

Farm as Form: Wendell Berry's *Sabbaths*

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Rhyme and meter have certainly known their ups and downs in this century.¹ Early on, it seemed that the great modernist poets, Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Stevens, had more or less banished them from serious poetry in favor of free verse. Of course, there was the recalcitrant figure of Frost, who refused to play his tennis without a net; and even Eliot, whose verse was soaked in Elizabethan cadences, warned that “good” *vers libre* was not really *libre* at all, that the ghost of a meter lurked somewhere behind the arras. Still, the main effort seemed to be, as Pound remarked of Williams’s practice, to break the back of the pentameter line. Then the ’thirties ushered in what seemed to be a new dispensation altogether on the authority, practical as well as theoretical, of the New Critics. Perhaps someone had noticed that Eliot’s favorite poets, the Elizabethans, had used rhyme and meter even in witty and paradoxical poems of undissociated sensibility. In any event, poet-critics like Ransom, Tate, Winters, and Blackmur not only heaped critical praise on unified, formally structured lyrics, but wrote such poetry themselves: lyric units making use of rhyme and meter as integral parts of their meaning. A glance at the magazine verse of the ’forties and ’fifties reveals that in spite of the continuing presence of the older modernists (as well as such isolated followers as Oppen and Zukofsky), the short, rhyming lyric was very much the mainstream poem in America.

The ’sixties brought an end to all this. Actually, the signs of change were in the air a decade earlier: the rediscovery of Ezra Pound, the emergence of the Black Mountain School and the Beat poets, the critical enthusiasm that began to devalue Donne’s ratiocinative irony in favor of the passionate mysticism of the later Blake. But in the ’sixties, in America at least, the lid blew off traditional form altogether.

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Even punctuation was “out”. Established poets like Lowell and Berryman, who had matured under the ægis of Ransom, made influential leaps into free verse. And a whole generation of younger poets, schooled at least in the precepts of the New Critics as disseminated in the ubiquitous text, *Understanding Poetry*, echoed Robert Bly’s battle cry against “the Tate-Ransom nostalgia for jails” (“Looking for Dragon Smoke”).

Wendell Berry is part of this generation, and for most of his career he has followed its predilections as to form. It is of some present interest, therefore, that in his most recent book of poems, *Sabbaths*, he has made a major investment in traditional forms. It is worth considering just what Berry expects to get from formal verse that he could not have gotten from his earlier, free verse forms. Could this be simply a nostalgia for the poetry of his student days, the poetic equivalent of the recent revival of “Greek” life on college campuses, or does it suggest something new and necessary in his expression?

Like most poets of his generation, Berry has worked away from his origins in the new critical school toward the establishment of a personal poetic idiom. Along with Bly and many others in the ’sixties, he sampled the promiscuous freedom of surreal techniques and felt the attraction of political protest poetry. Unlike Bly, however, Berry did not consider such impulses sufficient in themselves, either philosophically or poetically. Instead, he sought to reflect and articulate in his poetry the vital rhythms and satisfactions of rural life, and more specifically the life of a farmer at home in his community and accepting of his place in nature, what he has called “the system of nested systems” (*Standing by Words* 46). Berry’s model of the nurturing (as opposed to the exploiting) man has been the farmer “whose life does not travel / along any road, toward / any other place, / but is a journey back and forth / in rows,” in “the fields / whose past and potency are one” (“Rising”, *Selected Poems* 242). The idiom of poems like this one from *The Wheel* (1982), a supple, short-lined free verse, was admirably equipped to express Berry’s mystical but rooted sense of farming. The language is simple and concrete—it is on easy, conversational terms with the outside world—but free enough, in telling moments, to rise into the higher temperatures of mystical expression. Its natural speech rhythms trace the landscape of hilly farmland and woods in Berry’s native Kentucky, accurately registering the encroachments of one upon the other, reading closely the history of the land.

There has long been, perhaps, a latent contradiction in Berry’s work between the formality of his philosophical positions, the “system of systems,” for instance, which he calls “an updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being” (*Standing by Words* 46-47), and the colloquial freedom of his chosen verse forms.

In his critical writings, Berry has been aware of a correlation between natural and literary form. In his essay, "Standing by Words," he notes that "one of the great practical uses of literary disciplines...is to resist glibness—to slow language down and make it thoughtful. This accounts for the influence of verse, in its formal aspect, within the dynamics of the growth of language: verse checks the merely impulsive flow of speech, subjects it to another pulse, to measure, to extra-linguistic considerations; by inducing the hesitations of difficulty, it admits into language the influence of the Muse and of musing" (*Standing by Words* 28). For Berry, a "merely impulsive flow of speech" is the linguistic correlative of philosophical rootlessness, of not knowing one's place in the decorum of nature. Such rootlessness represents a licentious and therefore dangerous freedom in a world whose survival is dependent on maintaining the delicate balance of its constituents. In another essay, "Poetry and Place," Berry relates the organic form of community and place to literary form: "one's farm...is indeed a form. It's not a literary form, but it is *like* a literary form....Like any other form, it requires us to do some things and forbids us to do others. Some acts are fitting and becoming, and some acts are not. If we fail to do what is required and if we do what is forbidden, we exclude ourselves from the mercy of Nature" (*Standing by Words* 192-93).

