

Wendel Berry: An Agrarian Poet

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Wendel Berry—poet, essayist, novelist, teacher, and organic farmer—was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1934. He holds A. B. and M. A. degrees from the University of Kentucky, where he is now a member of the faculty of the English department. He has taught, before coming back for good to his native place, in California and New York.

I

“The Man Born to Farming,” the first poem of Wendel Berry’s third book of poetry, *Farming: A Handbook* is a concise and explicit depiction of the poet himself, with all of his ideas and ideals integrated into a single poetic vision:

The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
 whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
 to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
 yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie
 down
 in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.
 His thought passes along the row ends like a mole.
 What miraculous seed has he swallowed
 that the unending sentence of his love flows out of his mouth
 like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water
 descending in the dark?

He could not, however, be content with being merely “the grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming;” he was a man of the modern age, a man determined to mend and survive the present day currents running adverse to humanity and creation. He had to fight his way through what he thought was conducive to the catastrophic disaster of our environment: nature was in danger of irredeemable destruction. The evidence can be seen, he believes, “in our wanton and thoughtless misuse of the land and the other natural resources, in our wholesale pollution of the water and air, in strip mining, in our massive use and misuse of residual poisons in agriculture and everywhere, in our willingness to destroy whole landscapes in the course of what we call ‘construction’ and ‘progress’...” (CH, p. 10)

His native place was not an exception. He had to write “The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mine Morality in East Kentucky” (LLH, pp.12-29), a protest against the erosion and water pollution as the by-product of strip-mining in East Kentucky. Believing in American ideals

and finding nothing in them to justify the war in Vietnam, "our support of puppet tyrants, or our slaughter of women and children, or our destruction of crops and villages and forests..." he had to write "A Statement Against the War in Vietnam" (LLH, pp. 64-75), originally a speech delivered to the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft at the University of Kentucky, February 10, 1968. Though proud enough of his native place to declare: "I am a Kentuckian by birth, by predilection, and by choice," (LLH, p. 64) he is frequently surprised by the awareness of what his ancestors did to their slaves. There is a "wound"—a "hidden" wound which both the white people and black men have had to suffer, for as he writes in *The Hidden Wound* (p. 2):

If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.

His insight into his own nature and that of his fellow men is so deep and sensitive that he is even conscious of the sins he is not directly responsible for, of "The Fearfulness of Hands That Have Learned Killing" (O, p. 11):

The fearfulness of hands that have learned killing
I inherit from my own life. With my hands from boyhood
I formed the small perfect movements of death,
killing for pleasure or wantonness, casually.
Manhood taught me the formal deadliness
of hunter and farmer, the shedding
of predestined blood that lives for death.
Only marrying and fathering lives
has taught me the depth of ruin,
and made me feel quick in my hands the subtlety
and warmth of what they have destroyed.

He had to write "The Loss of the Future" (LLH, pp. 45-63), pessimistically but solemnly describing how American people are "guilty of grave offenses against their fellow men and against the earth," how they have become "the worshipers and evangelists of a technology and wealth and power," and how they have lost the future and idealism.

Nevertheless it is true that he started as, and still remains, an agrarian, since it is for him the only way of being true to his cause and living up to the responsibilities as a poet and writer.

II

He bases his outlook on life and human destiny and the whole idea of civilization on his knowledge of what true agriculture should be. To him civilization and agriculture mean the same thing; indeed they are the two aspects of the same thing. He is a severe critic,

not only of what he called 'agribusiness' with its preoccupation with immediate profit and nothing else, but also of every kind of vices of the twentieth century industrialization which is founded on insatiable production and reckless consumption without regard to the irreplaceable effects it leaves on the earth. True agriculture has nothing, Wendel Berry insists, to do with efficiency which is so much emphasized in modern industry. It has nothing to do with mass-production and mass-waste. It must be understood "in terms of a whole and coherent system that would maintain the fertility and the ecological health of the land over a period of centuries." (CH, pp. 95-96) A long-term vision of life must take the place of short-term pursuit of money, the former comprising succession of births and deaths, which alone is able to maintain an eternal life. Just as the forest "manures itself and is therefore self-renewing," (CH, p. 98) a correct relationship between the process of growth and that of decay is what makes true agriculture. It is not a laboratory science but a science of practice; it is an "art growing out of cultural tradition."

