

A Kinship of the Fields: Farming in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas and Wendell Berry

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Nature has been an important subject of poets since the time of the ancients, and since the romantics a central one.¹ Poetry about farming, however, is much more rare; only odd acres of the many set aside in the poetic landscape for Arcadian contemplation have actually been tilled. There are few compatriots of Hardy's "man harrowing clods / In a slow silent walk" ("In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations' "). In recent years, however, this imbalance of poetic ambition has been redressed to some extent by the work of two very different poets, R. S. Thomas in Wales and Wendell Berry in Kentucky. Thomas, who spent his career as a country priest, has written many poems about the peasants among whom he conducted his ministry. Berry has gone even further, leaving a promising academic career to devote himself to farming and making farming the central theme of his mature work. While they share many assumptions, however, about the centrality of the experience of working as opposed to contemplating the land, Thomas and Berry approach farming from different perspectives and treat it in differing ways that reflect their very different cultural matrices.

For one thing, Thomas has always considered farming from the point of view of an outsider, who may or may not always empathize with his subjects. The calling of priest separates him distinctly and irrefragably from the lives of the peasants, to whose spiritual needs he officially ministers. Thomas makes no attempt to romanticize these peasants, but presents them in the fullness of their imperfections. They are likely to appear like Walter Llywarch, "Born in Wales of

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approved parents, / Well goitred, round in the bum, / Sure prey of the slow virus / Bred in quarries of grey rain" ("Walter Llywarch," *Selected Poems* 60). Thomas presents Walter as a sort of Welsh Everyman, one of many "who waited in the long queue / Of life that wound through a Welsh valley," whose life is characterized by its bleakness and banality. Like his parents, everything else about his life is "approved" and determined. Walter has taken

as others had done
Before, a wife from the back pews
In chapel, rather to share the rain
Of winter evenings, than to intrude
On her pale body; and yet we lay
For warmth together and laughed to hear
Each new child's cry of despair.

The conditions of Welsh society oppress Walter, his wife, and his children with the sort of fearful determinism that characterizes Blake's "London."

Walter is not the only peasant locked in a miserable cycle of events. In "On the Farm," Thomas presents a portrait of the Puw family:

There was Dai Puw. He was no good.
They put him in the fields to dock swedes,
And took the knife from him, when he came home
At late evening with a grin
Like the slash of a knife on his face.

There was Llew Puw, and he was no good.
Every evening after the plowing
With the big tractor he would sit in his chair,
And stare into the tangled fire garden,
Opening his slow lips like a snail.

There was Huw Puw, too. What shall I say?
I have heard him whistling in the hedges
On and on, as though winter
Would never again leave those fields
And all the trees were deformed.

And lastly there was the girl:

Beauty under some spell of the beast.
Her pale face was the lantern
By which they read in life's dark book
The shrill sentence: God is love.
(*Selected Poems* 82)

tic fashion. The Puws represent a society dominated by hard, soul-wearing work (readers of Thomas Hardy will remember his description of swede docking in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*), in which religion is known negatively when at all. Even then it is mostly excluded from the male world. Thomas seems aware, however, that his portrait is absurdly bleak to the point of parody. He suggests this with the nursery-rhyme repetitions in the first lines of the stanzas, which hint at the unreal and the fabulous, as well as the jingling rhymes of the names ("Huw Puw, too"), though the rest of the description is realistic enough. The life of the Puws, certainly, cannot be all there is to life? Perhaps there is a suggestion of affection for them, a pathetic sense that the Puws are victims of the anonymous "they" of the first stanza, but it remains a suggestion only. Life's book is dark, not only in the sense of bleakness, but in its obscurity also, and the peasants are the keepers of this obscurity. This mystery, rather than some sense of them as "holy fools," is the product of their witlessness.

