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Responsibly at home: Wendell Berry's quest for the simple life

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Case Western Reserve University, 1992

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RESPONSIBLY AT HOME: WENDELL BERRY’S
QUEST FOR THE SIMPLE LIFE

by

BERNARD BAKER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Program in American Studies
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
January, 1992
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RESPONSIBLY AT HOME: WENDELL BERRY’S QUEST FOR THE SIMPLE LIFE

Abstract

by

BERNARD BAKER

Wendell Berry, Kentucky poet, essayist, novelist, farmer, professor, and conservationist is an eloquent contemporary spokesperson for one of the most enduring visions in American culture, the simple life. As a philosophy of living, the simple life has embraced a multitude of ideas and forms throughout American history. In general, it may be seen as a state of mind oriented toward the harmony and balance of the material and the spiritual, the real and the ideal. It is usually animated by a sense of moral purpose and buoyed by the assumption that life will be enhanced by exercising enlightened restraint. Berry combines elements from three distinct simple life traditions—agrarianism, romanticism, and environmentalism—to
produce a coherent philosophy of simplicity.

The cornerstone of Berry's vision is human relationship to place. This relationship exists simultaneously on three levels. The most concrete is composed of the individual and the particular parcel of land where he or she lives. The second level expands the domain of place to include family and community. The final level prescribes the place of human life in the order of Creation. The full exploration of relationship to place leads to Berry's lifelong attempt to answer the question, "How can one live responsibly at home in the world?"

The dissertation sketches the diverse traditions from which Berry draws inspiration, and then analyzes his poetry, fiction, and non-fiction for the elucidation of his simple life vision. It examines Berry's strident critique of contemporary American culture and explores some of the implications of the alternative he poses.
For Laura,
my constant source of inspiration
In order to facilitate the reading of this dissertation, citations for Berry’s works will be given parenthetically at the end of each passage. Following is a list of abbreviations for those titles cited in this fashion. References to works by others will be provided in notes at the end of each chapter.

List of Abbreviations

to works of Wendell Berry cited in this study


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INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades Wendell Berry has become well known and respected in several disparate realms of American society. Farmers from Caribou, Maine to Sweet Home, Oregon know of his work in “sustainable agriculture”; environmentalists include him among the ranks of those struggling to redirect American relationships with the natural world; traditionalists find in Berry a voice which venerates many time-honored values and customs, while those seeking dramatic change are nourished by his insistence that American society has evolved upon a series of dangerously mistaken assumptions; writers draw inspiration from his literature born out of an intimacy with a particular place. Berry is a familiar figure to the audiences of National Public Radio, The Atlantic and Harper's, to students on many campuses, to agricultural officials at land grant universities, state and federal agencies, to members of food cooperatives across the nation, to backyard organic gardeners, as well as to devotees of small publishing houses. An essay of Berry's is standard fare in most collegiate anthologies of non-fiction and/or the art of writing.
As an organic farmer, writer, university professor, and conservationist, Berry’s popularity (or in some instances, notoriety) in various pockets of America is at least partially attributable to the constant challenges he provides. Buoyed by a firm moral foundation, Berry’s work provokes one toward self-examination, and to considerations of one’s actions in respect to one’s community, environment, nation, and culture. His is a clarion call that Americans free themselves from the bonds of size and specialization, that we stop abdicating control over our lives by allowing government, institutions, corporations, and experts to dictate the terms, conditions, and values by which we live. He makes the reader uncomfortable even as one nods in agreement with him. Like Thoreau, to whom he acknowledges an enormous debt, Berry first pricks away at the reader’s conscience and consciousness, and then instills one with the belief in one’s potential for change.

My interest in Berry began with a personal desire to make sense out of the rapid transformation occurring in my homeland of midcoast Maine. Berry’s The Unsettling of America (1977) located that transformation within the larger pattern operating upon all of rural America, and offered possibilities for individual
action. Through further reading of Berry I found it necessary to re-evaluate my commitments to localism: to place, community, and personal responsibility. Berry urges readers to ask, "What is the effect, on our neighbors and on our place in the world, of what we do?" It is a question that one cannot begin to answer without acknowledging the interconnectedness of our lives with one another and with the rest of creation, and then acting out of reverence for those connections.

Commitment and connections surface repeatedly in the previous work done on Berry. The overwhelming majority of such efforts, however, have been literary analyses confined almost exclusively to his poetry. While literary analysis has its role in this dissertation as well, the focus is upon Berry's efforts to define and enact a life of rich simplicity. Thus his essays, poetry, and fiction are probed for the visions of simplicity they contain, as are his ideas as a farmer, philosopher, and cultural critic. Furthermore, the dissertation contends that Berry's voice resonates with echoes of some important American cultural values re-cast and combined into an organic whole.

Because all of Berry's impulses gravitate toward a unified vision, dividing an analysis of his work into separate chapters is a difficult and somewhat artifi-
cial task. One cannot separate the farmer from the poet, the husband and father from the essayist, the crew worker or conservationist from the novelist. Unlike many who have responded to a dream intellectually while disengaging themselves from it physically, part of Berry's genius lies in his insistence that the lines he plows in his fields and those he writes in his study are interlocking components of the same larger effort to produce meaning. A useful analogy for thinking about Berry can be drawn from anatomy and physiology. Here it is an understanding of the whole body and its complexity of inter-relationships that is essential. Even though systems such as the circulatory or digestive ones are studied as discrete entities, they are, in fact, inseparable, and can only function in concert as parts of a larger whole. So it is with Berry's organic vision, where there are no lines among the arts of farming, writing, or caring for people and the earth.

The design of this dissertation, therefore, seeks to maintain the interdependent unity of Berry's vision. Chapter I sketches the diverse intellectual traditions from which Berry draws inspiration in his attempt to create a unified life of simplicity. Attention is focused on both direct and indirect influences. In
some cases, Berry has been deeply affected by key individuals whose work he has studied. Here the debt is clear. In other instances, I have drawn attention to people with whom Berry does not explicitly express familiarity, but whose ideas contributed to the traditions that nourish him.

The subsequent chapters move as Berry's mind does, from the particular to the abstract. The image which suggests this movement is a series of three concentric circles, each one representing another element of human relationship to place. All exist simultaneously; all impact one another. The innermost circle is composed of the most concrete relationship with place, that of an individual and the particular parcel of land he or she inhabits. Thus, chapter II introduces Berry's fundamental ideas about the connections between personal identity and place, with the farm as his paradigm. Chapter III then explores the bountiful evocation of this relationship in Berry's fiction and poetry.

The second concentric circle expands the domain of place to include where one fits into human society. Chapter IV, therefore, examines marriage and household, Berry's cardinal sense of human relationship. Chapter V broadens the perspective to include a discussion of the value and meaning of community. The outermost cir-
icle prescribes the most abstract sense of place, that of human life in the order of Creation. Chapter VI scrutinizes Berry’s beliefs on the propriety of human actions in a world beyond our power to create or comprehend, but within our power to destroy. The domains represented by the three circles cannot be separated without the destruction of the whole vision, thus a discussion of Berry’s views on farming will necessarily also be a discussion of morality, economics, artistic creation, and personal ecological responsibility.

Taken as a whole the three domains create a rich blend of spirituality and practical working knowledge, personal moral action, and long range responsible communion with the earth. The goal is a continuous harmony; the means is an alternative to either the industrial/post-industrial model which is America’s dominant view, or the traditional pastoral sentimentalism that has often characterized the opposition. In the foreword to *Recollected Essays* (1981), Berry states that, “my work has been motivated by a desire to make myself responsibly at home both in this world and in my native and chosen place” (*REC*, ix). This responsibility grows out of an eclectic culling of ideas, and coheres in a brand of the simple life ideal which seeks with directness and clarity to pursue a
life of meaning and commitment. It is a vision for individual lives and cultural revolution.
Notes to the Introduction

Four dissertations have been written on Berry. The first two, both done in 1978, are concerned with Berry's moral framework as revealed in his first volumes of poetry and early collections of essays. Gary Wayne Tolliver, *Beyond Pastoral: Wendell Berry and a Literature of Commitment* (Ohio University, 1978) discusses the relationship of the artist to society, and consequently how Berry's philosophical ideals are cast into aesthetic forms. Robert Joseph Collins, *A Secular Pilgrimage: Nature, Place, and Morality in the Poetry of Wendell Berry* (Ohio State University, 1978), provides close textual analysis of many of Berry's key poems in order to trace the conflict between art and nature. The third dissertation, Brenda Powell, *Contemporary Poets: The Quest for Value Beyond Nihilism* (University of California, Berkeley, 1980), places Berry in comparison with other poets such as Gary Snyder who search for productive value systems in a chaotic world. A fourth work, Robert Ward Strizich, *The One Life* (University of California, San Diego, 1984), is unavailable through University Microfilms. Of the approximately two dozen journal articles on Berry, eighteen focus on his poetry, one on the novel *A Place on Earth*, and the remaining few compare him to other authors.
 CHAPTER I: AN ECLECTIC COHERENCE

The Simple Life Vision

Wendell Berry, Kentucky poet, essayist, novelist, farmer, professor, and conservationist is an eloquent contemporary spokesperson for one of the most enduring visions in American culture, the simple life. Through his farming and his writing, Berry seeks to clarify, embody, and promote a complex web of ideas and attitudes which, paradoxically, comprise the life of simplicity. Above all, his is a moral vision of humanity in harmony with the earth, with one's family and community, and with the mystery of creation—a rare and elusive ideal by any standards. Berry maintains, however, that such an ideal is both possible and necessary for the health, and perhaps even the survival of American culture.

Over the past thirty years Berry has produced three dozen books, all of which have grown out of the intersection of his practical experiences as an organic farmer, his broad and penetrating reading, his keen observations of American culture, his fierce independence, and his veneration of traditional values and
forms. Berry’s efforts are unified by a moral framework which shapes his actions in the field and the study, channeling both into a careful and honest search for and analysis of values. He shares John Gardner’s conviction that "...true art is moral; it seeks to improve life, not debase it....Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness."\(^1\) Through the art of farming and the art of writing, Berry doggedly pursues the answers to the fundamental ethical question of how to live responsibly on this earth and in human society. Like those authors in western tradition whom Berry admires most—Dante, Milton, Thoreau, W.C. Williams—he believes that the artist must be animated by a moral consciousness which affirms the significance of each individual’s actions. He seizes upon the imperative that one must hold oneself accountable for the integrity and health of the place where one lives and the culture one transmits to succeeding generations. A reader of Berry’s work, regardless of whether or not he embraces Berry’s views, cannot escape engaging in both self-scrutiny and analysis of contemporary culture.

The scrupulous self-examination in Berry’s writing, coupled with his merging of personal and public history, place the collective body of Berry’s work within
the New England tradition of the spiritual autobiog-
ography. Daniel Cornell suggests, "Thus the myth of
America from Edwards to Emerson, from Adams to Albee,
from Bradford to Berry, consistently defines the indi-
vidual by reference to the life of the nation and the
nation through the life of its representative individu-
als." Berry’s books form a continually unfolding nar-
rative of a simple life ideal he is trying to enact and
an extended critique of the culture he would reform.
In Berry’s eyes, American society is arrogant, voro-
cious, ruthlessly competitive, and ultimately destruc-
tive of the earth and itself. It is a disintegrating
culture. In the jeremiad voice common to many of his
essays, Berry catalogues the symptoms of our social
disintegration:

...divorce, venereal disease, murder,
rape, debt, bankruptcy, pornography,
soil loss, teenage pregnancy, fatherless
children, motherless children, child
suicide, public child-care, retirement
homes, nursing homes, toxic waste, soil
and water and air pollution, government
secrecy, government lying, government
crime, civil violence, drug abuse, sexual
promiscuity, abortion as ‘birth con-
trol,’ the explosion of garbage, hope-
less poverty, unemployment, unearned
wealth. (HW, 131)

Each one of these crises has complex roots, which in
Berry’s perspective can inevitably be traced back to a
few overriding sources: abstraction, specialization,
misdirected economics, and dissociation from the natural world. The alternative to disintegration and chaos which his life and his writings offer is one of personal responsibility, restraint, particular love and care for place and community, cooperation rather than competition, and respectful interdependence with nature. It constitutes a call for a private revolution, "not the revolution by which men change governments, but that by which they change themselves" (LLH, 74). Berry's voice rises out of America's simple life tradition and is embodied in a lifetime effort to make a difference.

Wendell Erdman Berry was born on August 5, 1934 in the small agricultural town of Port Royal, Kentucky. Within a short radius of Port Royal all of Berry's grandparents and great-grandparents had lived, infusing in him a sense of connection between place and identity. In "A Native Hill," he declares, "all that any of us may know of ourselves is to be known in relation to this place..." (LLH, 17). From his grandfather and neighbors he learned the art of farming without mechanization, a way of life rapidly disappearing in America. In 1952 Berry entered the University of Kentucky, earning a B.A. in English (1956) and an M.A. (1957).
He taught briefly at Kentucky's Georgetown College before entering Stanford as a Wallace Stegner Writing Fellow in 1958-59. The following year he remained at Stanford to teach creative writing. Several months back in Kentucky were followed by a year in Italy on a Guggenheim fellowship. Berry then directed the First Year English Program at New York University for two years before accepting a teaching position at the University of Kentucky in 1964. That crucial decision (see chapter II) allowed Berry to plant himself in the land he knows best. The succeeding years of Berry's life have been an attempt through farming and writing to know his world, and hence his proper relationship with it. What emerges from this dual effort is a forceful contemporary articulation of the simple life.

As a philosophy of living the simple life has embraced a multitude of ideas and forms throughout American history. Hard to define (and harder to live), simplicity has much less to do with standard of living than with quality of living. It may be seen as a state of mind oriented toward the harmony and balance of the material and spiritual, the real and the ideal. While simplicity cannot be reduced to a single idea, David Shi suggests, in his introduction to the anthology of simple life writings entitled *In Search of the Simple*
Life (1986), that it can successfully be described by one or more of the following beliefs and attitudes:

- A concern for family nurture and community cohesion; a hostility toward luxury and a suspicion of riches; a belief that the primary reward of work should be well-being rather than money; a desire for maximum personal self-reliance and creative leisure; a nostalgia for the supposed simplicities of the past and an anxiety about the technological and bureaucratic complexities of the present and future; a taste for the plain and functional, especially in the home environment; a reverence for nature and a preference for country living; and a sense of both religious and ecological responsibility for the proper use of the world's resources."

These diverse notions share a common denominator in the underlying assumption that life will be enhanced by exercising enlightened restraint. The frenetic pursuit of wealth, material objects, and power must be curbed so that it does not "smother the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of the commonweal.""

A simple life vision is usually animated by a sense of moral purpose. It orders one's priorities toward the "higher values" of duty, faith, family, of artistic creation and service to community- Wordsworth called it "plain living and high thinking." To do so does not require primitive asceticism. Most simple life practitioners have sought some middle position between
strict self-denial and rampant consumerism. Shi suggests, "the essence of simplicity is not in renunciation but in discrimination....Indeed, the key to mastering the fine art of simple living is discovering the difference between personal trappings and personal traps." Simplicity's moral base has promoted the elevation of human aspirations to a plane beyond the purely material, to a serious consideration of human purpose beyond exclusive self-interest and appetitive satisfaction. Most simple life visions have evolved from codes of conduct that seek to ennoble human life. More often than not they are motivated by the search for answers to the grand questions, as in the title of Wendell Berry's latest volume of essays, What Are People For?

American simple life thinking has diverse roots in various traditions. Most notable are the secular republican values of ancient Greco-Roman culture, the religious dictums of the Judeo-Christian heritage, the spare spirituality of Eastern religion and mysticism, and the literature of nineteenth-century Romanticism. From Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, Greek and Roman philosophers argued for a balanced life that combined an active intellect with moderate material desires.
championed a vigorous public life of civic virtue as one whose rewards far outweighed the acquisition of wealth. Simplicity and temperance combined with spiritual devotion characterized much of Old Testament teachings, as did the life and preaching of Jesus. Likewise, the great teachers of the Orient, Confucius and Buddha, advocated a right livelihood of spirituality and virtue that shed the wayward encumbrances of material possessions. Centuries after the pastoral simplicity of poets like Virgil and Horace, the Romantics of the past century offered their clarion call for people to adopt a simpler alternative whose model was the natural world. Elements of these sources can be found everywhere in American culture, having helped to produce simple life approaches as various as John Winthrop’s "city on a hill," Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond, The Farm commune in Tennessee, organizations like Earth First!, and Wendell Berry’s Lanes Landing farm.

Over three centuries American attempts at simplicity have been astonishing in their number, diversity of motives, and methods of practice. Advocates have appeared from every locus on the political spectrum, reactionary through radical, and from all segments of social stratification. Some like the Amish
and Mennonites, motivated by deep religious commitment, have chosen to remain outside the mainstream of American culture. Others, like the Boston Brahmins Charles Eliot Norton and William James, practiced a genteel simplicity from their privileged positions of comfort. In fact, as Shi contends, voluntary simplicity "has been and remains an ethic professed and practiced primarily by those free to choose their standard of living." To some, consciously choosing simplicity has constituted an overt rejection of America's dominant economic and social order, while to others preaching its tenets has served as an instrument of social control useful in curbing the ambitions of the underclass. Reflected in these contrasts are the tensions inherent in a culture which simultaneously promotes idealism and hedonism, individuality and conformity, selfishness and service. Beyond these stresses, however, it has been the unrivaled prosperity of American life which has offered simplicity its greatest challenge.

If, as R.W.B. Lewis suggests in *The American Adam* (1955), culture can be seen as a protracted dialogue, a clash of key voices and ideas which seek ascendancy at any given time, the simple life in America has usually been one of the subservient voices in the conversa-
Although its virtues have seemed attractive in every age and have been voiced in the rhetoric of countless spokespersons, the simple life has continually been displaced by the material. An abundance of opportunities to procure wealth and the worship of technology have combined with the perceived rigors of simplicity to overpower whatever attractiveness it might hold for the majority of Americans. In addition, the dominant voice has regularly accused simplicity’s advocates of being naive and utopian, or of harboring Luddite fears of progress. Furthermore, many who have embraced simplicity have hindered its broader appeal through their self-righteousness, or other attitudes such as sentimentality about the past, virulent anti-urbanism, disgust with capitalist economics, and abrasive individualism. Nonetheless, the simple life refuses to be excluded from the dialogue that creates American culture. Although it always has been and probably always will be a minority ethic, simplicity continues to exert significant influence upon American thinking. David Shi concludes his study, The Simple Life (1985), with this observation:

As a myth of national purpose and as a program for individual conduct, the simple life has been a perennial dream and a rhetorical challenge, displaying an indestructible vitality even in the face of repeated defeats. It has, in a
It is within this tradition, which has given sustenance to some of the most moving and profound American voices, that Wendell Berry speaks today. Berry is particularly compelling because he endeavors to enact the ideal, making his life and his art the practical realization of his simple life vision. As a moral philosopher, Berry’s ideas invariably lead to the necessity for responsible action, which he then, in turn, takes. For Berry, a person’s beliefs and values or the products of his mind and hands remain incomplete until he insures that such things are properly used in the world. The issues involved are personal, but the ramifications are cultural:

If the culture fails to provide highly articulate connections between the abstract and the particular, the organizational and the personal, knowledge and behavior, production and use, the ideal and the world— that is, if it fails to bring the small disciplines of each man’s work within the purview of those larger disciplines implied by the conditions of our life in this world— then the result is a profound disorder in which men release into their community and dwelling place powerful forces the consequences of which are unknown.

(CH, 127)

To work responsibly at the problem of connections marks the philosophical base for Berry’s life as both a
farmer and a writer. Through both he seeks to define America’s current profound disorder and to posit the simple life alternative of plain living and high thinking.

Berry’s brand of simplicity has been nourished by his appropriation of aspects of three distinct lines of simple life thought in American culture: agrarianism, Romanticism, and environmentalism. Eclectic in his tastes, but coherent in his vision, Berry has over time combined elements of these often conflicting ideologies to fashion a unique place in contemporary culture. To many farmers, Berry is a leading practitioner of and the most prominent spokesperson for sustainable agriculture; in the literary world, he is an accomplished stylist who provides a tragic yet ultimately restorative vision of humanity in relationship with nature; for environmentalists, according to one critic, he is a widely read Jeremiah, "...a sort of Thoreau for our times—equal parts Johnny Appleseed, H.L. Mencken, and Earth First zealot." Berry is all of these, as well as a man whose deeply held conservative convictions lead him, ironically, to the espousal of some radical reforms. By briefly tracing the three traditions which constitute a significant portion of Berry’s intellectual roots, one can more clearly comprehend his eclectic coherence.
The Agrarian Legacy

Agrarianism has been one of the most enduring and pervasive ideologies in American culture. The image of the virtuous independent farmer has held a prominent position in both the reality and mythology of American political, social, economic, and artistic life for more than three centuries. Even though that farmer is today an endangered species, his symbolic attraction remains firm in the nation’s consciousness, reminding many of a set of values from which they believe we have strayed.

Agrarian thought has several major pillars, beginning with the premise that cultivating the soil is the most ennobling vocation, that farming is a sanctified calling. It is a life of natural goodness which emphasizes practical skills, while its continual involvement in nature’s cycles of growth and decay offer a constant spiritual reminder of humanity’s limitations and dependence upon God. The soil itself has been seen as a source of regenerative power, a repository of virtue. Tilling the soil instills honor, self-reliance, and integrity. Being a farmer requires strength, courage, and manliness, but without sacrificing neighborliness, hospitality, and compassion."
The independence and self-sufficiency commonly accorded to farming is one of agrarianism's most magnetic attractions. Farmers can meet their own basic needs for food and shelter, unlike the rest of the population. This should suggest the standard by which one judges the economic system. Rather than using wealth, agrarians offer the degree to which one's vocation encourages independence, freedom, individuality, and morality as the appropriate evaluative measures.

Furthermore, the farmer possesses a socially sanctioned identity. It is nourished by thousands of years of historical tradition and rooted in the concreteness of a place—a region, a community, a particular land. Its organicism farming offers harmony and order which stand in contrast to the modern tendencies toward fragmentation, abstraction, and alienation. Agricultural communities, in the agrarian view, offer a model for a stable social order built upon cooperation. Finally, agrarians hold scorn for the developments which have exiled them to the periphery of American life: industrialization, technological proliferation, ruthlessly competitive capitalism, urbanization, and the massing of power in centralized bureaucracies. Agrarians generally attribute these forces with the destruction of independence, dignity, morality, and community.
The patron saint of American agrarianism is Thomas Jefferson, whose two hundred year old argument for a decentralized, agriculturally-based republic continues to motivate Wendell Berry today. For Jefferson, agriculture’s value to the nation extended far beyond economic realms. He found there the source of human virtues and the attitudes necessary for democratic self-government. The independent yeoman was a symbol of everything that was virtuous in the newly emerging society. His cultivation of the land and of traditional moral values were to be the bulwark that would protect America from the degeneracy that plagued Europe. In Notes on the State of Virginia (1785), Query XIX, Jefferson penned the quintessential statement of agrarian simplicity in American letters:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on the casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition....While we have land to labor then, let us never
wished our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff...let our workshops remain in Europe...The loss by the transportation of commodities across the Atlantic will be made up in happiness and permanence of government. The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour.¹⁰

Economic considerations are of secondary importance in Jefferson’s vision, one in which simplicity, frugality, industriousness, patriotism, freedom, and virtue are all interrelated with owning and tilling the land.¹¹ Since approximately 90% of Americans were farmers in Jefferson’s day, he was not, as Wayne Rohrer and Louis Douglas point out, “defending a minority right in upholding the agrarian interest; he was energizing the majority.”¹² By contrast, Berry today is defending the minority and seeking to re-educate the majority.

