THE BLOSSOMS ARE GHOSTS AT THE WEDDING

Expanded Edition

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Land, Earth, Soil, Dirt: Some Notes Towards a Sense of Place

Years ago, the morning after an evening of beer drinking and poetry reciting, a hungover clot of revelers was walking back from breakfast. Northwest poet Robert Sund, whom I had met the night before, lagged behind the rest of us, preoccupied. He had stopped and was staring into a corner, a crack where two concrete buildings met. Curious, we went back; he looked up from a small, cranial-shaped pile of moss and said something like, “That’s our only hope.” We laughed nervously, a little shaken, it struck us all. The moss was patiently turning the buildings to soil, to dirt, to earth. That moment has haunted me since, and the idea of soil and its import has become a recurrent meditation for me.

I want to look at soil as a metaphor, as a self-darkened lens that bends light, dividing, revealing, obscuring; a lens to watch light thickened green by life and kneaded rich by death’s dark hands. I want to behold a rainbow as the faint echo of soil’s gravid hive. Imagine soil as the context, the textural background of other imaginations, an other, darker nature grounding culture, personality, language. A good place to start is in the words we use about soil. By examining, exhuming, the stories hidden in them, we reveal a strata of unconscious attitudes towards soil. We say “back to the land,” “mother earth,” “good ground,” “dirty,” but only vaguely know what we’re saying. Our descriptions lack discrimination, want felt meaning. Reviewing the stories biding in the words and following their instruction, we may resuscitate a poetic, a way of seeing and knowing the local world we walk upon.

Land is a word nearly synonymous with soil. We cultivate, plow and till the land. But these are activities originally germane to soil. Their use with land is an example of the natural poetic license that dwells in language. Land is from the Indo-European root *lendh* (“open land”). This sense still adheres to the cognates of *lendh*. Old English has *land* meaning speciﬁcally (“open land”). French has *lande* (“heath, moorland, especially infertile moorland”). Our word *lawn* comes to us from French *lande*. Old Slavic has *ledo* (“wasteland”).

German has additionally *landau* (“water meadow”) (land + *owa* [water]). Old Celtic has *landa* (“a valley”). Welsh and Cornish have *lann* (“an enclosure”). *Land* is a relatively abstract term that refers to boundaries. Its basic idea is open or closed space. Its root does not refer to any other speciﬁc aspect of landscape except its openness or closedness. At heart, it’s about “land shape,” about surface, not soil.

Land’s meaning for us is *owned topography*. The idea of property is the word’s current context. To express other qualities of landscape requires qualiﬁcation: heart land, forest land. Land no longer constellates an image. We can “land” anywhere. There is a land romance: some of us went “back to the land.” But it is telling that we went back to the land (an abstraction) not to the Palouse, the Olympic Rain Forest, or even the heath, desert or forest. Part of the diffculty of the back-to-the-land movement is that its speech does not adequately inform its impulse. For us land is a concept, not a locality.

*Earth* is another word we substitute for *soil*. It is a word with a surprising spectrum of meanings. Its root is the Indo-European *er* (“earth, anciently and essentially the place between the heavens and the land of the dead”). It is the name of our planet, Earth, gravity’s burrow, the invisible genius that keeps our feet on the ground and tethers moons swole scythe-like magic. Gravity, whose pull prescribes and consecrates our orbit and allows our blue-green, ﬁre-hearted dream to dance its tragic dance around a dying star.

We cannot yet “buy earth”—we ﬁnd that hard to say. Historically, earth has meant or still means: the world, cosmos, soil, surface, country, chemical oxide, the place between heaven and hell, electrical ground (British), a grave, a burrow, a shelter. To condense all these meanings we might say earth is the place of fundamental, fateful connection.

*Dirt* is the unsavory side of our descriptions of soil. *Dirt* is from Old Norse *drit* (“excrement”). *Drit* is from Old Norse *drita* (“to shit”). It is telling that we use a word with that root to describe soil. Healthy soil digests shit and puts it to use, but dirt and soil are not the same. Granted, soil can be dangerous if fouled by poisons or diseased wastes, but we are missing the fundamental difference between soil and dirt when we confuse them. Soil is a “community enterprise.” Shit is potential nutrients “looking for work.” We do *dirt* dirty, using it as a synonym for soil or earth. We should maintain its speciﬁc connections to excrement. Earth and soil are not shit. An earthy mind and dirty mind are different gatherings. I wonder if there isn’t a ruling class prejudice hiding in the continued confusion of dirt and soil. It’s almost as if the soil were beneath us instead of holding us up.