The prototype of Wendel Berry an agrarian is the boy standing "in the role of student before his father's father, who, halting a team in front of him, would demand to know which mule had the best head, which the best shoulder or rump, which was the lead mule, were they hitched right," as he tells of himself in his younger days, in "A Native Hill," an autobiographical essay, included in *The Long-Legged House*.

The essay is a kind of modern *Bildungsroman*, telling how the five years of apprenticeship with "the old farmer" made a critical difference in his life, how he came to find himself inseparably tied to that part of the earth which is his native place and how this relationship made for "a high degree of particularity in his mental process," how, for instance, when he thought of "the welfare of the earth, the problem of its health and preservation, the care of its life," he had his native place before him, "the part representing the whole more vividly and accurately, making clearer and more pressing demands, than any *idea* of the whole." (LLH, p. 173)

The essay goes on to tell how the ultimate and necessary inclination of his life caused him to give up, for what he wholeheartedly desired, the life in New York, "the literary metropolis," or "the so-called cultural spring." Returning to his "origins" as he had so ardently desired, he begins to see the place "with a new clarity and a new understanding and a new seriousness," finding in it "the real abundance and richness." (LLH, p. 177) Finally he comes to see himself "as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants." (LLH, p. 178) It was, as the first part of "The Return" (O, p. 21) describes:

To re-enter
the place of beginning, the place
whose possibilities I am one of,

to return
and resume such a continuance
as there could be no other place,

to come back
to what could not be escaped—
that is to say there never was departure.

But the realization that one is deeply tied together with one's native place is the understanding that one is obliged to serve the place in order to preserve its health and fertility. This obligation necessarily involves discipline and hard work, self-denial and self-devotion. In his recent poem entitled "Rising," (*The Southern Review*, Winter 1976, pp. 136-39) the same "grandfather" (though in this case represented simply as "he"), who loomed in his childhood as a teacher, again comes to life to teach the poet as a young man, who "having danced until nearly/ time to get up, went on/ in the harvest, half lame/ with weariness." The elder "took no notice, and made/ no mention of my distress./ He went ahead, assuming/ that I would follow." The young man follows the old farmer, "dizzy, half blind, bitter/ with sweat in the hot light." He follows his disciplinarian, at first almost blindly, but soon afterwards more and more wholeheartedly, finding in the old man one who was destined to be his guide, who

never turned his head,
a man well known by his back
in those fields in those days.
He led me through long rows
of misery, moving like a dancer
ahead of me, so elated
he was, and able, filled
with desire for the ground's growth.

"The ground's growth"—that was what the poet was destined for, finding in the efforts to ensure it the supreme wisdom of living on this earth.

Thus the young man gradually learns the significance of working not by "will" but by "desire," and how to turn what was to him "ordeal" into "order and grace, ideal and real." The old man is no longer a human being trying to teach the poet; he is the great earth itself, teaching man how to live on it, just as Roy Campbell's "Zulu Girl" was, whose body looms above her baby "like a hill/ Within whose shade a village lies at rest,/ Or the first cloud so terrible and still/ That bears the coming harvest in its breast."

Although the Zulu girl's baby is too small to realize the truth about her mother, the soliloquist in "Rising" does, for after a difficult and painful awaking, the poet tells of himself:

The boy must learn the man
whose life does not travel
along any road, toward
any other place,
but is a journey back and forth
in rows, and in the rounds
of years. His journey's end
is no place of ease, no
temperate isle, but the farm
itself, the place day labor
starts from, journeys in,
returns to: the fields
whose past and potency are one.