Certainly, Jefferson himself was no simple yeoman farmer, nor did he restrain his personal delight in technological innovation.¹³ Furthermore, in his two terms as president Jefferson’s policies shifted to accommodate the changing realities of American life. This meant supporting the growth of native industry and commerce that he had earlier denounced. His concessions, however, were born more of expediency than principle.¹⁴ Leo Marx posits that Jefferson exhibited a
profound ambivalence about agrarian society and progress, rhetorically embracing the myth of a "middle landscape," a pastoral ideal located somewhere between nature and civilization. In this vision land becomes landscape, less the reality of agricultural economics than the image of specific moral, political, religious, and aesthetic values associated with the land. Marx suggests:

Recognizing that the ideal society of the middle landscape was unattainable, Jefferson kept it in view as a kind of model, a guide to long-range policies as indispensable to intelligent political thought or action as the recognition of present necessities....Jefferson’s genius lay in his capacity to respond to the dream yet to disengage himself from it.17

Wendell Berry’s genius is to respond to and promote the dream for as many as are willing, while practicing it himself daily.

For Berry, Jefferson’s genius lay in the insistence upon education and widespread possession of land as the critical components necessary for democracy. Berry firmly supports Jefferson’s contention that broad ownership of property creates stable communities, tangible connections to the country, and permanent interest in its welfare.18 Central to both of their definitions of ownership is the stipulation that it derives only from occupancy and use. Absentee land-
lords or corporate ownership of huge tracts of land
negate the close connection that agrarians perceive
between property and the political independence con-
genial to democracy. To agrarians, one needs to own
property to own one’s soul.\textsuperscript{11} For both Jefferson and
Berry, the small family farm constitutes the ideal
ground for nourishing economic security, egalitarian-
ism, and independence. In a 1983 interview Berry
provides a contemporary echo of these Jeffersonian
principles:

> In defending the small farm, I am
> defending the idea that great numbers of
> ordinary people should own property—not
> money or stock certificates or insurance
> policies, but real property, property
> that can give them direct practical sup-
> port, the means to help themselves, and
> so make them to a proper extent inde-
> pendent, both in their domestic
> economies and in their minds. People who
> have a measure of economic independence
> can obviously afford to think and speak
> and vote more freely than people who do
> not. To me this modest idea of property
> is not just legal or political or eco-
> nomic, but is validated also by the long
> cultural memories and feelings that
> adhere to the idea of homeland—not a
> nation to be defended ‘patriotically,’
> but a place personally loved in the par-
> ticular terms of its hills and trees and
> streams, houses and households, where
> the knowledge and memories of grand-
> parents can pass with clear local
> reference into the minds of grand-
> children.\textsuperscript{12}

Like Jefferson’s, Berry’s argument for agrarian
simplicity stresses the multidimensional unity, not the
fragmentation, of economic, political, cultural, moral, and ecological concerns. It emphasizes an active ideal of citizenship which reconciles the often oppositional tensions of individualism and social responsibility.  

While agrarian sentiments remained popular in American imaginations in the century and a half after Jefferson, agrarian ways of life steadily receded as industrialism advanced. In 1930 a group of twelve influential southern intellectuals attempted to reverse, or at least arrest this pattern with the publication of their manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The group, known as the Southern Agrarians, were centered at Vanderbilt and spearheaded by the former Nashville Fugitives, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson. Their unsparing attack upon industrialized society and promotion of an idealized agrarian alternative has generally been dismissed as a politically reactionary, misguided romantic attempt to re-create an idyllic South that never existed. Such criticism is certainly warranted of the sentimental pastoral portrait of an organic social order presented by the Agrarians, as well as of the elitism, nativism, and racism implicit in several of the book’s essays. At the same time, however, *I’ll Take My Stand* offers an
insightful and powerful critique of industrialization and modernity which Berry shares.

At the core of the Southern Agrarians’ quarrel with industrialization lies its detrimental effects on human perception of self and society. They see industrial modes of production as dehumanizing, highly specialized and narrowly focused activities oriented to securing immediate material gains at the expense of spiritual welfare and moral obligations. The endless consumption which fuels the industrial economy isolates people from a proper relationship with one another and with nature. The casualties from these alienations are drastic: a decay of the sensibility, respect, and piety which are the grounds for religion and art; the exploitation and brutalization of the natural world; and the diminution of the amenities of life, including family, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, and romantic love. As Donald Davidson suggests, "The evil of industrial economics was that it squeezed all human motives into one narrow channel and then looked for humanitarian means to repair the injury." Conversely, the Southern Agrarians, Louis Rubin posits:

...refused to divide man’s life into isolated segments; there was no such thing, they insisted, as economic man, political man, social man; there was only man, and his various activities must be considered as parts of one human
life. To think and act otherwise was to make him less than human, producing fragmentation, division, chaos.\footnote{26}

This emphasis on unity and integrity prompted Berry to suggest that despite the significant flaws in the Agrarians’ argument, the cause for which they spoke was "the cause of human civilization" (CH, 120).

That they felt the cause of human civilization can best be advanced in an agrarian society is exemplified by John Crowe Ransom’s paean to the farmer and concern for his plight:

He identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province. But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of ‘natural resources,’ a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market, or a credit system. It is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer’s farm. It means the dehumanization of his life.\footnote{27}

Wendell Berry stands in total agreement with this portrait of a good farmer and the entire set of values and assumptions behind him. Indissolubly linked in such a life are the moral, aesthetic, spiritual, and economic dimensions of an individual, his family and
household, and his community. Berry's major critique of the Southern Agrarians is that this devotion to the land and the farmer that they expressed was mostly an abstraction—none of them worked the soil with their own hands. Agrarianism without agriculture, Berry cautions, can be easily reduced to sentimentality, or dismissed as neo-Jeffersonian mythology. But the ideals of the Southern Agrarians remain true for Berry, who suggests that "no ideal is invalidated by anyone's, or by everyone's, failure to live fully up to it..." (SBW, 100).

Contemporary agrarians who do attempt to live up fully to the ideal comprise Berry's peer group, a loosely knit nationwide network of practitioners of "sustainable agriculture," or those who do "not deplete soils or people." It seeks to put the "culture" back into agri-culture by re-directing thinking about agricultural processes and policies and their relationship to cultural values and ecological health. These agrarians are calling for a revolution in the definition of what constitutes the public good in American agricultural policy. Currently, that definition is simply cheap and plentiful food. It is based on the industrial model whose standards are maximum productivity and wealth. "Almost everything we have
celebrated as our success in farming," Donald Worster notes in a 1984 essay collection co-edited by Berry, "has been defined in terms of those ends. It has now, however, become clear that our ends have been our undoing."

For at least the past five decades American agriculture has been dominated by the ideas, values, and techniques of industrialization. This has meant the use of standard procedures and precision technology in an attempt to produce uniform results, in mass quantity. Such specialization is antithetical to diversity, promoting narrow monoculture cultivation. Typically, this occurs on a huge corporate farm organized so as to separate ownership from daily operation, thereby focusing exclusively on production quotas and profit margins. The use of expensive technology institutionalizes debt on most farms, which forces further emphasis on expanded productivity and predicates that solutions to problems will necessarily be sought in further applications of technology. Aesthetic and social values are usually alien concepts in the boardroom discussions of markets, growth, and profits. America clearly has, agrarians argue, agribusiness not agriculture.

The cheapest and most plentiful food in the world is, in fact, being supplied by American agribusiness,
but at a cost to people and the environment that
agrarians insist cannot be condoned. With the excep-
tion of the period 1979-1981, every year since 1959 has
witnessed a loss of at least 1,000 family farms in
America, and sometimes as many as 142,000 (1960). From
1980-1988 alone, 1.1 million Americans left their
farms, bringing the resident population of farmers down
to only 2% of the national population. Worster
explains:

A farm policy defined only in market
terms inevitably must destroy the
agricultural community to make it
prosper. It must lead to disillusionment
and frustration, uprooting and aliena-
tion, wearing farmers out, then casting
them off. When farmers cease to farm, all of the businesses in
their communities suffer, as do the critical services
tied to the local tax base, such as the public schools.
Many migrate to urban centers, where inevitably some
will swell the ranks of the unemployed.

While productivity in almost all agricultural com-
modities has soared, so have its disastrous long-range
environmental consequences. To produce one pound of
beef in Iowa requires 8,000 pounds of precious aquifer
water. One bushel of grain harvested there results in
5-6 bushels of soil loss; in eastern Washington that
bushel of grain costs 20 bushels of soil. As long
ago as 1979, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that plant nutrient losses owing to soil erosion amounted to approximately $18 billion annually. The high levels of productivity are achieved partly through the massive application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides which pollute the soil, water, and air, pose health risks for agricultural workers, and to varying degrees, contaminate the food that eventually finds its way to the consumer’s table.

Sustainable agriculture offers an alternative approach. Its foundation is the Jeffersonian vision of the independently owned and operated family farm. Here a family’s workplace and home are identical, an equation that encourages personal care and responsible use. Sustainability hinges upon abandoning the concept of land as a resource in favor of perceiving it and humanity as parts of the fragile network of nature. Natural systems must be used as the standard against which agricultural success is measured. Organic farming in the image of nature requires a delicate balance among all kinds of agriculture—trees, livestock, grains, grasses, vegetables—on the same land. The key is interdependence, for the whole system may falter if any strand is omitted. Above all, sustainability reflects an attitudinal change toward a series of rela-
tionships. These are summarized in the seven challenges of the 1989 Asilomar Declaration for Sustainable Agriculture:

- promote and sustain healthy rural communities;
- expand opportunities for new and existing farmers to prosper using sustainable systems;
- inspire the public to value safe and healthful food;
- foster an ethic of land stewardship and humaneness in the treatment of farm animals;
- expand knowledge and access to information about sustainable agriculture;
- reform the relationship among government, industry, and agriculture; and
- redefine the role of U.S. agriculture in the global community.\(^{36}\)

Thus sustainability calls for a new agenda for agriculture, redefining the public good as farming that makes people healthier, maintains their ties to land and community, promotes a more just society, and preserves the earth and its network of life.\(^{37}\)

The agrarians whose model Berry champions most consistently are the Amish. In Amish culture Berry finds an enviable unity of economic, spiritual, moral, and ecological concerns, all founded on the love of their particular land. Berry contends that the Amish esteem farming simultaneously as a practical art and a spiritual discipline. They have limited the size of their farms to human scale, and their use of technology, favoring human labor combined with freely available energy (sun, wind, and water). By thus curtailing
their costs and by practicing the domestic arts, they have achieved self-sufficiency and independence. Through the art of neighborliness and the primacy of family life the Amish have preserved healthy communities. By exercising restraint they have kept alive the age old dream of agrarian simplicity that leads to lives simple in means but rich in ends.\textsuperscript{30}

Wendell Berry's involvement with this resurgent agrarianism has derived from both inclination and study. While beginning his non-mechanized reclamation of an old farm in Kentucky in 1965, Berry read some outspoken agricultural scientists who early in this century advocated the standard of nature as the proper one for agriculture. The skills he had learned as a young boy, combined with the writings of Liberty Hyde Bailey (Cornell), F.H. King (Wisconsin), J. Russell Smith (Columbia) and British soil scientist Sir Albert Howard, all helped to point Berry toward nature as the analogue for farming.\textsuperscript{37}

In other words, in land originally forested, the farmer must study the forest to know how to produce a healthy field there. One must consult the original "genius of the place," to be in league with natural processes. Similarly, Berry maintains close contact with plant geneticist Wes Jackson, developer of The
Land Institute, a 200 acre experimental station studying ecosystem-level agriculture. Jackson’s efforts are directed at building a mixed perennial grain agriculture based on a model supplied by a small parcel of virgin Kansas prairie. Berry serves as a board member and advisor to both The Land Institute and The Land Stewardship Project in St. Paul, Minnesota. In addition, he travels extensively to visit farmers who practice sustainable techniques and lifestyles. His published accounts of those visitations help to disseminate practical information nationally.

By virtue of his practice of sustainable agriculture on his hillside Kentucky farm, his books and articles (in periodicals as various as Harper’s, The New Yorker, Organic Gardening, The Hudson Review, and Draft Horse Journal, to name a few), and his public appearances, Wendell Berry re-invigorates and amplifies the voice of agrarian simplicity in America’s cultural debate. He makes it strikingly clear that there is much more at stake in this subservient voice than just good farming. But to categorize him strictly as an agrarian too narrowly confines the scope of Berry’s vision and the moral purposes of his art. One must also listen to some Romantic voices in American letters to hear their echoes in Berry today.
The Romantic Legacy

The transcendentalists centered around Concord from 1830-1860 blended aspects of European romanticism with Puritan moralism to promote several ideas currently essential to Berry's life and art. A reverential attitude toward nature, an organic sense of humanity's relationship to the rest of the natural world, a harmony between nature and religion, an insistence upon a kind of self-reliance distinct from selfish individualism, a predilection for introspection, a belief that human identity is most clearly revealed morally, and the need for Americans to alter the ever-widening split between materialism and idealism were cardinal notions of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Berry embraces these same precepts a century and a half later. Furthermore, he shares their advocacy of simplicity as a personal ethic, an individual program of moral responsibility and spiritual growth.

Rather than seeing the natural world as either the howling wilderness of his Puritan ancestors or the utilitarian plowed earth of the agrarians, Emerson found there the source for moral goodness, spiritual inspiration, and aesthetic pleasure. For Emerson,
nature offered an antidote to the hypocrisies of civilization, a place where one could be elevated and inspired to a heightened exploration of the self. Nature was a projection of divine creative energy and an externalization of the soul. Through the imaginative contemplation of the natural world one could penetrate to spiritual truth, bringing oneself into closer correspondence with divinity and the potential for growth toward perfectibility. As such, nature always remained a symbol for Emerson, and he went to it as the faithful do to a shrine. While Berry shares Emerson's reverence for the woods and fields, while his fictional characters regain equilibrium and identity there, and while such romanticism permeates his poetry, nature is anything but purely metaphorical for him. As Speer Morgan suggested of Berry in *The Southern Review* (1974):

Rather than an awestruck visitor he is a resident. Rather than a Johnny Appleseed of holiness he is a farmer who hoes the dirt. If there is joy, expansion, or an ideal in nature, he earns it through time and attention. If there is epiphany there are also worms in the tomatoes.

In Berry’s life and art the imaginative contemplation of nature remains critical, but it does not follow from abstraction. Rather, it grows directly out of the intimate knowledge of a particular place gained through
sweat, decisions and risks, triumphs and losses, observation, and patience.

Emerson also espoused a life which would balance work and self-examination. Ideally, one’s work would be self-sustaining and complemented by material restraint, thus allotting time and energy for profound thought and artistic creativity. It was only by placing clear limits on their economic activities that Emerson believed Americans could escape the soulless individualism of the marketplace. Needed was a corrective restraint in how to perceive personal economics.

In "Man the Reformer," he states:

Economy is a high, humane office, a sacrament, when its aim is grand; when it is the prudence of simple tastes, when it is practiced for freedom, or love, or devotion."

The material world was not to be discounted, but neither was it to take precedence over the inner world of the spirit. A balance could be struck by putting one’s work in the proper perspective, by reforming domestic habits to reflect true need. While Emerson often had great difficulty heeding his own advice, Berry has remained relatively steadfast in the Emersonian creed that life is a selection. His simple life choices are based on the health of his land and family, his marriage and community, and the knowledge, as Thoreau
defined it, that "the cost of a thing is the amount...of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run."  

More than Emerson, who admitted to having "the seeing eye but not the working hand," Thoreau combined the romantic tenets of transcendentalism with the practical skills and restrained appetites of the simple life. Provocative and prickly, Thoreau consciously shunned the path toward the acquisition of money and possessions that his Concord neighbors trod with alacrity. Instead, he sought an integral life where making a living would not be subversive of his great end of life—movement toward human perfectibility. Leo Stoller maintains that for Thoreau, "the whole duty of man—workman, thinker, artist—was to perfect his own unique self." Such perfection entailed balancing the life of the mind with the work of the hands, forming a cohesive philosophy of living. Thoreau insisted:

To be a philosopher...is to love wisdom so as to live according to its dictates a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically."

To this end Thoreau tried to labor with his hands (i.e. surveying) on a purposely limited basis, leaving himself time for the various activities and interests which culminated in his essays. That he was unable to
do such shuffling very successfully was one of the constant disappointments in his life. Berry seemingly has achieved considerable success in implementing Thoreau's vision, for the farming labor that supports his body also nourishes his soul and sparks his mind. Work that originates in necessity is transformed into artistic activity which disciplines the spirit and informs the vision. This, in turn, affects subsequent decisions on the farm. ~

During Thoreau's twenty-six month experiment on the shores of Walden Pond he attempted to create an economy of self-sufficiency that would serve as a base for self-culture. He yearned to know what he could do without, what constituted the "true necessaries and means of life." He wanted to reject overtly a society that he believed had lost all sense of proportion and moral identity in its dogged pursuit of wealth and blind faith in technology. " He hoped that by stripping himself of superfluities and by studying the complex natural processes surrounding him he might "live deliberately," might "suck out all the marrow of life." In Walden, he delivers the challenge:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe...till we come to a hard bottom
and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d’appui...a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer....

What eventually registered on Thoreau’s Realometer was not that one need live a spartan existence or return to primitivism, but that one had to think profoundly and then act responsibly about what was truly important for both humanity and the earth. On this distinction Berry suggests:

As Thoreau so well knew, and so painstakingly tried to show us, what a man most needs is not a knowledge of how to get more, but a knowledge of the most he can do without, and of how to get along without it. The essential cultural discrimination is not between having and not having...but between the superfluous and the indispensable....The man who can keep a fire in a stove or on a hearth is not only more durable, but wiser, closer to the meaning of fire, than the man who can only work a thermostat. (HW, 76)

Getting closer to the meaning of the fundamental aspects of life is made possible through self-reliance. Both Thoreau and Berry advocate scrupulous self-examination to determine what one really needs and which skills or knowledge will be necessary to meet those needs. Three critical assumptions form the underpinnings of this self-reliance. First, both men hold an unyielding optimism that people can control
their own destinies. Thoreau writes, "I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor." Second, both understand true freedom as independence from the vagaries of centralized powers, the whim of the marketplace, or the conformity of fashion. For Berry, people are free "precisely to the extent that they are equal to their own needs. The most able are the most free" (CH, 130). Third, they hold the conviction that, in Thoreau's words, "our whole life is startlingly moral." If human purpose on earth is to be morally responsible, the self-reliant person is in the best position to act with clear recognition of the ramifications of those actions. Unlike the consumer who has little or no knowledge of the policies, attitudes, and actions which his money supports, the self-reliant individual holds the power to do right. "We can ally ourselves," Berry maintains, "with those things that are worthy..." (WPF, 102).

High on the scale of worthiness for Thoreau was the natural world. Like Emerson, he saw nature as a metaphor for the human mind, for the unlimited potentialities within each person. Thus he held no favor for agrarianism, referring to Concord's young farmers as "serfs of the soil," but exalted in wilder-
ness. Roderick Nash suggests that for Thoreau, "wildness was the source of vigor, inspiration, and strength. It was, in fact, the essential ‘raw-material of life.’" People needed to enter the wild to be restored, to find the freedom and solitude that civilization destroyed. Physically stepping into such an environment, Thoreau believed, would open the door to journeys of discovery within the more crucial environments of mind and soul. He entered nature with a receptive mind, keenly observing and recording the processes at work, the cycles of rebirth, life at its essential core, stripped of the human trappings that clouded one’s vision and of the perception that everything was a resource to be exploited for material gain. Relationship with nature became a means for a continual dialogue with self. For Berry, the value of Thoreau’s model is unmistakable:

Man cannot be independent of nature. In one way or another he must live in relation to it, and there are only two alternatives: the way of the frontiersman, whose response to nature was to dominate it, to assert his presence in it by destroying it; or the way of Thoreau, who went to the natural places to become quiet in them, to learn from them, to be restored by them. To know these places, because to know them is to need them and respect them and be humble before them, is to preserve them. (LLH, 41-2)

What was to be found in nature could awaken the dormant capacities within each individual, revealing the
ultimate meaning of Thoreau’s famous dictum, "In wild-
ness is the preservation of the world."  

His stay at Walden and especially his 1846 venture
to the Maine woods, however, tempered Thoreau’s ideas
about primitive simplicity. Assertions about the natu-
ral superiority of Indians and others who lived in
daily contact with the wilderness were gradually
altered in favor of the balance point of a middle
ground, a "half cultivated" existence that combined the
inherent goodness of wildness with the achieved bene-
fits of culture. Nash asserts:

For an optimum existence Thoreau
believed, one should alternate between
wilderness and civilization, or, if
necessary, choose for a permanent
residence ‘partially cultivated
country.’ The essential requirement was
to maintain contact with both ends of
the spectrum."

This is precisely what Berry has done on several
levels. His homestead consists of both forest and
cultivated land, each its own textbook on nature’s
ways. At home in both, Berry is engaged in a lifelong
experiment of how and to what extent one can cooperate
in natural processes, as well as what one must leave
alone. By splitting his life between farming and writ-
ing, Berry maintains "contact with both ends of the
spectrum." So do his books, as they meditate on human
relationship with nature, on self and society, on the
values of simplicity, on the place of humanity in the
great mystery of Creation, or on the advantages of some
specific agricultural technique or application. Fur-
thermore, he reveals that the spectrum is not
accurately depicted by a horizontal line, but rather by
a set of spheres which overlap in places. Those over-
lapping areas form a middle ground of wholeness and
richness, where a person can be responsibly at home
with self and the world. It is the domain of the
simple life.

The Environmental Legacy

A third important line of intellectual descent for
Berry’s simple life ideas comes from those naturalists,
ecologists, philosophers, and poets who have championed
the nation’s environment. Their causes have varied
from passionately advocating the official preservation
of wilderness areas to calling for a new understanding
of how humans relate to the rest of the natural world.
They have been characterized by awakened consciousness
to the elaborate web of life on earth, and the small
but disproportionately powerful role humanity plays
within it. They have stood in stark contrast to
American society’s dominant view of the environment as
an unlimited repository of resources whose unconscious pillage and/or willful exploitation in order to satisfy insatiable appetites of growth and consumption are considered a national birthright.

