the distortion inherent both in perception and any attempt to capture the 'real'. Meatyard viewed his work as "sur-real" or uncanny, more real than real', as it probes the liminal zone 'between the assumed reality of photography and the strangeness of his images' (Young 12).

Similar to Meatyard's revealing the strangeness of the familiar, Morton describes non-humans beings as 'strange strangers' in that the stranger 'isn't just strange ... She, or he, or it ... is strangely strange. Their strangeness itself is strange. We can never absolutely figure them out ... they are intrinsically strange' (*Ecological Thought* 41). Yet, rather than perceiving the strange stranger as such, we tend to elide the unsettling aspects of the ecological mesh 'because we're so familiar with it'. Smoothing out perceptual incongruities, we become lulled into routinised ways of perceiving and interacting with the world such that the intrinsic strangeness of other beings slips from the field of critical inspection.

Like Meatyard, Morton maintains that intimacy does not diminish strangeness, but in fact heightens it: 'what could be stranger than what is familiar? As anyone who has a long-term partner can attest, the strangest person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it. The more we know them, the stranger they become. Intimacy itself is strange' (41). Humans consider normal or real those perceptions that are scaled to the spatio-temporality of the human body. Like Meatyard's masks, even slight perceptions to the perceptual flow, such as time-lapse photography, can defamiliarise phenomena: 'Time-lapse makes things appear unnatural: even flowers take on a weird, monstrous quality' (44).

Meatyard describes these disruptions in his own work as turns to the 'unbelievably real ... [a] kind of super real, better than real' (Young 13). Meatyard's images reveal that our common views of the world are comfortable distortions, 'what we think we know' (13) as he 'transmuted the drab banality of ruined houses, dime store masks, and hooded sweatshirts into disturbingly stark surrealist dramas' (Tannenbaum 39). Berry was interested in Meatyard's cracking of normalised aesthetic frames and his desire to highlight surprising and even disturbing attributes of beings in their places. Like Meatyard, Berry's work grapples with questions and ambiguities of the local. He is fascinated with the problem of the body in place, the ways that our physical situatedness and cultural frameworks limit and naturalise what we perceive in the local, and how we might fracture and recast these views.

Walking with the Wizard: Meatyard and Berry's Pilgrimage into Darkness

A year before Meatyard's death, Meatyard and Berry published *The Unforeseen Wilderness* as part of an effort to fend off the Red River Gorge's destruction at the hands of a hydroelectric dam.⁴ The work pairs Berry's prose with Meatyard's imagery. Berry was amazed at Meatyard's ability to bring surprising aspects of the banal to the perceptual forefront and shared Meatyard's desire to highlight the extraordinary in the ordinary: 'Gene was a wizard. He had an incredible gift of seeing and of picture-making' (Grubbs 171). In his outings with Meatyard, he knew that 'surprises were coming' (*Unforeseen Wilderness* x).

Berry describes one such surprise in looking through a camera Meatyard had set up to capture an image of lichen on an ash tree: 'this altogether accountable sight became altogether unaccountable. It was unearthly, seeming to remove the ordinary elements of

the vision out of ordinary time' (xi). Meatyard takes lichen, an otherwise 'accountable' object, known, quantifiable, commonplace, and seemingly unworthy of further consideration, and thrusts it into the perceptual forefront. In doing so he reveals it as 'unaccountable' being, a strange stranger. Lichen is ubiquitous—an organism that appears banal and unworthy of attention. Yet, lichen is strange. A composite organism consisting of a symbiosis of fungus, bacteria, and algae, lichen spreads as an epiphyte upon rocks, exposed soil, and plants. Lichen displays strikingly 'unearthly' neon hues and occurs in some of the most extreme environments on earth. Some forms of lichen can survive 'high doses of ionizing radiation and UV radiation, vacuum and extreme high and low temperatures'—even the conditions on Mars (De Vera 472). Meatyard's work fractures the normality of our body's spatio-temporal situatedness in viewing something as 'ordinary' as lichen such it suddenly appears as a being from 'another world ... unearthly' (*Unforeseen Wilderness* xi).