In another poem entitled "Meet the Family" (*Selected Poems* 54), Thomas offers a dry litany of peasant types: John One, whose "eyes are dry as a dead leaf," John Two standing "in the door / Dumb," John Three "Drooling where the daylight died / On the wet stones," and finally John All's "lean wife, / Whose forced complicity gave life / To each loathed foetus." It is easy to see why a critic like Marie Peel can argue that Thomas' "incapacity to see himself with others and to share in a common natural humanity seems to have brought him to a point of hating and denying life itself" (66). Yet the case does not seem as simple as Peel makes out. Like Tolstoy, Thomas is well aware of the stubborn recalcitrance of the peasantry, what he has called their "mute beast-like endurance" (Lethbridge 38), but at the same time he claims that he "wanted to propagandize, on behalf of the small farmer in his fields" (Lethbridge 42). Thomas is interested in the paradox of the farmer, for whom the beauty of nature (as the romantics have conceived it) "doesn't seem to mean much," but whose "figure is human" and "casts a human shadow across the landscape," and who "may be just as close to the truth as anybody else" (Lethbridge 42). Calvin Bedient has spoken of Thomas' somewhat eccentric Anglicanism as "a badgering compassion" whose atmosphere "is continually present — asserting the human, brightening when it finds it, darken-

ing when it does not” (60-61). Thomas is compelled to take a difficult look at the peasant whose life he wants to propagandize, even when, as with John One, to “Look at him” is to “learn grief.”

Thus, even Iago Prytherch, who appears in a number of poems, is described as having “a half-witted grin / Of satisfaction” as he churns “the crude earth / To a stiff sea of clods” (“A Peasant,” *Selected Poems* 11). Thomas would have us see Iago

fixed in his chair
 Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire.
 There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind.
 His clothes, sour with years of sweat
 And animal contact, shock the refined,
 But affected, sense with their stark naturalness.

“A Peasant” gives clear expression to the ambiguous feelings aroused in Thomas by the Welsh peasantry. Thomas is indeed frightened by Iago’s half-wittedness, “the vacancy of his mind,” the frustrating lack of concern for the spiritual problems that occupy the refined poet himself. And yet the refined sensibilities of the poet and his literate readers (Iago, we may assume, is not among Thomas’ readers) are treated with a certain irony. These sensibilities are not only “refined” but “affected,” and as A. E. Dyson has pointed out, in the context of Thomas’ poem these words become “near synonyms”(9). The effect is subtly to convert Iago’s crude naturalness from a quality eliciting the readers’ contempt to a quality challenging the readers’ and poet’s artificiality. After this “turn” in the poem, Thomas goes on to present this

prototype, who, season by season
 Against siege of rain and the wind’s attrition,
 Preserves his stock, an impregnable fortress
 Not to be stormed even in death’s confusion.
 Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,
 Enduring like a tree under the curious stars.

Exactly what kind of “prototype” Iago is remains subject to question. He is certainly not an idealized “noble savage,” nor is he in any sense an inspiration for one’s spiritual life, as we shall see Berry’s farmers are. Thomas’ farmer experiences life at its barest, in the absence of God, and indeed in the absence of any but a physical dimension. What appears to claim Thomas’ admiration is Iago’s gaunt

stoicism, his ability to hold out against the “siege” of nature, to endure “like a tree” in the vast and questionable universe suggested by the “curious stars.” They are curious in the sense that they excite our speculation (though not Iago’s) and remain, like Thomas’ God, silent and unknowable.

What threatens his stoicism is not nature but the modern world, which Thomas considers basically villainous and emblemizes with tourism and the machine. Unlike some of Berry’s farmers who have left the world behind in a mystical return to the soil and the natural techniques of farming (the chief threat to the farm culture in the United States, according to Berry, is agribusiness), Thomas’ peasants are radically innocent and thus helpless before the corruptions of the modern world. Theirs is not a vitalizing reform culture, but the vestige of ancient custom, surviving because it is as yet untouched or overlooked. In a poem called “Invasion of the Farm” (*Selected Poems* 37), Iago Prytherch addresses the curious tourists who have come to gaze at what they consider a picturesque Welsh scene:

I am Prytherch. Forgive me. I don’t know
What you are talking about; your thoughts flow
Too swiftly for me; I cannot dawdle
Along their banks and fish in their quick stream
With crude fingers. I am alone, exposed
In my own fields with no place to run
From your sharp eyes. I, who a moment back
Paddled in the bright grass, the old farm
Warm as a sack about me, feel the cold
Winds of the world blowing. The patched gate
You left open will never be shut again.