It is at this point that the poet's thought is elevated from the particular to the universal, from an individual to the whole. Short-sighted vision of human life is replaced by macroscopic, or, to use Wendel Berry's term, "cyclic," vision. A resolution of the conflict is achieved between the general belief in the life of a man, or any man, whose "death could end the story," for

His mourners, having accompanied him
to the grave through all he knew,
turn back, leaving him complete,

and the other story of "lives, knit together," the lives of the collective man,

overlapping in succession, rising
again from grave after grave.

Hereafter the poem goes on into the problem of life and death—death in life and life in death, once so solemnly meditated upon by T. S. Eliot. With Wendel Berry death is the prerequisite of life; the grave is a beginning for "those who depart from it, bearing it/ in their minds," for

There is a grave, too, in each
survivor. By it, the dead one lives.
He enters us, a broken blade,
sharp, clear as a lens or a mirror.

And he comes into us helpless, tender
as the newborn enter the world. Great
is the burden of our care. We must be true
to ourselves. How else will he know us?

Thus the poem begins to assume a deep philosophical as well as ethical tone, which so dramatically characterizes some of T. S. Eliot's poems. While, however, Eliot was deeply concerned with the moral state of the modern mind at the beginning of the twentieth century, Berry is thinking of a world more generalized, more ecological and scientific. While Eliot had in mind mainly the Western people in their agony, whatever its cause, Berry always has in mind the whole earth, the whole humanity, the whole living things that comprise the life of our planet, all of them fresh from the earth, not yet contaminated by the defilements of modern civilization. Eliot was something of a savior, in the guise of a poet, of the civilized parts of the world. He lived in the days when there was no confrontation between the developed and the developing nations. Berry's voice is that of an ecologist whose interest covers the whole earth. This is the difference between a man living in an atmosphere dimly lit by the cultural twilight of *fin-de-siècle* lingering into the early years of the twentieth century ("the dream-crossed twilight between birth and dying"), and a man living in a scientific age when moon landing is a reality—a reality, however, that, according to Wendel Berry, no one with an understanding can just stand by with a feeling of innocent admiration, but must question the reasonableness of such an undertaking. While Eliot sought after "the still point," an absolute center of meditation and enlightenment,

Wendel Berry believes in a flowing, in a cycle of life, or even a transmigration:

There is a kinship of the fields
that gives to the living the breath
of the dead. The earth
opened in the spring, opens
in all springs. Nameless,
ancient, many-lived, we reach
through ages with the seed.

Life is perpetuated by dying, just as the woods “stands upon its yields/ And thrives.” In the same way

Love binds us to this term
With its yes that is crying
In our marrow to confirm
Life that only lives by dying.
(CM, p. 52)

While Eliot took it for granted that humanity is predetermined by his original sins, Wendel Berry believes in, or at least lays emphasis on, the innocence and purity of mankind, so long as they are one with nature. Instead of being obsessed, as Eliot was, by sexual failure and pre- and post-War lassitude, Wendel Berry was “a great relisher of the world,” with passion for life and love. Disguised as a “Mad Farmer,” he finds satisfactions not only in

Growing weather; enough rain;
the cow's udder tight with milk;
the peach tree bent with its yield;
honey golden in the white comb,

or

raspberries ripe and heavy amid their foliage,
currants shining red in clusters amid their foliage,
strawberries red ripe with the white
flowers still on the vines,

but also in

the bodies of children, joyful
without dread of their spending,
surprised at nightfall to be weary;

the bodies of women in loose cotton,
cool and closed in the evenings
of summer, like contented houses;

the bodies of men, competent in the heat
and sweat and weight and length
of the day's work, eager in their spending,
attending to nightfall, the bodies of women;

sleep after love, dreaming
 white lilies blooming
 coolly out of my flesh;

after sleep, the sense of being enabled
 to go on with work, morning a clear gift;

the maidenhood of the day,
 cobwebs unbroken in the dewy grass;

the work of feeding and clothing and housing,
 done with more than enough knowledge
 and with more than enough love,
 by men who do not have to be told;

(F, p. 61)