Defamiliarised amidst his home terrain, Berry senses himself in an alien landscape—the haunt of strange beings that were there all along but are only now revealed. Berry describes this as the 'disturbance' that accompanies Meatyard's work: '[Meatyard's work] has kept me involved a sort of fundamental disturbance like an earthquake, unsettling, for sure, but at the same time giving evidence that something lively is going on in the world'. An earthquake comes unexpectedly. It shocks without warning. An earthquake reveals that what may have been deemed stable bedrock is in reality plates adrift upon liquid. What was settled is now fluid. The quake is a catastrophe that 'throws down' the simplified acculturated perception of place yet enlivens; it reveals locales in new and exhilarating ways:

Looking at his pictures, I am aware that my basic assumptions about reality are being tampered with. I am being nudged, forcibly and a bit gleefully, by the possibility that what we have taken to be reality is a mere social convention, going out of date . . . I turn from the photographs to my surroundings, feeling that what I see is not all that is there...this work alerts me to the fact that we have arrived here at this moment by ways that are mostly unknown to us...we are dealing...with real mystery . . . These pictures invite us to live on the verge of surprise, where fear accompanies delight . . . Sooner or later he is apt to produce evidence that you are not where you think you are (*Remembering* 83-86).

The shock of Meatyard's perceptual quake not only surprises, but mingles fear with delight. It arouses fear in the shock of the other—that heretofore 'accountable' beings and places, such as lichen on a tree, suddenly seem unearthly and strange—and that what had been stable platforms from which to observe the world have suddenly been shaken and melted into air. Despite the fear, the quake brings delight in the thrill of perceiving the familiar in new and exciting ways and of coming into the 'real news' of the world—that the world is not what we thought it was and we are intimately enmeshed in it. Ecological consciousness itself arouses both fear and delight. For better or worse, all places and beings are enmeshed and therefore effects, including trauma, cannot be isolated.

Meatyard's work is the quake of intimacy in place, a narrowing of the distance and abstraction that allow a simplified and comfortable view of place, and an opening to intimacy that, according to Berry, allows the possibility of 'tragedy that lies at the heart of community life ... only experienceable in the context of a beloved community' (*Writer and Place* 19, 21).

Berry and Meatyard's work in the *Unforeseen Wilderness* attempts to testify of the quake and the presence of mystery. They perceive their inherent limitations in that their sense of the place is a perceptual drop in an ocean; nevertheless, through both text and images they strive to do justice to the irreducible mystery of the place. The landscape they encounter is not simply complex—which implies that it could be figured out with a fast enough computer. Rather, it is saturated. It is too given, a surfeit that exceeds perceptual or conceptual containment.

Berry describes place as 'real mystery'. 'Mystery' comes from the Greek *myein*, meaning to close the eyes or lips. A mystery is unaccountable or unspeakable. The phenomena Berry and Meatyard work to document are real, yet any accounts of them are doomed to almost absurd partiality and are paltry in their inability to capture the givenness of the place. Further, any portrayal of saturated phenomena is inherently a distortion, an anamorphic bending of a place that, like the *memento mori* skull in Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, only makes sense from a particular perspective.

How then to do justice to the mystery, to glimpse the unseeable or to speak the unspeakable? First is to help the reader to recognise that places are not 'accountable', made of discreet objects and beings that can be isolated, counted, and definitively known, but that encountering other beings in their places is an encounter with 'saturated phenomenon', saturated in that they exceed conceptualisation and description. Next is to identify all perception as hermeneutic distortions. The 'real' lies beyond a perceptual screen that cannot be removed: 'what we have taken to be reality is a mere social convention, going out of date'. Finally, to affect radical surprise in the event of perception—to transform perception from circumscribed, 'accountable', views of beings in place to an ongoing perceptual quake.

The quake is ongoing in that it cannot happen once and for all; rather, since any experience of phenomena occurs in 'evolutionary lived experience' it cannot 'ever affect me twice in the same way' (Marion, *In Excess* 106). The quake rattles the accumulated sediment of perception and mingles fear and delight. It is everywhere, already happening all around.



Fig. 3 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, *Untitled [Red River Gorge]* ca. 1967-70 (Source: New York: International Center of Photography, 2004: 230. Print)

Berry opens *The Unforeseen Wilderness* with a venture into mystery, a meditation on the Red River itself. He situates his experience of it as a fragment in a flow whose origins are irreducibly obscured: ‘How the river works as a maker of landscape, sculptor, arm of creation will always remain to some degree unknown ... Although its processes may be hypothesized very convincingly, every vantage point of the country is also a point of speculation, a point of departure from the present surface into the shadowy questions of origin and of processes’ (5). Since his spatio-temporality precludes any comprehensive account of the river, and explanations are inherently partial, it spreads before him as a mystery. The best he can do, therefore, is to offer testimony—testimony to a mystery located on earth rather than a transcendental beyond. Berry draws attention to the river’s irreducibility and interconnectedness: ‘To come to any understanding of the Red River one must consider how minute and manifold are its workings, how far beyond count its lives

and aspects and manifestations ... one must stand on its banks aware that its life and meaning are not merely local but are intricately involved in all life and all meaning' (5-6).

