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Anne Marie Breznau

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FATAL SINGING: INTRODUCING WENDELL BERRY

Anne Marie Breznau

The words "fatal singing" from Wendell Berry's poem **"Stones"** summarize Berry's belief about the potential of all living creatures. Life is fatal but that is cause for gentle grieving and singing rather than despair. Berry writes and lives seeing, as he writes, "the light lie / down / in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn" (**"The Man Born to Farming"**). His essays, novels, and poetry are permeated with the modern human condition as he defines it--humans running from death into a far worse living state of their own creation. It is only in the embracing of the vital part that the death of all things plays in the continuance of the life of the whole that a human can be willing to joyfully choose all the limitations of his or her brief existence. Hands and feet immersed in the earth, fully aware of grief and joy, engaged in either planting or dying, each human sings not despite darkness and death but because he or she is only whole when death has been welcomed as one welcomes love, and the grief and joy experienced erupt into song.

Having begun with the core of Berry's message, let me retreat to the periphery and peel my way, as Berry did, more slowly inward to his central truths.

It is not unusual for a poet also to be a prolific writer of essays; it is perhaps singular, however, to find a poet with so many essays written on one subject, and a subject at that not ordinarily associated with literature. Wendell Berry, if not exactly a naturalist, is a man of nature. He is a farmer. He has more than eight collections of essays on or related to farming plus large numbers of individual essays published in farm magazines.

What seems to be a polarization of poetry and agricultural writings is actually Wendell Berry's highly unified vision developing. Studying **The Unsettling of America** (essays, 1977)

while reading **Clearing** (poetry, 1977) or relaxing with **The Memory of Old Jack** (novel, 1974) provides a wholeness of experience that suggests each genre is incomplete without the others. In the same way, the act of farming and the writing of poetry are one. Donald Hall hints at this wholeness of idea and expression in a **New York Times Book Review** (1977) when he calls the poems of **Clearing** "testimony which could be interleaved among the chapters of **The Unsettling of America**."

Quality and content aside for the moment, one is apt to wonder with Jonathan Yardley in **Sewanee Review** (1974, p. 542) just why Berry "has yet to achieve a wide reputation" when in "less than two decades of steady writing he has built up a substantial body of serious work." Although Berry has been reviewed positively in periodicals geared to the general public, and enthusiastically by literary critics, he remains mostly unknown. Despite an impressive assault on the literary press, Berry's acceptance into the basic anthologies which speak the mainstream of the literary tradition has been minimal; in fact, it is limited to inclusion of his rather sentimental, nonrepresentative poem, **"The Peace of Wild Things."** One wonders if his clarity of vision, his answers, in a century when despair and meaninglessness seem to dominate white male poetry has kept him "out of the club" so to speak. That is another essay, however, and having raised the question I shall make no effort to answer it.

Poet, philosopher, professor, and farmer, Wendell Berry follows in the steps of thinkers like Jefferson, Whitman, and Thoreau in living what he writes. No "ivory tower" poet, he is as apt to stride across his land, plowing between a pair of work horses, as he is to work "at his table, the window / staring into the valley" (**"Openings"**).

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He addresses himself more and more to farmers. He encourages them to become self-sufficient through diversification of crops, organic and ecological methods, and an attitude of stewardship rather than exploitation of the land. He advocates the return of political and cultural power to the hands of the farmer--the grower of food, the preserver of the earth. He encourages many more citizens to return to the land and heal their piece of it. If so, his essays maintain in **The Unsettling of America**, the culture would begin to heal as would the earth and the individual.

Like the child who identifies first with home and town, then progressively with county, state, nation, planet, and universe--so Berry defines himself first as a member of a household, then as a citizen of Port Royal, Kentucky. Unlike the child, who probably sees the sequence of addresses as leading longitudinally outward from the home, Berry sees them as all part of a wheel turning in one place, the ancient Wheel of Life (**Unsettling of America**).