As in “A Peasant,” Thomas’ irony here seems to be directed not at the ignorant Iago, but at the cultivated tourists with their “quick stream” of thoughts. Iago himself is pathetic in his modesty and helplessness, the protection of his “old farm” lost forever. What there is of protection (salvation, of course, is not in question here) seems to lie in avoidance if possible of the contamination of the modern world, a kind of physical and secular equivalent of asceticism. As Thomas notes in his affectionate portrait of eighty-five year old Job Davies (“Lore,” *Selected Poems* 68):

Rhythm of the long scythe
Kept this tall frame lithe.

What to do? Stay green.
Never mind the machine,
Whose fuel is human souls.
Live large, man, and dream small.

The advice is anti-romantic and indeed anti-modern, asserting, as it does, that our grasp should exceed our reach, but there is a stern sanity about it that recalls similar statements by Wendell Berry.

At times — one might almost say in certain moods, for Thomas has confessed himself a creature of changeable moods (Lethbridge 39) — he can come very close to Berry's sort of farm mysticism. An early poem entitled "Soil" (*Selected Poems* 17) presents a dignified portrait of a peasant working "A field tall with hedges, ... slowly astride the rows / Of red mangolds and green swedes / Plying mechanically his cold blade." Having set this scene out of Millet, Thomas penetrates what one might call its mystical basis:

This is his world, the hedge defines
The mind's limits; only the sky
Is boundless, and he never looks up;
His gaze is deep in the dark soil,
As are his feet. The soil is all;
His hands fondle it, and his bones
Are formed out of it with the swedes.
And if sometimes the knife errs,
Burying itself in his shocked flesh,
Then out of the wound the blood seeps home
To the warm soil from which it came.

In many ways this beautiful poem sums up Thomas' paradoxical view of the farmer. His mind, as the present civilized society would define it, is limited by the hedged enclosure of his field. The boundless sky, suggestive of spiritual aspiration (one remembers Coleridge's assertion that the blue of the sky is nature's fittest emblem of pure feeling), is of no interest to him. To the farmer the dirt is all. Yet Thomas modulates our attitude with a word more positive than dirt, the "soil." The farmer's "gaze is deep in the dark soil," suggesting a mystical experience of the mystery of nurturing earth, surely nature's "poetry" in its most sublime manifestation. Thomas' farmer, unlike those who watch him (including the poet himself), is something completely natural like the mangolds and the swedes. And as these crops suggest (consider the association of mangold, or mangel, with

Wurzel, he is something rooted, in intimate contact with the source of life itself. His blood, which he spills for our nurture, is at home in the “warm soil.” Thomas will not romanticize the farmers’ dreary existence, nor is he quick, in the vein of Seamus Heaney, to equate digging with a “cold blade” and “digging” with a pen; his own life and concerns are quite different. But in poems like “Soil” he celebrates a fundamental tragedy and glory of human life emblemized in the figure casting “a human shadow across the landscape.”

Wendell Berry’s farmers are very much of a newer world than Thomas’ peasants, though their ways, as he celebrates them, seem traditional enough. In the context of modern America, however, traditional, organic farming constitutes a form of spiritual rebellion against the deracinated modern world and the soul- and soil-destroying machinery of agribusiness. (One of Berry’s frequent *personae*, characterized, as he puts it, by “contrariness” toward the modern world, is known as “the mad farmer.”) Unlike Thomas, whose work he admires, Berry has not contented himself with observation, but has made farming his way of life, and indeed has written numerous polemical essays on the theoretical and practical aspects of farming as he would practice it in the modern world. Traditional farming is for Berry nothing short of a revolutionary calling, and his treatment of it in poetry is filled with mystical fervor. In a volume with the ironically practical and American title, *Farming. A Hand Book*, Berry presents a farmer whose joyful mysticism mitigates and renders meaningful his intimate experience of death:

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 a dung heap, and rise again in 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?
 (“The Man Born to Farming,” *Collected Poems* 103)