Jean Luc Marion's theory of saturated phenomena provides a useful vocabulary and theoretical framework to more fully flesh out Berry's and Meatyard's sense of the irreducible mystery of perception in place. Marion draws attention to phenomena 'that cannot be wholly contained within concepts that can be grasped by our understanding' (Mackinlay 1). Unable to be circumscribed within limits imposed 'by a subject who somehow constitutes them', saturated phenomena give 'so much in intuition that there is always an excess left over, which is beyond conceptualization' (1-2). While Marion provides cases studies of experiential events normally considered excessive or sublime, such as divine revelation, he claims that seemingly banal perceptual events can also be saturated: 'No witness, however educated, attentive, and informed . . . could, even after the fact, describe what is happening at the present instant' (*In Excess* 33).

Marion's examination of a seemingly mundane perceptual 'event', reveals the extent to which the event of perception is saturated with the influence of the past, is infinitely complex in its unfolding in the present, and occurs as a singularity. Every perceptual event includes manifold influences that reach out from 'a past of which we are ignorant and imposes itself upon us' (33).

Innumerable contingencies must have occurred to enable any perceptual event, and the modes by which we perceive and describe events, language, concepts, are almost entirely inherited from a past, of which we are largely ignorant and over which we have no control. Perceptual events also entail infinite complexity. What is perceived is only a distorted perceptual slice of phenomena that, from the quantum to the planetary, exceed our perceptual ability to contain them. Further, perceptual events are singularities in that they can only occur once and the passage of time makes reproducing any perceptual event impossible. Phenomena are therefore inherently saturated, and are never able to be definitively contained or plumbed.

Marion points to our own bodies, our 'flesh' as an example of a phenomenon that is intimate yet profoundly mysterious and most often ignored. What can be more intimate than one's own body? Yet, for Marion, our routinised and radically simplified perception of the our flesh causes us to ignore most of what goes on below the horizon of our perception: 'Daily life scarcely gives me access to myself; actually, it dispenses me from having the desire and even need of it . . . I will pretend I have access to myself, but I will exempt myself from verifying it too often as to be able to deal with my worldly business with a free spirit' (82). Barring an injury, a closing of the gap between inside and outside in which the exterior world 'invades' our flesh (92), flesh functions as an under-examined source of identity that is both a differentiation from and connection to the world.

Flesh is a necessary medium of perception; yet, it inherently limits and distorts: 'flesh has nothing optional about it—it alone converts the world into an apparition, in other words, the given into phenomenon. Outside my flesh, there is not phenomenon for me...the flesh spiritualizes—in other words, renders visible the bodies of the world that would remain,

without it, in the night of the unseen. My flesh opens to me ... the area of uncertainty' (89). 'The bodies of the world' are always perceived through the mediation of flesh, a flesh that, regardless of our intimacy with it remains an alterity: 'Wherever I look for my self I only encounter a potentially infinite series of alterities: my body, my arm, my ideas' (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 175). We perceive alterity through alterity. Flesh inherently distorts by projecting apparitions, entities that are there and yet not, that startle and ripple upon the fluidity of consciousness.

The saturated nature of phenomena and the limitations and distortions of the flesh leave open a perceptual gap that allows for what Marion describes as an 'endless hermeneutic' 'deployed without end and in an indefinite network' (*In Excess* 33). Interpretation of worldly phenomena is not limited to post-perceptual cognition; rather, as Marion points out, perception itself is a hermeneutic—contingent upon the limits and subject to the distortions of our spatio-temporal situatedness. Mystery and ambiguity is present in the very act of perception. If perception itself is hermeneutic, then smooth coherent interpretations, perceptions, and interpretations of reality are open to Berry's perceptual quakes—disturbing reshufflings of the 'real'.