His writings and his life depict a relationship with a piece of land. In **"The Wages of History"** (**Farming: A Handbook**), he states the thesis that has determined his life choices: "men's negligence and their / fatuous ignorance and abuse / have made a hardship of this earth." Thus, he considers himself "bound and doomed to the repair of history."

Amidst academic success and literary output, Berry looks, sounds, and works as a farmer. His movement from the poetic to the practical has exasperated his strongest admirers, academic and agricultural. A Michigan farmer and academic said, "He comes here and wants to walk across the land and talk about why I haven't plowed under my manure yet. I pick up **Clearing**, read a bit and want to shout at him--'you're a poet, damn you, go be one!'"

Berry's choice is not that simple. He is a poet but, as James Finn Cotter writes in **America** (1977, p. 82) on the one hand his "poetry exists as part of the life of soil, animals"; on the other hand, he is a farmer not "in order to write," but in order to farm. The priority is clear. His fans may rail at his choice, but Berry's writings express what he believes he is; and he believes he is a farmer. As Jack Hicks puts it in **American Literature**

(1979, p. 239), Berry is a "husband in the oldest senses of the word, having committed himself in multiple marriages to wife, family, farm, community, and finally to the cycle of great nature itself." Berry cannot go off and be a poet only, because his productivity is born out of the struggle between poetry and farming.

Berry recently defined himself as an "agricultural thinker and writer" (letter to Michigan farmer, 1982), but he did not come easily to this perception. Tracing the development of Berry's poetry, one finds that he has slowly attempted (like Thoreau) to make his life and poetry fit his philosophy. To look at only some of his books of poetry in sequence, it is clear that he (a) settled a small piece of land about the time he completed **The Broken Ground**, (b) hurt and healed with the land in the books **Openings and Findings**, (c) shared meaning derived from farming with others in **Farming: A Hand Book**, (d) announced a life-time commitment of farming in **The Country of Marriage**, and (e) embraced the delight that he finally found through agricultural work in **Clearing**.

Reading all of Berry's major collections is not unlike farming. It is walking into a wilderness of the profound and the silly, the well-wrought and the haphazard, in order to find a place from which to build. It is entering what Berry calls "the dark," and entering without a great body of established analysis and criticism to bolster one's ideas and perceptions. A critic, faced with the enormous quantity, exceptional quality, and the diversity of Berry's individual poems can do one of two things. She can "hunker down" with a few of them and explicate, or she can attempt to make a path through the overall dark forest of images, philosophy, and emotion. I have chosen to do the latter, to walk his farm, you might say.

Those critics who have reviewed Berry would agree. Robert Hazel in **Kenyon Review** (1965, p. 378) says Berry is important in his "coherent notion of existence." David Ignatow in **Partisan Review** (1977, p. 317) singles Berry out for "vision." Ignatow also advises getting a feel for the breadth of Berry's mystical love for the land. In **Hudson Review** (1969, p. 363), William Dickey speaks of Berry having "a world"

within which the speaker of his poems must live. Dickey seems more interested in those qualities which are "central to Berry's intelligence" than in individual poems. The fact seems to be that the quality of the poems as poetry is erratic, but the voice of the poet-farmer is commanding; it "whispers with authority" as the *Virginia Review* (1965, xiv) notes.

Six books read in sequence seem to capture both the essence of the good and true man that Berry becomes and some of his most well-wrought poems.

The Broken Ground, 1964, collects poems which reflect Berry's earliest struggle to define himself as something more than a poet and academician. It gives him a philosophical kinship with the earth. Its title admits, as Robert Hazel points out in *Kenyon Review* (1965, p. 379), that Berry himself knew his movement toward the earth was only beginning. The title also exemplifies Berry's love of the multiple meanings of language. It represents the broken ground into which his father is being placed in the opening elegy, the breaking up of the academic bent of Berry's life, and the realization of what is to be the central metaphor of Berry's vision--the cycle of breaking the earth to bury a dead thing (a body, a seed) so that the then broken ground can open of itself and bring out new life.