It is to be noted that Wendel Berry's belief in eternal life ("we reach/ through ages with the seed") is not limited to biological truth; it is his life-philosophy. He explains his belief in the seventh section (*The Road and the Wheel*) of his important essay, significantly entitled "Discipline and Hope." (CH, pp. 139-51)

There are, I believe, two fundamentally opposed views of the nature of human life and experience in the world: one holds that though natural processes may be cyclic, there is within nature a human domain the processes of which are linear; the other, much older, holds that human life is subject to the same cyclic patterns as all other life. If the two are contradictory that is not so much because one is wrong and the other right as because one is partial and the other complete. The linear idea, of course, is the doctrine of progress, which represents man as having moved across the oceans and the continents and into space on a course that is ultimately logical and that will finally bring him to a man-made paradise. It also sees him as moving through time in this way, discarding old experience as he encounters new. The cyclic vision, on the other hand, sees our life ultimately not as a crosscountry journey or a voyage of discovery, but as a circular dance in which certain basic *and necessary* patterns are repeated endlessly.

This philosophy corresponds to the main idea of modern ecology in recognizing that "the creation is a great union of interlocking lives and processes and substances, all of which are dependent on each other." (CH, p. 142) It sees in the creation the essential principle of "return." It considers death inescapable as a biological and ecological necessity, death being an integral, indispensable part of life. It is a practical way of living that comes from the correct recognition of the relationship between creation and humanity. To speak in Stevencian way, life and farming are one; farming and philosophy are one.

III

Wendel Berry's poems are woven of one or more of several themes, which, however, like each of the spectral components, are finally superposed upon each other to form a white beam of light—Wendel Berry's agrarian or cyclic vision.

The first theme one notices is the yearning for pristine wilderness, into which nothing that man has made or done since the beginning of history can intrude. But this dream,

perhaps not a natural, but, one may say, an artificial, dream, although “inescapable,” is sure gradually to fade away little by little to bring into sight “the flowing of history,” bringing in its train “all the things we have built and dug and hollowed out.” With a bitter taste of disillusionment—a natural result of such a dream—the poet desperately cries out, “Where are the sleeps that escape such dreams?”—a rather abrupt and hollow-sounding line that makes the poem less satisfactory. The quotation is from part 3 of “The Return.” (O, p. 22)

I dream an inescapable dream
 In which I take away from the country
 the bridges and roads, the fences, the strung wires,
 ourselves, all we have built and dug and hollowed out,
 our flocks and herds, our droves of machines.

I restore then the wide-branching trees.
 I see growing over the land and shading it
 the great trunks and crowns of the first forest.
 I am aware of the rattling of their branches,
 the lichen channels of their bark, the saps
 of the ground flowing upward to their darkness.
 Like the afterimage of a light that only by not
 looking can be seen, I glimpse the country as it was.
 All its beings belong wholly to it. They flourish
 in dying as in being born. It is the life of its deaths.

I must end, always, by replacing
 our beginning there, ourselves and our blades,
 the flowing in of history, putting back what I took away,
 trying always with the same pain of foreknowledge
 to build all that we have built, but destroy nothing.

Where are the sleeps that escape such dreams?

A more satisfactory achievement can be seen in part 11 and 12 of “Window Poems” (O, pp. 45—47) which won Wendel Berry the First Prize of the Borestone Mountain Awards for 1969. In part 12, quoted in full below, the poet seems to be enjoying (which means that readers too can enter the same level of enjoyment) a dream of “the second coming,” not of a new god or a new civilization as Yeats did, but of wild nature which once dominated the earth:

The country where he lives
 is haunted
 by the ghost of an old forest.
 In the cleared fields
 where he gardens
 and pastures his horses
 it stood once,
 and will return. There will be
 a resurrection of the wild.
 Already it stands in wait
 at the pasture fences.
 It is rising up

in the waste places of the cities.
 When the fools of the Capitols
 have devoured each other
 in righteousness,
 and the machines have eaten
 the rest of us, then
 there will be the second coming
 of the trees. They will come
 straggling over the fences
 slowly, but soon enough.
 The highways will sound
 with the feet of the wild herds,
 returning. Beaver will ascend
 the streams as the trees
 close over them.
 The wolf and the panther
 will find their old ways
 through the nights. Water
 and air will flow clear.
 Certain calamities
 will have passed,
 and certain pleasures.
 The wind will do without
 corners. How difficult
 to think of it: miles and miles
 and no window.