Let us return to Berry and Meatyard's *Unforeseen Wilderness*. Berry's experience of the river may now be considered as an experience of a saturated phenomenon. The river's coming into being lies shrouded in deep geologic time that is gone, yet determines the ways that Berry perceives and interacts with it. Conversely, Berry himself is a conglomeration of cultural inheritance and his own spatio-temporal situation. The river appears strange because of the gap between the river and the viewer and mysterious since saturation precludes definitive comprehension or description: 'in the aspect of the river, in any of its moods, there is always a residual mystery. In its being it is too small too large, too complex and too simple, too powerful and too delicate, too transient and too ancient and durable ever to be comprehended within the limits of a human life' (6).

Berry's prose points to an inability of linguistic and conceptual containers to account for the river's excess. His pairing of contradictory descriptors, 'too small too large, too complex and too simple' suggests that common conceptual containers are insufficient to contain its saturation. In attempting to make sense of the river it appears to be a paradox. Like the mystic St. John of the Cross, who describes light so intense that it exceeds the senses and appears as darkness, the river exceeds conceptual containers and in order to be rationalised and naturalised must be simplified and distorted.⁵



Fig. 4 Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Untitled [Red River Gorge] ca. 1966 (Source: New York: International Center of Photography, 2004: 225. Print)

If phenomena in the world are saturated, why don't they normally appear so? Berry's second meditation in *The Unforeseen Wilderness*, 'The One-Inch Journey', ponders the gap, the inherent space between the world and our perception and experience of it. Specifically, Berry highlights the gap's intensification through our array of technological equipment and the tendency to perceive the world in terms of desire. Berry recognises the gap as inevitable; the world is invariably perceived through the lens of human perception and coloured by cultural preconceptions: 'there is no knowledge but human knowledge...we are inescapably central to our own consciousness ... we are isolated within our uniquely human boundaries' (*Affection 26*).

Berry's 'Window Poems' draw attention to the inherent gap between human consciousness and the surrounding world. The poems consist of a series of mediations as he observes the outside through the gridded frame of his window: 'forty / panes, forty clarities / variously wrinkled, streaked / with dried rain, smudged, / dusted'. From his view, 'The frame / is a black grid / beyond which the world / flings up the wild / graphs of its growth' (*Collected Poems*, 73). Berry refers to the window as 'a form / of consciousness, pattern / of formed sense through which to look / into the wild / that is a pattern too, / but dark and flowing' (73). The separation of the glass highlights the perceptual gap, while the regularity of the window speaks to the ordered cultural forms through which he peers into the darkness outside. Berry's windows are not perfectly translucent. Rather, he describes them as 'wrinkled, streaked ... smudged, dusted', altering and obscuring a view of what lies beyond. Rather than simply ignoring the window in an attempt at objective observation. The question, therefore, is not one of escaping the gap or bridging it completely—the tantalising claim of discourse that suggests access to 'real nature' beyond cultural and technological intervention. Rather, the question is recognising and taking into account the nature of the gap. In *The Unforeseen Wilderness* Berry describes the relationship between the individual consciousness and the world as a creature in a shell:

The mollusk-shell of our civilization, in which we more and more completely enclose ourselves, is lined on the inside with a nacreous layer that is opaque, rainbow tinted, and an inch thick. It is impossible to see through it to the world; it works, rather, as a reflecting surface upon which we cast the self-flattering outlines and the optimistic tins of our preconceptions of what the world is (23).

Aquatic organisms secrete shells as an external protection—the Latin root, *secretion*, means 'to separate'. Shells buffer against contingencies and death; yet, as in Berry's metaphor, shells separate and obscure the possibility of a 'true' sense of what lies beyond. For Berry, our modern 'shell' has become so opaque and impenetrable because of technological mediation that it obscures any clear view of the outside. The shell is also a rainbow and a mirror. Its pearlescence mesmerises and distracts with an artificial view while its mirror-nature reflects human desire.

