

Standing by Words: Wendell Berry's "Interesting Prose Side"

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The consideration of contemporary American poetry brings immediately to mind such terms as diversity and plenitude, if not indeed, overabundance.¹ Reviewing the many anthologies of the fifties and sixties, one notices not so much an emerging canon of recent poetry as the many new camps of modern poets, often armed, rival, and conflicting. One is tempted to say, paraphrasing Yeats, that the only thing certain of these poets is that they are too many. What is surprising is that so many of these poets were trained at a time when the teaching of poetry, guided by the New Critics, had as much homogeneity as at any time in recent history. It is not an overstatement to say that *Understanding Poetry*, the famous Brooks and Warren textbook, charmed an entire generation of aspiring poets with the theories and predilections (and indeed the prejudices) of the New Criticism. There seemed at last to be something approaching a consensus about how the poetry of the past was to be read, and how the poetry of the future should be written.

What Brooks and Warren called for were individual, "well-made" lyrics, emphasizing paradox and irony, and drawing for inspiration on the Elizabethans by way of Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Such poems were to be "impersonal" and coherent in themselves—that is, apart from any recourse to literary history or some other discipline not properly within the scope of literary study. What one might call the poet's "public" responsibilities were to be determined solely within the context of such literary study. Brooks and Warren made little secret of their preference for poems whose first ambition was to "work" as poetry, and only then to be of significance to the larger concerns of life. *Understanding Poetry* speaks of the "poem" in terms of a modern, organic trope emphasizing its coherence:

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Certainly it is not to be thought of as a group of *mechanically* combined elements—meter, rhyme, figurative language, idea, and so on—put together to make a poem as bricks are put together to make a wall. The relationship among the elements in a poem is what is all important; it is not a mechanical relationship but one which is far more intimate and fundamental. If we must compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant. (16)

Obviously, it is unfair of Robert Bly to describe the New Critics' approach as "the Tate-Ransom nostalgia for jails," an attempt "to construct poetry machines, so that even people with no imagination can write it" (163). But at the same time such comments, here in Bly's typically extreme fashion, are representative of the frustration many of the poets working in the sixties began to feel.

Indeed, much of the poetry of the sixties is to be understood in terms of the various escape routes different poets found from the enchantment of *Understanding Poetry*. Thus, we find the "Beat" poets, such as Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and Corso using blatantly "open" forms and reveling in the lifestyle of an "adversary" culture. There is also the "deep imagery" school, poets like Bly, Merwin, Wright, and the later Roethke, flirting with the unconscious via surrealism (especially a variety from Spain and Latin America). One might also instance the so-called "confessional" poets, such as Robert Lowell, Plath, and Berryman, who take the romantic autobiographical impulse to an extreme degree. Even poets such as Merrill, Rich, and Wilbur, who seemed more comfortable than most with the closed, ironic forms of the New Critics, have sought through sequences, long poems, and *outré* subject matter to break free of the isolation of the well-made poem.

The subject of this essay, Wendell Berry, grows out of the New Criticism also, but he has developed in his own ways. Increasingly, he has come to emphasize in his poetry a sense of history and place, the seeking of roots, a refusal to consider literature apart from the larger concerns of life. Among other things, this humanistic element has given him an interesting "prose side" rare among contemporary poets. At a time when "literary intellectuals" have often retreated from a serious role in the affairs of the world, Berry has remained a moralist with the high aspirations of a Victorian sage: the ambition, with literature as his vehicle, to discover and chart out a decent, sane, meaningful life in a world seemingly indecent, insane, absurd. Indeed, Berry is the kind of poet who finds the creation of good literature concomitant with and inseparable from the creation of a good life.

The invention of such a poetic self is by no means easy. For Berry it has been

a matter of strenuous honesty about the self and searching development as a poet and thinker in areas where the fashionable poetics of his youth offered neither guidance nor sway. Berry's prose, the medium where much of his development has been hammered out, offers us a rare and valuable running commentary on the work of a contemporary poet.