John Muir is usually credited with providing the spark for modern environmentalism. Beginning in the 1870's, Muir's campaign to preserve wilderness areas remains the mainstay of many activist individuals and organizations. Much of Muir's environmental consciousness was shaped by his appropriation of Transcendentalist ideas of nature. Nourished by his reading of Emerson and Thoreau, as well as by his years of personal wilderness experience, Muir believed in trying to merge his consciousness with nature, to seek unity in its complexity and order. Nature, Muir wrote in My First Summer in the Sierra (1911), is a "window opening into heaven, a mirror reflecting the Creator." Natural objects were "sparks of the Divine Soul." The wilderness was the total patterning of creation made manifest. The longer he sojourned there, the more Muir began to realize that it was a unified order which included human beings. If one studied and mingled with nature, the possibility for transcendent power would become available.

Out of this awareness grew Muir's respect for the rights of all aspects of creation, anticipating by a
half century many ecologists’ argument for biospheric equality. For Muir, it was a dangerous heresy to measure the natural world by its utility for humanity. Instead, he affirmed that there was inherent value in all organic and inorganic forms. Steadfastly echoing this idea today, Berry suggests that human limitations prevent our perception or understanding of the larger pattern of creation. Thus our actions must be taken only after considering their potential consequences upon patterns and order we did not make and cannot fully know.

Muir’s actions focused on educating the eastern public to protect western wilderness by establishing national parks. His efforts helped create Yosemite in 1890. Two years later he co-founded the Sierra Club in order to maintain a watch on both Yosemite and Yellowstone, as well as to promote other efforts at preservation and to provide a fellowship forum for urban nature enthusiasts. By the turn of the century Muir was America’s pre-eminent spokesperson for preservation and its best known advocate of primitivism. Implicit in his unbounded appetite for wildness was a criticism of a crude civilization of greed, which Muir characterized as diseased and overwrought. A cure lay available in an ascetic life in the wild. While few followed Muir’s
lifestyle, throngs were inspired by him and joined in his causes. The Sierra Club has grown to become one of the largest and most powerful conservation organizations in the country.

Wendell Berry has a keen interest in conservation and preservation, but retains serious misgivings about the conservation movement and its large organizations. At the root of his quarrel is the belief that only individuals can properly define and enact their relationship with the world, through actions whose impact is specific and tangible. Conservation organizations, in Berry’s perception, can only define a relationship with the world in general terms. This has usually meant that they have divided the country into two essential categories: areas that they wish to preserve (wilderness) and areas that are appropriate for use by the population. Such a divided mentality inevitably spells disaster because it focuses on the protection of some places while consigning others to “inadvertent destruction” (UNS, 27). The key focus needs to be on the areas of use. Responsible use cannot be enacted by organizations, only by individuals:

The use of the world is finally a personal matter, and the world can be preserved in health only by the forbearance and care of a multitude of persons. (UNS, 26)
While conservation groups can help define and advocate responsible use, and promote legislation which attempts to mandate it, people must willingly practice it or little lasting change will occur. Those who undertake the responsibility to alter their own lives are "worth more to the conservation movement than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend their ways" (CH, 81).

A man more akin to Berry’s environmental views than Muir was Muir’s contemporary, John Burroughs. Rather than being an activist in conservation issues, Burroughs was a congenial and popular farmer who wrote natural history essays. At "Riverby," his seventeen acre farm eighty miles north of New York City, Burroughs followed Thoreau’s advice of limiting his material needs in order to have more time for higher thinking. That thinking resulted in an approach to nature study that Thomas Lyon suggests, "preserved both empirical accuracy and the sense of wonder and enjoyment." Burroughs’ writings promoted a simple life vision based on personal moral action and moderate desires. He eloquently objected to the acquisitiveness and class divisions that dominated turn-of-the-century society. Like Berry does today, Burroughs denied that any answers lay in the various "isms" offered by com-
peting factions. Instead, he counseled his readers to seek simple pleasures, a "moderate competency," humility, and a life rich in the immediate and particular details of a place intimately known and loved. In "What Life Means to Me," Burroughs summarized his combination of contact with the natural world, self-reliance, and limited desires:

That is the simple life—direct and immediate contact with things, life with the false wrappings torn away...How free one feels, how good the elements taste, how close one gets to them, how they fit one's body and one's soul! To see the fire that warms you....To be in direct and personal contact with the sources of your material life; to want no extras, no shields; to find the universal elements enough....These are some of the rewards of the simple life.  

The intent of this passage is echoed countless times in Berry's works. Like Burroughs, he finds the value of appreciating and caring for one's particular place in the world to be priceless.

By mid-century conservationists and naturalists were joined by an emerging group known as ecologists, many of whom sought to re-define American understandings of all human use of the environment. Pre-eminent among them was Aldo Leopold. Leopold's career serves as a metaphor for the evolution of environmental thought in this century. After graduating from the Yale School of Forestry in 1909, he received a position
with the United States Forest Service in District III, at that time the territories that would become Arizona and New Mexico. His emphasis mirrored the thinking of the day—production management. He conducted research on methods of increasing populations of cattle, sheep, fish and game, and trees. He led an active war against predators, encouraging a widespread campaign to destroy wolves and mountain lions. Within a few years Leopold’s specialized interest in game management led him to two significant changes. The first was a steadily growing appreciation for the need to protect all wild things against human exploitation. In a 1915 article Leopold stated his hope "...that every citizen may learn to hold the lives of harmless wild creatures as a public trust for human good, against the abuse of which he stands personally responsible." The second shift, in 1924, was to accept the assistant directorship of the Service’s Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin.

During his Wisconsin days Leopold began to perceive productivity as a function of the overall health of a habitat. This led initially to his active involvement in wilderness preservation efforts, but ultimately to his development of what he termed "ecological consciousness." By the mid 1930’s as a faculty member at
the University of Wisconsin, Leopold argued the radical contention that land was an organism and that there was a necessary interdependence among all living things within a given environment. Humans belonged to that environmental community, not as lords or masters, but as ordinary citizens. Human attitudes toward the natural world, therefore, had to change or else "disharmony and sickness would continue to characterize those parts of the earth man had civilized."  

Leopold formulated a "land ethic" as his controlling vision. This consisted of extending the ethical considerations reserved for human interactions to all life forms. Human relationship with the environment, he stressed, must be examined from ethical and aesthetic perspectives, not just economic ones. Once one perceives the natural world as an intricate network of interdependent parts, then humans must assume their share of the responsibility for the health of the rest of life on earth. Morality, rather than economics, constituted the proper sphere for human relationship with the world. In A Sand County Almanac (1949) Leopold offered a simple but compellingly powerful ethical standard:

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.
These two sentences have become the foundation for the biocentric thinking known as "deep ecology" (see chapter VI). Deep ecologists ask the kinds of questions that scientists traditionally do not, questions which recognize that ethics, politics, value theory, and science are inseparable. Norwegian Arne Naess explains:

We need to ask questions like, ‘Why do we think that economic growth and high levels of consumption are so important?’ The conventional answer would be to point to the economic consequences of not having economic growth. But in deep ecology, we ask whether the present society fulfills basic human needs like love and security and access to nature, and, in so doing, we question our society’s underlying assumptions."

Both the land ethic and the concerns of deep ecologists are central to Berry’s work and life. "There is," Berry maintains after all, "only one value: the life and health of the world" (CH, 164). Therefore, all policies, all decisions, all actions, whether personal, corporate, or national should be governed by that standard.

Although Berry has earned a considerable audience among environmentally conscious readers, he remains outside of the mainstream environmental movement for two fundamental reasons. First, unlike contemporary environmental writers whom he admires, such as Gary
Snyder, Barry Lopez, and Edward Abbey, Berry’s attention focuses on agriculture rather than on wilderness. For most Americans, agricultural land and practices are omitted from discussions of conservation, preservation, pollution, or other popular concerns. The second reason can most clearly be demonstrated by a brief glance at Berry’s attitudes which are revealed in his praise of Edward Abbey.

Abbey, Berry claims, is a problem for many in the movement because he is not an environmentalist, conservationist or “boxable ist of any other kinć” (WPF, 36). While he clearly joins in the defense of some environmental issues, Abbey never wavers in his determination to expose that the root of our environmental problems is cultural; it is the way we live that is at fault. Berry contends that, at heart, Abbey is an autobiographer:

He may be writing on one or another of what are now called environmental issues, but he remains Edward Abbey, speaking as and for himself, fighting, literally, for dear life...As an autobiographer, his work is self-defense; as a conservationist, it is to conserve himself as a human being. But this is self-defense and self-conservation of the largest and noblest kind, for Mr. Abbey understands that to defend and conserve oneself as a human being in the fullest, truest sense, one must defend and conserve many others and much else. What would be the hope of being personally whole in a dismembered
society, or personally healthy in a land scalped, scraped, eroded, and poisoned...? Edward Abbey is fighting on a much broader front than that of any 'movement.' He is fighting for the survival not only of nature, but of human nature, of culture, as only our heritage of works and hopes can define it. (WPF, 39-40)

This characterization of Abbey perfectly captures the essence of Wendell Berry—an individual who defies easy categorization, a thinker whose refusal to conform to any movement's orthodoxies allows his perceptions to remain focused on the full dimensions of problems, and a fighter for the integrity of human life and nature. Furthermore, it is clear that as Berry writes about Abbey, he is aware of being autobiographical as well. What he praises in Abbey he seeks to accomplish himself.

Berry's summation of Abbey's value for American society precisely describes his own efforts:

...he sees the gravity, the great danger, of the predicament we are now in, he tells it unswervingly, and he defends unflinchingly the heritage and the qualities that may preserve us. (WPF, 47)

To those who would consequently label either Abbey or Berry a crank, Berry would undoubtedly delight in E.F. Schumacher's rejoinder to that charge: "A crank is a low-cost, low capital tool. It can be used on a small scale. It is non-violent. And it makes revolutions."
The revolution Wendell Berry promotes is one that would have Americans change the way they live daily life. Such change must derive from a re-assessment of fundamental purposes and a focus on means rather than ends. In his combining of insights gained from environmentalism, agrarianism, Romanticism, and some great moralists of the western tradition, Berry has fashioned a way to live as fully and as simply as he can. Berry argues that the essential unity of life is available for people to reclaim. The reclamation process demands an overarching moral framework and a belief that things cohere. Speer Morgan suggests that the integration of Berry’s "ethic, passions, writing style, and whole life," achieve in his thought the “status of a practical metaphysic, a way of acting according to his understanding of the ground of being." His ground of being reinforces his insistence on the application of ideas and virtues as their real tests. Berry is perhaps most clearly described by the epithet he uses for his father— a practical visionary.

Readers of Berry soon recognize that his work is complex and varied within the limitations of an organic vision of simplicity that is necessarily singular. In other words, each of his texts refines, expands, or
places in a new context a select number of recurrent themes, all building off a consistent philosophical base. As one student of Berry’s work comments:

> What at first may appear to be a simple body of agricultural literature, on careful examination gains the character of a sophisticated and elaborately coherent, moral and ethical philosophy.\(^{30}\)

Furthermore, this unity and coherence is advanced by the way in which Berry’s works in different genres complement one another. His essays establish the parameters of his vision of the world. They are instructive, often polemical, both sharply critical of American culture and earnestly affirmative of the possibility for change. Berry’s poetry is more lyrical and celebrative, while never losing contact with the burden of history and the fallen nature of humanity. His fiction provides characters (almost exclusively male) who are struggling to live responsibly toward one another and the earth, fleshing out the cardinal notions of the non-fiction. On the linkage among these forms Berry remarks:

> The life of the mind and imagination, I think, bears little resemblance to a contest. My various pieces of writing are not involved in a race for first place, but in something more like a neighborhood; they have been necessary and helpful to each other.\(^{31}\)

All three genres stress the difficulties, but ultimately the rewards, of a simple life dedicated to
the responsible enactment of humanity’s role in creating and maintaining the health of the earth and its inhabitants. With this goal clearly in mind, Berry fastens his attention, both as an artist of the field and the word, on his proper place on earth. He is secure in the belief that on that ground a life of simplicity, meaning, and value can be created.
Notes to Chapter I

7. Ibid., p. 7.
10. Tom Chaffin, "America's Agrarian Jeremiah," review of *What Are People For?*, by Wendell Berry, in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*.
13. Jefferson's lack of economic focus in evaluating the merits of agricultural society is one piece of evidence in Leo Marx's argument that pastoralism more accurately describes Jefferson's vision than does agrarianism. In *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Marx contends that the true identity of Jefferson's husbandman is "the good shepherd of the old pastoral dressed in American
hospun" (127).
15. John F. Kasson, Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900 (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 24-5, cites as examples the nailery Jefferson built at Monticello that turned out 10,000 nails a day, as well as the textile mill of four jennies with 112 spindles created there.
18. In a famous letter to John Jay (1785), Jefferson wrote: "Cultivators of the earth are...tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds." Berry echoes, "...as many as possible should share in the ownership of the land and thus be bound to it by economic interest, by the investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition" (UNS, 13).
19. This axiom has been expressed throughout agrarian literature, perhaps receiving its most poignant treat- ment in the dumbstruck articulation of evicted tenant farmers in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath: "We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good it's still ours-being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it" (34-5).
21. The connection of farming and democracy is com- monplace in agrarian literature. Two critiques of this alliance are A. Whitney Griswold, Farming and Democracy (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1948) and Grant McConnell, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953). Griswold contends that urban areas feed democracy more than rural ones, while McConnell suggests that most farmers define democracy as local control. Berry strongly advocates for local control of government, school, church, and businesses, believing that this prevents the kinds of abstractions which lead to the mining of local resources for the profit of distant powerbrokers.
22. The eight other members of the Southern Agrarians included Andrew Lytle, Stark Young, John Gould
Fletcher, Lyle Lanier, Henry Kline, Herman Nixon, Frank Owsley, and John Donald Wade.


28. This definition is Berry's, and has been widely adopted by individuals and organizations in the sustainable agriculture movement. See Bruce Colman, "Preface and Acknowledgements," in Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman, eds., *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), p. ix. This book grew out of a June, 1982 meeting in Des Plaines, Iowa. Similar to John Crowe Ransom's summoning together the Nashville Agrarians fifty years earlier, Wes Jackson gathered together farmers, scientists, writers, and environmentalists to discuss what could be done for American agriculture. Berry played a prominent role in the session and helped to edit the interdisciplinary text.

29. Donald Worster, "Good Farming and the Public Good," in *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*, p. 32.


Productivity as the single standard of American agricultural policy is reflected in government spending priorities. In 1982, according to the Washington Post (June 13), the USDA spent about 25% of its $430 million research budget on methods of improving productivity, while allocating less than $1 million, or .002%, to studies of organic practices that would reduce the farmer’s production costs and provide a healthier product.

Quoted in The Land Stewardship Project, The Land Stewardship Newsletter (Autumn 1990), p. 15. The Asilomar Declaration was drafted by a group of sustainable agriculture advocates and experts at a 1989 gathering in Pacific Grove, California.

There are four common objections raised by those who criticize this attempt to reverse the industrialization of agriculture. They are: 1) it would entail the return of back-breaking labor; 2) a return to family farms would reduce the food supply; 3) the price of food will rise; and 4) the quality and variety of food available to consumers will decrease. Advocates of sustainability answer these charges in a variety of ways. On the labor issue: a shift in the scale of farming would logically suggest the reduced size and use of machinery, but not necessarily its elimination; tasks on a family farm are more varied than on a monoculture operation, providing diversity and opportunities for different uses of the body; physical labor is an enriching and worthwhile endeavor for physical health and satisfaction. On the food supply: even the USDA concedes that on a per acre basis the small farm is more efficient and can match or exceed agribusiness yields. On price increase: this will probably be true initially, although the higher costs of local production of food might be offset by the transportation and processing costs that make up the bulk of every food dollar. On quality and variety: decline will be in food’s appearance due to absence of color additives and pesticides; improvements in taste, safety, and nutritive value are unquestionable; some decline in variety will occur due to seasonal availability, but could be offset by use of cold frames and other techniques of

For a sampling of Berry on the Amish see HE, 177-8; UNS, 95; GGL, 249-263; REM, 77-84. While Berry does not propose that the Amish provide a model for all to imitate, he offers them as proof of the economic feasibility of redirecting farming toward the health of the land, its benefactors, and their communities.


For example, in *The Gift of Good Land,* Berry includes essays chronicling farming practices in Kentucky, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia,
Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Arizona, and even Peru.


**4.** Quoted in Shi, *The Simple Life*, p. 133.


**6.** Leo Stoller, "Thoreau's Doctrine of Simplicity," *New England Quarterly* 29 (December 1956): 444.

**7.** Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 15.

**8.** There is a significant difference in Thoreau's and Berry's approaches to work. Thoreau sought to work less, a shift away from traditional Protestant doctrine, believing that the average working person did not have the time to develop true integrity. Berry, on the other hand, sees work as a sacrament, as the activity by which one creates identity and fulfills the moral responsibility of humanity. Berry's ideas on the work of the farmer are explored in chapter III.

**9.** Thoreau's criticism of American society is succinctly summarized in the title of his essay devoted to the topic, "Life Without Principle."

**10.** Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 70.


12. In *Walden*, Thoreau asks of his townsmen who farm, "Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?" (p. 8) In "The Bean-field" chapter he suggests of his agricultural enterprise that, "It was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation" (p. 112).


**14.** Thoreau, "Walking," *The Atlantic Monthly* (June,


\textsuperscript{36}. John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra, quoted in Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, p. 125.


\textsuperscript{38}. Thomas Lyon, Jr., This Incomparable Lande, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{39}. Shi, The Simple Life, pp. 198-201. See also


4. Berry’s moral reasoning is much like Leopold’s. It is to Leopold that Berry and his co-editors dedicate *Meeting the Expectations of the Land*.


6. Arne Naess, quoted in Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs, Smith, 1985), p. 74. Devall and Sessions list the basic principles of deep ecology as follows: 1) human and non-human life have intrinsic value independent of usefulness for human purposes; 2) richness and diversity of life forms contribute to intrinsic value and are values in themselves; 3) humans have no right to diminish richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs; 4) flourishing of life (human and non-human) requires a decrease in human population; 5) current human interference with non-human world is excessive and worsening; 6) policies must be changed; 7) attitudinal change is needed to shift toward an appreciation of quality of life rather than standard of living; and 8) people who agree with the previous principles have an obligation to implement the necessary
changes (p. 70). Berry agrees with all of these except the required decrease in population, and has made it his life’s work as a farmer and writer to try to implement such changes. For more on deep ecology and Berry see chapter VI; see note 2 in that chapter for bibliographic references on deep ecology.

47. Snyder, Berry’s personal friend to whom he dedicated Standing By Words, is the leading literary shaper of deep ecology sensibilities. Earth House Hold (1969), Turtle Island (1974) and Good, Wild, Sacred (1984) are good examples of his affirmation of wilderness and his belief that it needs to be re-introduced into civilization in order to release stored energy and natural integrity. On the differences between Berry and Snyder see Patrick Murphy, “Two Different Paths in the Quest for Place: Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry,” American Poetry 2 (Fall 1984): 60-68. Barry Lopez, in Arctic Dreams (1986) and Crossing Open Ground (1988), explores two different paradigms for perceiving wilderness, those of domination or democratic membership. Edward Abbey’s many books have unsparingly blasted American society’s hedonistic wastefulness, often through contrast with wilderness solitude. Desert Solitaire (1968), Cactus Country (1973), and Abbey’s Road (1979) are key examples of his efforts.


CHAPTER II: THE CENTRALITY OF PLACE

In his provocative treatise on morality in literature John Gardner explains the coherence of Dante's poetry by suggesting that, "The Commedia, then, is Dante's construction of a complete universe...all built on one test...'What can I say without shame or embarrassment, without a sense of being base or cynical, in the presence of Beatrice?'" Similarly, the deeply moral underpinnings of Wendell Berry's work support a universe built upon a singular test- "What must a man do to be at home in the world?" Berry's answer to this question embraces many ideals of simple life thinking, but their common root is a complex and intimate knowledge of place. It is mostly through a marriage with place that Berry suggests one can earn sufficient knowledge to understand oneself, to act responsibly toward others and the earth, and to create art.

Such knowledge of place is, for Berry, the first imperative for awareness, a corollary to consciousness. And as Thoreau made clear, consciousness, (to be "fully awake") will lead to moral reform because one will begin to ask the right questions. The questions "Who am I?" and "What should I be doing with my life?" can-
not be addressed, Berry would assert, without asking "Where am I?" simultaneously. As one grows to understand the mutuality of dependence of oneself and one's place, the need to become a caretaker or steward of the place will be manifestly clear. The failure to do so, or unconsciousness, will inevitably be destruc-
tive. Berry sees this individual failure as one of our worst national failings:

The American disease is the assumption that when a man has exploited and used up the possibilities of one place, he has only to move on to another... Our people are suffering ter-
ribly from a sort of spiritual nomadism, a loss of meaningful contact with the earth and the earth's cycles of birth, growth and death. They lack the vital morality and spirituality that can come only from such contact. (LLH, 86)

Fortunately, this disease can be cured, like many other illnesses, on a personal level. Individual consciousness that leads to responsible action can reverse the debilitating effects of 300 years of self-destructive behavior.

As a writer who is calling for Americans to develop communion with their land and local culture, Berry seems to be echoing a voice that has resounded since the early nineteenth century. In the 1830's Ralph Waldo Emerson made his eloquent pleas for a literature which celebrated the local and the commonplace.  

Emer-
son worried that "without American writers and artists to celebrate the land...Americans' relationship to their lands was fated to remain what it was, shallow, meretricious, exploitative." Therefore, Emerson sought a national literature, a distinctly American voice that grew out of the particularities of American life.

Berry, however, seeks a different remedy. While he unquestionably advocates writing which is connected to native land and culture, he is not interested in the abstraction of a national literature or an American voice. Indeed, Berry maintains that abstraction is at the root of many of our most pressing problems because it allows individuals to absolve themselves of responsibility for their own actions. Embracing a certain political, social, or scientific ideology distances people from their immediate feelings of obligation to one another and to the earth. Instead, Berry desires that all Americans immerse themselves in the particularities of their experience and develop a personal, intimate relationship with their land and community. Such actions could create the forms by which to enact the consciousness of these critical relationships. The result, Berry believes, would be spiritual, moral, and ecological health. Among a "genuinely
native and settled people" the practical forms of daily
and seasonal life, repeated year after year and gener-
ation after generation, function religiously as
ceremonies of atonement with the world:

In such a situation a person would not
consider himself to be involved in a
series of abstract relationships, as one
of a number, but a conscious responsible
participant in the life both of the land
he lived from and of the universe,
dependent upon the greater life but also
its protector. (HW, 89)

It has been Berry's determination to become "genuinely
settled" and to farm and to write his way into the com-
plexity of such immediate intimacy with place. This is
the direction Berry's pursuit of the simple life fol-
lows.