The poems approach the dominant theme from many directions but the fact that the darkness of the earth is both death and life seems to underlie all. Birth from death or darkness is of two types: 1. the verdant growth of plants; and 2. human song, that "fatal singing." Berry's movement ultimately is toward a need to actually make himself a kind of plant so that, hands in the soil, he can transmit the song of the earth.

Berry halts in his place as a farmer, not without pain. He seeks to understand darkness and to stay intimately aware of it ever after. He finds security only in the omnipresent return of the dead to the darkness of the broken ground and the resurrection of them in different forms. In **"A Music,"** he honors the act of "singing in a dark place," the ultimate human possibility. In **The Broken Ground** he sees that he must plant or farm as well as sing.

In **Openings**, 1968, emerges a man

who has not even metaphorically been able to become a farmer yet. Berry realizes the many ways in which he is wounded (opened) and the many wounds there are within the culture. The poems **"My Great-Grandfather's Slaves"** and **"The Migrants"** state that it is wrong to own land greater than you and yours can serve, wrong to enslave or to pay another to work your land. To want more than you can work is the greed that he believes has destroyed the U.S. He thus condemns himself to being the laborer as well as the owner of the land.

In **"The Snake"** and **"The Fearfulness of Hands That Have Learned Killing,"** Berry continues to explore the evils of humans and of himself. Hope in the midst of all this darkness comes in the form of "openings" of light yet remaining in the sky at nightfall. People, he seems to be saying in **"Porch Over the River,"** like the phoebes, "cross and re-cross...alert / for what may still be earned / from the light." A modern man still, he admits in **"The Return"** that his "mind is not good enough." He makes a powerful summary of his own and of man's guilt: "I am eager to own the earth and to own men. I find in my mouth a bitter taste of money, / a gaping syllable I can neither swallow nor spit out. I see all / that we have ruined in order to have."

Many poets, many humans, overwhelmed with guilt, have stopped here. Not Berry. He must embrace the exploitative, grasping nature of man and self before his real work will even begin as a poet or farmer. After describing modern men both as "violent and brainless" and "neighbor and brother," he acknowledges that he must love humans, however repulsive, or become as fully evil as humans can be.

Into his desperation, a final "opening" or insight appears when he sees a great sycamore tree that is constantly being torn open by the nails of humans or the lightning of Nature, but that can always heal itself in its place. He sees a way for himself and other humans. "I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it / and is fed upon, and is native, and maker" (**"The Return"**).

In the poem **"Marriage,"** he writes of his wife as an opening, source of hope, and healer. He still believes himself unworthy

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and thinks his fate, like that of the sycamore, other humans, and the earth itself, is to be hurt and to spend the rest of his life healing himself and the culture. Ironically this is the very fate one critic willed him after reviewing **The Broken Ground**. Robert Hazel in **Kenyon Review** (1965, p. 379), astonished at Berry's first book, feared that he was too good too quickly. He wanted for Berry that he "lose an eye, an ear, and one hand" in order for his personal maturity to reach the level of his poetic skills.

Findings, 1969, is divided into three sections: "The House," "The Handing Down" and "Three Elegiac Poems." The carving of a house from a wilderness is the subject of the first poem. House indicates culture too. In **Findings** Berry again faces a question that plagues him: what has brought him to farming? In answer he remembers the old people who held his land before him, and the unfinished work of tending and nurturing that "the hands / that laid them by never / took...up again." As a poet and a farmer he can finish that work. "This is what my mind owes for its life... Unless the living be damned in the dead's honor, intelligence must gash and gleam / among these remnants" ("**The White and Waking of the House**").

He then enters stanzas blasting government and church, equating the endurance of these institutions with the house having to "endure its winters" ("**The Design of the House**"). The evils of these groups must be outlived because, in moments of anger, he recognizes his own kinship with such violence. Fortunately the steady discovery of love--of wife, family, house--the "findings" of his world become antidotes to his wounds.