Berry's sixth Sabbath poem describes the effects of such distortion. He portrays 'The intellect so ravenous to know', which, ignorant of its own tendency to see the world through the distorted mirror shell, pretends to 'hold the very light' and 'discloses what is so and what not so' (*Timbered Choir* 30). Like Oedipus' pride in his vision and foresight, according to Berry, the intellect mistakes its limited and distorted perception for complete knowledge. However, like Tiresias' retort, 'You have eyes and yet you cannot see your own damnation' (*Oedipus Rex* 413), according to Berry, the intellect is 'blind in what it sees'. Confident in its view, the intellect imposes its orders upon the world according to forms that ultimately 'come to a margin of their kind [and] are lost in an order we are ignorant of' (*Timbered Choir* 30). Drawing on language again reminiscent of St. John of the Cross, Berry insists that the intellect 'Must finally know the dark...the living shade that reveals'—in other words, the intellect must recognise the dark/saturated nature of the

world, a world that exceeds our conceptual faculties and is therefore inherently viewed in simplified hermeneutic distortions. Such a view encourages a careful and humble approach to perceiving and interacting with the world and is the basis of Berry's 'way of ignorance'.⁶

Berry's analogy of the rainbow-mirror-shell is similar to Marion's discussion of the idol. According to Marion, in the view of world as idol, objects and beings merely serve as mirrors 'that reflect the gaze's image...the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim' (*God Without Being* 12). While the idol has an existence independent of human cognition, in terms of human perception and interaction with it, the gaze makes the idol. The gaze of the sovereign subject both constitutes the idol as a reflection of its own desires and fills it with intentionality, which preceded both the idol and the act of the gaze. The sovereign subject has essentially 'pre-seen' the idol so that whatever form the idol assumes, it is always a passive container of pre-formed modes of perception and desires: 'The gaze precedes the idol because an aim precedes and gives rise to that at which it aims' (11).

The idol acts as a mirror. A mirror however is usually recognised as such by those using it. In contrast, the idol is mirror-like in that it reflects, but has the double function of obscuring its own mirror-nature, meaning that it covers up the fact that it is functioning as a mirror of the desires of the subject: 'The idol's mirror function ... obscures itself—an "invisible mirror"' (12). According to Marion, 'the idol supplies vision with the image of what it sees ... the gaze gazing at itself gazing ... without perceiving in it the gaze that gazes' (26), meaning that the gaze sees only itself, its own desires in the invisible mirror of the idol. However, the gaze is not able to perceive that this is occurring and is belied into believing that what is perceived is the true nature of the idol.

Returning to Berry's shell analogy, the world is always already saturated in its irreducible interconnectedness; yet, being beyond our perceptual and conceptual abilities we rely on 'shells' that buffer the excess and smooth our perception. This allows us to perceive the world in more easily digested pieces—simplifications that allow us to manipulate it to our ends and structure it as hedges against danger and death, 'to fortify ourselves against the void, to combat the cognitive dissonance, to ward off the fear' (Fox 106). We secrete the secret—behind ossified shells that separate us from the mystery of the saturated world. We therefore remain, according to Marion, 'for the most part blind to our surroundings ... what we have agreed that [the world] is obtrudes between our sight and what the world is' (*God Without Being* 38). We are ever trapped in a form of blindness, a shell that intervenes between 'what the world is' and our perception of it. Despite the limitations of the shell, the choice is not between shell and no shell, since no shell is death, but rather the degree of separation and distortion.

The gap, the rainbow-mirror-shell, always distorts. We cannot break through it. It obscures and even blinds, but Berry suggests that we can come to recognize it and lessen, although not eliminate, its distortion. The effort to lessen the shell's distortion leads to the trauma and the weirdness of the local—trauma in that the perceptual quake liquefies solid perceptual 'ground' and weird in that the quake reveals the world in ways that make bare the distortions and insufficiencies of our smooth perceptions. For Berry and Meatyard, this

shift occurs on the scale of the local because it is the intimacy with the local, one's immediate surrounding that one has come to know well, that tends to reveal its saturation and mystery.

Berry describes Meatyard's work as an effort to experience the local in new ways, a pilgrimage into mystery. For Berry, Meatyard enters a place not as 'the tourist-photographer who goes to a place, bound by his intentions and preconceptions, to record what has already been recorded and what he therefore expects to find, but the photographer who goes into a place in search of the real news of it' (39). Rather than the view of the world as idol/mirror, which merely reflects what the subject already brings to it, Meatyard's approach to the 'real news' of the world is a pilgrimage into darkness: 'His search is a pilgrimage, for he goes along ways he does not fully understand, in search of what he does not expect and cannot anticipate ... he has made a dark place in his mind, exultant and fearful, by which he accepts that he does not know what he is going to see ... He has entered into the darkness—in order to see!' (40). Berry's account of his journey with Meatyard through the Red River Gorge is such a pilgrimage—an exploration of landscape made dark by its excess. Their pilgrimage is not to remove the shell or close the gap, but an effort to grapple with the gap and testify to a portion of the place's mystery.