*Ground* is another word associated with soil. Ground is from Old English *grund* (“foundation, earth”). *Ground* means bottom; a “groundling” was originally a name for a ﬁsh that lived on the bottom of ponds or a person who preferred, or could only afford, the pit in front of the stage. *Ground* means fundamental, basic. We run aground; we are well grounded in thought. Many disciplines use the word (carpentry, naval terminology, philosophy, engineering, art, etc.). Ground is cognate with Old English *grynde* (“abyss”). So, ground is cousin to depth and mystery. It is also used in reference to soil and landscape. We work the ground, the groin, also from *grynde* (“abyss”) of the earth. Perhaps we confuse soil and ground because soil grounds us, soil is *fundamental*; it *grounds* us. It completes the circuit.

Finally we come to soil, “the root metaphor,” “our only hope.” Soil is the secret sublimation of the land. It is the black, alchemic gold of this green earth, the re-enchantment of waste and death. It is the humming dignity of the gravid ground, the black honey of our sun-drenched hive. Soil is an earthy, grounding term that is not land. Soil is not easily owned or domesticated. It suffers our earthly antics with motherly patience calmly awaiting our return. Soil’s history as a term is fascinating. In time it has meant: a wild boar mire, a pool of water used as a refuge by hunted deer, sexual intercourse, composition of the ground, mold, staining, to purge a horse on green feed.

Etymologically, soil has two roots. First, soil is from Indo-European *su* (“to produce young”). Cognate words are sow, succulent, socket, hyena and hog. Pigs were sacred to the earth goddess. Pigs and snakes were her favored images. The sense that comes to us from this root is mire or stain, but behind these senses—“in the roots wild pigs are breeding and birthing at the mired edge of ancient oak forests; deer are dying near a hidden pool.” “Soiled” we touch the sacred suckling succulent sow.

*Soil’s* other sense (ground-earth) comes to us from Latin *solum* (“ground ﬂoor, threshing ﬂoor”) and the obsolete (“solium, throne”). The Indo-European root is *sed* (“to sit, to settle”). Soil’s cognates are nest, nestle, seat, soot, cathedral, sole. Soil is where we stand. The “soles” of our feet touch the soil, grounding us. “He’s got his feet on the ground.” Soil is a throne of bones where light nests, where we settle. The ancestors tickle our feet from its fertile shade.

Soil is a kind of bicameral word. Like a good two-house legislature, it “converses.” The two root meanings, *fertility* and *seat*, have intertwined since Middle French, when the words became identical in sound and spelling. Indeed the sow is enthroned in soil. Soil is the throne, the nest that bears young, the queen’ s room. Soil is the land in hand, smelled and seen. Soil supports the living and receives the dead.

The science of ecology affirms the etymological complexity of soil. From *Ecology and Field Biology* by Robert Leo Smith: “Soil is the site where nutrient elements are brought into biological circulation by mineral weathering. It also harbors the bacteria that incorporate atmospheric nitrogen into the soil. Roots occupy a considerable portion of the soil. They serve to tie the vegetation to the soil and to pump water and its dissolved minerals to other parts of the plant for photosynthesis and other biochemical processes—vegetation in turn inﬂuences soil development, its chemical and physical properties and organic matter content. *Thus soil acts as a ‘sort of pathway’ between the organic and mineral worlds*.”

In short, soil is the bridge between the living and the dead, both in one, a living death, a paradox. Geologist Robert Curry explains the crucial connection between soil and human life: “All (forms of) life, without exception, are dependent upon outside sources of nutrients for their support within a substrate upon which they nurture themselves. In all non-marine systems, the ultimate substrate is soil. Even marine systems are dependent upon weathered minerals derived by soil-forming processes throughout geologic time on land. Soil is not an inert inorganic blanket of varying thickness on the land that can be differentiated into subsoil and topsoil. Those naive terms belie a basic misunderstanding that permeates the agricultural advisory services of this country. Soil is generally recognized by soil scientists to be a dynamic, living assemblage of precisely bio-geochemically segregated macro- and micronutrient ions held in a series of remarkable storage sites. These nutrients are provided by slow weathering over geologic time and are translocated and reprocessed by soil organisms and plant activity. In general the living biomass beneath the ground equals or exceeds that above ground.[!]

“Soil is thus not a mineral, geologic resource but a biospheric resource that, although renewable, can reform only at extremely slow geologic rates of tens of centuries. The soil nutrients within their delicately segregated geochemical levels represent precisely and literally the sum total of the long sustainable economic capital of the nation.”