Berry was born on August 5, 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, and as a boy was taught to farm near the place he has since fixed as his home, Port Royal. He attended the University of Kentucky, where he received an A.B. degree in 1956 and an M.A. one year later. In 1957 he married Tanya Amyx, and in 1958, having received the Wallace Stegner Fellowship, he and his wife moved to Stanford. This marks the beginning of what one might call Berry's "worldly" period: an extended time during which he led the typically rootless life of a promising urban academic. From 1958 to 1960 Berry remained in California as a fellowship recipient and then a lecturer before a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed him to visit Italy and France in 1961 and 1962. From 1962 to 1964 he taught at New York University, directing the freshman writing program. In 1964, however, he accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Kentucky at Lexington, and a year later he moved with his wife and two children to Lanes Landing Farm, a small piece of land he had bought at Port Royal. This place, with which his family had been associated since the early nineteenth century, has been Berry's home ever since. For a number of years he lived and wrote there while pursuing a successful academic career in Lexington, rising to distinguished professor of English in 1971 and Professor of English in 1973. In 1977 he quit teaching to devote himself to writing and farming. He has come to emphasize more and more his life as a farmer, however, as the dust jacket of his recent volume of essays, *Standing by Words*, will attest: "Wendell Berry lives and farms with his family in Kentucky." Indeed, much of his philosophy is summed up in these words.

II

Berry's typical themes grow out of his acute sense of the corruption of our culture. It is audible in his prose pieces as early as *The Long-Legged House* (1969) and has been persistently sounded ever since. *The Unsettling of America* (1977), a hard hitting critique of the policies of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl L. Butz, contains some of Berry's clearest articulations of this theme. The dominant spirit

of American history, from the conquistadors through the whole series of "gold rushes" to the recent conquest of the moon, he finds a "mixture of fantasy and avarice" (3). The people who embodied this spirit, whether they styled themselves "seekers for El Dorado" or "missionaries" or "reachers for the stars," were actually the victims of a permanent state of dissatisfaction. They were never satisfied with a place on earth, but were always seeking "somewhere farther on" (3)—that is, after having exploited and impoverished the place where they had been.

In a sort of counterpoint to this tendency, however, there has always been another, weaker one according to Berry: "the tendency to stay put, to say, 'No farther. This is the place.'" This tendency, the older one which characterized the native Indian cultures of America, had the flaw, however, of being "less glamorous, certainly less successful" (4). But even though "the first and greatest American revolution ... was the coming of people who did NOT look upon the land as a homeland" (4), the expanding frontier always left behind a few who did want to stay put.

Exploitation by the dominant group was not limited to the Indians, however. Berry argues that a "consistently operative" law of American history "is that the members of any *established* people or group or community sooner or later become 'redskins'—that is, they become the designated victims of an utterly ruthless, officially sanctioned and subsidized exploitation" (4). Thus the colonists who exploited the Indians were themselves exploited by imperial governments; the independent farmers who in a sense succeeded them were "exploited by, and recruited into, the the industrial society" (5) to the point of virtual extinction. Indeed, the only alternative to "this destiny of exploitation" was making it "into the class of exploiters" where one remained "so specialized and so 'mobile' as to be unconscious of the effects of one's life or livelihood" (5).

Against these exploiters, whose characteristic type is the modern "strip-miner," Berry sets what he calls "the nurturer," whose model is "the old-fashioned idea or ideal of the farmer" (7). Whereas the exploiter seeks only money and profit, "the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's" (7). The nurturer, unlike the exploiter, does not pose as an "expert"; rather, his "competence" is in "a human order ... that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery" (8). As we shall see, this notion of the antagonism of exploiter and nurturer informs Berry's ideas of work, poetry, life, and religion. And it animates his development as a creative writer.

A chapter in *The Unsettling of America* entitled "The Body and the Earth" considers the consequences of exploitation for modern society and modern work, "the life of the body in this world" (97). Exploitative contempt for the earth leads

naturally to contempt for and exploitation of our bodies, which are "joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures" (97). The damaging result of this attitude and the belief in "the specialist system" that accompanies it has been an isolation of the body from the activities and life of the world:

at some point we began to assume that the life of the body would be the business of grocers and medical doctors, who need no interest in the spirit, whereas the life of the spirit would be the business of churches, which have at best only a negative interest in the body. In the same way we began to see nothing wrong with putting the body...to a task that insulated the mind and demeaned the spirit. (104)

This divisive attitude brings with it abuse, exploitation, and contempt for "other bodies for the greater good or comfort of our own" (104). In Berry's conservative though somewhat unorthodox religious view (see Pevear), it is a sin thus to set the soul "against the body, to thrive at the body's expense" (105). For under these conditions what Berry conceives as "spiritual value" can no longer have a practical or worldly force (105). In opposition to the orthodoxies of both religion and capitalism, Berry maintains that "you cannot devalue the body and value the soul—or value anything else....The world is seen and dealt with [under this view], not as an ecological community, but as a stock exchange, the ethics of which are based on the tragically misnamed 'law of the jungle'...a basic fallacy of modern culture" (105). The law of competition thus reigns and results in "sexual division" (making nurture "the exclusive concern of women" (113)), "the dismemberment of the household" ("the isolation of sexuality" through "the lore of sexual romance and capitalist economics" (117)), and the abstraction of work from any meaningful relation to the earth.