Suddenly immersed into a landscape that he perceives as too strange, Berry's initial response is like an allergic reaction against the unfamiliar. Out of place and hemmed in by alterity, he experiences discomfort and sadness: 'a heavy feeling of melancholy and lonesomeness comes over me ... I have felt it before when I have been alone at evening in wilderness places that I am not familiar with' (49). He hedges his psyche by erecting a sharp boundary between internal familiarity and external alterity and begins to imagine the gorge as haunted with the wraiths of the past: 'These are haunted places, or at least it is easy to feel haunted in them, alone at nightfall ... If one spends much time here and feels much liking for the place, it is hard to escape the sense of one's predecessors' (50). With the world rigidly bifurcated, for Berry, the liminal zone between familiarity and strangeness becomes the haunt of spectral beings—beings that haunt the spaces between sharp binaries.

A stranger in a strange land, he seems to have entered an anomaly, a dark periphery of the map, ominous and haunted, and his initial reaction is to be rid of it, to wall himself up. However, as he lingers in the gorge he begins to reframe his hasty binaries. He realises that human domestication, which to him seemed the norm, is in fact the anomaly and that in a macro-cosmic context his sense of normality is provisional. This reversal reframes mysterious 'wilderness' from a rarity being chased into oblivion to the norm. His comfortable sense of familiarity and domesticity begin to feel less a comfort and instead limiting: 'Wilderness is the element in which we live encased in civilization ... It is a wilderness that is beautiful, dangerous, abundant, oblivious of us, mysterious, never to be conquered or controlled or second-guessed, or known more than a little ... coming here, what I have done is strip away the human façade that usually stands between me and the universe, and I see more clearly where I am' (55).

In employing descriptors such as ‘beautiful’; ‘abundant’; ‘dangerous’, and ‘mysterious’ to the place in which he finds himself enmeshed, Berry begins to experience what Morton calls ‘the ecological thought’. The ecological thought is an ongoing process of recognising the profound, and often disturbing, implications of interconnectedness: ‘The ecological thought is about warmth and strangeness, infinity and proximity, tantalizing ‘thereness’ and head-popping, wordless openness’ (12). In the ecological thought, neat concepts such as ‘here’ and ‘over there,’ ‘familiar’ and ‘strange,’ begin to blur under the weight of interconnectedness. One need not travel to the heart of darkness to experience wilderness. In this view, the soil underfoot and even the intimate terrain of one’s own body and the bodies of others are dark and teeming wildernesses.⁷ Berry begins to recognise his interconnectedness to this place through the medium of his body:

What I am able to ignore much of the time, but find undeniable here, is that all wildernesses are one: there is a profound joining between this wild stream deep in one of the folds of my native country and the tropical jungles, the tundras of the north, the oceans and the deserts. Alone here, among the rocks and the trees, I see that I am alone also among the stars (55).

Like Marion’s account of flesh, Berry’s body both individuates and enmeshes him: ‘I am alive in the world, this moment ... I am reduced to my irreducible self ... As I leave the bare expanse of the rock and go in under the trees again, I am aware that I move in the landscape as one of its details’ (62-63). While speaking of interconnectedness, Berry retains the subjective ‘I’—which as Morton points out is the paradox of the enmeshed subject, a paradox that cannot simply be wished away either through a rigid bifurcation of subject/object or ‘the ultimate fantasy [of] ecology without a subject’ (*Ecology Without Nature* 83). Through some sense of his interconnectedness, Berry feels his sensations of unease begin to diminish: ‘As the twilight draws on I no longer feel the strangeness and uneasiness of the evening before’ (66).

With Berry’s sense of the place becoming less strange, less other, he seems on a fast track to naturalising familiarity—the neutralisation of the otherness of places and with the desire to cast them in our own image. However, he quickly points out that the place cannot simply be naturalised or deemed predictable. While his sense of the world as threatening foe has begun to cede to a sense of interconnectedness, which in many strains of nature writing entails a trajectory of naturalisation, Berry checks himself and the reader by pointing out that interconnectedness does not equate to stability, predictability, or benevolence: ‘That the world is stable and its order fixed is perhaps the most persistent human delusion. How many errors have been made on the assumption that what was *is*?’ (71). This reminds ecocritics of Morton’s assertion that ‘the ecological world isn’t a positive, sunny “Zippity Doo Da” world’ (15), or Michael Pollan’s warning against viewing nature as ‘Candyland ... a version of nature that answer[s] to every ... wish’ (18), Berry questions the assumption of a stable or benevolent world that can be definitively known and controlled. Despite places becoming more familiar, places can never be fully naturalised. The gap cannot be bridged. Inherently mysterious, a place’s excess and irreducibility works to unsettle human attempts at naturalisation from within and