Berry formally embarked on this path in 1964 with
his decision to return to his native Kentucky. At that
time he was living a young writer's dream in New York
City: a faculty position at prestigious NYU with
proximity to America's literary and cultural wealth.
He was offered a teaching position at the University of
Kentucky, which he accepted despite the admonitions
from his senior colleagues at NYU. They stressed the
career risks involved in leaving New York's literary
life. After agonizing for some time, Berry chose to
move, later remarking:

I knew that because I was a writer the
literary world would always have an
importance for me and would always attract my interest. But I never doubted that the world was more important to me than the literary world; and the world would always be most fully and clearly present to me in the place I was fated by birth to know better than any other. (LLH, 175)

Within a year Berry had purchased a small, hillside farm which lay within a four mile radius of where seven generations of his family had lived. Now that this was not only his native place, but also his chosen one, Berry urgently sought to appropriate his heritage. The process was exhilarating and frightening:

And for the first time I felt my nakedness. I realized that the culture I needed was not to be found by visiting museums and libraries and auditoriums. It occurred to me that there was another measure for my life than the amount or even the quality of the writing I did; a man, I thought, must be judged by how willingly and meaningfully he can be present where he is, by how fully he can make himself at home in his part of the world. I began to want desperately to learn to belong to my place. The test, it seemed to me would be how content I could become to remain in it, how independent I could be, there, of other places. (HW, 87)

Here was an experiment, an opportunity for renewal, a chance to discover through the daily work of the farm a sense of what culture is sufficient to his life in a given place.

In the ensuing years Berry has solidified his beliefs on how one can live responsibly and meaning-
fully in one’s place. The process begins with Berry’s a priori understanding that wild creatures belong to their place by nature, but that humans can only belong to theirs by knowledge and by virtue. Human economy in any given place should be subject to the asking of three critical questions before any human action is taken: "What is here? What will nature permit us to do here? What will nature help us to do here?" (HE, 146) Implicit in these questions are the recognitions that each place has its unique features which must be respected, and more importantly, that people have historically exercised too much power with too little knowledge. One must begin by thinking of oneself as "living within rather than upon the life of the place" (LLH, 150). Living upon the world is a state of consciousness which suggests that a person has already made a profound division between oneself and one’s place. Identity with place becomes an abstraction, like regionalism or patriotism, which usually leads to actions that cannot be reconciled with the health of the land.

Living within a place, on the other hand, suggests a complex relationship pieced together over time through patterns of value and restraint, through principle and expectation, through memory, familiarity, and
love. The result of living within a place is two kinds of knowledge: objective, particular experience of the world, and reverence for the mystery of creation, for the patterns which lie beyond human understanding.

THE FARM AS PARADIGM

Berry establishes the farm as his central conception of place, and posits the farmer as man’s proper role in relation to nature. Since work, for Berry, is where relation to place comes alive, the farm becomes the possibility for a lifetime education into stewardship and love. The farm is land with boundaries within which an individual can exercise a certain amount of control through the labor of rebuilding and the continuity of generational history. In a meditation from Sabbaths Berry writes:

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. (SAB, 18)

With his mind in place, "the farmer," suggests Patrick Murphy in American Poetry, "attempts to harmonize with nature, atone for the sins of previous generations, and develop a universal appreciation for all life."  

Berry’s concept of the farmer exists in marked contrast to the prevailing portrait of contemporary
American farmers. In fact, beginning with his 1977 publication of *The Unsettling of America*, Berry has probably been this country’s most outspoken critic of farming practices and policies. His cardinal objection is that traditional agriculture has given way to the dictates of an industrial economy, with disastrous results for individuals, families, communities, soil, and consumers. Where Berry would invoke the principles of husbandry, stewardship, and discipline as standards of behavior, the industrial economy invokes efficiency. The industrial ideal of efficiency, or the highest possible annual production by the smallest possible number of "workers" for the least possible monetary return, has divided the farmer’s mind from his work and his place. It has moved him away from nurture toward exploitation; it has made him a victim of his own, and our culture’s, failings.

Berry’s use of the terms ‘exploitation’ and ‘nurture’ describe a division that exists between people, as well as within people. They are polar positions in a great morality play whose stakes are high. The characteristics of these opposite kinds of mind can be defined:

The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money profit; the nurturer’s goal is health-
his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery.

(UNS, 7-8)

The farmer who has ceased to be a nurturer has done so because he has believed the tenets of the industrial economy. In practice, this means that he has expanded his acreage so much that he must rely upon expensive technology in order to farm. To purchase these machines the farmer has to amass huge debts, which in turn force him to alter his ideas on crops and land use. He abandons diversity for monoculture; he gives up some of the time-honored and complex strategies of independence (crop rotation, manure use, animal power, solar power) in favor of a more facile dependence on petroleum, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and of course, equipment and credit. This oversimplification of the problems confronting the farmer and his place,
this industrialized division which comes between the farmer's mind and his work, leads him away from understanding the "necessary likenesses between the processes of farming and the processes of nature and begins to order the farm on the assumption that it should and can be like a factory."

In virtually every volume of his essays Berry accosts those institutions of American agriculture whose vested interests have been served in changing agri-culture to agri-technology: agribusiness corporations, university specialists, and government agencies. This troika (though certainly with the farmer's help) is implicated in each of the critical problems facing American agriculture today: soil erosion; aquifer mining; pesticide use; fertilizer use; over-capitalization; decline of rural economy; vanishing of the family farm. All of these issues are symptomatic of the systemic problem of seeing land and people as resources. In such a view the value of land becomes equal to its sale price, the failure of millions of small farmers is an acceptable trade-off for progress, and competition becomes the sufficient and definitive human motive. The casualties from this value system are not just those listed above, not just what the majority who do not farm can dismiss as issues particu-
lar to agriculture. The casualties include the dissolution of community, the diminishment of character, and the destruction of the earth.\footnote{7}

The gulf between Berry’s vision of the farmer as the model for man’s relationship with place and the industrial ideal of the farmer as mass producer was forcefully depicted in 1977 when Berry debated Former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz.\footnote{8} Butz, in office from 1971-1976, was a powerful proponent of agribusiness who was quite popular with the farming constituency. Butz’s argument articulated the salient features of the modern farming credo. There is no crisis in agriculture. Thanks to scientific and technological advancement, as well as big business practices we have reduced the number of families on the land from 45\% at the start of the century to about 4\% now. This means that millions of people have been spared the drudgery of manual labor in the dirt, with the result that we all live better for it. One worker on an American farm can now feed and clothe himself and seventy other people. We feed ourselves for less than seventeen percent of our take-home pay, which allows us to afford automobiles, tv dinners, and color televisions. Food is our number one source of foreign exchange, amounting to $24 billion in 1976. There are,
of course, some trade-offs for this astounding produc-
tivity, some displaced people and some rural institu-
tions that face pressures. However, Butz asserts:

... our challenge is not to yield before
the nostalgia of yesteryear. Our chal-
gen is not to turn the clock back.
Our challenge is not to go back to more
inefficient ways. Our challenge is not
to put more people back on the land and
therefore decrease the efficiency of
American agriculture. Our challenge is
to adapt to the changing situation in
which we find ourselves. We need...to
adopt Butz’s Law of Economics— it’s a
very simple one: Adapt or Die.”

Berry’s approach to the subject of agriculture was
so far removed from that of Butz that it prompted the
Secretary to remark, "I’ve got a feeling that Dr. Berry
and I haven’t met here tonight.”10 Berry countered,
"We may never meet, because he’s arguing from
quantities and I’m arguing from values.”11 Berry began
with the belief that agriculture cannot be disconnected
from other parts of society, that everything is inter-
twined so that whatever affects the farm also affects
many aspects of the culture. As farms continue to
increase in size and mechanization, as chemical usage
proliferates, as farm foreclosures multiply, the land
is being neglected, abused, and wasted as never before;
key cultural losses are occurring as well. When energy
replaces knowledge, methodology replaces care, and
technology replaces morality the very foundation of
American society is shaken. Berry told the audience:

The farmer standing in his field is not simply a component of a production machine. He stands where lots of cultural lines cross. The traditional farmer, that is the farmer who first fed himself off his farm and then fed other people, who farmed with his family, who passed the land on down to people who knew it and had the best reasons to take care of it— that farmer stood at the convergence of traditional values, our values: independence, thrift, stewardship, private property, political liberties, family, marriage, parenthood, neighborhood—values that decline as the farmer is reduced by a technologist whose only standard is efficiency.\textsuperscript{12}

The Berry-Butz division is also fleshed out in Berry’s most recent novel, \textit{Remembering} (1988). Here Andy Catlett, a small acreage organic farmer, agricultural journalist and outspoken critic of farm practices (a thinly veiled autobiographical character) is attending an agricultural conference in San Francisco in 1976. Catlett has been invited to speak, but before he does so the reader is given an opportunity to witness Berry’s central villains in operation. The conference, “The Future of the American Food System,” is attended almost exclusively by agribusiness representatives, academicians from university agriculture departments, and governmental bureaucrats. A working farmer is hardly to be found anywhere in the vast auditorium.
The first speaker is a man, who precisely like Butz, was “an old farm boy who had made good, by becoming, first, a professor of agriculture, and then a great administrator in a great college of agriculture, and then the chairman of the board of a great agribusiness firm, and then an agricultural official, and then a high agricultural official” (REM, 10). This official expresses the common argument about American farm productivity, with the view that reducing the farm population from 45% to 4% is clear evidence of progress. He acknowledges the trade-offs (breakdown in old family unit, loss of communities, small business closings, fewer neighbors, soil erosion, water shortages, and chemical pollution), but concludes "that's the price of progress" (REM, 12).

He is quickly followed by Berry’s second target, the university specialist. This agricultural economist has developed a "quantimetric model" of the American food system with pre-input, input, and output divisions for each of its fifteen crop submodels. By way of explanation the economist offers: "A model will be recursive in structure when two conditions prevail: the matrix of coefficients of endogenous variables must be triangular, and the variance-covariance matrix of structural equation disturbances must be diagonal"
The economist then gives way to two colleagues who present papers entitled, "Suggestible Parameters in the Creation of Agricultural Meaning," and "The Ontology and Epistemology of Agriculture as a Self-Correcting System." Together the three professors illustrate Berry’s disdain for specialists. A specialist fragments knowledge and discipline into narrowly defined compartments. By doing so one loses sight of the effects of one’s work on other areas. Furthermore, the specialist tends to value the gathering of information for immediate use and to devalue the ultimate effects of such information. He deals in abstractions, and it is these abstractions that make it inevitable that things and lives will be transformed into money.

By the time Catlett arrives at the rostrum it is clear that what has taken place thus far has been talk about an agriculture of the mind. Catlett’s assessment is quick and cutting:

No farmer is here. No farmer has been mentioned. No one who has spoken this morning has worked a day on an actual farm in twenty years, and the reason for that is that none of the speakers wants to work on a farm or to be a farmer. The real interest of this meeting is in the academic careerism and the politics and business of agriculture, and I daresay that most people here, like the first speaker, are proud to have escaped the life and work of farmers, whom they do not admire. (REM, 23)
No quantimetric model could begin to explain what Catlett knew from experience, the dimensions of farming which defy quantification while clearly expressing value. What never seemed to enter the consciousness of speaker or audience member at the conference was felt by people like Andy Catlett. As one who still farms by traditional methods, Catlett is like the man portrayed eighteen years earlier in Berry’s poem, “The Man Born to Farming”:

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 the dung heap, and rise again in the 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? (CP, 103)

Berry’s concern with the farmer as the paradigm for human relationship with the earth is an overarching theme that unites all the genres of his writing, and more importantly, the actions of his life. He begins with the assumption that the proper role for mankind is that of steward, for the earth has been entrusted to people as a gift. “It is a gift because the people who
are to possess it did not create it...People are not
gods. They must not act like gods or assume godly
authority" (GGL, 270). Therefore, our responsibility
is to use the gift lovingly, through knowledge and
care, and to pass it on unimpaired to the next gener-
ation. To Berry, the best chance for this to happen
lies in the mind and heart of the small farmer.

Berry takes great exception to the popular concep-
tion of the mind of the farmer. The old assumption
that the agricultural mind is a limited one is an
egregious misconception which fits the purposes of
those who want to do the farmer’s thinking for him
(agricultural industrialists and bankers who stand to
make great profit using the farmer’s head), or those
who denigrate manual labor, or those who wish to remain
unconscious of their own responsibility and culpability
for current ecological and cultural predicaments. In
fact, the list of virtues which Berry sees as critical
for the good farmer reveal a complexity that is usually
associated with artists: accurate memory, observation,
insight, imagination, inventiveness, reverence, devo-
tion, fidelity, and restraint. Berry asserts:

The good farmer (like the artist, the
quarterback, the statesman) must be
master of many possible solutions, one
of which he must choose under pressure
and apply with skill in the right place
at the right time. This solving
requires knowledge, skill, intelligence, experience, and imagination of an order eminently respectable. It seems probable (in farming as in art) that such a mind will work best which is informed by a live tradition.13

This live tradition, for Berry, is that of the small, organic family farm. The critical components of this tradition are scale, diversity, commitment over time, and the practical and moral virtues of good farming practice. What can result is a unification of vision which extends Berry's definition of an organic farm far beyond the commonplace notion of one that grows food without the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Berry believes that properly conceived, an organic farm is one "whose structure is formed in imitation of the structure of a natural system; it has the integrity, the independence, and the benign dependency of an organism" (GGL, 143-4). In other words, the farmer's mind, body, and farm must be understood as a single entity.

The first requirement is one of scale. The farm must be small enough that the farmer can learn to know it intimately. If the farm is of human scale, less than 100 acres or so, one can become familiar with its design and its uniqueness, its needs and expectations. Husbandry, stewardship, and correct discipline are possible when the land is small enough to be contained
within the farmer's vision, walked by his feet, and worked by his hands. Intimacy grows through the daily and seasonal tasks which produce well worn paths in familiar earth. Work becomes a ritual where care and attention take precedence, for there is little margin for error or waste. On the industrialized corporate farm, which according to Kirkpatrick Sale in Human Scale, averaged 3,206 acres in California in 1972, the likelihood that many acres will suffer from inattention, carelessness, haste, or the indifferent application of power by a hired laborer who feels no connection with the land is enormously high. On the small family farm there is no room for these actions, nor is there likely to be anyone who would find them as acceptable or unavoidable.

The two poems which serve as introduction to Berry's latest volume of essays, What Are People For? (1990), illustrate the consequences of error and rectitude on the organic farm. The first poem, "Damage," meditates on Berry's mistake years ago of trying to make a small pond on a steep wooded hillside that he wanted to pasture. Although the operation appeared initially successful, a wet fall and winter caused a large section of the woods floor on the uphill side of the pond to slip down into the water. "The trouble,"
Berry recognizes, "was the familiar one: too much power, too little/ knowledge. The fault was mine" (WPF, 5). Even though the pond was small enough that the damage was minor and would heal over time, because the farmer and his land are a single organism the event festered inside Berry. The poem continues:

And yet there is damage— to my place, and to me. I have carried out, before my own eyes and against my intention, a part of the modern tragedy: I have made a lasting flaw in the face of the earth, for no lasting good.

Until that wound in the hillside, my place, is healed, there will be something impaired in my mind. My peace is damaged. I will not be able to forget it. (WPF, 6)

The companion poem, "Healing," reveals that while the scar in the hillside heals naturally, the wound in the farmer’s mind requires a reawakening of his consciousness. He has to re-learn that there are limits to the work one does on the farm and in one’s life. One cannot and should not make or order the world to one’s design. One must, rather, make one’s design fit the world’s:

Order is the only possibility of rest.

The made order must seek the given order, and find its place in it...

Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night. (WPF, 12-13)
The second crucial dimension of scale concerns the technological choices that one makes. Beyond a certain point the making of a technological choice affects many more people than merely the individual who made the choice. A farmer who decides to farm a thousand acres with the heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has chosen for thousands of others, people as well as animals, just as surely as the power company which chooses to build a nuclear plant. Technological choices which impair the soil, water, and air are, in effect, choices made for all others. Paraphrasing C.S. Lewis from *The Abolition of Man*, Berry suggests of the person who makes technological choices that "past a certain scale, if the break with the past is great enough, he chooses for the past, and if the effects are lasting enough he chooses for the future. He makes, then, a choice that can neither be chosen against or unchosen. Past a certain scale, there is no dissent from technological choice" (SBW, 60). Berry would insist that before people select their tools and techniques, they must choose their values and dreams.

On the farm of human scale the farmer’s work is a daily enactment of his awareness that he is part of an interconnected system. This awareness leads to the land being lovingly used, not exploited for profit and
maximum yield. It makes him understand over time the ways in which he and the farm both empower and limit one another.

After scale, the next basic component of small farm tradition is diversity. Berry understands the paradox of simplicity, that it is predicated upon a varied and intricate design of dependencies. He writes, "In agriculture, as in nature and culture, the more complex the system or structure (within the obvious biological and human limits), the more sound and durable it is likely to be" (GGL, xi). Whereas the large farm will most likely specialize in one or two crops, have few animals, and depend largely on machinery, chemicals, and credit, the small farm stresses diversity in economy through complexity of structure. For example, small farms traditionally employ a cropping pattern designed so that less than ten percent of the land in any given year would be planted in crops which require exposure of the soil. What was in row crop like corn one year will be in small grains like wheat, rye, or oats the next. The small grain fields will, in turn, be seeded in clover or grass. As this cropping rotation shifts around the farm it must also mesh with the grazing rotations of the varied livestock. A balance must be maintained between crops and livestock, between
grain crops and legumes, between nutrition and fertility. Added to this are the sophisticated techniques of livestock breeding, soil maintenance, erosion prevention, and woodlot management."

The successful handling of diversification is part of the larger mutuality of dependence of farmer and farm, which is a product of commitment to place and principles that continues through each successive year. It is the work of a lifetime. In "People, Land, and Community" from Standing By Words, Berry stresses that the process of learning to live in one's place involves on-going examination of one's actions. He recognizes that there may be a gulf between a person's intention or vision and what really is or must be. That distance will reveal itself through work at solving the unique problems of a place, coupled with a scrupulous look at the designs of both nature and the farmer:

When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. Truth begins to intrude with its matter-of-fact. One's work may be defined in part by one's visions, but it is defined in part too by problems, which the work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one's first vision of one's place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one's sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one's love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one's
visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—all have been changed by mutual correction. Correct discipline, given enough time, gradually removes one’s self from one’s line of sight. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one’s knowledge can cause respect for what one knows. (SBW, 70)

Correct discipline, love, and enough time emerge as the necessary elements for a close relationship with place to develop. Berry’s sense of correct discipline means an understanding of what needs to be done and a willingness to do it properly. After the work has been done, the good worker knows that time is needed for the work to reveal its worth. The farmer’s imperative is to stay, study the consequences, understand by living with the effects, and then if necessary, correct the situation by more work and longer living. It is only by living in place for a lifetime, Berry argues, that the farmer can make the conscious intentions and information he possesses when starting to farm, into good (correct) intentions and knowledge.

Clearly evident here is the irony that living the simple life places complex demands upon the individual. Berry’s insistence on moral action and personal responsibility make each decision on the farm part of a
continual search for truth, for an insight into enduring patterns of value. In "Solving for Pattern," in The Gift of Good Land, Berry outlines the nature of good solutions to agricultural problems, solutions which are guided by the dictates of correct discipline and the overriding principle that they must contribute to "the health of the soil, of plants and animals, of farm and farmer, of farm family and farm community..." (GGL, 137). Establishing health as the priority sets parameters within which one can search for solutions which are in harmony with the larger pattern. While Berry elucidates the essence of these solutions for agricultural problems, it is evident in his thinking that as cultural attitudes they have broad applicability to many other facets of contemporary society. This is, of course, consistent with his insistence upon the interconnections among the systems of a society.

Characteristic of each of Berry's axioms is his application of the key simple life principle of restraint. In any biological system there exist natural checks that maintain the balance between use and continuity. In nature, populations are controlled and equilibrium is usually maintained by predator/prey relationships, pests and disease. Normally, whatever occurs in one year must not be allowed to borrow from
or diminish the next. Berry maintains that human culture removes those natural checks, leaving us only moral restraint to govern our actions. As defined by Berry:

Restraint [is] ... the ability to accept and live within limits; to resist changes that are merely novel or fashionable; to resist greed and pride; to resist temptation to 'solve' problems by ignoring them, accepting them as 'trade-offs,' or bequeathing them to posterity." (GGL, 145)

In other words, "Can we forbear to do anything that we are able to do?" (UNS, 95)

"Solving for Pattern" elucidates Berry's fourteen principles for agricultural solutions, each of which reveals the workings of his mind and the sanctity of his vision of harmony with place. These principles of good farming practice have their basis in moral reasoning, emphasize both simplicity and personal responsibility, and are seen to fruition in practical application. They can be roughly divided into four categories: acceptance of limits; practicality; inclusiveness; and interconnectedness.16

The acceptance of limits has multiple dimensions. Most immediately, it means that a good solution to a problem has to acknowledge that there are parameters one must work within, employing to the greatest extent those materials and resources that are at hand. The
further away from the problem that one looks, the greater the risk of engaging in a solution that will be accompanied by other problems. Similarly, Berry insists, one must accept the limitations of discipline. "Agricultural problems should receive solutions that are agricultural, not technological or economic" (GGL, 141). A corollary to this suggests that limits or clear boundaries must be maintained between biological order and mechanical order. The farmer who keeps this distinction paramount will seek solutions that grow out of the complex mutuality of dependence he has with his land. The farmer who loses this awareness will often abandon diversity and fall prey to the oversimplified solutions proffered by the salesmen of industrial agriculture.

In addition to the limitations of kind and discipline, a good solution must reside within limits of degree, or as Berry continually asks, "How much is enough?" While the industrial model is predicated on the assumption that enough is all that the market will bear, the model based on health insists that the scope should be determined by one's limits of attention and care. Berry asserts that regardless of the kind of work, there is a critical point beyond which increases in quantity necessarily produce decreases in quality.
Since any pattern contains such a limit, one must
determine where the turning point lies. The yardstick
for the good farmer must be his own consciousness:

A healthy farm incorporates a pattern
that a single human mind can comprehend,
make, maintain, vary in response to cir-
cumstances, and pay steady attention to.
(GGL, 142)

Finally, Berry cautions that one must not perceive
a solution for something that it is not. All human
agricultural attempts, even organic ones, are at best
imitations or analogies of natural processes. They are
not what nature would be doing if people were not
there. Berry suggests that human efforts can, if
properly conceived and carried out, be organic
artifacts. The farmer can approximate nature’s ways
only through the exercise of specific human virtues:
"accurate memory, observation, insight, imagination,
inventiveness, reverence, devotion, fidelity,
restraint" (GGL, 145). Therefore, the acceptance of
limits is a cautionary framework which seeks to remind
one constantly that as a human it is only by virtue
that one can belong to one’s place.

Virtue must be enacted; it cannot exist only as an
abstraction. For Berry, the practical application of
good solutions to problems won’t come from absentee
specialists and experts, but from people who work
through the problems in place and who must live with
the consequences of their actions. Therefore, the
solutions they attempt should have wide margins. This
will allow for failure without discouraging people from
attempting alternatives after they study the results.
A good solution should not put one in a position where
everything is at stake if the idea fails. No proposed
solution can afford to be that costly. The statistics
on farm foreclosures testify to the error of placing
total emphasis on one plan—usually the production of a
single cash crop planted via huge bank loans. If for
any reason (weather, disease, low prices due to over-
production) the crop cannot be sold for sufficient
profit, all has been lost. The best solutions, Berry
counsels, are cheap ones that do not "enrich one person
by the distress or impoverishment of another."