Indeed, Berry has written often on the joyless activity of modern work. Through increasing specialization and a loss of contact with the soil that feeds us, our work has become increasingly sterile, technological, and lacking in significant human contact. In *The Gift of Good Land* (1981), contemplating the appeal of two modern advertisements, Berry writes of

the widespread, and still spreading, assumption that we somehow have the right to be set free from anything whatsoever that we "hate" or don't want to do. According to this view, what we want to be set free from are the natural conditions of the world and the necessary

work of human life.... Implicit in all this is the desire to be free from the "hassles" of mortality, to be "safe" from the life cycle. (184)

But life and work outside the life cycle are neither pleasurable, nor interesting, nor, in an essential sense, practical. As Berry puts it, "when people begin to 'hate' the life cycle and to try to live outside it and to escape its responsibilities, then the corpses begin to pile up and get into the wrong places" (186). As a society we pay the high price of sterility and pollution, for "the only real way...to escape the hassles of earthly life—is to die" (185).

Berry is hopeful, however, that a life-giving sense of work is at least marginally recoverable through the actions of individuals, those who have "turned off the road that leads to 'Midland City, U.S.A.' [a futuristic projection of life in 2001]. They are the home gardeners, the homesteaders, the city people who have returned to farming, the people of all kinds who have learned to do pleasing and necessary work with their hands" (180). They are the people who have learned, as Berry puts it in *The Unsettling of America*, that "the 'drudgery' of growing one's own food...is not drudgery at all. (If we make the growing of food a drudgery, which is what 'agribusiness' does make of it, then we also make a drudgery of eating and of living.) It is...a sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies" (138). By realizing this, we can restore "the connections [that] have been broken by the fragmentation and isolation of work," and recover a "good work" which "IS living, and a way of living" and "is one of the forms and acts of love" (138,139).

Berry's practical and many-sided notion of "fidelity" plays an important role in maintaining the cultural continuity of the body and the soil. According to Berry, "a purposeless virtue is a contradiction in terms" (*Unsettling of America* 121), and thus fidelity, like any other virtue, must have a practical basis. In the context of marriage, for instance, fidelity should not be seen as "a grim, literal duty enforced only by willpower" (120), but the provider of a responsible use of sexual energy, "the necessary discipline of sexuality" (122), without which "irresponsible sexuality would undermine any possibility of culture" (122). Fidelity unites a man and woman not only with themselves but with the community around them. The responsibility it entails is thus a "sexual responsibility toward all others" (*Unsettling of America* 122), and indeed a responsibility toward the natural order which encloses the community of men. This suggests the analogous forms of fidelity to the household and one's place in the world:

Fidelity to human order...if it is fully responsible, implies fidelity also to natural order. Fidelity to human order makes devotion possible.

Fidelity to natural order preserves the possibility of choice, the possibility of the renewal of devotion.... One who returns home—to one's marriage and household and place in the world—desiring anew what was previously chosen, is neither the world's stranger nor its prisoner, but is at once in place and free. (130,131)

This notion of marital fidelity and its analogues, centered in the paradox of the last phrase, is of great importance in Berry's life and poetry. In retrospect, the central act of his life seems to have been his decision to leave his teaching post in New York and return to Kentucky. This has allowed him, as he puts it in "A Native Hill" (1969), to grow "more alive and more conscious than [he] had ever been" (*Recollected Essays* 79) and to experience the paradox fidelity brings: "the possibility of moments when what we have chosen (and what we desire are the same" (*Unsettling of America* 122).

