CHAPTER 12

Gleaning Aesthetics: Poetry as Communal Salvage

In a passage from the writings of his followers, St. Francis’s love of the lark is noted, the bird gaining Francis’s affection by the lowliness of its food and the spontaneity of its food collection. “Sister lark . . . is a humble bird who goes cheerfully along the road to find herself some corn, and even if she finds it among the dung of beasts, she takes it out and eats it.” Gleaning nutrition from what most might disdain as mere waste, her humility is admirable.

A basis of Judeo-Christian culture stipulates that waste in the form of gleanings should be left for the poor. In Leviticus (19: 9–10; 23: 22), gleanings are to be left after harvesting. There is profound virtue in gleanings, in both those who leave and those who gather. Waste should be left for the poor and alien to gather. Gleaners are those people cut off from the community, their low status a result of codification. Both actions reinforce the hierarchy and distinction between those who leave and those who gather; those who can afford to waste and those who can only afford to survive on charitably donated waste. Those who leave gleanings for those who are cut off from community are acting for the community and the common good. In this way, gleaners are made gleanings for society, and as such constitute an integral part of the community.

The Hebrew Bible emphasizes the plight of the foreigner. Leviticus suggests how to deal with wasted people, including ostracism and separation. But in several passages the Jews are instructed to treat the “stranger” like themselves, suggesting an affinity between each group (Leviticus 16: 29; 17: 8–16; 24: 10–15). The punishment for disobeying remains becoming aliens themselves. “And they that are left of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies’ lands; and also in the iniquities of their fathers shall they pine away with them” (Lev. 26: 39). The exile is a reject—as an immigrant,
he is human waste, but a powerful symbol, laden with the potential to become one of the chosen. *Leviticus* speaks to the protection of aliens and how one should protect strangers:

And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev. 19: 33–34)

And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee. (Lev. 25: 35)

God promises to lay waste to cities that disobey his edicts (26: 31). After all, as the Lord tells the Israelites, “The land shall not be sold forever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Lev. 25: 23). All are alien to God.

**The Ruth Effect**

*The Book of Ruth* most movingly presents the “Ruth effect”—the expression of and acting upon utter ethical affinity. One woman stays with another (daughter-in-law with mother-in-law after the husband/son dies). A foreigner, worse, a vilified Moabite, Ruth elects to stay with Naomi. “But Ruth cleaved unto her” (Ruth 1: 14). The model for *hesed* (steadfast love and faithfulness) for Israel is embodied in a Moabite. “For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; / where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me” (Ruth 1: 16–17).

Ruth proposes to Naomi that they glean among the ears of corn in the fields of Boaz in Bethlehem. Boaz hears of her gleaning and tells Ruth to glean there by his

“maidens. Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them; have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch thee? and when thou art athirst, go unto the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.” Then she fell on her face, and bowed down to the ground, and said unto him: “Why have I found favour in thy sight, that thou shouldest take cognizance of me, seeing I am a foreigner?” (Ruth 2: 8–10)

She eats with his maidens and he even helps her gleaning: “And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying: ‘Let her glean even among the sheaves, and put her not to shame. / And also pull out