Manufactured solutions to problems, toward which
Berry voices a strong distrust, tend to be exclusive
rather than inclusive. They seek to cure only one
problem and often create new ones in the process. This
happens because their focus is very narrow, and since
they are developed and tested for general use their
applicability to the particular needs of a specific
locale may be limited to say the least. The good solu-
tion has a wider scope, addressing more than one issue
without side effects. The standard governing this notion of inclusiveness is, once again, health: "I am talking about health as opposed to almost any cure, coherence of pattern as opposed to almost any solution produced piecemeal or in isolation" (GGL, 141). Furthermore, health is promoted when the proposed solution is consistent with the harmony or balance within a pattern. This would constitute a qualitative improvement. It is with a vision of the whole in his mind that the farmer has his best chance of choosing well. Then with knowledge, fidelity, and care he can put his choice to work.

The logical extension of coherence of pattern is recognition of the interconnectedness among patterns. This is where Berry’s definition of organic comes most fully into play. Once a farmer understands that his mind, body, and farm are a single organism, it makes sense that what is good for one part will be good for another. Conversely, he cannot sacrifice any part without affecting every other one. Whatever one does to the soil is not limited to that realm. Improvements or sacrifices to the health of the soil necessarily will send ripples through the health of the plants, animals, and people who are connected to it. The conclusion is self-evident to Berry:
It is the nature of any organic pattern to be contained within a larger one. And so a good solution in one pattern preserves the integrity of the pattern that contains it. A good agricultural solution, for example, would not pollute or erode a watershed. What is good for the water is good for the ground, what is good for the ground is good for plants, what is good for plants is good for animals, what is good for animals is good for people, what is good for people is good for the air, what is good for the air is good for the water. And vice versa. (GGL, 145)

The ethical coherence of this view is consistent with the most committed simple life thinking. It stresses a commitment to ideas and things that are greater than one’s own pleasure, material gain, or ego. It places a premium on careful thought and considerate action. It stresses private responsibility for public concerns. It is most fittingly summarized by Berry himself when he states: "A good solution, then, must be in harmony with good character, cultural value, and moral law" (GGL, 145).

Berry’s essays decry the disintegration of American culture due to our inability or unwillingness to seek good solutions to serious problems. The family farm as paradigm is an endangered species because it is being overpowered by a destructive order of values built upon the single standard of economic gain. The failure is rooted in a national, disastrous breach between our
inner and outer lives. Berry argues that Americans cannot have both livelihoods and amusements that are destructive, yet wish to live in a healthy environment. This fracturing of consciousness has led to a false sense of independence from nature, a dangerous belief in freedom from responsibility, and a blind faith that technological innovation will rescue us from the messes we create. Since in actuality humans cannot be autonomous, but are either responsibly or irresponsibly dependent upon the world, we must learn to choose to employ our power morally and as harmlessly as possible. For Berry, this means a return to the principle of "kindly use." In "Preserving Wildness" Berry states:

It is not possible (at least not for very long) for humans to intend their own good specifically or exclusively. We cannot intend our good, in the long run, without intending the good of our place—which means, ultimately, the good of the world. (HE, 139)

Berry’s own efforts to intend the good of the world take two concrete, interrelated forms. The first is his lifelong commitment to restoring and tending his literal place on earth, his farm. The second emerges through his writings, where he richly portrays the inescapable connection between place and identity, place and artistic creation.
PLACE AND ART

Like Gary Snyder, Hayden Carruth, and Donald Hall, Wendell Berry recognizes the importance of place as a pre-condition for art. From his earliest moments as a writer Berry acknowledges that his writing is implicitly about being in place. In the autobiographical essay "The Long-Legged House," Berry explains the roots of this identification:

...I began that summer of my marriage [1957] the surprisingly long and difficult labor of seeing the country I had been born in and had lived my life in until then.... As a writer, then, I have had this place as my fate. For me, it was never a question of finding a subject, but rather of learning what to do with the subject I had had from the beginning and could not escape.... I was so intricately dependent on this place that I did not begin in any meaningful sense to be a writer until I began to see the place clearly and for what it was. For me, the two have been the same. (LLH, 139-141)

From this initial identification of writer and region Berry moved to a more particular and intimate involvement with his own land and farm. In it he found the order and design necessary for his art. During 1968-9 while away at Stanford, Berry kept a journal in which he recorded his growing awareness of the importance of the Kentucky farm. His journal entry for
6/29/69 reveals: "this place has become the form of my work, its discipline, in the same way the sonnet has been the form and discipline of the work of other poets: if it doesn’t fit it’s not true" (CH, 52). Since then, Berry has both reiterated and modified this statement, suggesting that it contains three interrelated truths for him.

The first is the connection between farming and writing. If one sees the land as an infinite form which through love, commitment, and responsible action can yield one a sense of identity and purpose, provide one with a means of perceiving the greater order of Creation, then farming becomes an aesthetic act. The correct disciplines of farming—character, devotion, imagination, knowledge, sense of structure—are precisely those qualities Berry would identify with the writer, whose moral responsibilities are "to work to tell the truth and to work to keep the language fit to tell the truth."¹⁺ Both are restorative arts based on formal principles and must be infused with ethical responsibility. In a 1983 interview with the editors of The Bloomsbury Review, Berry responded to a question about the commonalities of farming and poetry by saying:

In both one must be concerned for the way that things are joined together, in
one’s mind and art and in the world. Neither a farm nor a poem should be made at the world’s expense; the world must not be looked upon as a supply of ‘raw material’ for either. To my way of thinking any made thing should be made in harmony with its sources, and all things so made will have much in common; they will tend to be analogues of each other.20

The second, commingled sense of place and art is the connection to life that is critical for both. When Berry says that place can be the form of a poem he is advancing the argument against autonomy, against the belief that art can exist for its own sake. Autonomy in art, for Berry, makes it artificial and worthless, because it is "the connection between words and acts, words and things, poems and effects" which explains the existence of art. When art strives for autonomy, to exist for its own sake, it becomes unique in the world. "What else," Berry asks, "exists for its own sake?...How, once a thing exists, can it be prevented from having an effect?" (SBW, 97) Just as "The farm must be made a form/ endlessly bringing together/ heaven and earth..." (CP, 191), so too must be what one writes. In the study and in the field some actions are fitting, and some are not. We are never immune from the consequences of what we create:

If we fail to do what is required and if we do what is forbidden, we exclude ourselves from the mercy of Nature; we
destroy our place, or we are exiled from it...We are lost in the 'dark wood' of Dante—dark, I think, not because the wood itself is dark, but because we cannot see where we are. We are lost in our own error. (SBW, 192)

Thus Berry has attested that the meanings of his place are his meanings, and that his art must grow out of and be responsible to that connection. His art cannot create a world of its own, but must instead be a part of a preserving unity with this world. Therefore, Berry's criteria for judging his own writing will not be traditionally artistic, but rather as he comments, "whether or not my writing will continue to come out of, and go back into, the way of life we follow here." Therefore, writing actually has more to do with the way Berry lives his life than with the words he puts down on a page. Since Berry lives in his subject, he recognizes that it will be altered by what he writes, just as he, having changed his subject, will be changed by what he writes about it. This is the essence of a holistic philosophy.

Thirdly, Berry is sensitive to the pejorative label that is often associated with being a regional writer. He begins his defense by cautioning that all writers are regional ones, even those who write about fashionable regions (New York City) but do not recognize this. Or as Eudora Welty has suggested, "regionalism
is an outsider’s term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life." More importantly, Berry rejects the kind of regionalism that mines an area for raw material, producing a literature that is either sentimental or condescending and exploitative. Such writing is often cliche-ridden and peopled by stereotypes, such as the lazy hillbillies and Bluegrass colonels of the Kentucky tradition Berry denounces. It is dominated by a mythical past, a dead language, and a severely limited vision which it mistakes for universality. In opposition to this Berry offers the example of his mentor, Wallace Stegner. Berry sees in Stegner’s fiction the care of one who understands and finds important the history of a place, and whose historical insights and honesty are accepted as duty. This kind of writing protects a region from its would-be exploiters. In "The Regional Motive," Berry delineates his distinction:

The regionalism that I adhere to could be defined simply as local life aware of itself. It would tend to substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in. It pertains to living as much as to writing, and it pertains to living before it pertains to writing. The motive of such regionalism is the awareness that local life is intricately dependent, for its quality but also for
its continuance, upon local knowledge.  
(CH, 67)

By focusing on the territory underfoot, by seeing his place first clearly with his eyes and then with the idealism of his imagination, Berry strives to create a literature of region whose particular concerns resonate far beyond the hills of Port Royal. To a great extent he has been successful. There are noticeable lapses into didacticism and sentimentality, and it is likely that his fiction will never be regarded among the first rank of American literature. Nonetheless, Berry has succeeded, in three genres, in creating a compelling vision of life that reminds us all that "the world must live in men's minds if men are to continue to live in the world" (LLH, 42). That consciousness permeates his simple life philosophy and motivates his daily behavior.
Notes to Chapter II


4. This consistent Berry theme receives forceful expression in “Preserving Wildness” (WE, 146-149) and in the two poems that serve as the framing device in WPF, 5-13.

5. Patrick D. Murphy, “Two Different Paths in the Quest for Place: Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry,” American Poetry v.2(1) (Fall 1984): 64.


7. Herman E. Daly and John Cobb, Jr., in For The Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 268-282, cite three major consequences for rural life of current economic theories of farming: 1) the commitment to productivity decreases the need for farmers, therefore depopulating rural areas and increasing urban populations; 2) the commitment to maximizing profits (with prices not including social and ecological costs) leads to destructive land use; and 3) the commitment to free trade on specialized products for export leads to the inability of rural people to feed themselves.

8. The debate was part of the “Life Schools Community Forum–The Crisis in American Agriculture,” sponsored by the Indiana Committee for the Humanities, held at Manchester College, North Manchester, IN, on November 13, 1977. In a sense the debate was a sequel, for forty-seven years earlier on almost the identical day (November 14, 1930), John Crowe Ransom of the Southern Agrarians defended traditional agricultural practices in a debate with Stringfellow Barr, a leading advocate of the new wave of industrialized agriculture. For details of the Ransom-Barr affair see Stewart, Burden


11. Ibid., p. 126.

12. Ibid., pp. 123-4. This argument is one of the pillars of agrarianism. Gaylord Nelson, in the foreword to Walter R. Goldschmidt, As You Sow: Three Studies in the Social Consequences of Agribusiness (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1978), echoes Berry’s viewpoint: "The family farm provides a social environment in which the central virtues of American life are fostered. It is at once a business, a job and a set of family relationships. At best, it does not provide an easy life and in bad times there are often harsh difficulties. But it provides a good life, and one in which independence, industry, hard work, foresight, cooperation and other qualities central to America’s needs are fostered. For most of our history, the family farm has been the seedbed of our culture."

13. Berry, Meeting the Expectations of the Land, p. 25.


16. Berry’s fourteen good solutions are listed in "Solving For Pattern" in GGL, pp. 140-145. The categories are mine.

17. For example, Newsweek (November 12, 1990) reports that many farmers in parts of Arkansas are currently facing bankruptcy because the U.S. trade embargo on Iraq has cut off half of this nation’s annual export production of rice. Farmers near Stuttgart, AK typically own farms of 1,000-1,500 acres planted almost exclusively in rice. That they are failing to learn from their current plight is indicated by the comment of one veteran of more than fifty harvests: "Rice will
come back on the market, but we’re going to plant as much corn as we can" (p. 30).

18. Berry admires these three for, among many other reasons, their open discussion of how their artistic consciousness is greatly influenced by place. Snyder’s Sierra mountains and the farmsteads of Carruth (Vermont) and Hall (New Hampshire) inspire and give form to their work.


20. Ibid., p. 25.

21. From a letter Berry wrote, quoted in Ditsky, p. 12.


23. Berry’s praise of Stegner can be found in "Wallace Stegner and the Great Community," in WPF, pp. 48-57.
While Wendell Berry’s essays cogently argue for a life of deep connection to the land and identity drawn from a particular place, it is in his fiction and poetry that the reader can feel the intensity of Berry’s passion. Here the polemics on personal responsibility, economics, ecological consciousness, agricultural practices, morality, and community are translated into engaging accounts and images of people striving to enact Berry’s ideals. The difficulties of pursuing simplicity are clearly revealed in their struggles; the joys of achieving it are celebrated with quiet dignity. The lifelong work of repair and restoration, of atoning for the ravages executed by preceding generations is balanced with the careful continuation of traditional skills and attitudes learned from beloved mentors. Pervasive throughout these stories and poems is a focus on ethical action and the coherence of seemingly disparate elements in life—both by-products of one’s attempt to live responsibly at home in one’s chosen place.

PLACE IN FICTION
Intending the good of one’s place and the world requires a unified character, which is the ideal that Berry wrestles with in his fiction. His four novels and collection of short stories depict people and a community which are striving for unity and coherence in a world rapidly slipping away. Berry’s fictional world, Port William, modeled closely on his own Port Royal, Kentucky, is a small, rural community of tobacco farmers who share an abiding passion for their land. This passion gives them meaning and identity, purpose and vision. Berry draws upon the ancient analogy of farmer and field as husband and wife, making marriage the central metaphor for a farmer’s relationship with place:

A man planting a crop is like a man making love to his wife, and vice versa: he is a husband or a husbandman...As husbandman, a man is both the steward and the likeness of God, the greater husbandman...All the essential relationships are compramended in this metaphor. A farmer’s relation to his land is the basic and central connection in the relation of humanity to the creation; the agricultural relation stands for the larger relation. (CH, 159-60)

Berry’s farmer/husband faces an enormous challenge. Even though Berry departs from the American literary tradition of depicting rural life as dull, often night- marish, and stifling to the human spirit, his farmers
are born into a world of mortality and darkness, of weakness and temptation, in a region of the world that has witnessed much rape and misuse. The husband’s role is to vie against his fallen nature to create harmony and wholeness in his life, his family, his land, and his community. Jack Hicks suggests in *American Literature* (1979) that the husband’s literal and metaphoric role "is one of healing old wounds, of atoning for past violations, by the re-awakening in human consciousness of the sense of nature’s ‘interlocking systems,’ of the possibilities that human lives might share and thrive in the old organic dream...." This is a lofty ideal, and one which most of Berry’s farmers cannot achieve, lending an air of pathos and sometimes tragedy to his fiction. Nonetheless, the pursuit of this vision of a natural order within which to conduct one’s life is the source of the satisfactions Berry’s characters do garner.

*Port William* is a fictive universe much like Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. Characters are interwoven among the texts, against a rich background of history and setting. The lives of members from key families like the Coulters, Feltners, and Catletts intertwine and offset each other over several generations. Lines of succession mingle with ones of pos-
session and obsession. It is a male dominated world in which Berry’s husbands define themselves through working the land, carrying on the traditions of their predecessors, and providing for their wives and families (the latter two aspects will be the focus of chapter IV). Their primary relationship is with the land and the offices of husbandry and stewardship. The image of the husband grows organically through the novels and short stories as time loops continually into the past and back to the present, and as characters’ lives recycle through ages and phases, through juxtaposition with one another.

Berry’s first novel, Nathan Coulter (1960; revised 1985), is a dark bildungsroman which records in first person narration a brief, tumultuous time in Nathan’s early adolescence. Nathan is Berry’s apprentice husband, unfortunately learning the duties from a poor role model. His father, Jarrat Coulter, is a hard man whose obsession with the ownership and working of land supercedes all other aspects of his being. When Nathan’s bed-ridden mother dies early in the novel, Jarrat’s only response is to continue splitting wood, leaving Nathan and his older brother Tom to hear the news from their grandmother and to suffer alone. Jarrat subsequently abdicates his responsibility for rais-
ing the boys by forcing them to live with their grand-
parents. A later fistfight between Jarrat and Tom
drives Nathan’s brother away from the family com-
pletely.

The result for Nathan is a series of losses which
lead to a future gain. With his mother’s death he
lost his innocence; with his father’s distancing he was
denied any parental bonds; with his brother’s absence
he had to endure the trials of growing up alone. The
failures of husbandry fill his world and produce an
alienation so strong that Nathan might be totally lost,
were it not for the land. With the aid of his Uncle
Burley’s compassionate and humorous nature, Nathan has
found in the farmer’s daily work on the land a suggest-
tion of the dream of husbandry, of the possibility of
unity. Moments before his grandfather’s death, Nathan
stands with him by a hilltop spring from which he can
achieve a glimpse of perspective:

I thought of the spring running there
all of that time, while the Indians
hunted the country and while our people
came and took the land away from them
and cleared it; and still running while
Grandpa’s grandfather and his father got
old and died. And running while Grandpa
drank its water and waited his turn.
When I thought of it that way I knew I
was waiting my turn too...In a way the
spring was like him, a part of his
land; I couldn’t divide the spring from
the notch it had cut in the hill.
Grandpa had owned his land and worked on
it and taken his pride from it for so long that we knew him, and he knew himself, in the same way that we knew the spring. His life couldn’t be divided from the days he’d spent at work in his fields. (NC, 179–80)

For a youth struggling to establish his identity this peek at the promised land, seconds before the novel ends with Nathan hoisting his dead grandfather into his arms, is not great consolation. It does, however, foreshadow the excellent husband Nathan will become in later works, where he comes into manhood after his return from WWII. He marries a friend’s widow, is a good father to her daughter, fathers a son of his own, and becomes heir to the Feltner farm.

The ray of light that emanates from the ending of Nathan Coulter is largely a function of Berry’s 1985 revision of the original text. In a note for the revised edition Berry expresses his fascination that his characters created twenty-five years earlier would continue to populate his vision. The major alteration Berry made was to cut the final four chapters of the original edition so that the ending would be “truer both to itself and to Nathan’s part in the writings that have come since.” The excised pages focus on Nathan’s sexual fascination with a neighbor’s young wife. He sleeps with her the night of his grandfather’s death and is recognized while sneaking away by
the returning husband, Gander Lloyd. Lloyd's subsequent attempt at revenge, coupled with Jarrat Coulter's denunciation of Nathan, prompt Nathan to leave home under the cover of darkness. The revision is tighter stylistically, more optimistic thematically without becoming sentimental, and more consistent with the portrayal of character. The organicism of Berry's world of Port William allows for growth to come out of decay, just as each year's crop is nourished by the death of its predecessors. Berry needed, in his reworking of Nathan Coulter, to plant the seeds for the man Nathan would subsequently become.

If Nathan Coulter represents the potential for good husbandry, Mat Feltner in A Place on Earth (1967; revised 1983) is the closest Berry comes to embodying the ideal. Mat masters the disciplines necessary to be an excellent farmer. He learns to embrace a vision of the intricate formal patterns of his work in the overlapping cycles of the farm and the larger world that contains it. His life becomes "a striving upward in the flesh, back toward unity with the natural world." The journey, however, is a long and painful one.

In A Place on Earth, Berry gives his readers his most fully realized portrayal of Port William. The physical land, the texture of community life, and the
presence of the past exert such powerful influences in
the novel that, as the title suggests, the place itself
functions as a key character. In describing the land
Berry sets the stage for the work of the husband:

There it was, dark as shadows under the
trees, abundant and deep, waiting to be
opened. Surely no dirt was ever more
responsive or more alive. You could
believe, for once, that the earth might
give back to a man more than it took
from him. It welcomed him everywhere he
put down his hand or his foot or his
seed... In two or three generations the
country was imponderably changed, its
memories, explanations, justifications
fallen away from it. The first-comers
left it diminished and detached from its
sources. It was like an island, the past
washing up to it, in fact, as the force
of its becoming, but not as knowledge.
Past and future bore against it under
cover of darkness. Whoever wanted to
make a beginning, then, had to begin
with something already half-finished.
And scarcely known. (POE, 24-5)

Everything that the husband inherits has been
previewed here. An Eden- luscious ripe, sexual and
fertile, infused with dark mysteries of innocence and
knowledge- has been plundered and lost. Man is left
with the question asked in Robert Frost’s "The Oven
Bird": "what to make of a diminished thing?" The ans-
swer for Mat Feltner (although never consciously articu-
lated until the final page) is to try to lift the cover
of darkness, to re-attach the land and one’s life to
their sources, to be a healer. This is the life’s work
of the farmer/husband.
The present action of the novel occurs from March to September of 1945. The seasonal cycles are analogous to the fictive development that takes place. The land slowly emerges from the season of death to the time of sowing, then of germination and fruition, and finally to the hint of death's return. It is the closing months of WWII and Mat has just received word that his only son, Virgil, is missing in action. Mat is suddenly forced to make sense of his life within the growing awareness of Virgil's death. From the opening sentence ("The seed bins are empty."), Berry's imagery suggests the darkness and loss against which Mat will have to struggle.

It is mostly through labor that Berry's husband figures can enact their struggles. Physical work enables Mat to enter into the rhythms of nature and finally discover the key to the larger design. Plowing behind a team of well-trained horses, planting and harvesting tobacco, pruning fruit trees, making pools for livestock, mending fences—these acts of obligation become sacraments, daily celebrations of husbandry which support life and provide identity. Plant and animal husbandry proffer concrete actions whose tangible results are buffers against the abstraction of losing Virgil. They are easier for Mat than the grief-
sharing duties of husbandry with his wife, Margaret (see chapter IV). Especially significant for Mat is lambing time, when the farmer-as-midwife is a bringer of life into this world. In the late night winter darkness Mat makes his rounds in the barns, ever wakeful while all others are asleep:

In spite of the difficulty and weariness, he goes about his work with greater interest and excitement than at any other time of the year. This is the crisis of increase—what he was born to, and what he chose. When he has made sure of the life of whatever is new-born—when he has done, at any rate, all that can be done—he is at peace with himself. His labor has been his necessity and his desire...Moving gently and slowly, he straightens the lamb’s head and forelegs, and delivers it, wet as a fish, into the air...Mat feels a kind of magician’s triumph. His trick is the trick of the life of a thing, almost as liable to fail as to succeed. His labor is a labor of joy whose joyfulness depends on this precarious result. (POE, 84-5)

While the birth of an animal serves as a dramatic reminder of life’s precariousness, the good steward is constantly mindful of his responsibility to the earth. Mat recognizes when he becomes the overseer of the property of an ineffectual relative that much work must be done on this land even though Mat has no need of the land nor any intentions of buying it. The work "must be done for the sake of the land itself—and for the sake of no one he can foresee, someone who will come
later who will depend then on what is done now" (POE, 150). One's work should have the coherence of one's character. The necessity for this kind of responsibility and commitment is underscored by the permanence of one's actions upon the world. Mat relates a poignant incident to his daughter-in-law, Hannah, which illustrates this demanding standard. In Virgil's first solo farming venture, he plowed incorrectly on steep land allowing a subsequent rain to wash out his crop and much topsoil. Mat recounts to Hannah his words to his son:

"Virgil," I said, "this is your fault. This is one of your contributions to the world." That was hard for me to say. And he took it hard. I saw he was about to cry. And bad as I hated to do it, I let it work in him while we stood there and looked...I said, "Be sorry, but don't quit. What's asked of you now is to see what you've done and learn better." And I told him that a man's life is always dealing with permanence— that the most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your doings as temporary...What you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent. (POE, 176)

The work of the farmer is "a kind of kinetic prayer, a witnessing and affirming of man's active place in the natural world...." The good farmer's workdays start and finish in response to necessity, interest, and obligation, rather than to a time clock or whistle. Long experience in the same place combined
with practical judgment, commitment, and endurance are required. Berry’s farmers have real callouses on their hands, and backs that ache at the end of a day. Manual labor, for Berry, should not be denigrated as it is in our culture; rather, it should be celebrated for the role it plays in the sustenance of a healthy life.  