The somewhat prescriptive, neo-Augustan tone of much of this (the reader will note Berry's eighteenth century-like capitalization of Nature) is not surprising in a critic who has just spent a number of pages defending Alexander Pope's attitude toward nature against some rather ill-considered criticism by Robert Bly. But it may seem surprising coming from a poet who for most of his career has practiced a form of free verse. Berry has always been one for consistency, however, and in *Standing by Words* he is bringing his critical thinking into line with certain philosophical attitudes puzzled out over the last twenty years. It is fitting that the author of *The Unsettling of America* should come to see that "the work of poetic form is coherence, joining things that need to be joined, as marriage joins them—in words by which a man or a woman can stand, words confirmable in acts....Thus, for a couple, marriage is an entrance into a timeless community. So, for a poet (or a reader), is the mastery of poetic form. Joining the form, we join all that the form has joined" (*Standing by Words* 213). Berry does not luxuriate in currently fashionable notions of the indeterminacy of meaning. For him, form is not merely abstract or arbitrary, but is the animating structure of life as it is really lived in all variety. It stands as warp to the weft of raw and transient experience.

In *Sabbaths*, the poet in Berry is attempting to work out the practical implications of these ideas, and it represents a daring move. It is always dangerous (though perhaps also necessary) for an artist to leave behind modes of expression

he has found both congenial and serviceable. Therefore, on a certain level, the technique of *Sabbaths* is less assured than that of *The Wheel*. There is a “Sunday Best” tone in certain of these poems, a self-conscious formality that issues in biblical allusions and formal allusions to poets like George Herbert and Dante (a couple of the poems make use of *terza rima*). Occasionally, there are lapses into hollow versifying, as in these lines:

To sit and look at light-filled leaves
 May let us see, or seem to see,
 Far backward as through clearer eyes
 To what unsightly hope believes:
 The blessed conviviality
 That sang Creation's seventh sunrise...(*Sabbaths* 9)

At moments like this, one has the impression that the meter and rhyme scheme are controlling Berry rather than the other way around. The nature mysticism here seems schoolish and awkward compared to such supple free verse efforts as “On the Hill Late at Night” (*Farming: A Handbook* 1970):

The ripe grasslands bend in the starlight
 in the soft wind, beneath them the darkness
 of the grass, fathomless, the long blades
 rising out of the well of time. Cars
 travel the valley roads below me, their lights
 finding the dark, and racing on. Above
 their roar is a silence I have suddenly heard,
 and felt the country turn under the stars
 toward dawn. (*Selected Poems* 113)

Here the free verse rhythm delicately mimes the movement of “the soft wind”, while the harsh *cæsura* before “cars”, staring into the blank space at the end of the line, suggests the intrusion of the modern world. Equally effective is the other delayed *cæsura* before “above”, whose hushed, lifting quality ushers in the tone of revelation in the next lines. The point here is not to make invidious comparisons, but to demonstrate something of the masterly free verse technique Berry has risked leaving behind.

A good part of *Sabbaths*, on the other hand, does attain to mastery of a different kind. One might consider these lines from the poem beginning “Here where the dark-sourced stream brims up”:

From cloud to sea to cloud, I climb
The deer road through the leafless trees
Under a wind that batters limb
On limb, still roaring as it has

Two nights and days, cold in slow spring.
But ancient song in a wild throat
Recalls itself and starts to sing
In storm-cleared light; and the bloodroot,

Twinleaf, and rue anemone
Among bare shadows rise, keep faith
With what they have been and will be
Again: frail stem and leaf, mere breath

Of white and starry bloom, each form
Recalling itself to its place
And time. (44-45)

Here Berry's native poetic instincts are fully in command of the form, wrestling with it (notice the sharp but telling enjambments) and rendering it supple enough to express his sense of the spring's explosive renewal. The language is concrete and colloquial, but the ultimate confines of the form nicely suggest the order of nature itself, which contains the explosion.

