

Prophet and Seer: Citizenship in the Poetry of Wendell Berry

by James B. Goode

Internationally known Kentucky writer, farmer, environmentalist, and conservationist Wendell Berry has lived in sight of the Kentucky River near where it flows into the Ohio River for over forty years, in a landscape where generations of his family have farmed since the early 1800s. His home has been at Lane's Landing near Port Royal, Kentucky where his parents were born.

Berry's fiction to date consists of eight novels and the twenty-three short stories collected in *That Distant Land* (2004), which, when read as a whole, form a chronicle of the fictional small Kentucky town of Port William. His non-fiction (mainly collections of essays) consists of 32 works published between 1970 and 2008; his poetic works include 23 books published between 1964 and 2007, many of which engage citizenship as an everlasting truth for mankind in its journey through life and is the subject closest to his heart. (See attached bibliography).

Critics have said that much of Wendell Berry's poetry is concerned with human relationships to nature, to all of humanity, and ultimately, to God and the powers of creation. What is central to all this is the farmer, the land, marriage, and the family. The love inherent in his message guides us to be better citizens. If we love each other, the land, our communities, and democracy, the very essence of citizenship will emerge. Berry is keenly aware of the citizenship involved in owning his farm. In the poem "History," appearing in his collection *Clearing* (1977), Berry says, "All the lives this place / has had, I have. I eat / my history day by day" (1-3).

In the opening poem in the collection *The Country of Marriage* (1973), Berry asserts "That it is life I know the country by / Mine is a life I know the country by" (8). It is obvious to Berry that we hold the country's history in our hands and must respond as the world changes. It is our obligation to read the text of the world and to react appropriately. Berry says, "Our place is changing as we stand, / . . . In us the land enacts its history" (12, 14). We must recognize that the land supports us, that "When we stood it was / beneath us, and was the strength by which we held to it" (15-16).

Jim Minnick's interview with Berry, appearing in the December 2004 issue of *Appalachian Voices* further demonstrates Berry's notion of civic responsibility regarding the land:

Minnick: I was re-reading "A Native Hill," and this one sentence struck me. You're talk-

ing about coming back, and you write, “Here, now that I’m both native and citizen, there’s no immunity to what is wrong.” The “citizen” part jumped out at me on this reading. What is the connection between “native” and “citizen”?

Berry: That essay “A Native Hill” is an early one, written a long time ago, partly in the exhilaration of rediscovering my own part of the world, of seeing it with the change of vision that came with the feeling that I was going to live here, that I was here for life. It was an exhilaration sobered by the understanding that we had made historical blunders here that would have to be corrected. To live here responsibly meant that you had to accept responsibility for those blunders and errors and find, if you could, suitable remedies and corrections. So the word “citizen” occurs in that sentence because of its implication of responsibility. You can be a native without consciously assuming responsibility. A citizen consciously assumes responsibilities that belong to the place, responding to the problems of the place. (Minnick pars 5-6)

In his collection of poems *The Country of Marriage* (1973), Berry introduces a character he calls the “Mad Farmer.” In the poem “The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment,” this character stands against the grain and defends the Jeffersonian ideal that the most civic and democratic lifestyle is that of the self-sustaining rural agrarian. His mad farmer says that in this we become

free men in the great communion
of the free. The Vision keeps
lighting in my mind, a window
on the horizon in the dark. (5-8)

This excerpt is exemplary of Berry’s Whitmanesque love for freedom and democracy so aptly expressed in the “Preface to the 1855 Edition of the *Leaves of Grass*.”

The poem “A Vision,” appearing in the collection *Clearing* (2007), further bears this deistic notion introduced in Crèvecoeur’s 1782 *Letters from an American Farmer* and ultimately influencing agrarian visionaries like Jefferson:

Families will be singing in the fields.
In their voices they will hear a music
risen out of the ground. They will take
nothing from the ground they will not return,
whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.
Its hardship is its possibility. (19-31)

His love for land and the fruit it will bear for generations to come is manifest in another poem in this collection titled “Planting Trees.” As he plants a bucket of twenty trees he says:

I return to the ground its original music.
It will rise out of the horizon
of the grass, and over the heads

of the weeds, and it will rise over
the horizons of men's heads. As I age
in the world it will rise and spread,
and be for this place horizon
and orison, the voice of its winds. (12-19)

Caring for the land, replanting trees, and thereby creating a horizon for generations to come is paramount in Berry's notion of citizenship. It is an unselfish act. He says:

I have made myself a dream to dream of its rising, that
has gentled my nights.
Let me desire and wish well the life
these trees may live when I
no longer rise in the mornings
to be pleased by the green of them
shining, and
their shadows on the ground,
and the sound of the wind in them. (20-27)

In another poem "The Recognition," appearing in *The Country of Marriage*, Berry emphasizes the importance of what we owe the future and particularly what debt we owe the land.

But our memory of ourselves, hard earned
is one of the land's seeds . . . what we owe the future
is not a new start, for we can only begin
with what has happened. We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come.
That makes of a man's grave a rich furrow. (37-46)

Berry proposes that we all have the potential to leave behind a rich legacy. We have only to realize that the seeds of citizenship we plant will long survive us.