As the house rises out of the wilderness, so spring comes and with it "**The Garden**." But he doesn't want to literally garden, he feels "doomed to cultivate the real." Grimly, he sees he must learn from the "seasonal order of these rows." But not yet! Back he goes to the window where the garden can be merely that which distinguishes summer from other seasons out there. Eventually he decides in an "agony of choice" that "going out is necessary." He moves out into the garden.

The second part of **Findings**, "The Handing Down," uncovers the value of human

relationships over time and of nature's messages over time. Words link him to ancestors, and the voices of birds hand out their knowledge freely through "the dark trees around the house...to the end of the dark." He finds the words of nature and ancestors generously given and very healing.

Again, though, he must confront the end of his own humanness, his death and entry into the soil. He does this first in the mind--by looking down the road to old age and finding: there is "an agony in ripening... / which becomes irrelevant at last / to ripeness." In this solace, he takes his time learning "on the porch," then "in the potato rows," and at last "Among the shades and neighbors / of his summer walk." More comfortable, he writes: "He's in the habit of the world / The world has finally worn him / until he's no longer strange to it. / His face has grown comfortable on him."

Farming: A Hand Book, 1970, is the voice of the mature poet and maturing farmer. The soil, if not a joy, is at least his "divine drug," the ultimate healer. Berry notes the exhausting annual labor and the annual defeat of that labor by the seasons. In "**The Stones**" he celebrates in "fatal singing,...the weariness that loves the ground." "**The Supplanting**" admits that only constant work can keep the wilderness from retaking the house and the garden.

There is, however, more than the sweat of preparing and maintaining; there is also sowing. Here the farmer feels his power. In spite of "history's death upon the place and the trees that would have / come / I claim, and act, and am mingled in the fate of the world."

Water poetry now bursts forth. Berry explains that water fascinates him because he was "born in a drought year" and is a "dry man whose thirst is praise / of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup" ("**Water**"). In "**Rain**" he expresses pleasure at the fact that the earth can renew "without any man's doing or help."

In a powerful poem, "**Morning News**," he speaks of assassination and murders, the memory of which "drives sleep out of the head / at night." Such horror, however, now serves to strengthen his sense of birthright, of place. "The earth is news!"

he proclaims. In **"On the Hill Late at Night"** Berry demonstrates both his new joy in the earth and his lean poetic style at its best. Using no words unusual to uneducated speech, he juxtaposes them in Biblical simplicity and surprise. "The hill has grown to me like a foot. / Until I lift the earth I cannot move."

A word needs to be said about Berry's concept of man and woman, for Berry has been criticized for his concepts. He seldom uses "man" however in the generic sense. He usually means white males. White males are the destructive force, the spoilers of the earth. Under most circumstances he is almost too forgiving of woman. He believes so much in the power of her fertility that he says at one point--one good woman can undo a city (**"The Mad Farmer in the City"**). Images of Women in Wendell Berry is another essay for another time.

In Part II of **Farming: A Hand Book**, Berry's **"Mad Farmer"** persona dominates. The Mad Farmer states that farm men must stand against the shambles of the world. They must plow up the churchyard and dance with goddesses. He has the farmer convert the Parson's refined wife and together they change the earth. Towards the end of the book, Berry becomes serious again and finds hope in a network of human connections around the earth--all humans "grown out of native ground" (**"A Letter"**).

In the last section of **Farming**, the poet begins to wonder if he can ever express what the farmer observes. "I meant my words to have the heft and grace, the flight and weight of the very hill, its life rising" (**"Meditation in the Spring Rain"**). He increasingly believes his work as a farmer is of more worth to the earth than his poetry and insists that his words cannot equal the Creation he serves. "And there I see the articulation of feather and living form, a brilliance I receive / beyond my power to make" (**"The Heron"**). He ends the book in praise of what he cannot do and what he cannot know. He praises it simply because he cannot know it.