Whereas Thomas’ religious concerns and his social concern for the peasantry tend scrupulously to be kept distinct, Berry’s farmer is the keeper and carrier of the mystical intuition that lies at the center of his religious thought. “The man born to farming” is born also to an understanding of the cyclical dying and reviving of the earth, the delicate balance of death and life that informs and underlies our

existence. Far from being ignorant, picturesque, or peripheral, he tends the paradoxical knowledge that according to Berry is of central importance to us as human beings: that “without death and rot there can be no new life” (*The Unsettling of America* 193). The passage about the light rising in the corn subtly echoes one of Berry’s favorite biblical passages about “the corn of wheat” that falls into the earth and dies and thus “bringeth forth much fruit.” The farmer’s hands reach into the earth not simply to fondle it, but to “sprout” with new life. For Berry “the soil is a divine drug,” in which the mystery of existence, ready to burst out in an “unending sentence of...love,” is maintained.

Unlike Thomas, Berry writes not as an outsider but from the perspective of the farmer. In “Sowing” (*Collected Poems* 104-05), the act of sowing new seed to reclaim a neglected piece of land involves the speaker in the history of the place and indeed in the fate of the world as it unfolds there:

In the stilled place that was once a road going down
from the town to the river, and where the lives of marriages grew
a house, cistern and barn, flowers, the tilted stones of borders,
and the deeds of their lives ran to neglect, and honeysuckle
and then fire overgrew it all, I walk heavy
with seed, spreading on the cleared hill the beginnings
of green, clover and grass to be pasture. Between
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.

For Berry, no place is an imprisoning backwater, as Thomas’ Wales may sometimes seem to be. The farmer reads intimately the history of his place, and even where history has decreed “death upon the place,” he may “claim” and “act” to revitalize it, spreading the “beginnings” of new life.

The establishment of roots, of a connection with place, is of central importance to Berry’s philosophy. This is quite possibly a result of Berry’s being American. Where Thomas is certain of his “place in the world” and his relations to others (his colleagues, his parishioners, the businessmen and literati of the outside world with whom he sometimes has contact), Berry seems relatively uncertain of his place, and is constantly in need of reaffirming such a place. Indeed, the fundamental act of his career was his decision to leave a teaching post in New York and return to a farm in Kentucky where he was born. Berry refuses the much bandied about notion that “you can’t go home again,” and his efforts as a man and thinker have been to be rerooted in place, community, agriculture, nature — what he has called the “system of nested systems” (*Standing by Words* 46). The calling of the farmer

and the quasi-mystical involvement in place which it entails are central to his enterprise. In "The Current" (*Collected Poems* 119), Berry writes that

Having once put his hand into the ground,
seeding there what he hopes will outlast him,
a man has made a marriage with his place,
and if he leaves it his flesh will ache to go back.
His hand has given up its birdlife in the air.
It has reached into the dark like a root
and begun to wake, quick and mortal, in timelessness.

This paradoxical state of connection with the land, "quick and mortal, in timelessness," establishes the farmer as the mediator of past and future, the bearer of "The current flowing to him through the earth." It is a mystical state enabling him to witness his ancestors, "the bearers of his own blood," as well as "one descended from him, / a young man who has reached into the ground, / his hand held in the dark as by a hand." Unlike Thomas' peasants, who seem sometimes to pass a curse of the land from generation to generation, Berry's farmers offer each other a mystical communion of place, the "current" flowing through the generations and redeeming them from the tragedy of time.

In a poem entitled "On the Hill Late at Night" (*Collected Poems* 113), he describes his own sense of willing rootedness:

I am wholly willing to be here
between the bright silent thousands of stars
and the life of the grass pouring out of the ground.
The hill has grown to me like a foot.
Until I lift the earth I cannot move.

These lines compare interestingly with Thomas' description of the peasant in "Soil." Thomas' tragic determinism is quite alien to Berry and absent from his poem. Though the hill has grown to him "like a foot," he insists on his willingness to be there and expresses what amounts to a mystical delight in his position as a farmer "between the bright silent thousands of stars / and the life of the grass." And this delight remains with Berry even when his position involves knowledge of the darkest aspects of life.