Berry's philosophy has an unusual coherence: his ideas about a variety of topics generally considered the domain of specialists (e.g. agriculture, religion, sexuality and marriage, poetry) all have their basis in a harmonious principle of man's place in the world. In *Standing by Words* (1983), he describes this philosophy as "a system of nested systems: the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature" (46). This "updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being" (46,47) is kept in a very delicate balance, however, dependent on the disciplined submission of each system to the next larger one. The discipline, or rather disciplines involved here are the fibers of human culture and "must be deliberately made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced" (47). In our society, the system of systems is in a virtual state of disintegration because of a reversal of the hierarchy, which Berry compares to the Greek notion of *hubris*. Modern man, like Milton's Satan, is guilty "of attempting to rise and take power above [his] proper place" (47). In doing so he falls victim to specializations of various sorts as the connecting disciplines of the system of systems "degenerate into professions, professions into careers" (47). Thus our specialized "external" accountings (such as the report of two agricultural writers applauding the transformation of the dairy cow from a "family companion animal" to an "appropriate manufacturing unit of the twentieth century" (44)), by upsetting the hierarchies, fail "to consider all the necessary considerations" (47)—that is, other than those of greed. The accounting of the two farm "experts," for instance, ignores "the claims of family, community, and nature" and leaves "the outer circle [nature]... "under the control of simple greed" (48).

Berry outlines three kinds of interests involved in the system of systems: "on-

togenetic," "phylogenetic," and "ecogenetic," which represent respectively self-interest at the center, humanistic interest reaching through family and community into agriculture, and "the interest of the whole 'household' in which life is lived" (48). The special vulnerability of the system of systems is "that the higher interests can be controlled or exploited by the lower interests" (48) through a willful reversal of the necessary hierarchies. It is here that religion has its place in the scheme of things. Left to his own ignorance or devices, man has the brute power to distort and thus disrupt the "earthly" elements of the system of systems. Like the aether of the medieval imagination, religion encloses the system of systems "within mystery, in which some truth can be known, but never all truth" (49). Standing protectively above and outside the ecocentric part of the hierarchy, it provides an "interest of some kind above the ecocentric" (49), beyond the willful and ignorant reach of man. According to Berry, "the practical use of religion...is to keep the accounting in as large a context as possible...Religion forces the accountant to reckon with mystery" (49). This insures that any "answers" will be subject to the human limits of humility and restraint, which are essential conditions of man's place in the world. Thus "a reliable account is personal at the beginning and religious at the end" (50,51); it associates man in a properly respectful way with the larger structures and the ultimate mystery surrounding him.

Berry maintains that "this kind of accounting gives us the great structures of poetry—as in Homer, Dante, and Milton" (51). And in what is perhaps a *raison d'être* for his own work, Berry writes that in our day "ecological insight proposes again a poetry with the power to imagine the lives of animals and plants and streams and stones. And this imagining is eminently proprietous, fitting to the claims and privileges of the great household" (51). Thus it is possible to find life interesting even without "nuclear powerplants or 'agri-industries' or space adventures," the "big technological solutions" (51). As he does so often in his writing about farming, Berry opposes what he calls "the elaborations of elegance" to the less practical and more glamorous "elaborations of power" (51). He applies the antidote of a "nurturer" to the poison of exploitation. Against the technological fantasies of R. Buckminster Fuller, which cannot stand by their words because they lack any firm sense of man's special place in the universe (Berry compares them to the boasts of Milton's Satan (57)), Berry sets his own religious sense of man's place and security in the world around him.

One of the most important ingredients of Berry's sense of man's place in the world, indeed of his religion, is his acceptance of death. As Speer Morgan has demonstrated, Berry's writing about death has moved increasingly away from abstract confrontation with an "enemy" toward acceptance of death as a part of the

whole of life ("Wendell Berry: A Fatal Singing"). According to Morgan, "Berry is learning to 'conquer' the opponent by cooperating with it fully;...he learns to "'oppose' death with such grace that he dances with it" (873). Certainly his recent elegies, such as the "Requiem" and "Elegy" for Owen Flood in *The Wheel* (1982), exhibit impressive "grace" and mature depth of feeling we do not find so readily in his earlier attempts in this genre. But putting detailed considerations of the poetry aside for the moment, we should note that coming to terms with death has long been an important part of Berry's philosophy of life. "It is time's discipline," Berry has written, "to think / of the death of all living, and yet live" (*Poems* 99). In this particular poem, "A Discipline" (1968), Berry (very much involved at the time in Vietnam protest poetry) is contemplating a modern industrial or nuclear holocaust, but the insight of its last lines is more generally applicable. For Berry, living is done not only in the shadow of the world's death, but his own, and the deaths of those he loves, and indeed the seasonal deaths of the crops. The sense of death permeates, as it must, everything he does, even what is most hopeful of life. In the poem "For the Rebuilding of a House" (1970), for instance, he notes that "I build / the place of my leaving" (*Poems* 106). Another poem of the same year called "The Silence" offers an imaginative experience of death:

What must a man do to be at home in the world?
 There must be times when he is here
 as though absent, gone beyond words into the woven shadows
 of the grass and the flighty darknesses
 of leaves shaking in the wind...