Berry's love of God and God's creation is essential to his vision of citizenship. We have only to take the lessons given us by nature to learn to co-exist in harmony. Unselfishness is at the core of this notion. In his collection *Window Poems* (2007), Berry amplifies the urgent need for brotherhood bathed in the light of utilizing what God has provided naturally, not exploiting it in destructive ways. He says in poem 19:

Let men who cannot be brothers to themselves, be brothers
to mulleins and daisies
that have learned to live on the earth.
Let them understand the pride
of sycamores and thrushes
that receive the light gladly, and do not think to
illuminate themselves. (13-20)

In poem 20, he says:

If we, who have killed
our brothers and hated ourselves,

are made in the image of God,
 then surely the bloodroot,
 wild phlox, trillium and mayapple
 are more truly made
 in God's image, for they have desired
 to be no more than they are,
 and they have spared each other.
 Their future
 is undiminished by their past. (11-21)

Berry further believes that traditional values, such as marital fidelity and strong community ties, are essential for the survival of humankind. In his collection *Clearing*, Berry traces the ownership of the farm he and his wife Tonya purchased in Henry County, Kentucky in 1965. Marriage is inextricably tied to man, to woman, and to earth. In the poem "Where," he says:

And here we found and made
 our wedding substances,
 our life rising and setting
 on this ground, a daily light,
 wearing us down, kneading us
 into itself, raising us up.
 What we eat is resurrection
 of what we have eaten.
 The flesh we had is changed
 Beyond any words we knew
 Into this unity we are:
 woman, man, and earth,
 each other's metaphor.
 I say this while the age
 achieves its ruin, rain
 falling hard in the night
 into the swollen river,
 a rage of lies in the air. (94-111)

In Berry's view, the disintegration of communities can be traced to the rise of agribusiness: large-scale farming under the control of giant corporations. Besides relying on chemical pesticides and fertilizers, promoting soil erosion, and causing depletion of ancient aquifers, agribusiness has driven countless small farms out of existence and destroyed local communities in the process. In a *New Perspectives Quarterly* interview, Berry commented that such large-scale agriculture is morally as well as environmentally unacceptable:

We must support what supports local life, which means community, family, household life—the moral capital our larger institutions have to come to rest upon. If the larger institutions undermine the local life, they destroy that moral capital just exactly as the industrial economy has destroyed the natural capital of localities—soil fertility and so on. Essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil. (Poetry Foundation par 2)

Mr. Berry is no agrarian ideologue and does not propose that everyone must farm

or leave the city for the country. Rather, he argues that “everybody has agrarian responsibilities”—meaning that wherever one lives, one is obliged to do so according to an ethic that places paramount importance on the cultivation of love and care for one’s particular place, its people and its traditions—and to resist all things that separate one from that responsibility, which is not chosen, yet required of all (Dreher par 11). Berry laments in poem 13 of *Window Poems*:

Sometimes he thinks the earth
might be better without humans.
He’s ashamed of that.
It worries him, him being a human, and needing
to think well of the others
in order to think well of himself. (1-7)

In poem 25 of *Window Poems*, despair about the disregard of citizenship by mankind found manifest in his behavior overwhelms Berry:

The bloodroot is white
in the woods, and men renew
their abuse of the world
and each other. Abroad
we burn and maim
in the name of principles
we no longer recognize in acts.
At home our flayed land
flows endlessly
to burial in the sea.
When mortality is not heavy
on us, humanity is—
public meaninglessness
preying on private meaning.
As the weather warms, the driven
swarm into the river,
pursued by whining engines,
missing the world
as they pass over it,
every man
his own mosquito. (1-21)

In poem 15, Berry suggests, “The world is greater than its words. / To speak of it the mind must bend” (37-38). In poem 19, Berry says “And when mind has not outraged / itself against nature, they die and become the place they live in . . .” (30-33). And in poem 23, he concludes: “She is the comfort of the rooms / she leaves behind” (12-13).

Another attempt to rail against our patent disregard for citizenship and therefore for the very future survival of the earth and mankind is found in Berry’s recent poem “A Speech to the Garden Club of America (with thanks to Wes Jackson and in the memory of Sir Albert Howard and Stan Rowe)” which appeared in the September 28, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*.

As is so characteristic of Berry, he denounces the destruction of the world in order to foster “progress.” He apologizes for getting to the Garden Club meeting “. . . by

sustained explosion through the air / Burning the world in fact to rise much higher / than we should go" (4-6). For Berry, there is a diminishing return for "improving" the world in which we live.

This poem challenges the seemingly conventional wisdom that all that the creator has provided is exclusively commodity. Berry asserts that we should always question the cost of attempting to rise higher than we should. He says we must question the value of temporary progress against the backdrop of millennia—even eternity. The important task at hand is to attempt to survive by nature's rules rather than those concocted by man. Berry maintains that nature is immortal. For him, the economy is a pyre that promotes a destructive fire: "An anti-life of radiance and fume / That burns as power and remains as doom" (34-35). He leaves us with the kind of wisdom we may have long forgotten, but need to revive—the kind one can find in Bible verses, Anne Bradstreet's "Meditations Divine and Moral," or Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. As he says, "The garden delves no deeper than its roots / And lifts no higher than its leaves and fruits" (36-37).

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Chronology of Wendell Berry's Published Poetic Works

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- November twenty six nineteen hundred sixty three*. New York: Braziller, 1964.
- Openings*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968.
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