This is a dream quite free from the presentiment of failure, although the poet seems to complain in the last lines: "How difficult/ to think of it: miles and miles/ and no window." But actually he is never disillusioned; he is rather happy and contented, as when he concludes part II:

All passes, and the man
 at work in the house
 has mostly ceased to mind.
 There will be pangs
 of ending, and he regrets
 the terrors men bring to men.
 But all passes—there is even
 a kind of solace in that.
 He has imagined animals
 grazing at nightfall
 on the place where his house stands.
 Already his spirit
 is with them, with a strange attentiveness,
 hearing the grass
 quietly tearing as they graze.

The poet knows how to make for himself an imperishable dream of "the old forest"—"a dream to dream/ of its rising, that has gentled his nights." This kind of dream requires that there be an effort on the part of the dreamer to perpetuate it by helping the pollen "survive the ghost of the old forest" (CM, p. 23):

I become the familiar of that ghost
 and its ally, carrying in a bucket
 twenty trees smaller than weeds,
 and I plant them along the way
 of the departure of the ancient host.
 I return to the ground its original music.

“Window Poems” are composed of flowing rhythms of ideas, never twisted, never forced or vexed. One can say that at least in this series of poems Wendel Berry rises into the level of greatness. In it his spirit is at the height of free play. Part 27, the final part of the series is a kind of symphonic finale consisting of an interplay of “what is his,” “the known/ adrift in mystery,” on the one hand and “a roofless place/ and a windowless,” on the other (O, pp. 58-59):

.....What is his is
 past. He has come
 to a roofless place
 and a windowless.
 There is a wild light
 his mind loses
 until the spring renews,
 but it holds his mind
 and will not let it rest.
 The window is a fragment
 of the world suspended
 in the world, the known adrift in mystery.
 And now the green
 rises. The window has an edge
 that is celestial,
 where the eyes are surpassed.

With the longing for wild nature is closely connected the desire for kinship with the earth itself. In Wendel Berry’s poems one frequently meets the images of “seeding” and “putting hands into the earth,” as an emblematic means of getting one with the earth. “The Seeds” (F, p. 30) is an apt example:

The seeds begin abstract as their species,
 remote as the name on the sack
 they are carried home in: Fayette Seed Company
 Corner of Vine and Rose. But the sower
 going forth to sow sets foot
 into time to come, the seeds falling
 on his own place. He has prepared a way
 for his life to come to him, if it will.
 Like a tree, he has given roots
 to the earth, and stands free.

When one makes “a marriage with his place” and his hand “has reached into the dark like a root/ and began to wake, quick and mortal, in timelessness,” (“The Current” F, p. 41) one enlarges oneself into time and space, or rather into timelessness and spacelessness.

There one will see "the old tribespeople bend/ in the sun, digging with sticks," and is

made their descendant, what they left
 in the earth rising into him like a seasonal juice.
 And he sees the bearers of his own blood arriving,
 the forest burrowing into the earth as they come,
 their hands gathering the stones up into walls,
 and relaxing, the stones crawling back into ground
 to lie still under the black wheels of machines.
 The current flowing to him through the earth
 flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,
 a young man who has reached into the ground,
 his hand held in the dark as by a hand.

In "Song in a Year of Catastrophe" (F, pp. 38-40) the poet is being followed by a voice, saying:

It can't last. It can't last.
 Harden yourself. Harden yourself.
 Be ready. Be ready.

It is a persistent voice that would not be denied, for what it says has such grave implications that concern not only the poet but everyone else that the poet cannot but obey it. Now obeying it and putting his hands into the earth so as to let them "take root/ and grow into a season's harvest" is found to be "learning the dark." It is to "die/ into what the earth requires of you." The poet "let go all holds and sank/ like a hopeless swimmer into the earth,

and at last came fully into the ease
 and the joy of that place,
 all my lost ones returning.