disillusion dreams of definitive knowledge and control: ‘Slowly, almost imperceptibly, my experience of strangeness was transformed into an experience of familiarity [however] [t]he place did not become predictable; the more I learned of it, the less predictable it seemed ... Its mysteries remained—for though we pretend otherwise, the unknown increases with the known’ (96).

Despite a shift from alterity toward familiarity, he maintains that familiarity does not equal a place being benign, naturalised, or under control:

But if [a place] has become familiar, if we have begun to feel at home in it, that is not because it has become comfortable or predictable or in any way prejudiced in our favor. It has not even become less fearful. But the nature of our fear has changed. We no longer fear it as we fear an enemy or as we fear malevolence. Now we fear it as we fear the unknown. Our fear has ceased to be the sort that accompanies hate and contempt and ignorance; it has begun to be the fear that accompanies awe, that comes with the understanding of our smallness in the presence of wonder, that teaches us to be respectful and careful. And it is the fear that is accompanied by love. (103)

While for Berry the anxiety of alterity, of strangeness as enemy, gives way to familiarity, this familiarity must not be confused for predictability and naturalisation. The world lies beyond the gap, ever ready to surprise and disrupt processes of naturalisation. For Berry, the key is not in coming to some definitive version of the world, but in shifting how the world is imagined and therefore treated. The world cannot be seen as a menacing enemy to be conquered and conceptually colonised; rather, it must be feared out of respect and approached with affection.

The Shock of the Familiar, ‘The Rise’

While *The Unforeseen Wilderness* works through hostile reactions to alterity toward interconnected intimacy, it ends by emphasising that this intimacy does not include naturalisation. Places, even familiar ones, cannot be naturalised. Berry’s 1969 essay, ‘The Rise’, is an example of denaturalising the familiar. In ‘The Rise’, Berry highlights disturbing aspects of the familiar and highlights that habitual perceptions are inherently simplifications. Berry describes the Kentucky River, a tributary of the nearby Ohio River, which flows near his home, Port Royal, Kentucky. Being visible from his writing desk, the river is undoubtedly a familiar sight. However, despite, or perhaps because of, his familiarity and long-term interactions with the river, Berry notes his continual surprise in experiencing the river’s transformations: ‘each new experience of [the river] bears some of the shock of surprise. It would take the mind of a god to watch it as it changes and not be surprised’ (*Long-Legged House* 99). Berry also describes the river’s inherent darkness: ‘as one watches, there emanates from [the river] ... an insinuation of darkness, implacability, horror. And the nearer look tends to conform this ... One must simplify it in order to speak of it. One probably simplifies it in some way in order to look at it’ (99). Here Berry notes that, in Marion’s terminology, any ‘event’ of perceiving the river is a hermeneutic

distortion of saturated phenomena coloured by mood, cultural frameworks, and contained within aesthetic frames.

While he acknowledges a certain familiarity with the river, ‘some of us feel a kinship with it’ (100), he perceives that this sense of familiarity involves simplification: ‘one ... simplifies it in order to look at it’ (99). By simplifying it, the viewer places the river into a ‘ready-made box’ that is thought to be safely comprehended and classified. Morton notes, however, that when we perceive phenomena in ready-made boxes we are ‘looking at the box, not at the strange stranger’ (*Ecological Thought* 41). Berry describes individual perceptions of the river as fragments that invariably fall short of the saturated whole: ‘That horror is never fully revealed, but only sensed piece-meal in events, all different, all shaking, yet all together falling short of the full revelation. The next will be as unexpected as the last’ (*Long-Legged House* 100). The perceptual shell smooths and elides the river as saturated phenomenon, obscuring its monstrousness and potential for destruction.