This order, together with the accommodations we must make with it as living beings within nature, is one of the main themes of *Sabbaths*, as it has become perhaps the central theme in all of Berry's varied work. The notion of nature as embodying a strict form of polyphonous spontaneity finds expression in a number of poems. Keenly and delicately, Berry observes its outlines:

Over the river in loud flood,
in the wind deep and broad
under the unending sky, pair
by pair, the swallows again,
with tender exactitude,
play out their line
in arcs laid on the air,
as soon as made, not there. (*Sabbaths* 71)

The effort of all these prepositional phrases is to place the flight of the swallows, evanescent at once and enduring, in the larger form of nature, and the method, the form is to match the swallows' own "tender exactitude". (Indeed, Berry's use of prepositions throughout his work to establish a firm sense of place would repay critical study.) When Berry wishes to place our "intellect so ravenous to know", it is with *terza rima* stanzas, invoking the authority of Dante and his ordered sense of the life of the world and man's position in it. Human intellect, as Berry has often told us and tells us once again, "must finally know the dark" (*Sabbaths* 35). Recognizing that "all orders made by mortal hand or love / Or thought come to a margin of their kind, / Are lost in an order we are ignorant of," we must learn to

Leave word and argument, be dark and still,
And come into the joy of healing shade.
Rest from your work. Be still and dark until

You grow as unopposing, unafraid
As the young trees, without thought or belief;
Until the shadow Sabbath light has made

Shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf. (36)

Not only here, but throughout *Sabbaths* this mystical play of light and dark on the leaves extends a prominent metaphorical concern of Berry's earlier work.

This poem touches also on two related issues of Berry's present book: his structuring of the work around various "Sabbaths" marked off by years from 1979 to 1986, and his repeated use of overtly Christian references. This latter has been an issue of some contention. Berry has never been a writer to fit anyone's preconceptions. Critics have chided him on occasion both for "preachiness" and lack of religious orthodoxy. I have argued on other occasions ("Moving the Dark to Wholeness" and "A Kinship of the Fields") that Berry is a deeply religious poet, though his religion has never been that of the strictly orthodox Christian, encompassing as it does the myths of eastern religions (the "Wheel of Life") and the Winnabago Indians as easily as the stories of the Bible. Berry is suspicious of the tendency in certain strains of orthodox Christianity to exalt spirit at the expense of the body, which he considers ultimately corruptive of man's respect for nature. And he prefers the cyclical notion of time held typically by "primitive" religions to the linear vision of time enshrined in Christian dogma. On the other hand, in *Standing by Words* he explicitly accepts a sphere of religious interest standing protectively above and outside the system of systems:

there has to be a religious interest of some kind above the ecogenetic [i.e., “the interest of the whole ‘household’ in which life is lived”(48)]...the system of systems is enclosed within mystery, in which some truth can be known, but never all truth....you cannot speak or act in your own best interest without espousing and serving a higher interest. It is not knowledge that enforces this realization, but the humbling awareness of the insufficiency of knowledge, of mystery. (49-50)

This is not, as some critics have charged, an attempt to make a religion of ecology, for Berry insists that the religious sphere, the sphere of ultimate mystery, stands outside the ecological system, but it is vague enough in its contours to disquiet the churchly. Even in *Sabbaths*, the “mad farmer” in Berry maintains his wonted “contrariness”:

The bell calls in the town...
I hear, but understand
Contrarily, and walk into the woods. (*Sabbaths* 10)

What is new in *Sabbaths* is not a conversion to orthodox theology, but the acceptance of a traditional, Christian vocabulary, which enforces a certain measure or form on Berry's previously unsponsored religious expression. The book is sprinkled with references to Resurrection, Creation, Paradise, Heaven, Eden, the forfeit Garden, the Lord, the Maker, God and His sepulcher, and of course Sabbath, all with their appropriate, numinous capitalizations. Berry makes discrete use, however, of this formal nomenclature. Resurrection, for instance, is not limited in its connotations to a doctrine of Christian theology, but serves to illuminate through its formal control the vast and spontaneous energy of spring:

The tracked rut
Fills and levels; here nothing grieves

In the risen season. Past life
Lives in the living. Resurrection
Is in the way each maple leaf
Commemorates its kind, by connection

Outreaching understanding. (*Sabbaths* 7)

The resurrection here is unique to Berry's sense of religious interest, of mystery "outreaching understanding." It functions to denominate formally the vital return of the year so important in Berry's cyclical notion of time. Berry absorbs the Christian nomenclature in all its intricacy, as he does the devices of formal verse, in order to express his own sense of the delicate relations informing the system of systems and the religious mystery surrounding it.

The title of the book itself is redolent with specifically Judeo-Christian associations. The word "sabbath" has its origins in a Hebrew verb meaning "to rest," and is used in the Bible to indicate the seventh day of the Creation, the Lord's day of rest. It has come to suggest either the seventh or the first day of the week, and in Christian tradition it is synonymous with Sunday, a day of abstinence from work and the day of Jesus' Resurrection. All these senses are allowed play in Berry's work, which gives it an uncommon associative density. For Berry, the sabbath represents the formal closure of one of the chief cycles of time. It marks at once the end of the work week and the beginning of the new week. Its repeatability in difference makes it especially important to a poet like Berry, who has long been interested in cyclical time as manifested in days, in the seasons, and in generations. The cyclical structure of *Sabbaths* is reinforced by its subdivision into eight parts, which refer specifically to eight years and by implication to eight days in the closed circle of a week, from Sunday to Sunday. Thus the sabbath connects meaningfully with the symbolism of the Wheel of Life and Berry's earlier work.