Farming, with its intimate experience of death, provides Berry with the rich system of metaphors that informs his work. The putting of hands into the ground, for instance, becomes for Berry something more than a simple act of farming. It

suggests not only the communion with past and future generations, the mystical handshake in the dark that Berry would achieve, but the acceptance of death as a natural and even a desirable part of life. “Song in a Year of Catastrophe” (*Collected Poems* 117-18) treats the necessity of accepting the death of “the things that you love” as well as one’s own death. Written in 1968, it is perhaps haunted by the circumstances of the Vietnam War, but its concerns are at once more personal and more general than those of the mass of “protest” poems of the period. Berry’s response to international catastrophe (interestingly like Thomas Hardy’s during another war) is the age-old response of the nurturing farmer:

And I went and put my hands
into the ground, and they took root
and grew into a season’s harvest.
I looked behind the veil
of the leaves, and heard voices
that I knew had been dead
in my tongue years before my birth.
I learned the dark.

* * *

I let go all holds then, 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.

Berry has argued, in what can be taken as a gloss on these lines, that “because death is inescapable, a biological and ecological necessity, its acceptance becomes a spiritual obligation, the only means of making life whole” (*Recollected Essays* 199).

This insight, the cynosure of Berry’s thought, is essentially an agricultural one, which parallels in farming cultures as diverse as those of the Winnebago Indians, the Bible, and Virgilian Rome. Berry has been taken to task by Richard Pevear for his unorthodox religious views, for making, as Pevear puts it, “A ‘religion’ of his cause” (346), but this view seems, in a bad sense, churchly, limiting, and wrong-headed. A more serious criticism might be that Berry romanticizes farming and farmers in the service of a theoretical and personal ideal, and that in doing so he neglects what is really dark, uncommunicative, and socially limiting in modern agricultural life, aspects Thomas, with his stern but relatively traditional sense of the Christian mission, focuses on with compassionate penetration. Yet Berry’s

agricultural mysticism enables him to do what Thomas' Anglicanism cannot: to find in the ordinary activity of farming a living and deeply religious significance. For Berry, there is no separation of religious aspiration and the reality of working the land. This is a profoundly optimistic and perhaps an essentially American notion, and it lends to Berry's farmers a spiritual dignity denied Thomas' peasants, who must reveal their human centrality and importance in a spiritual vacuum. It is significant that in his later books, as he begins to deal more insistently with religious themes, Thomas recurs with surprising infrequency to the peasant characters who played so important a role in his early poetry.

Berry, meanwhile, has continued to make farming and farmers the philosophical and metaphorical center of his work. Among the most moving poems in his recent book, *The Wheel*, are a series of elegies for his friend and mentor, Owen Flood. Flood is presented as perhaps Berry's ideal of a farmer, though it should be pointed out that he seems ordinary and real enough. In "Rising" (*Collected Poems* 241-44) we see him at work:

a man well known by his back
in those fields in those days.
He led me though 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.

Owen Flood teaches the young Berry how to transmute the "misery" of his labor into a "desire" with spiritual as well as physical implications. He is Berry's perfect cyclical man, the model nurturer. His life may be "a journey back and forth / in rows, and in the rounds / of years," but in his fields "past and potency are one," and "many-lived," he may "reach / through ages with the seed."

Thomas and Berry have produced very different and to some degree complementary bodies of work about a subject little treated but of tremendous importance in the history and continued presence of man. Thomas' poetry about farming is characterized by its control, objectivity, and basically tragic persuasion. Berry's poetry is freer in form, subjective (as any writing suggesting mystical experience must be), and essentially optimistic. Thomas' characters endure in a world where traditional life is punishing, the changes wrought by industrialism are equally if not more painful, and God (as we can know Him) is silent or uncaring. The peasant, as Thomas sees him, is a lonely figure on the landscape, "endlessly ploughing wrestling with the angel / Of no name," his face "Unglorified, but stern like the

soil” (“The Face,” *Selected Poems* 93). Berry’s farmers, on the other hand, find meaning and solace in a tradition they seek out, and a kind of spiritual ecstasy in their work. Far from being helpless against the intrusions of the modern world, they are prophets of an alternative life, and far from being lonely, they establish “a kinship of the fields” (“Rising”), a convivial communion with the dead of nature’s past and the unborn of her future.

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