To paraphrase Curry, we might say soil is fate. This notion resonates with soil’s connections to seats of power, the sow goddess, soil our destiny, our destination. Soil is the land in hand, a speciﬁc place. Soil embodies the meeting, is the meat of weather and rock; “remembers” them into trees and kingﬁshers, salamanders and salal. Each location knots that meeting differently. Your county soil survey becomes a kind of earth phrenology—soil is a live being, a dark leaf breathing water and light. Soil is myriad neural serpents writhing knotted on an inﬁnity of their discarded skins. It is its own renewable research, a porcine cannibal lover, phoenix, shit-eating alchemist, Ouroboros enshrined, an honest mother. Persephone, goddess of spring lives underground, ensoiled. She rises in spring, wife of wise Hades, King of Wealth and Death. Her name means “bringer of destruction.” Perhaps she is a personiﬁcation of soil, the living death. Demeter’s virginal daughter married to the king of the dead. (Interestingly, in one of his myriad seductions, Zeus, the king of heaven, approached Persephone in the guise of a snake as she sat in the great cave of creation weaving the threads of destiny.) Plants and animals follow her back into the light. Soil blurs the distinction between the living and the dead, humbling us. Soil is the pious Confucian son tending the graves of the ancestors. It is husband and wife in one dark body. Soil is the dwelling wave, the archetypal, renewable resource. *Resource* from *re-surge* (“to surge back”), and *surge* is from Latin *subregere* (“to rule from below”). So, a resource surges back ruled by powers hidden from view. Soil is the paradoxical deathdark well of our living. Soil is the resurrecting, hidden ruler, fate-maker, dark-eyed, blossom-giddy girl weaving destiny deep in the ground.

We are all earth-born, literally and ﬁguratively, and the word *human* conﬁrms this assertion. Our words human, humble and homage all derive from Latin *humus* (“earth, soil, ground, region, country”). A human is earth-born, shares the quality of humus. It is well to remember that to our ancestors humus was local and that “humanity” was born, arose from a speciﬁc locale, a place. The people over the hill might not be quite human, in the sense of your local humus. Our language knows we are earth-born even if we think we are heaven sent.

Human awareness is the blossom in the fertile mix of two soils, the soil of language and the soil of place. The “soil” of language is not merely metaphoric, it is mortally real. Language wants a place, a locus, as much as you or I. Vernaculars are living proof of languages rooting and blooming where it lands. Language grows into where it lives, symbiotic; old world metaphors re-sown into new landscapes. Our perceptions and our witness catch the stark light and green it into meaning. These meanings compost and compose a deeper experience of where we are. Words are living beings; they borrow our breath for inspiration; they blossom, fruit, root and die.

Language in place, ensoiled, inevitably blooms culture. Culture in root means to plow, return, cycle. Understood etymologically, culture is soil homage. Culture grows out of and dies back into language in place; the stories enrich the words. Culture is the sacred blossom; it consecrates the ground, soul and soil of the same dark being.

Western society has abandoned the older notion of culture, the husbanding of human life in place. Our culture does not arrive through the discrimination of the different songs the wind rings in the several pines of the Sierra, or the terror of the child lost in the rain forest, or the shape of a ﬁsherman’s pipe; no, instead we buy our culture. It is a consumer item, an *uncouth* import.

Whether it was dire necessity or some fatal species-speciﬁc ﬂaw, we took to the wind with a cross and sword. We learned to grow anywhere, choke out the natives. (Aboriginal peoples often die of homesickness.) We came to favor shallow roots, learned to grow in places we wasted. This may be what we really are, but our language once lived in a neighborhood where the word for tree and truth were the same—Indo-European *dru*, whence (“truth, tree, trust, druid”, etc.) Each speech has an accent, the odor of composted history. If left alone, our patterns of speech become localized, “dried” by the heat, made pungent by rain. But our electric neighborhood ignores locality; dialogue is now electriﬁed. Blind as a volt, our tongues are in the radared air, groundless. TV is our tree.

The soil is where we return our dead; it is the home of the ancestors. This sense of soil is lacking for most of us. We are careless. I have not witnessed the lives and deaths of my kin. True to the American dream, we scattered, seeking private versions of wealth, ignoring Hades’ dark treasure. I am less for my lack of witness. Human life grows in weight and intensity as people stay in one place. The ancestors form a wedge behind us, press us forward on the edge of that weight. Depending on our ability to bear the weight, to balance it, our located word is good and drives deeper into the haunt of home or it breaks and we ﬂoat up into the vapid torrent of commercial culture. Without the ancestors, without the soil of souls, we are potted plants, doomed in real weather. When we speak of living here, we should remember that perhaps the most important thing we will do here is die here, that our deaths will matter and be the ﬁrst step in steadying our children’s steps. Our graves will anchor them while they work the subtle weather of this cedar-green world. Soil supports the living and receives the dead.

Tilth  
Tilth comes from Old English *tilian* (“to work hard for, to cultivate”), with associated words in Dutch, Celtic and German that mean opportunity, agreeable and pleasant. To till is to work hard, to strive for the good and agreeable. Tilth, then, is the quality of carefully tended and worked soil, a term that belongs to the farm and ancient soil of our speech. If we stay put long enough we might some day say of a good story teller, “Her words have tilth.”