The epigraph of *Sabbaths* is taken from *Isaiah* 14:7: "The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing." This is an uncharacteristically gentle passage amidst a series of oracles of the Lord's doom on the *hubris* of foreign peoples, in the case of Chapter 14, the Babylonians. The eighth verse continues: "Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee [the King of Babylon], and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, Since thou art laid down, no feller is come up against us." The "singing" would appear to be of the trees, and metonymically of the birds in the trees. That such singing should come as the harbinger of a great empire's destruction sets Berry's work subtly in a darker key. The absent fellers of trees are by implication modern Americans as well as Babylonians, with relevant environmental overtones. This suggests, of course, one of Berry's central themes, exploiting man's possibly imminent destruction of nature. The new note is the implication of divine, retributive force, and Berry's own awe in the face of it:

He steps
Amid a foliage of song
No tone of which has passed his lips.

Watching, silent, he shifts among
The shiftings of the day, himself
A shifting of the day's design
Whose outline is in doubt, unsafe,
And dark. One time, less learned in pain,

He thought the earth was firm, his own,
But now he knows that all not raised
By fire, by water is brought down. (*Sabbaths* 73)

The song of the trees and "the day's design" take on a dark and fearfully numinous aspect for one "learned in pain." Berry has always cautioned us to prepare for disaster by accepting death as a necessary part of nature, but here he seems conscious of the ultimately mysterious causes in the religious sphere. *Sabbaths*, however, represents also a provisionally hopeful dissipation of Berry's fears through meditative attention to nature and its intricate balance:

what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing
the day turns, the trees move. (*Sabbaths* 5-6)

The day of rest after labor becomes for Berry the day of unburdening his fears, of dispersing consternations in a formal song echoing the formality of nature itself.

The emphasis on the sabbath as a day of rest, however, contrasts with the workday feeling of so many of Berry's earlier farm poems. Where the farm poems

allow mystical intuitions to arise from everyday encounters with the ecological sphere of nature, the sabbath poems, though rooted in nature, seek actively to penetrate the religious sphere through formal meditation, the prescribed activity of the seventh day. This occasions a greater reliance on mystical tropes than is usual in Berry's work, particularly in the pervasive images of light and song:

Thrush song, stream song, holy love
 That flows through earthly forms and folds,
 The song of Heaven's Sabbath fleshed
 In throat and ear, in stream and stone,
 A grace living here as we live,
 Move my mind now to that which holds
 Things as they change. (*Sabbaths* 47)

The "songs" here function on several interactive levels of metaphor: the simple and familiar comparison of a bird's sounds with song, the somewhat less familiar comparison of the sound of the stream with song, the parataxis identifying these with the notion of "holy love," and the mystical representation of "the song of Heaven's Sabbath," which involves them all, and amounts to an experience of grace. Berry's meditative scheme also issues in a more elaborate and rhetorically driven syntax:

Not again in this flesh will I see
 the old trees stand here as they did,
 weighty creatures made of light, delight
 of their making straight in them and well,
 whatever blight our blindness was or made,
 however thought or act might fail. (*Sabbaths* 81)

The extravagance of Berry's diction is held beautifully in check by the sinuous grammatical structure. Through formal artifice, Berry achieves, on this occasion and on many others in *Sabbaths*, a fine linguistic balance, an order cognate with those of agriculture and nature.

Berry's technique in *Sabbaths*, far from being simply nostalgic, an empty exercise in the "well-made" poetry of the 'forties and 'fifties, represents a logical and compelling development of his craft. Berry has long been a poet of the internal relations—instinctual, formal, and ritual—which join together families, communities, even the past and future generations with themselves, with the ecological system, and with the ultimate sphere of mystery. For Berry, the farm is one, though not the only, form which embodies and sustains these relations:

Enclosing the field within bounds
sets it apart from the boundless
of which it was, and is, a part,
and places it within care.
The bounds of the field bind
the mind to it. A bride
adorned, the field now wears
the green veil of a season's
abounding. Open the gate!
Open it wide, that time
and hunger may come in. (*Sabbaths* 18)

This poem, whose immediate subject is the farm as form, a dominant idea in Berry's work, might serve also as an *ars poetica* for *Sabbaths*. Artistic form shares the responsibilities of all other vital forms: recognizing limits and orders, and joining things to create new and fertile orders. Thus may time and hunger, the uncontrollables, be domesticated to substantial pleasures.

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