Real work in Berry’s novels, like the hand cutting of tobacco under a blistering Kentucky sun, is sometimes rendered in epic terms. The young Andy Catlett, home on vacation from college in the story "That Distant Land," describes his co-workers like Agamemnon might have lovingly spoken of his troops advancing on Troy:

They drove into the work, maintaining the same pressing rhythm from one end of the row to the other, and yet they worked well, as smoothly and precisely as dancers. To see them moving side by side against the standing crop, leaving it fallen, the field changed, behind them, was maybe like watching Homeric soldiers going into battle. It was momentous and beautiful, and touchingly, touchingly mortal. They were spending themselves as they worked, giving up their time; they would not return by the way they went. (WB, 107)  

Since the ability to work well is one of the major yardsticks Berry employs to measure the husband, all of his fiction contains examples of men who work poorly or with a misguided focus to serve as foils for the true husband. In A Place on Earth there is the miserly
storekeeper, Milton Burgess, "the husband of his ledger" who can see no value in anything "unless it can be made to add up." Griffith Merchant, Mat’s uncle, appears as the antithesis of the good steward. Griffith owned one of the most fertile tracts of land in Port William, but "lived on his land like a blight, troubled only by the slowness with which it could be converted into cash, unable to see or care beyond his line fences" (POE, 105). This lack of vision and responsibility is passed on to Griffith’s son Roger, who lived alone on the property for forty years. During that time the house crumbled in disrepair while the fields became overgrown with bushes and trees. Most of the land Roger has never seen, let alone attempted to care for. Roger succumbs to the bottle, as does Whacker Spradlin, two for whom work has no enduring value.

There can be, as well, an imbalance on the other side of the scale—those who allow their work to so dominate their lives that they shut out the other duties and pleasures of being human. Jarrat Coulter’s obsessiveness ruined him as a husband and father; in The Memory of Old Jack (1974), Sims McGrother’s mean-spirited philosophy of work ("kill a mule, buy another’n, kill a nigger, hire another’n...") leads to
the decline of his good land; and in *Remembering* (1988) the agribusiness farmer Bill Meikelberger's ulcer churns as he sits in his plush office worrying over his debts while hired workers harvest his 2,000 acres, all planted in corn. For these failed husbands there is no ritual of renewal at the start of the day, no peace in the depth of the night.

A sense of balance, of perspective is necessary for true husbandry, or else the possibility of harmony, of unity, cannot be attained. The work of the good husband must be of use to the world as well as to himself. When the farmer gives love to the work of his hands the work emerges as song and the land responds in kind:

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 paradisal dream. Its hardship is its possibility.

(from "Work Song," *CP*, 188)

The song of his labor is one factor which helps to free the husband from his solitary existence and opens for him that "paradisal" possibility of wholeness. For
Mat Feltner, such a moment of epiphany is created through a series of events which lead to his re-discovery of the processes of renewal in nature. Mat has to learn, once again, man’s place in the greater design of the world in order to finally heal the wound opened by Virgil’s death. His two tutors are his two "wives," Margaret and the land. Margaret makes Mat understand that their loss of Virgil has not negated the time they had with him nor the meaning of his life. She says:

From the day he was born I knew he would die. That was how I loved him, partly. I’d brought him into the world that would give him things to love, and take them away. You too, Mat. You knew it. I knew so well that he would die that, when he did disappear from us the way he did, I was familiar with the pain. I’d had it in me all his life...But I don’t believe that when his death is subtract-ed from his life it leaves nothing.

(POE, 257-8)

Margaret’s plea for Mat to gain understanding of the place of death in human life is amplified by the insistence of his other wife, the land. Mat must struggle to recover what he has always sensed, that the land is the only continuity in their lives, the only pattern that can provide insights into the larger, unseen patterns of life. On the occasion of another death, the suicide of Margaret’s brother Ernest Finley, Mat and Old Jack Beechum reflect on their collective
history with the land. Sitting in the presence of
death, Mat with his back to the coffin and Old Jack
facing him, they turn to the past:

The old man spoke of the names and landmarks and happenings of a time before
Mat’s birth, and Mat listened, his mind
drawn back before its own beginning,
held and quieted by the vision of
another time, and by the sense of the
continuance of the land, the place,
through all that has happened on it and
to it— its history of a little cherish-
ing and much abuse. For as always it was
finally the land that they spoke of,
fascinated as they have been all their
lives by what has happened to it, their
own ties to it, the wife of their race,
more lovely and bountiful and kind than
they have usually deserved, more demand-
ing than they have often been able to
bear. (POE, 298)

The cumulative power of the vision of the land that
arises in their conversation, the long looping backward
into generational continuity, the immediacy of Ernest’s
body inches from his own, and the weight of Virgil’s
death pressing against his temples have brought Mat to
"the end not just of talk but of thought as well."

Language, having reached its limit of conveying what
lies beyond the scope of words, necessarily fails Mat.
Sensing that he can live no longer by too much thinking
either, Mat rises stiffly from the chair where he has
spent the night to walk out to his pastures. After a
morning of chores two events occur which bring Mat into
the wakefulness of knowing beyond words the mystery of
death in life.
The first is a birth. One of Mat’s young cows who had gotten with calf late was missing from the herd. A long search through the lower pasture and woods brings Mat to where the cow stands; nearby a calf lies curled up in some tall grass. For a moment Mat stands in the presence of this miracle, aware of the animal’s wildness and conscious once again that he is about to cross that gap between species, between wildness and domesticity, in moving toward care and love. He raises the calf to her feet and then backs away so that the cow will return. Resting against a tree, Mat watches, "pleased with them and with himself." It is a holy moment of affirmation. One of the husband’s tasks, and here his pleasure, is constantly to re-discover nature’s renewal of life. It is a large part of the lens Mat must fashion and don in order to envision possibility and hope.

The second event is a spiritual journey. Instead of returning to the house, Mat walks on into the woods. He picks his way down slopes which once were clearings and fields, but which the forest has reclaimed, erasing whatever character they once accepted from human use. They have grown natural again. Mat sits at the base of a huge tree, staring down into the silence of the woods where he knows that work was done before his time, or
even before his father's. He allows the land to enter
his consciousness and heal him:

He feels the great restfulness of that
place, its casual perfect order. It is
the restfulness of a place where the
merest or the most improbable accident
is made a necessity and a part of a
design, where death can only give into
life. And Mat feels the difference
between that restful order and his own
constant struggle to maintain and regu-
late his clearings. Although the mean-
ings of those clearings and his devotion
to them remain firm in his mind, he
knows without sorrow that they will end,
the order he has made and kept in them
will be overthrown, the effortless order
of wilderness will return.

The leaves brightly falling around
him, Mat comes into the presence of the
place. It lies clearly and simply before
him, radiant as though a light in the
ground has become visible. He has come
into a wakefulness as quiet as a sleep.

(POE, 316-7)

Berry brings Mat Feltner, his mature husband, to
peace through a recognition of the greater design of
the universe, the harmony and unity of which death is a
necessary and natural part. It took Mat's intimacy
with place to bring him to feel that "...possession is
ultimately relinquishment, taking and being taken
finally in balance." He is, for the first time in
months, fully awake, and therefore able to know and to
respond to what the world asks of him. He can now let
go of his son without diminishing Virgil's life and can
proceed with his own. The land that he has nourished
with the labor of his life, once again nourishes him in return. Theirs is a marriage whose bonds grow stronger with each ensuing season.

In Berry’s third novel, The Memory of Old Jack (1974), marriage to his land is what sustains Jack Beechum for his 92 years. This hauntingly beautiful, poetic novel is an elegy for a man and for a way of life that Berry fears is vanishing. Jack is a husband of the old school, whose fidelity to his place on earth overcomes the string of tragedies that mark his life, causing his friend Mat Feltner to remark, “It’s not a tragedy when a man dies at the end of his life.”

Set in September of 1952, shortly before Jack’s death, the novel proceeds through a convoluted series of memories that tell the history of Jack’s life, of Port William, and of cultural values in transition. Born in 1860, Jack is scarred by losses in his early years. His older brothers are both killed in the Civil War, Mathew in 1862 and Hamilton in 1864. A year later, 1865, Jack’s mother dies. The house and farm suddenly echo with emptiness. Nancy, the only other child left in the Beechum family, raises Jack, prolonging her courtship by Ben Feltner (Mat’s father) until Jack is old enough to be independent. Jack’s father allows the farm to deteriorate so badly that by the
time of his death in 1878, it is in ruin and deeply indebted. These experiences begin shaping the direc-
tion Jack’s life will follow:

By his sixth year Jack’s mind had already learned what would be one of its characteristic motions, turning away from the house, from the losses and failures and confinements of his his-
tory, to the land, the woods and fields of the old farm, in which he already sensed an endlessly abounding and unfolding promise. (MOJ, 24)

With the promise also comes Jack’s growing awareness of the consciousness necessary to stewardship. In 1885, at age 25, Jack is finally able to purchase from the other heirs this land that his father and grand-
father had farmed. For the previous five years he had worked it as a tenant, but now that he owned it, "the rest of his life seemed to him to lie there, unborn in the dark soil of the old farm." Ownership brings new purpose to Jack’s farming, even though he is on the same and only land he has known his whole life. The difference is one of responsibility for the health of his place. Now in his daily work in his fields, pas-
tures, and woodlands he is imprinting the land in his mind, "his thought becoming indistinguishable from it." Furthermore, Jack’s desire to labor with his hands and by the sweat of his brow to create life is transformed from a willingness to a deep emotional need:
When he stepped into the first opening furrow of a new season he was not merely fulfilling an economic necessity; he was answering the summons of an immemorial kinship; he was shaping a passage by which an ancient vision might pass once again into the ground. (MOJ, 38)

As a farmer Jack Beechum practices much of the husbandry that Berry values. He rises long before the sun to begin his workday. The animals are well-tended, the house, barn, and outbuildings are in good repair, the fences are all mended and sturdy. Jack plows with a lovingly trained and worked team of horses. He is eminently practical and frugal. As a man at work in the world, in his chosen place, Jack has the vitality and purposefulness that Berry admires. Yet he still falls prey to the malaise that infects much American thinking, of believing that he needs more than he has in order to be fulfilled. Jack becomes obsessed with buying the adjoining Farrier farm, certain that the hunger and ambition of his life would be sated by being a great landowner. This would be the first step in the next phase of the American Dream. Power and respect would be accorded to him; he would far surpass the accomplishments of his parents. In a flaw that is characteristic of all of his novels, Berry cannot resist this opportunity for didacticism. In chronicling the change that is overtaking Jack, Berry elucidates the implications of Jack’s land lust:
...that no place may be sufficient to itself, but must lead to another place, and that all places must finally lead to money; that a man’s work must lead not to the health of his family and the respect of his neighbors but to the marketplace, to that deference that strangers yield to sufficient cash...[Jack] wanted more land. A man falling in his own esteem needs more ground under his feet; to stand again he may need the whole world for a foothold. (MOJ, 65)

Berry directs the reader to consider the pervasiveness of the temptation to which Jack succumbs. It represents the dominant trend toward materialistic standards of value which the dictates of simplicity have argued against consistently for 300 years. Berry rescues Jack Beechum, but not without exacting a toll. After three painful years of struggling against his increased work load, the burden of a hired hand, and his stifling debt to the bank, Jack recovers his sense of perspective. He realizes that in purchasing the Farrier place he relinquished his independence and forced himself into a diminished relationship with the patch of earth that he had spent the first third of his life learning to love. Jack sells the property at a considerable loss of both money, and esteem in his wife’s eyes, but with an undeniable gain of self. It will take fifteen years for Jack get out of debt for the second time.
This pattern of loss and recovery dominates Jack’s life. The losses are consistently personal: a lengthy but failed marriage; a stillborn son; the death of a lover; a daughter who flees the farm and everything Jack represents as soon as she is able. The acts of recovery all share a connection to place. Jack’s faithfulness to his land, “through all its yearly changes from maiden to mother, the bride and wife and widow of men like himself since the world began,” continually restores his vision and provides him with peace. Furthermore, his mentorship of others who will be wedded to the land, especially Mat Feltner and Elton Penn, offers Jack a glimpse of immortality. Jack willingly accepts his role as the elder, the link to the traditions of the past. He tries to instruct those who would follow by reciting the knowledge he has gained through painful experience. With the death of Ben Feltner and the inheritance of the farm falling to Mat, and after Mat has proven himself worthy of that inheritance, Jack fears that Mat might repeat Jack’s mistakes of pride and greed. In the tones of a father talking to his son, Jack directs Mat’s gaze to the land that bears the signs of Ben’s entire life and says: “That’s all you’ve got, Mat. It’s your only choice. It’s all you can have; whatever you try to gain some-
where else, you'll lose here... And it's enough. It's more than enough" (POE, 163). To the best of his ability, Jack is articulating the potential for fulfillment that Berry finds in one's relationship with place, as well as a simple life philosophy that self-consciously subordinates materialism to restraint. "Wisdom," Berry says in praising what Thoreau sought to teach, "is always poised upon the knowledge of minimums; it might be thought to be the art of minimums" (HW, 76).

This concern for the transmission of the land and the values of husbandry to the younger generation is crucial for Berry. The demographics of the twentieth century clearly record the flight from the farm and, for Berry, the consequent imperiling of an entire way of life and system of values. In his essays Berry coolly instructs his readers in the reasons for this population shift and warns of the concomitant effects on American society. In The Memory of Old Jack and the related story, "It Wasn't Me," from The Wild Birds (1985), the drama is personalized. Jack's daughter, Clara, had always embraced an irreconcilably different view of the world than Jack's. She left the farm, moved to Louisville where she married Gladston Pettit, a wealthy banker, and rarely in the final thirty years
of Jack's life came to visit him. Having been given the farm in Jack's will, her sole interest lies in its sale price. Arriving back at the farm for Jack's funeral, her demeanor reveals her attitude: "In her high heels she walks uncertainly on the deep sod, as though wading, but with determined haste. She does not look at the ground. Walking on it, she asserts her difference from it" (MOJ, 211-12).

For the final eight years of his life Jack Beechum lives in a hotel room in Port William while Elton and Mary Penn farm his land as tenants. "They were good, they were Old Jack's kind, they listened to him and cared about him, they were the chief pleasure of his final years" (WB, 47). Under Jack's and Mat's tutelage Elton becomes an excellent husbandman, lovingly caring for the Beechum farm as if it were his own. In fact, Jack intends precisely that, willing to the Penns what he believes to be half the purchase price of the farm, and stating his intentions to his lawyer and longstanding friend, Wheeler Catlett.

Thus Berry has peopled the stage for a contemporary morality play about the fate of the land and the state of American values. On one side stand the Pettits, wealthy, hungry for more, and unwilling to honor Jack's wishes for the transmission of his place on earth. They
want, "as a matter of principle," fair market value for the land. On the other side of the stage huddle the Penns, poor, hungry for the chance to fashion a meaningful life of stewardship, and uncomfortable with accepting any obligation that they could not repay. Through Catlett’s efforts the Penns do buy the farm at auction, but Clara’s failure to honor her father’s vision earns for her and costs the Penns an additional $100 per acre, or $15,000 total. Greed and selfishness win a partial victory, but the possibility for the survival of a good, yet endangered, way of life is extended. Berry asks his readers to see that the true line of succession is not literal kinship, but the spiritual kinship of those who are willing to appropriate the heritage of meeting the expectations of the land.

The other violence that Clara does to Jack’s life is to bury him by her standards rather than by his. Dressed in a suit and tie, lying in a "veritable Cadil- lac" of a coffin, his facial wrinkles smoothed away by make-up, Jack’s body greets his friends looking like that of a bank president. On his way home from the funeral, Mat Feltner corrects this vision by describing how a man who spent his life married to the earth would want to go to his grave:
He would be taken in secret to a place at the edge of one of his fields, and only the few who loved him best would be permitted to go that far with him. They would dig a grave there and lay him in it. They would say such words as might come to them, or say nothing. They would cover him and leave him there where he had belonged from birth. They would leave no stone or marker. They would level the grave with the ground. When the last of them who knew its place had died, Old Jack’s return would be complete. He would be lost to memory there in the field, silently possessed by the earth on which he once established the work of his hands. (MOJ, 206-7)

Jack’s death heightens the awareness Berry has created of the possibility that such men are a vanishing breed. This recognition weighs heavily on the mind of the lawyer, Wheeler Catlett, a character modelled closely after Berry’s father.” He is one of Berry’s notable exceptions, a man who shares the farmers’ attitudes toward place without actually working the soil himself. Wheeler is the link between Port William’s farmers and the world, the protector of their interests because he realizes how closely their fate is mingled with his and with the survival of those simple life values which he holds so dear. It is Wheeler’s presence and sensibilities which tie together the six stories that comprise The Wild Birds.

The stories span 37 years, 1930-1967, or almost all of Wheeler’s career as a lawyer and a period of great
transition for American agriculture. The stories are uneven: two are sentimental, two beautifully moving, and two didactic. Each serves in some manner to add to Berry's vision of Port William as a country in decline, but not without hope. Wheeler's dilemma throughout the stories differs somewhat from those faced by Berry's husbandmen because it is both more public and more abstract. Wheeler is as deeply rooted in place as anyone in Port William. His mother is a Coulter, his wife, Bess, is Mat Feltner's daughter, he spent his youth learning to farm, and he is the son Jack Beechum never had. But early on he perceived the irony that in order to defend the people and the way of life that he loved against the vicissitudes of "progress," he would have to choose another life for himself.

He leaves Port William for college and law school, and then returns to establish his practice in Hargrave, the nearby county seat, while still living on a farm in his birthplace. From Hargrave, Wheeler has labored not in the fields, but for them. He has a better understanding of the big picture than most of his farmer friends, consequently he both protects them "against the law itself, before which they were ciphers" and fights for their positions in the public arena. For example, in "It Wasn't Me," it is clearly
Wheeler’s professional and personal intercession in the settling of Jack’s estate that allows the Penns to gain that land and maintain it as an organic farm. In the title story, Berry uses the awkward device of a speech that Wheeler is writing to voice Berry’s frustration with the self-defeating state of American agriculture:

What [Wheeler] was struggling to make clear is the process by which unbridled economic force draws life, wealth, and intelligence off farms and out of the country towns and set them into conflict with their sources. Farm produce leaves the farm to nourish an economy that has thrived by the ruin of the land. In this way, in the terms of Wheeler’s speech, price wars against value. (WB, 116)

Although certainly clumsy as a narrative technique, Wheeler’s speech allows him to articulate for the reader the broader perspective within which to view the more personal struggles of Port William’s farmers. Those struggles are voiced by the farmers who come to Wheeler’s office, and are neatly summarized by Burley Coulter’s remark, “Pret’ near all my life I’ve been figuring out where I am and what I’m responsible for...” (WB, 138). Here Berry’s farmer/husbandman relates his continual task of finding out what it takes to be at home in the world. The person for whom this task becomes most problematic turns out to be Wheeler’s son, Andy.

Early indications of Andy Catlett’s struggle to define himself occur in The Memory of Old Jack and The
Wild Birds, where he appears as a college student torn between his desire to pursue an education that will most likely lead him away from Port William, and the pull to enter the farming life of those people he loves and respects. In Remembering (1988), Andy resolves his dilemma twice, for like The Memory of Old Jack, the narrative in this most recent Berry novel flows within the protagonist's consciousness. The action continually loops into the past and then crystallizes in the present. At two key moments in Andy's life his vision clarifies, enabling him to perceive that his path to fulfillment leads home to Port William and to his relationship with his place on earth.

Andy's journey to self-knowledge allows Berry to swipe at several of the targets which he addresses in his essays, often giving the novel the tone of a sermon. While Remembering opens in 1976, Andy's initial moment of recognition had taken place twelve years earlier. After his graduation from college and his marriage to Flora in the late 1950's, Andy moved to San Francisco to work as a journalist. There he covered minor agricultural stories, in the process becoming indoctrinated into the industrial farming model:

He learned a little of the way the agricultural world wagged, and, perhaps because he was so far from home and from what his father would have told him if
he had asked, he assumed that the way it wagged was the way it was supposed to wag: that bigger was better and biggest was best; that people coming into a place to use it need ask only what they wanted, not what was there; that whatever in humanity or nature failed before the advance of this mechanical ambition deserved to fail; and that the answers were in the universities and the corporate and government offices, not in the land or the people. He was capable, in those days, of forgetting all that his own people had been. He loved them, he thought, but he had gone beyond them as the world had. (REM, 72)

Three years in this vein led Andy to Chicago, to work for a college friend who had become the editor of Scientific Farming, a journal that promoted the tenets of industrial agriculture. This arrangement lasted for five years, until in 1964 a story assignment changed Andy’s life. He was to interview a farmer, Bill Meikelberger, that the journal would feature as its Premier Farmer for 1964. Meikelberger is, of course, the model agribusiness man, the antithesis of Berry’s ideal of the farmer. He owns a 2,000 acre spread in central Ohio, most of which he acquired in small parcels by patiently buying out his neighbors. All of the acreage is planted in one crop, corn. There are no animals, no garden or woodlot, no pastures or fences. He relies on hired labor to run his herd of machinery, while he frowns over his account books in his home office. When asked about his finances, Meikelberger
recites the gospel of credit: "Debt is a permanent part of an operation like this. Getting out of debt is just another old idea you have to junk. I’ll never be out of debt. I never intend to be" (REM, 75). Andy departs vaguely troubled by what he has seen, but unable to articulate the precise problems.

In a less than subtle fashion, Berry provides Andy his needed perspective by bringing him into contact with Isaac Troyer. Troyer is an Amish farmer who embodies Berry’s organic alternative. His farm of 80 acres is personally and lovingly tended. Troyer plows with a team of mares rather than a tractor, keeps a variety of livestock, and uses manure rather than chemical fertilizers. While he works Troyer can see his neighbors at work in their fields, and exchanges of labor are commonplace communal activities. Troyer’s parents live in a small house on the property, sharing in the labor, as do Troyer’s wife and children. Evident everywhere are the disciplines of the household and the homestead. Troyer owes no debt; furthermore, he shows no interest in increasing the size of his farm, citing three reasons which convey his mastery of restraint: 80 acres is enough for them to live well; buying more land would necessitate going into debt; expanding his acreage could only be accomplished by removing a neighbor.
The seven pages which describe Andy’s visit to Troyer’s farm are replete with idealized peaceful images and sensory details—the smell of the freshly plowed earth, the muffled footfalls of the horses on the sod, the songs of birds in the woods. It is a place of work, order, and rest. Whereas Meikelberger’s farm suggests a way of agriculture that is “as abstract as a graph,” Troyer’s place strikes Andy as a “...home to many lives, tame and wild...it said that a man could live with trees and animals and a bending little tree-lined stream; he could live with neighbors” (REM, 81). Andy recognizes that Meikelberger’s acreage could be home to twenty-five families like the Troyers, the beginnings of a healthy, independent community.