Berry notes the shock the river produces in residents when it doesn’t behave as expected, the shock of a phenomenon behaving contrary to the ways that it has been naturalised in its tidy conceptual/aesthetic box. He recounts a story of a man whose boat capsized in the river in the wintertime and who drifted for miles past ‘families in their lighted warm kitchens, eating supper maybe’. When the families discovered what had happened, Berry notes that their reactions were invariably ‘But it *can’t* be’, suggesting that their simplified familiarity with the river had lulled them into eliding the river’s destructive potential into routinised perception. Yet, as Berry point out, the river cannot be made familiar: ‘The river is horrifying because it is inhuman, alien to us’ (100). Phenomena such as the river cannot be naturalised; they resist and break out in unexpected ways, as Berry’s writing poignantly highlights.⁸

Conclusion

Here we have come full circle. The perceptual quake has shaken the experience of the local. The neat binary of strangeness versus familiarity dissolves as Berry’s intimacy with the local reveals a Möbius strip of familiarity and strangeness—what appeared strange is revealed as interconnected and familiar, and what was familiar and naturalised is revealed as strange and potentially dangerous. Through unsettling, commonly held perceptual categories, Berry’s and Meatyard’s works portray the ecological reality of the local. In doing so, they strive to affect perceptual quakes on commonly held notions of localism and interconnectedness, and draw attention to the fact that intimate phenomena exceed conceptual containment. The local is the site of both intimate interconnectedness and unsettling monstrosity. The monster is always *monstrum*, ‘that which demonstrates ... the norm or law’ (Thacker 23). By highlighting the monstrous in the familiar, Berry and Meatyard reveal beings as strange strangers and draw attention to the nature of our perceptual shell, the hermeneutic screen through which we perceive, distort, and simplify the world—a saturated world that exceeds our attempts at describing and naturalising it.

Weirdness is locality. The monstrosity of the familiar is what I call weird localism.

NOTES

¹ Berry's work has garnered both positive and negative attention from ecocritics such as Greg Garrard, Lawrence Buell, and Ursula Heise. Most critics laud him for his artistic craft and striving to practice what he preaches by living and working on his small Kentucky farm. Yet, some critics tend to be dismissive of Berry and his ideas as anachronistic or impractical. These critics view Berry as simply a prominent spokesperson for a nostalgic trend that yearns for a mythical 'simpler' in which individuals felt a familiarity with one another and their homeland; or, as occupying a position in a regional/cosmopolitan binary in which Berry's localism neglects contemporary 'cosmopolitan' and globalised realities in favor of a myopic regionalism.

² In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton notes that in considering and interacting with 'nature', humans tend to 'naturalize or collapse otherness', correlating other beings in the world to human perception and desires. Alluding to the film *Blade Runner* (1982), Morton poses that the alternative, is to 'identify with the replicant' (196). In other words, to deconstruct inherently naturalising notions of 'naturalness', and 'to love what is nonidentical with us ... the disgusting, inert and meaningless' (185,195).

³ Meatyard was influenced by Zen Buddhism while attending a photography seminar at Indiana University in 1956. There he became close with fellow-Kentucky resident the mystic Trappist monk Thomas Merton, whose work, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) discusses the relationship between mystical Christianity and Buddhism. It was through Meatyard that Berry came to know Merton. Meatyard claimed that an 'educated background of Zen' influenced all his photographs (Curtis 1).

⁴ The proposed Red River Gorge dam, intended as a flood control measure, met stern opposition from the Sierra Club. They solicited the help of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglass, who led 'The Dam Protest Hike' (1967). Douglass described the gorge as 'one of the great wonders of America' (Franklin 49). The struggle to halt the dam lasted several decades, finally ending with the Red River's entry into the National Wild and Scenic River system, an act signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1993.

⁵ In his treatise on mystical contemplation, *Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) describes being blinded by excess light: 'the brighter and more manifest in themselves are supernatural things the darker are they to our understanding' (125).

⁶ Berry's 'way of ignorance', is described in a book by the same name. It includes recognition of the inherent human ignorance in perceiving and interacting with the world and decrying the 'superstition' of believing that humans can confidently predict the future, or the future consequences of their actions (*Way of Ignorance* 53).

⁷ Often perceived simply as 'dirt', Berry describes soil as 'wild' and highlights its irreducibility and mystery: 'The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life. It is alive itself. It is a grave, too, of course. Or a healthy soil is. It is full of dead animals and plants, bodies that have passed through other bodies' (*Unsettling* 86).

⁸ Berry highlights the destructiveness of rivers in essays such as 'The Rise' and in his novel *A Place on Earth* in which a young girl, Annie, is swept away by a flood (116-120).

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