* * * *

It must be with him
 as though his bones fade beyond thought
 into the shadows that grow out of the ground
 so that the furrow he opens in the earth opens
 in his bones, and he hears the silence
 of the tongues of the dead tribesmen buried here
 a thousand years ago. (*Poems* 111-112)

Indeed, this is a spiritual discipline of the life of a farmer, of life maintained in contact with the land. The ground is broken, we remember, for burial as for planting. For Berry, this fact has more than the force of simple metaphor. Marriage to the land, fidelity to a place in the world, involves necessarily the acceptance of death. It is an ineluctable part of accepting one's place in the "system of systems." And it is, for Berry, the condition of our salvation. In *The Unsettling of*

America he quotes a farmer as saying that "without death and rot there can be no new life" (193). This echoes, he notes, a principle "as old and exalted as the Bible: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit'" (193). Always heterodox, Berry often harmonizes biblical quotations like this with passages from other very different cultures. In an earlier essay "Discipline and Hope" (1972), for instance, he quotes from a medicine rite of the Winnebago Indians: "Our father has ordained that my body shall fall to pieces. I am earth. Our father has ordained that there should be death, lest otherwise there be too many people and not enough food for them" (*Recollected Essays* 198). This passage, which recognizes that "if there is to be having there must also be giving up" (198), is typical of Berry's cyclical sense of time as opposed to the linear vision of time favored by traditional Christianity. And here too Berry matches it with a passage from the Bible:

Because death is inescapable, a biological and ecological necessity, its acceptance becomes a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole: "Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it." (*Recollected Essays* 199)

Indeed, it is in Berry's favoring of the cyclical vision of time that much of the lack of orthodoxy that so incenses Richard Pevear lies. Pevear objects to these lines on the grounds that Berry does not feel constrained by their specifically Christian reference, and accuses Berry of making "a 'religion' of his cause" (346). This judgment is rather narrow-minded, however, based seemingly on the notion that official Christianity can have a "fee simple" ownership of its texts and has a right to censor unorthodox interpretations of those texts. Berry is conservative, but he is not a backward-looking dreamer like Miniver Cheevy. Very much a man of our troubled century, he has never pretended to the orthodoxy of official religion. (One should add that he has never pretended to any sort of radical *chic* either.) Indeed, he has argued against official religion's disdain for the body as something ultimately corruptive of man's respect for nature. And we have seen that he prefers the cyclical notion of time held typically by "primitive" religions to the linear vision of time enshrined in Christian dogma. In this latter preference, one might add, Berry has much in common with many poets, mythological scholars, and religious thinkers of our century (including T.S. Eliot- the poet, if not the religious thinker) who grew up in the shade of *The Golden Bough*. But the core of Berry's thought is nonetheless profoundly religious, profoundly respectful of the ultimate

mystery of the universe. Like E.F. Schumacher, Berry draws for inspiration on the texts and practices of many religions that have helped sustain man in a permanent and symbiotic relation with the world around him, and fights against all those tendencies in our culture, even some rooted in religious theory, which undermine this relation.

III

In effect, Berry's first principle is respect for nature, the systems of systems enclosed in the mystery of creation, and this underlies even his theory of poetry. *Standing by Words* contains the most complete exposition of Berry's ideas on language and poetry and their relation to the rest of his philosophy. Modern poetry, like virtually everything else in modern life, is a victim of the tendency toward specialization. Like any other "specialist," the modern poet "withdraws from responsibility for everything not comprehended by his specialty" (*Standing by Words* 4). Berry notes that certain poets of our century, such as Yeats, MacDairmid, and Pound, have sought "larger responsibilities" of one sort or another, but he argues that "it remains true that the poet is isolated and specialized and that the old union of beauty, goodness, and truth is broken" (5). The very familiarity of this statement suggests how deeply it has penetrated our romantic, modern, and post-modern conceptions of the poetic craft. For Berry, the problem stems from the old doctrine "of the primacy of language and the primacy of poetry" (7). The specialized poets have made their art into a kind of "religion based not on what they have in common with other people, but on what they *do* that sets them apart" (7). A poem conceived in this way does not seek to make connections with the outside world or with readers. Similarly, it is not "an adventure into any [outside] reality or mystery" (7). What it does seek is merely the "self in words, the making of a word-world in which the word-self may be at home" (7). In place of the Aristotelian notion of the poet as a "mirror of nature," we now have poets for whom the world is simply "the poet's mirror" (8). According to Berry, this explains much of the "personal terror and suffering and fear of death" in modern poetry, for a world of mere words "gives to one's own suffering and death the force of cataclysm" (8). Berry firmly believes, however, that the real "subject of poetry is not words, it is the world, which poets have in common with other people" (8). This enjoins even the most spiritual of poets (among whom Berry classes Yeats)