The Country of Marriage, 1973, transforms the relationship of man and soil to Berry's famous marriage metaphor. Berry is healed by touching the soil and by being touched by love. The two become interchangeable symbols of a coming together

which serves something greater. Woman becomes the land and the darkness, to approach which the man has "given up the light and all directions" (**"Country of Marriage"**). To enter the mysterious realm of woman or earth for even an hour "is a moral predicament, a blessing / a man may be hard up to be worthy of" (**"Country of Marriage"**). That he intends his own marriage to assume cosmic symbolism in his poetry is clear: I give you my love for all / beautiful and honest women that you gather to / yourself" (**"Country of Marriage"**). The solemn covenant of man and woman and soil and place holds up the earth.

Clearing, 1977, shows a capacity for Berry to use longer poems. **"Where,"** for example, traces the literal history of Berry's land from woods to Indians, to survey, tract, record, and the sellings. He values this telling. He comments that history has taken place too much in public and too little in the stories of families clearing the land. In one of those lapses into prose which Donald Hall in **The New York Times Book Review** (1977, p. 26) laments, Berry writes: "Given a life, native tradition / of husbandry and taking care / that abundance might / have lasted. It did not. / One lifetime of our history ruined it" (**"Where"**).

"Work Song" has six parts and expresses a fundamental change in Berry's attitude toward his work. It is no longer what is required of him as a farmer but it is his song--the union that he has been seeking. He fears in fact the end of his work as a poet--"one day my poems may pass / through my mind unwritten." After a few vain wishes for an easier life, the poem ends in a burst of love, "Desire and circumstance / Are one. Like a woman's arms this work holds me" (**"Work Song"**). **"Reverdure"** is a song of willingness to be where he is. James Cotter writes in **America** (1977, p. 82) that **Clearing** "succeeds best in communicating the elusive meaning of love, not in its individual poems...but in its whole wording of a generous act." He reminds us that Berry may never speak again as a poet.

Berry does speak again but not immediately in the voice of the poet-farmer we have known. Gone is the prophet, the mystic, the visionary. The poems in his

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next book, **A Part**, 1980, seem to ape in many cases the short, cryptic speech of the farmers of Berry's novels. The transformation of poet to farmer seems complete. One hilarious, mischievous little "poem" seems odd after the journey through dark forests out of which Berry has come.

The first man who whistled
thought he had a wren in his mouth.
He went around all day
with his lips puckered
afraid to swallow.

Here is Berry laughing at himself and humans. Humans and poets, deluded with their own importance, afraid to swallow. It is, in all its elfin glee, the kind of story Berry's farmers might tell.

Fortunately, in **The Wheel**, 1983, Berry returns seriously to poetry and explores the many forms in which the circle, the Wheel of Life, occurs. One of his earliest metaphors, it is his most recent also. It is his counterproposal to the excesses of industrialized culture. Modern America, he writes, has replaced "the Wheel of Life as the governing cultural metaphor. Life came to be seen as a road, to be traveled as fast as possible, never to return. Or, to put it another way, the Wheel of Life

became an industrial metaphor; rather than turning in place, revolving in order to dwell; it began to roll on the 'highway of progress' toward an ever-receding horizon" (**Unsettling of America**).

The industrialized "wheel" has become symbolic of a world running amok. He will not have it so. Since earliest times, he insists, the circle has been aligned with unity and order. The Wheel of Life, the round table, spheres within spheres, the circles of peasant dances. He would have us all, so to speak, re-invent the wheel. He would have us restore the metaphor to the real life experiences it emerged from. He would have us change the way we perceive life--seeing it not as infinitely rolling out but more like Yeats' widening and narrowing gyre, coming 'round and 'round again.

His most recent book, **The Wheel**, reveals a poet-farmer who has gained in peace and insight and possibly lost in precision and intensity. It is easier to read **The Wheel** than **The Broken Ground**. The poetry, perhaps, is not as good. The wholeness of the philosophy and the poet-farmer is a triumph. In **The Wheel**, Berry rejoices and grieves more gently over the "fatal singing" which is the best to which he says humans can aspire.

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Anne Marie Breznau teaches in the Humanities Department at Nazareth College in Kalamazoo, Michigan.