Andy never writes the piece on Meikelberger, but his article on Troyer precipitates a battle with his friend which mirrors the one Berry has often had with his critics. The editor accuses Andy of letting nostalgia supercede judgment: “Issac Troyer is over and done with. He’s as obsolete as the outdoor toilet. His farm is history, Andy. It’s a museum” (REM, 85). As Andy argues back he realizes that he is giving voice to Wheeler Catlett’s stand on behalf of the Coulters and Penns of Port William, on behalf of a quality of life that Andy can feel, whether or not he can convince
others of its rectitude. For the first time in his life, Andy’s choice is clear.

He returns to Port William, buys the Riley Harford Place, which he had known all his life, and brings his wife and children there. He moves into and accepts his role in the history of the place. He sees what Berry saw upon returning to Kentucky in 1964: declining farms and towns, people fleeing to the city, woodlands that had been clear-cut, hillsides eroded from poor use, fields that had turned into thickets. Like Berry, Andy looked inside himself to ask the key questions about man’s relationship to his world:

He turned to his own place then—the Harford Place, as diminished by its history as any other—and began to ask what might be the best use of it. How might a family live there without reducing it? (REM, 96)

Andy settles comfortably into his reclaimed identity and for the next twelve years he pursues Berry’s organic vision of unity. Then he loses his right hand in a corn picker. Steeped in self-pity and feeling useless as a farmer, husband, and father, Andy alienates his family and friends. All of this action has been revealed in memories, since when the novel opens Andy is in San Francisco in 1976 at an agricultural convention. He is for the second time in his life a man who has lost his sense of place, and
therefore his sense of self. Andy's walk through pre-dawn San Francisco, a variation on the "underworld journey" of the hero, brings him into touch with places and lives that beckon to him, that hold attraction for him, and yet that he one by one rejects. Standing on the outermost arc of the pier near Fort Mason, in the netherworld between night and morning, Andy considers suicide: "All distance is around him, and he wants nothing that he has. All choice is around him, and he knows nothing that he wants" (REM, 51). Cut off from place, Andy cannot envision any way to start his life again.

Memories rescue him and help him to choose the path back home. Visions of relatives and friends, of moments of belonging, flood his mind. The narrative pursues these memories, weaving together the relationships and lines of descent that ultimately call Andy to return, once again, to his rightful place. His mind clears and direction becomes evident. For the second time in a dozen years he moves

...in the first steps of a long journey that, by nightfall, will bring him back where he cannot step but where he has stepped before, where people of his lineage and history have stepped for a hundred and seventy-five years or more in an indecipherable pattern of entrances, minds into minds, minds into place, places into minds: the worn and wasted, sorrow-salted ground, familiar to him as if both known and dreamed.
that owns him in a membership that he did not make, but has chosen, and that is death and life and hope to him. (REM, 65)

Despite its sentimental ending and those places where the narrative is merely a thin veneer covering agricultural polemics, *Remembering* serves to round out Berry’s portrayal of the man centered in place. By adding Andy Catlett to the previous trio of farmer/husbands, the mature Mat Feltner sandwiched between the apprentice Nathan Coulter and the declining Jack Beechum, Berry gives us the man who most actively chooses to accept this life and system of values. By the advantages of his later birth, his father’s position, and his own education, Catlett, like Berry himself, had an open door to the world beyond Port William. That he twice chose to appropriate this heritage, and that it twice succeeded in bringing him peace and fulfillment testifies to the power of this organic vision.

Berry’s works of fiction, however, also raise a disturbing question about who has the opportunity to choose this vision. Berry makes it clear that ownership of property is crucial to enacting his version of Jeffersonian agrarianism. Those characters in his novels who farm as tenants or labor as hired hands, regardless of their skills and intelligence, are
virtually cut off from the possibility of developing the kind of intimacy with place that Berry posits. His Black characters, who are sensitively and admirably portrayed, nevertheless find themselves in the position epitomized by Will Wells, Jack Beechum’s laborer. After two years of working alongside Jack, Will shows the inevitable frustration of one who has the "...knowledge that his labor formalized and preserved no bond between him and the place; he was a man laboring for no more than his existence" (MOJ, 81). It is essence, not existence, that Berry’s husbands’ labor seeks to create. While it may be correctly argued that few Kentucky Black men in the early to mid twentieth century possessed their own land, Berry thoroughly closes them out of the Port William membership.12 Equally marginalized are white tenant farmers like Gideon Crop, a frugal, strong, intelligent farmer, who at age 37 recognizes the implausibility of the dream without owning the land he works: He has seen more good years and days than he will see again. His time of limitless energy and limitless hope is gone, and there is nothing yet to show beyond that hopeful column of figures in the bankbook and in his mind, growing, he is afraid, too slowly. His life seems to him to have become a kind of race to see whether those figures will grow to their power before he has exhausted his own. (POE, 109)
The single exception is Elton Penn, who after a decade of tenant farming buys Jack Beechum’s place. But Berry makes it clear, as we have already seen, that this only happens because Jack and Wheeler Catlett intercede in the normal flow of events. There are no Jack Beechums and Wheeler Catletts in the lives of Will Wells, Joe Banion, or Gideon Crop. Certainly it is inaccurate in a broad, comparative perspective of American life to label Berry’s fictive world of independent subsistence farmers as elitist, but it is nonetheless a society with class, racial, and gender (see chapters IV and V) restrictions. These restrictions, however, do not invalidate the ideal of a simple life built upon communion with the earth.

PLACE IN POETRY

A look at Wendell Berry’s major volumes of poetry from the last twenty-five years reveals the steady evolution of his concern with place in human life, as well as how closely his poetic development coincides with his attempt to make his life live up to his philosophy. Each collection of verse meditates on Berry’s growing relationship with his Port Royal farm and how that awareness of place influences his percep-

In the autobiographical essay "A Long-Legged House," Berry credits William Carlos Williams with providing him the courage to write poetry about his own place in a manner which differed from the crippling heritage of local color. Berry suggests, "I felt I had a predecessor, if not in Kentucky then in New Jersey, who confirmed and contemporized for me the experience of Thoreau in Concord" (LLH, 142). In "A Homage to Dr. Williams" Berry explains that by examining how Williams’ poetry grew out of his life in his native city,
Berry could envision that writing could serve as a means by which he could be centered in place:

[Williams] has always about him the excitement of the awareness that poetry, as much as the ax or the plow, is a necessity of discovery and settlement, and of the husbanding and neighboring that must follow. His poems and stories and essays record the lifelong practice of citizenship, the unceasing labor of keeping responsibly conscious of where he was. He knew, as few white Americans have ever known, that a man has not meaningfully arrived in his place in body until he has arrived in spirit as well, and that the consummation of arrival is identification.

(CH, 56-7)

Most of the poems in The Broken Ground were written before Berry moved back to Kentucky, a fact which partially accounts for the abstract and distanced descriptions of the natural world found in this volume.

Indeed, many of the poems are set in the city, a dark place of ruin, so that the speaker, divorced from any connection to place, must create his own. He does this by singing. Song becomes the individual’s way of creating a design which can order his existence and provide meaning. As Robert Collins suggests in Modern Poetry Studies (1983), “Rather than being created out of an awareness of place, the song, or poem, creates the place in which one lives...” For example, in “A Man Walking and Singing” as the speaker traverses the city’s streets, “His singing becomes conglomerate/ of
all he sees,/ leaving the street behind him/ runged as a ladder/ or the staff of a song" (CP.13).

In contrast to the urban scenes are those country poems in which we see the beginnings of several of Berry’s major themes and image patterns. The opening verse, "Elegy," a song for the death of Berry’s grandfather, coupled with the title poem which closes the volume, direct the reader’s attention to a consideration of cycles—seasonal, generational, life and death—and the multiplicity of meanings in Berry’s metaphor of breaking open the ground of his particular place. The digging of the earth for his grandfather’s grave and the plowing that precedes the planting of seeds are two acts of the same impulse: burying the dead so that the broken ground can yield new life. In addition, Berry is breaking new ground personally (his move to Kentucky to begin farming) and professionally (publishing his first book of poetry). The title piece reflects these commingled notions, as well as expressing Berry’s reverent tone toward the mystery of the life cycle which is constantly revealed in the opening of the earth. Nevertheless, the kind of connection with place that dominates Berry’s mature work is only hinted at here.

By the time of Openings and Findings Berry’s verse has found a more genuine, less ornate and abstract lan-
guage, and a consistent focus at "placing man in his environment, at rediscovering the roots of community, family, and locale that preserve men from alienation." The poems are mostly careful descriptions of the rural landscape during the changing seasons. The speaker's entry into this landscape is tentative, for he is haunted by his ancestors' history of destruction, and slowed by his own uncertainty of his role. He recognizes that by entering into dialogue with the land he may find "openings" or insights into how to live rightly.

One such opening is provided in "The Sycamore." Berry describes a huge tree which offers a model for man, one that is deeply rooted in place and accepting of the responsibility for its own health: "In the place that is my own place, whose earth/ I am shaped in and must bear, there is an old tree growing,/ a great sycamore that is a wondrous healer of itself" (CP, 65). It has survived the ravages of nature (lightning) and man (nails, wire), even as it recognizes its own mortality ("There is a hollow in it/ that is its death"). The tree covers its scars with "the seamless white of the bark" and converts the experience of years into productivity. By standing firmly in its proper place the tree combines its design with the greater order of which it is a part:
It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark fate.
It is a fact, sublime, mystical, and unassailable.
In all the country there is no other like it.
I recognize in it a principle, an indwelling the same as itself, and greater, that I would be ruled by.
I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it, and is fed upon, and is native, and maker. (CP, 65)

But to be fully in place like the sycamore is a demanding task which the speaker is not yet able to accomplish. This is made evident by the series of poems which dominate Openings, the "Window Poems."
This sequence of twenty-seven poems reveals a persona who cannot exist in the natural world as he might wish. He is a man of theory, a writer in his study in the woods, separated from the world by a pane of glass; he is there, yet apart, an observer but not a participant. Berry exploits all of the rich possibilities of the window as a symbol. It is an artificial, man-made structure which acts as a barrier, keeping the speaker safe and warm, yet it allows the outside in. A window provides order and structure, limiting and determining one’s perspective of the world; under certain conditions it can reflect back one’s own image, a twist on the notion of revealing what is out-
side of the self. "The window is a form/ of consciousness, pattern/ of formed sense/ through which to look/ into the wild/ that is a pattern too,/ but dark and flowing..." (CP, 73).

The speaker’s attempts to open the windows are thwarted by his hatred of his society’s institutions ("public meaninglessness/ preying on private meaning"), by human hubris, greed, and violence, and by his recognition as a writer of the limitations of language ("The world is greater than its words./ To speak of it the mind must bend.") (CP, 86). At last, in the final poem of the sequence, the man in the study emerges from behind his window to become a part of the pattern he has been observing: "What is his is/ past. He has come/ to a roofless place/ and a windowless" (CP, 94-5). This movement out into nature affords the speaker a new perspective on his windowed perch, and by extension, on human place in the overall design of life: "The window is a fragment/ of the world suspended/ in the world, the known/ adrift in mystery" (CP, 95). The speaker has taken a critical step, literally and figuratively, toward the possibility of unity with his world. What remains for him to discover is the role he must play in order to achieve this desired harmony.

The answer is provided in Berry’s next collection of poems, Farming: A Handbook. Here Berry confidently
asserts that farming offers man a chance to enter nature’s design in a productive and redemptive fashion. The act of planting, of sowing seed becomes a dominant motif which suggests the farmer’s immersion in the cycles of the natural world and his recognition of the need to act responsibly toward a specific piece of the earth. In "Sowing" Berry writes:

...I walk heavy
with seed, spreading on the cleared hill
the beginnings
of green, clover and grass to be pas-
ture. 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. (CP, 104-5)

Suggested here and elsewhere throughout this volume is Berry’s conviction that an individual can make a difference to counteract our collective history of destruction toward the earth, and that such action will be an opening toward meaning in that individual’s life. Frederick Waage in Contemporary Poetry affirms that "Farming: A Handbook is full of these intimations that a cyclic sense of life, redemptive of public history, will (or can) begin by rooting in a closed private space—ideally a farm." A clear example of this notion is given in "The Morning News," where the poet bemoans the violence, hatred, and death that dominates news broadcasts. Much of this destruction is wrought
in blind obedience to abstract justifications of religion and patriotism. As an alternative, the poet offers: "I will purge my mind of the airy claims/ of church and state. I will serve the earth/ and not pretend my life could better serve" (CP, 110). Serving the earth, the particular beneath one’s feet and in one’s care, can move one away from exploitation toward nurture. Man as cultivator can become part of the channel of the life process, acting like a midwife participating in the birth of new life: "the summer’s garden continues its descent/ through me, toward the ground."

The poems recognize the exhausting physical labor which a life of farming demands, as well as the understanding that nature constantly works at re-claiming what man seeks to domesticate. Nonetheless, the speaker freely accepts these conditions because of the rewards of his communion with the earth. This enhanced relationship with the world is suggested by the shift in Berry’s use of singing. Whereas in The Broken Ground song was a means for man to construct a place for himself in an alien environment, now human song is subordinate to the earth’s singing. Man must learn to be silent, to abandon his design in order to merge with the world’s. In "Meditation in the Spring
Rain" the speaker climbs to a hilltop in an April rain and stands there "listening/ to the clashing syllables of the water. Surely/ there is a great Word being put together here" (CR, 136). Man must stop, be silent, ask the key questions (What would nature be doing here if man were not present? What will nature permit man to do here? What will nature help man to do here?) and then frame his design in accordance. When he does so, "then what presences will rise up/ before him, weeds bearing flowers, and the dry wind/ rain! What songs he will hear!" (CR, 112) The music of the earth. John Ditsky suggests in Modern Poetry Studies, "is, after all, the prerequisite of life in this world: Nature’s expression of its own pride in harmony, organization...."

Berry also creates the persona of the Mad Farmer, a man whose simple life philosophies stand against the rush and acquisitiveness of contemporary culture. In the aphoristic "Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer" he states "The finest growth that farmland can produce is a careful farmer." In section IX of the poem the Mad Farmer elucidates the unified life that farming can offer. It is the poetic expression of what Berry’s fictional farmer/husbands seek:

Sowing the seed,
my hand is one with the earth.
Wanting the seed to grow,  
my mind is one with the light.

Hoeing the crop,  
my hands are one with the rain.

Having cared for the plants,  
my mind is one with the air.

Hungry and trusting,  
my mind is one with the earth.

Eating the fruit,  
my body is one with the earth.  
(CP, 130)

Three years later, in The Country of Marriage  
(1973), the Mad Farmer remains alive, needling  
Americans to wake up and take measure of their lives.  
"Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" is at  
times acrimonious ("When they want you to buy some-  
thing/ they will call you. When they want you/ to die  
for profit they will let you know."); often sarcastic  
("Praise ignorance, for what man/ has not encountered  
he has not destroyed."); sometimes playful ("Invest in  
the millenium. Plant sequoias."); and unflinchingly  
moralistic ("Say that your main crop is the forest/  
that you did not plant,/ that you will not live to har-  
vest/...Call that profit. Prophesy such returns") (CP,  
151). The Mad Farmer’s insistence that the accumula-  
tion of money and things cannot be allowed to dominate  
the life of the mind or soul is classic simple life  
thinking. The challenge that he issues is reminiscent
of dozens of American voices, most notably that of Thoreau. In the *Southern Literary Journal* Daniel Cornell comments, "Like Thoreau’s *Walden*, Berry’s ‘Manifesto’ makes us transcend our usual categories, redefine the world, and thereby refocus the questions that we ask and ultimately the solutions that we need, all by giving investment and profit an organic significance."\(^{16}\)

Above all, the Mad Farmer remains a man of the land, steadfast in his affirmation of the Jeffersonian agrarian dream. After section I of "The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment" quotes Jefferson’s remark that "the small landholders are the most precious part of a state," section II presents the speaker’s fidelity to that vision:

That is the glimmering vein of our sanity, dividing from us from the start: land under us to steady us when we stood, free men in the great communion of the free. The vision keeps lighting in my mind, a window on the horizon in the dark.

*(CP, 154)*

It is here in *The Country of Marriage* that Berry gives full poetic treatment to the marital bond of the husband and his land that we have previously seen in his essays and fiction. The images of opening and healing which permeate the text are first associated
with his wife, Tanya, then with his land, and eventually the two become interchangeable symbols of a union which serves some mystery greater than themselves. The country of marriage emerges both as a particular locale of tangible fields and forests as well as a "...place where humans arrive having sailed beyond the utmost bounds of human thought." Just as Yeats asked, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" so Berry makes the farmer/husband’s identity inextricable from that of his two brides. But unlike Thoreau or the Romantic agrarians, Berry’s farmer is certain in his knowledge that fidelity, lifelong commitment to the land is required in order for nature to serve him. In commenting on this distinction, Speer Morgan says, "To [the farmer-agrarian], the love affair of the Romantic agrarian becomes a permanent marriage, so that when the easy sweetness of novelty wears off, the relationship may continue and deepen.

Similar to the realization that Jack Beechum reached, the speaker in "The Wild Geese" asserts, "what we need/ is here. And we pray, not/ for new earth or heaven, but to be/ quiet in heart, and in eye/ clear. What we need is here" (CP, 156).

After Berry had been farming for more than a decade his ideas on agriculture and culture crystallized. In
1977 he published two key works, *The Unsettling of America* and *Clearing*. While the essays in *Unsettling* ruffled some official feathers in the Department of Agriculture with their strident attacks upon American agribusiness, the poems in the companion volume quietly but forcefully addressed many of the same issues: the roots and consequences of a culture of exploitation, the possibilities afforded by an alternative of nurture, the centrality of place, the potential for health. *Clearing* is poetry of statement, where Berry’s embracing of simplicity has extended to his form and diction as well.

He chronicles the abuses of a culture which has avoided restraint under the guise of progress. In "Where," Berry summarizes the "achievements" of the exploitative mind:

The land bears the scars of minds whose history
was imprinted by no example
of a forebearing mind, corrected,
beloved. A mind cast loose
in whim and greed makes
nature its mirror, and the garden
falls with the man. (*CP*, 178)

Having despoiled the new Eden, Americans have heedlessly continued in patterns of behavior that threaten the planet and belie our most cherished ideals.

Berry’s speaker in *Clearing* walks the slopes of his beloved Kentucky hillsides, through two hundred years
of history, literally and metaphorically tracing the "eroding tracks of the joyless horsepower of greed."
But this long journey does not end in despair. The quest to understand what has preceded him leads him back to the present, to the particular ground beneath his feet and to the belief that there is a restorative vision that can be pursued. The potential is still with us; it is not too late to reclaim our inheritance by looking beyond the present wasteland back to those who at one time "took into their minds/ the troubles of this place,/...saw a good fate here/ and willingly paid its cost" (CP, 179). Berry’s persona must study the history of the place closely so that he can distinguish the real from the ideal and determine what attitude is needed to enact his vision of restoration. In "History" he acknowledges that his lifelong project of how to be at home in the world necessitates his engaging the land in dialogue, rather than imposing his vision upon it:

Through my history’s despite
and ruin, I have come
to its remainder, and here
have made the beginning
of a farm intended to become
my art of being here.
By it I would instruct
my wants: they should belong
to each other and to this place.
Until my song comes here
to learn its words, my art
is but the hope of song.
The organic dream is a demanding one, as Berry well knows. Having a conversation with one's land, consulting "the genius of the place," requires patience, acceptance, and faith. In any conversation in which one honors the integrity of the other member of the dialogue, one must expect that some replies will not be what had been anticipated or desired. Needed is the patience to bear answers that surface through long, slow growth; the acceptance that one's work can lead to no final accomplishment save death; and the faith that the mystery with which one converses will continue to reply. In "The Clearing," Berry also suggests that a person's vision "must have severity at its edge," must be strong enough to sustain itself against four major obstacles. The first is undoing the legacy of neglect—pastures that have been overtaken by bushes, broken cisterns, collapsing barns. Second, there is the seductive temptation of the land as real estate— a dismembered farm sold in pieces for "houses in the country," for more money than a farmer will earn in a lifetime of work. Third, one must protect against the indifferent application of power— Berry's mistaken effort to create a farm pond haunts him. And finally, there is the danger of weariness, the dread that too much need still be done.
These obstacles raise the question, "Then why clear/ yet again an old farm/ scarred by the lack of sight/ that scars our souls?" (CP, 185) The answer lies in the power of the vision, in the long term rewards of right livelihood, in the union with place that makes one a part of the design of the world rather than a blight upon it. Life must be served and the farm is the "proper destiny,/ here now and to come."

Through the hard work of husbandry, stewardship, restoration, and healing, through reining in one’s desires and judiciously using one’s power, an independent modest abundance can be achieved:

Vision reaches the ground under sumac and thorn, under the honeysuckle, and begins to rise. It sees clear pasture, clover and grass, on the worn hillside going back to woods, good cropland in the bottom gone to weeds. Through time, labor, the fret of effort, it sees cattle on the green slope adrift in the daily current of hunger. And vision moderates the saw blade, the intelligence and mercy of that power. Against nature, nature will serve well enough a man who does not ask too much. (CP, 181–2)

The three volumes of poetry that Berry published in the 1980’s maintain consistently his devotion to place,
while becoming increasingly spiritual in the conception of humanity’s place in the world (see chapter VI). A Part (1980) celebrates a person’s becoming a part of the natural design through the restoration of place. This is most clearly rendered in "Horses," a poem which contrasts the one way street of industrialization with the loop or cycle of the organic alternative.

The poem recounts the speaker’s rediscovery of old truths. As a boy he had learned to plow with a team of horses, at a time when a teamster “was thought an accomplished man/ his art an essential discipline.” Then the tractors came and all was changed. Berry’s description of what was almost universally trumpeted as a miracle of technological progress is a dark indictment of the technology’s effect on human work, and therefore, on human perception and action:

Our minds received
the revolution of engines, our will
stretched toward the numb endurance
of metal. And that old speech
by which we magnified
our flesh in other flesh
fell dead in our mouths.
The songs of the world died
in our ears as we went within
the uproar of the long syllable
of the motors...Veiled in that power
our minds gave up the endless
cycle of growth and decay
and took the unreturning way,
the breathless distance of iron.\textsuperscript{11}
\textsuperscript{(CP, 226)}

The killing of song that accompanies this change in "Horses" is indicative of the destruction of the chance
for communion with the earth, for song has increasingly been Berry’s symbol of such unity. Years later, however, the speaker, now a man, comes home to a farm and a team of sorrels, remembering the song of his labor and rejoicing in his elemental reunion with the world:

Going behind them, the reins tight over their backs as they stepped their long strides, revived again on my tongue the cries of dead men in the living fields. Now every move answers what is still. This work of love rhymes living and dead. A dance is what this plodding is. A song, whatever is said. (CP, 227)

The Wheel (1982) and Sabbaths (1987) reiterate the division between the destructive consequences of exploitation and the restorative acts of nurture. True to Berry’s mode of thinking, these generalizations are explored in the concrete and particular details of what a person may know best, one’s own place. In “Song (2),” from The Wheel, Berry returns to the image of the land as a lover, as a wife:

My gentle hill, I rest beside you in the dark in a place warmed by my body where by ardor, grace, work, and loss, I belong. (CP, 253)

And in Sabbats, Berry infuses a spiritual serenity into traditional meditations on his major themes. Here
the religious undertones that characterize all of
Berry’s works surface explicitly. People, fallen and
imperfect, scarred by their history of destruction, can
restore harmony to the world (and thereby to them-
selves) through properly conceived human labor. These
redemptive labors of love in one’s place will allow one
to enter the design of nature and hear the earth’s
song:

What if, in the high, restful sanctuary
That keeps the memory of Paradise,
We’re followed by the drone of history
And greed’s poisonous fumes still burn
our eyes?