"to turn outward" (8). Berry compares "putting exclusive emphasis upon a world of words" to organized religion's "putting exclusive emphasis upon heaven" (9). Both abet the degradation of the world and their respective disciplines, for "renunciation of the world may sustain religious or poetic fervor for a while, but sooner or later it becomes suicidal" (9). Indeed, the exclusive emphasis on language has a very negative effect on what Berry calls literacy in general, for the writer, freed from the requirement to experience something of life and the world, becomes a mere tinkerer with words. Berry mentions with some scorn, for instance, the presumption of John Dean III that he could be a writer simply because he enjoyed playing Scrabble (9). A more responsible view "would see words as fulcrums across which intelligence must endlessly be weighed against experience" (9). Berry has little patience with such writers as Mark Strand, Adrienne Rich, and William Matthews, who seem either to eschew all traditional forms, or to court a form of chaos (10-12). According to Berry, such fashionable "formlessness is... neither civilized nor natural. It is a peculiarly human evil, without analogue in nature, caused by the failures of civilization: inattention, irresponsibility, carelessness, ignorance of consequence. It is the result of the misuse of power" (12). Although not a Marxist, Berry seems close at times to such critics as Raymond Williams (see Steven Weiland) and Terry Eagleton in insisting on a public role for literature, and if not its submission to a politicized "solidarity," at least its acceptance of fidelity to the world and the community of men which are its proper subject and audience. Berry's insistence on a public role for literature is not a new idea. Indeed, it has an almost Victorian flavor. What is new is the way Berry wields such an idea in the mid twentieth century. It is part of a reaction against the "well-made" poetry of the fifties, which tended, among other things to be politely, decorously apolitical. Such reactions were fairly common among poets of the sixties (one thinks, for instance, of the "protest poetry" of Bly), but Berry is unique in the extent to which he develops his idea theoretically and raises it above the level of mere protest.²

²Roberts French once described Berry's poems as "pastorals of withdrawal" ("From Maine to Kentucky" 473), commenting that Berry "preaches incessantly at us" and that "one soon has enough of it" (473). These remarks are far from just. Berry's return to country life can hardly be called a withdrawal from reality, for in fact it brings him regularly into intimate contact with the hardest realities nature has to offer. Edwin Fussell writing in a pressurized airplane somewhere over California is much more withdrawn from the reality of life on earth, as indeed so many of us are who live the climate-controlled lives of the modern industrial world. And one might add that the hysterical avoidance of anything which even approximates "preaching" is itself a form of withdrawal from any role in the real affairs of the world. The poet-specialist, under such a view, must confine himself to the masturbatory manipulation of words without regard for audience

According to Berry, two important elements of recent poetry's withdrawal from a public role are its lack of song, "a force opposed to specialty and to isolation" (17), and its "estrangement from storytelling" (17). The modern poet who sings only to himself (i.e., does not really sing at all in an important sense) lapses "diffidently into a 'not overly excited discourse' on the subject of isolation, guilt, suffering, death, and oblivion—the self-exploiting autobiography of disconnected sensibility" (16). Similarly, when poets like Galway Kinnell speak "of the suppression of narrative as a goal... it is indicative of a serious lack of interest, first, in action, and second, in *responsible* action" (18-19). This is very important to Berry, for losing "sight of the possibility of right or responsible action" (19) is the cause, he feels, of the present malaise "in our art and in our lives" (19). According to Berry, much of recent poetry, like "the other specialized disciplines of our era," has been nurtured on and in turn has "fostered... a grievous division between life and work" (21) which we must do our best to balance and repair, even while respecting the necessary "tension between them" (22). As Berry puts it, "the *use* of life to perfect work is an evil of the specialized intellect. It makes of the most humane of disciplines an exploitive industry" (22).

or even the public meanings of his words. And yet, as Berry might argue, this narrow view of the poetic function invalidates much of the greatest poetry ever written. Indeed, Berry has never invited the rest of us home to his farm. As he puts it in one of the poems of *A Part* (1980): "In the labor of the fields / longer than a man's life / I am at home. Don't come with me. / You stay home too" (*Poems* 199.)

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