By dying the poet knows that all his lost ones return. Death is the beginning of life, which in its turn is the beginning of death—a cycle repeated eternally. Just as life is "a patient willing descent into the grass," (F, p. 31) so

After death, willing or not, the body serves,
 entering the earth. And so what was heaviest
 and most mute is at last raised up into song.

The meeting of man and wife follows the same pattern as man's meeting, or getting on with, the earth, as the poet says in part 4 of "The Country of Marriage:" (CM, pp. 6-9)

.....I come to you
 lost, wholly trusting as a man who goes
 into the forest unarmed. It is as though I descend
 slowly earthward out of the air. I rest in peace
 in you, when I arrive at last.

The bond of man and wife is “no little economy on the exchange/ of my love and work for yours, so much for so much/ of an expended fund,” but on “love,” which “in its abundance survives our thirst.” Love extends beyond individuals far into timelessness and spacelessness, for

Like the water
of a deep stream, love is always too much. We
did not make it. Though we drink till we burst
we cannot have it all, or want it all.

Thus it follows that

What I am learning to give you is my death
to set you free of me, and me from myself
into the dark and the new light.

Earth which contain life and death and everything will in the end take hold both of them, for

their union is consummate
in earth, and the earth
is their communion. They enter
the serene gravity of the rain,
the hill's passage to the sea.

“A Marriage, an Elegy” (CM, p. 18)

Life extends even into what are considered inanimate things, “The Buildings:” (F, p. 29)

The buildings are all womanly. Their roofs
are like the flanks of mares, the arms and the hair of wives.
The future prepares its satisfaction in them.
In their dark heat I labor all summer, making them ready.
A time of death is coming, and they desire to live.
It is only the labor surrounding them that is manly,
the seasonal bringing in from the womanly fields
to the womanly enclosures. The house too yearns for life,
and hot paths come to it out of the garden and the fields,
full of the sun and weary. The wifeliness of my wife
is its welcome, a vine with yellow flowers shading the door.

Sometimes, however, Wendel Berry has time to put his mind at ease, cutting himself from such serious problems as life and death, and enjoying fleeting moments in more subtle and comfortable situations. He enjoys *Haiku*-like imagistic description of momentary aspects of stainless nature, as in “March Snow:” (O, p. 15)

The morning lights
whiteness that has touched the world
perfectly as air.
In the whitened country
under the still fall of the snow
only the river, like a brown earth,
taking all falling darkly
into itself, moves.

Or sometimes he enjoys confrontation between himself and those people outside his world, between a proud man who has found himself in his native place “after an expense of history/ and labor six generations long” and “The Strangers,”(CM, pp. 37-38) those ignorant people who “have followed the ways/ by which the country is forgot.” Here the poet is in a strange mood of placid humor and irony:

The voices of travelers on the hill road
 at dusk, calling down to me:
 “Where are we? Where
 does this road go?”
 They have followed the ways
 by which the country is forgot.
 For them, places have changed
 into their names, and vanished.
 The names rustle in the foliage
 by the roadside, furtive
 as sparrows. My mind shifts
 for whereabouts. Have I found them
 in a country they have lost?
 Are they lost in a country
 I have found? How can they
 learn where they are from me,
 who have found myself here
 after an expense of history
 and labor six generations long?
 How will they understand my speech
 that holds this to be its place
 and is conversant with its trees
 and stones. We are lost
 to each other. I think of changes
 that have come without vision
 or skill, a new world made
 by the collision of particles.
 Their blanched faces peer
 from their height, waiting
 an answer I know too well to speak.
 I speak the words they do not know.
 I stand like an Indian
 before the alien ships.

He compares himself to “Indians” and the other people to those white men who arrived in the New World in “the alien ships,” but he is really proud of being an Indian who “knows” the place so well that he is “conversant with its trees and stones.”

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