Disharmony recalls us to our work.
From Heavenly work of light and wind and
leaf
We must turn back into the peopled dark
Of our unraveling century, the grief

Of waste, the agony of haste and noise.
It is a hard return from Sabbath rest
To lifework of the fields, yet we
rejoice,
Returning, less condemned in being
blessed

By vision of what human work can make:
A harmony between wood-land and field,
The world as it was given for love’s
sake,
The world by love and loving work
revealed

As given to our children and our Maker.
In that healed harmony the world is used
But not destroyed, the Giver and the
taker
Joined, the taker blessed, in the
unabused

Gift that nurtures and protects. Then
workday
And Sabbath live together in one place. Though mortal, incomplete, that harmony is our one possibility of peace.

When field and woods agree, they make a rhyme That stirs in distant memory the whole First Sabbath’s song that no largess of time Or hope or sorrow wholly can recall.

But harmony of earth is Heaven-made, Heaven-making, is promise and is prayer, A little song to keep us unafraid, An earthly music magnified in air. (SAB, 15-6)

Thus in both poetry and prose Wendell Berry acknowledges humanity’s dark history of misuse, while emphasizing the possibility of reclaiming the light and the music of harmony with our world. The process must begin at home, in one’s place.

In story and poem alike, Berry’s overriding concern with place serves as a foundation for his moral philosophy because it requires him to ask questions whose answers guide his conduct of life. The questions are ostensibly simple, but the search for their answers, which can lead to a life of simplicity, is complex and difficult. Berry would have us each ask:

“What is this place? What is in it? What is its nature? How should men live in it? What must I do?” (LLH, 199) The questions point us toward considerations of personal responsibility for our own well being, as well as that of the world. They are moral,
aesthetic, and practical. They insist that we understand action in terms of consequence, of cause and effect. They encourage staying in place, so that the ramifications of our acts over time are not misleadingly diminished in our minds. They make us consider what we really need, what would provide us with that "independent modest abundance" while maintaining a decent and preserving relationship with the world. Berry insists that the critical question of what is proper to do is meaningless without the context of place:

How you act should be determined, and the consequences of your acts are determined, by where you are. To know where you are (and whether or not that is where you should be) is at least as important as to know what you are doing, because in the moral (the ecological) sense you cannot know what until you have learned where. Not knowing where you are, you can make mistakes of the utmost seriousness: you can lose your soul or your soil, your life or your way home. (SBW, 103)

A person’s home, however, is much more than just a physical place. Place necessarily includes those with whom one shares any given environment, one’s family and community.
Notes to Chapter III

1. See Berry’s comments on the relationship between his fictional world and his real world in "The Long-Legged House," LLH, especially pp. 140-141.
2. The sexism obvious in this passage will be addressed in chapters IV and V.
3. The examples of treating rural life as brutish are legion in American literature. Notable ones include Hamlin Garland’s Main-Travelled Roads (1891), Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome (1911), Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River Anthology (1915), Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio (1919), and Ellen Glasgow’s Barren Ground (1925), to name a few.
5. Ibid., p. 244.
6. Ibid., p. 247.
7. Berry often cites the irony that millions of Americans are thankful that they have been liberated from manual labor, who then spend considerable time and money lifting weights and doing other forms of exercise. For example, "They’ve been liberated from meaningful work in order to pay to do meaningless work in order to keep healthy."
9. In HW, pp. 71-2, Berry describes his father’s practice in the county seat of New Castle, six miles from Berry’s grandfather’s farm in Port Royal. His description of his father’s attitudes are perfectly re-created in Wheeler Catlett: "In addition to, and in spite of, all else that he had become, he remained a farmer. Alongside the knowledge and abilities by which he functioned in courthouses and offices, there remained an indissoluble devotion to the life of the earth. He kept the farmer’s passion that sees beyond market values into the intricacy and beauty of the lives of things, and that hungers to preserve and enrich the land." This vision of John Berry is fleshed out in Wheeler.
10. Berry harshly criticizes modern education for implanting in rural students’ minds the belief that their potential can only be fulfilled by leaving the country for an urban area. Marshall Berman in All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 326, suggests that this attitude is not restricted to rural areas, but that it reflects the
great modern dream of mobility. In speaking about his
own boyhood in Brooklyn, Berman repeats a common
belief: "To live well meant to move up socially, and
this in turn meant to move out physically; to live
one's life close to home was not to be alive at all."

The parallels between Andy Catlett's life and
Berry's own are unmistakable. Both are born in 1934
in rural Kentucky to a father who is a lawyer; they
each have a brother named Henry who will join in the
father's practice; they both graduate college in 1956,
marry in 1957, and then move to urban areas, making
their livings by writing. Both return home in 1964
with their wives and two children, buy a small, run-
down farm and begin to re-claim it. They re-discover
their links to tradition and community and find in
their farming a clearer vision which informs their
writing. Both become uncompromising critics of
American economic policies which devalue life as they
see it.

There is a deep irony here for one of the major
distinctions between Berry and the Southern Agrarians
is his forceful renunciation of the racial prejudice
implicit in their writings. Furthermore, The Hidden
Wound is devoted to Berry's personal attempt to separ-
ate himself from his familial and cultural heritage of
slavery. Having sympathetically raised the racial
issues here in The Memory of Old Jack may be all that
verisimilitude allowed for.

Berry's Ambivalent View of Language," Modern Poetry

Robert B. Shaw, "Both Sides of the Water," Poetry

In section 4 Berry identifies the speaker as
"Wendell," and in section 11 recites the building of
his study, whose prose rendition occurs in "The Long-
Legged House." (LLH, 154-161).

Frederick C. Waage, "Wendell Berry's History,"

John Ditsky, "Wendell Berry: Homage to the Apple

Daniel Cornell, "The Country of Marriage: Wendell
Berry's Personal Political Vision," Southern Literary

Berry's portrayal of land as feminine, as a pas-
sive entity waiting to be seeded and and shaped by an
active male presence is stereotypically sexist agrarian
imagery. Such language and concepts remain an issue
throughout Berry's work, but more so in the earlier
writings. Berry's growing sensitivity to gender issues
is evident by his increasing use of nonsexist language in more recent works. In his early volumes of essays he used "man," but in the last three collections Berry has preferred "people" or "humans." Also, some of the more sexist poems from his early books do not appear in the 1985 edition of Collected Poems. For more on gender issues in Berry, Gary Snyder, and other environmental writers see Patrick D. Murphy, "Sex-Typing the Planet: Gaia Imagery and the Problem of Subverting Patriarchy," Environmental Ethics 10(Summer 1988): 155-168.

Collins, p. 47.

Morgan, p. 871.

One is reminded here of the scenes from John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939; reprint ed., New York: Penguin Books, 1979) when the Caterpillars, those "snubnosed monsters," crossed the ground, ignoring the features of the terrain, the fences, or the homes. The goggled driver "could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. He sat in an iron seat and stepped on iron petals." (p. 37)

Berry’s religious concerns and their influences on his writing and farming are discussed in chapter VI.
CHAPTER IV: THE CULTURE OF FIDELITY

The necessary extension to Wendell Berry's commitment to place is his passionate bond to those who occupy his place—his family and his community. Like many of his simple life predecessors, Berry insists that one's actions must stem from the belief that the good of the commonweal outweighs individual interest. Berry's commonweal, as in common well-being, is not an abstract notion like national interest, but rather it is the specific product of local devotion and love, the "particular love for particular things, places, creatures, and people, requiring stands and acts, showing its successes or failures in practical or tangible effects" (SBW, 60). The individual's imperative, in Berry's eyes, is to take vows and then stand by one's word. This fidelity will subsequently guide one's actions, making such deeds a vital link in establishing and maintaining the health of the local community and culture.

The two central vows that Berry embraces are those of marriage and membership in the community. Both require fidelity and sincerity; both aspire toward permanence and health. Both must be seen as processes
which, while emphasizing stability, grow and change over time and in response to circumstance. They are ways of staying in place so that the roots of love can fasten themselves firmly enough for enduring growth to occur. "Love proposes the work of settled households and communities," Berry insists, "whose innovations come about in response to immediate needs and immediate conditions." Berry holds this in contrast to the work of corporations and governments, whose changes he sees as motivated by the unbridled desire for future profit or power. Like farming, marriage and community in Berry’s vision are built upon organic models, instead of competitive economic ones. Their long range goal is health—physical, spiritual, and ecological—thus they emphasize the same list of virtues as farming does. In both marriage and community membership Berry finds traditional forms which make it possible to reconcile two antithetical drives: the need for individuality and the desire for a union which is something more than the sum of its parts. Both are critical components for a life of simplicity and meaning.

MARRIAGE

The marriage of two people constitutes Wendell Berry’s cardinal relationship for human life. It is a
cultural form that balances enablement and constraint, freedom and responsibility, the sacred and the profane. It is eminently a practical union, which is also a sacramental act. Marriage gives direction and purpose to fundamental human energies, thus allowing them to nourish and sustain life. In "Poetry and Place," Berry posits that "marriage is the earthly form of love that gives love its place and work and provides for the good care of both bodies and souls...Marriage takes love out of the mind and places it responsibly in the world" (SBW, 159). It proposes survival as a goal for us as a species, and defines human beings as creatures who make promises and keep them. It is also clearly much broader than a relationship between a wife and a husband. Marriage is a public act which encompasses the couple (bodies and minds), their history, their families and descendents, their place in the world (with its economy, history, and natural environment), and their human community (including its expectations, hopes, and memories). It is a function of not only love and commitment, but also of locality, circumstance, and duration.

Perhaps the easiest way to begin to understand Berry's view of marriage is to glance at what it is not. That picture is readily provided by contemporary
divorce statistics which suggest that over one half of all American marriages made today will end within a decade. Berry’s assessment of the current debased state of marriage as a cultural institution is swift and cutting:

Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate “relationship” involving (ideally) two successful careerists in the same bed, and on the other hand a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended. Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided. During their understandably temporary association, the “married” couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other.1

(WPF, 180)

The failures implicit in this description derive, Berry would assert, from a lack of understanding of marriage as a form, from misguided notions of fidelity and fulfillment, and from households that are consumptive without being productive.

Berry’s rich and compelling sense of marriage begins with his belief in the use of old forms. It is a traditional argument drawn from analogy to poetry and bolstered by epic moralists such as Homer, Dante, Spenser, and Milton. That it so clearly and openly contradicts demographic realities in a society which
Berry characterizes as disintegrating, is further evidence for him of its essential veracity. He begins with the taking of the marital vows, the giving of words which marks a couple’s entry onto a path of deep cultural and historical significance. The vows are an unconditional acceptance of the unknown, binding two people to a future that they cannot know. That exchange of words transplants two people in the country of marriage, a place that is real and worldly, made up of minds and bodies, characters, histories, and places. "In marriage as in poetry, the given word implies the acceptance of a form that is never entirely of one’s own making. When understood seriously enough, a form is a way of accepting and of living within the limits of creaturely life” (SBW, 201).

In both marriage and poetry forms are arbitrary before they are chosen. One could presumably marry any one of a thousand possible people, or frame a poem in a countless variety of ways. Once chosen, these forms cease to be arbitrary and instead impose certain limits inherent in them before the start. If misunderstood or misused these limits can be inimical. If used rightly they provide a vision of the good and hold open the possibility of hope. For example, if a poet chooses to write a sonnet and adheres to its conventions with
ignorant rigidity, he may make the form falsely exclu-
sive. As Berry puts it, "A set verse form can...be
used like a cookie cutter or a shovel, including and
excluding arbitrarily by its own rule" (SBW, 204). If,
on the other hand, the poet remains open to the pos-
sibilities inherent in the design, he may discover that
its limitations are a means of gaining freedom.

This potential for freedom within a form, either
poetry or marriage, is paramount to Berry’s vision. In
"Poetry and Marriage" he explains:

a set form can...summon into a poem, or
into a life, its unforeseen belongings,
and thus is not rigid but freeing- an
invocation to unknown possibility...It
may be that form, strictly kept,
enforces freedom. The form can be ful-
filled only by a kind of abandonment to
hope and to possibility, to unexpected
gifts. The argument for freedom is not
an argument against form. Form, like
topsoil (which is intricately formal),
empowers time to do good. (SBW, 204)

In other words, as a poet works within a verse form it
will undoubtedly create some impasses. The poet will
need to slow down or stop, and in time work through the
problems. The qualities that these impasses may draw
out of the poet- faith, forbearance, inspiration- will
serve him well. In fact, Berry offers that sticking
places are "the true occasions of the poem: occasions
for surpassing what we know or have reason to expect.
They are points of growth" (SBW, 205). The poet writes
the first line of a set form trusting that "life and language are abundant enough to complete it." The married couple exchange vows in an analogous trust, with faith that the impasses they will necessarily encounter will also be points of growth.

The value of this "sweet are the uses of adversity" theme cannot be understated for Berry. For the poet or the married couple, as for the farmer, it is when the obstacles created out of voluntary adherence to the demands of form are greatest that the real work, the real journey takes place. Since the form defines the realm of correctness, keeping it through moments of turmoil becomes instructive and fulfilling:

We had been prepared to learn what we had the poor power to expect. But fidelity to the form has driven us beyond expectation. The world, the truth, is more abounding, more delightful, more demanding than we thought. What appeared for a time perhaps to be mere dutifulness, that dried skull, suddenly breaks open in sweetness- and we are not where we thought we were, nowhere that we could have expected to be. It was expectation that would have kept us where we were. (SBW, 205-6)

The most salient example of such triumph in Berry's fiction occurs in A Place on Earth, in the marriage of Mat and Margaret Feltner. The impasse they face is the death of their only son, Virgil. Through the graces of time and faith, the work of forbearance, and the recog-
nition of the uses of failure, their marriage once again harmonizes their lives. Margaret offers, "we belong to each other. After all these years. Doesn’t that mean something?" Mat replies with characteristic understatement, "I don’t know what it means, I know what it’s worth" (POE, 258). It is a point of growth.

As a form, marriage balances the voices of the two muses that Berry would have inhabit our lives. The first, which he calls the Muse of Inspiration, whispers hopes and dreams into one ear. In the other ear can be heard the tones of the Muse of Realization, who repeats time and again, "It is yet more difficult than you thought." To listen only to the first muse sets one up for a life of disappointment; to listen only to the second creates an unnecessary rigidity which can paralyze. Because marriage recognizes that failure is possible, while simultaneously holding out the strength inherent in its form, it turns people away from either fantasy or self-pity and toward the real occasions of their lives. In "The Country of Marriage" Berry describes the worldly terrain of marriage and its balancing act:

Sometimes our life reminds me of a forest in which there is a graceful clearing and in that opening a house, an orchard and garden, comfortable shades, and flowers
red and yellow in the sun, a pattern
made in the light for the light to
return to.
The forest is mostly dark, its ways
to be made anew day after day, the dark
richer than the light and more blessed,
provided we stay brave
enough to keep on going in.

(EP, 146-7)

The ultimate value of old forms, to conclude the
poetry and marriage analogy, is that they link their
makers with a cultural and historical community that
serves as a reservoir of strength and unity. Berry
maintains:

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. Forms join, and
this is why forms tend to be analogues
of each other and to resonate with each
other. Forms join the diverse things
that they contain; they join their con-
tents to their context; they join us to
themselves; they join us to each other;
they join writers and readers; they join
the generations together, the young and
the old, the living and the dead. Thus,
for a couple, marriage is an entrance
into a timeless community...Joining the
form, we join all that the form has
joined. (SBW, 213)

Personal identity, while kept intact, is fused with
communal identity, so that we can become more than our-
selves. However, Berry never loses focus of his
insistence on personal moral action as the underpin-
nings of the common good. The vows taken by the
married couple are public and now must be confirmable
by their actions in this world and in their local community. As they do so, the good of the two people becomes the good of the commonweal.

Berry’s belief in the integrity of marriage as a cultural form rests heavily upon the value that he places on order in human life and society. Desirable order is to a great extent produced by those fundamental human relationships which aspire toward permanence, which cannot survive on a standard of convenience. For Berry, marriage, friendship, neighborhood and community inherently demand fidelity. Fidelity of this nature is not a function of duty alone. Duty-bound fidelity is often negative and can become a purposeless virtue, which, as Berry suggests, is a contradiction in terms, for “virtue, like harmony, cannot exist alone; a virtue must lead to harmony between one creature and another” (UNS, 121).

The compelling motive behind fidelity must be faith, the faith that staying in place will not be in vain. Such faith is not the same as the optimism that assures us that circumstances will improve, but rather a deeper belief “...that by staying, and only by staying, we will learn something of the truth, that the truth is good to know, and that it is always both different and larger than we thought” (SBW, 206). In
addition, fidelity built upon faith helps people resist the pressure for novelty that will surface during those inevitable times when what we have is not the same as what we desire. Since no such convergence can exist continually, fidelity prepares us for the occasions when it does indeed return. For example, in "Passing the Strait," Berry counters the kind of despair seen in Matthew Arnold’s "Dover Beach." He writes:

Past the strait of kept faith
the flesh rises, is joined
to light. Risen from distraction
and weariness, we come
into the turning and changing
circle of all lovers. On this height
our labor changes into flight.

(CP, 263-4)

A primary means by which marital fidelity contributes to human order is through its harnessing of sexual energy. Drawing his analogy from nature, where all energy moves in forms, and firm in his conviction that uncontrolled energy is inimical to culture, Berry believes that human energies must be given forms that restrain and channel them. Since sexuality is a powerful human energy, "Fidelity can thus be seen as the necessary discipline of sexuality, the practical definition of sexual responsibility, or the definition of the moral limits within which such responsibility can be conceived and enacted" (UNS, 122). Unlike the moralists whose writings shun sexual activity, Berry
views instinctive sexuality as one of the delights of being human. His poetry is replete with the metaphoric connections between the farmer/husband's plowing and seeding and his love-making with his wife, and with the gift of fertility. The issue is not with sexuality per se, but with its role in providing meaning to human life. Fidelity is to sexuality what the farm is to the wilderness—bringing it within the boundaries of human control and care, so that it may be tended and directed toward harmony.

Berry affirms that his predilection for the particular over the abstract applies to sexual fulfillment as well. "If one is to have the power and delight of one's sexuality," he says, "then the generality of instinct must be resolved in a responsible relationship to a particular person" (UNS, 123). This dovetails with Berry's definition of fulfillment, which clearly does not mean the satisfaction of appetites (sexual or any other kind). Instead of appetites, Berry would have people fulfill forms, as in the willing discharge of obligation. "Marriage is a form of sexual love which allows its fulfillment in both senses: in satisfaction and in responsibility for its consequences, and it sets a term to this responsibility—'until death'—at which it may be said to be fulfilled" (SBW, 209).
When such fidelity occurs it contributes to the essential unity of the whole community because energies are directed toward stability and order. In Berry’s ideal vision, marital fidelity is a centerpiece of the organic synthesis:

It is possible to imagine a marriage bond that would bind a woman and a man not only to each other, but to the community of marriage, the amorous communion at which all couples sit: the sexual feast and celebration that joins them to all living things and to the fertility of the earth, and the sexual responsibility that joins them to the human past and the human future. It is possible to imagine marriage as a grievous, joyous human bond, endlessly renewable and renewing, again and again rejoining memory and passion and hope. (UNS, 120)

The idealism here is a reflection of Berry’s ultimate faith in human goodness and wisdom, which though diminished by daily examples to the contrary, is not extinguished.

If marriage is to enact the earthly form of love it must have a place to do so. That place is the household, the controversial keystone in Berry’s philosophy of relationship and simplicity. It is through his sense of household that Berry develops an organic rather than what he sees as the prevailing industrial model of marriage, and where he opens himself most widely to charges of being paternal, sexist,
and reactionary. As we shall see, the issues are complicated by some disparities in his portrayal of the household depending upon which genre of his writing is examined.

As Berry makes abundantly clear in his work, all systems in a culture are interconnected. Thus changes that occur in the nature or organization of work will ultimately affect the structure and nature of the household, of marriage, and of human relationship to place. In "The Body and the Earth," from The Unsettling of America, Berry attempts to demonstrate how the industrialization of society disastrously disrupted the meaning of household and produced the dire consequences people live today.

Industrialization, according to Berry, produced a sexual division by relegating all that we associate with nurture to women. In pre-industrial societies men played important roles in nurturing, such as provisioning the household. This is not to suggest that there were no differences between the work performed by men and women, but Berry stresses that difference is to be distinguished from division. While the nurturing tasks traditionally performed by women (childrearing, food preparation, and housekeeping) were admittedly more confining than the work of men, such tasks still con-
ferred a measure of dignity. And since in agricultural societies the men’s tasks involved a great deal of nurturing of people, animals, and land, there was difference but not division. Industrialized society, however, separated the home and the workplace for most men, reducing their household duty to the abstract providing of money and establishing our legacy of the rift between working and living. For women, the results were disastrous. Nurturing became exclusively their concern, which "served to signify to both sexes that neither nurture nor womanhood was very important" (UNF, 114).

This change opened the way for much more exploitation. Women consequently faced daily tasks which society considered trivial, and which as the household increasingly changed over to a cash economy, were to be accomplished by "labor-saving" devices. "The modern housewife," Berry suggests, "was saddled with work from which much of the skill, hence much of the dignity, had been withdrawn, and which she herself was less and less able to consider important" (UNF, 114). As one’s work becomes less accomplished and satisfying, it becomes increasingly easy to deny one’s personal worth. Furthermore, since women were isolated from what men did at work, and therefore, from much of the major concern
of their lives, division widened. In the midst of a competitive commercial society these conditions made it likely that many women would begin to measure their identity more in terms of what they purchased than in what they performed. Men, concomitantly, divorced from the practical considerations of the household, found it relatively easy to dismiss it from their consciousness. Thus Berry draws the conclusion:

In modern marriage, then, what was once a difference of work became a division of work. And in this division the household was destroyed as a practical bond between husband and wife. It was no longer a condition, but only a place. It was no longer a circumstance that required, dignified, and rewarded the enactment of mutual dependence, but the site of mutual estrangement. Home became a place for the husband to go when he was not working or amusing himself. It was the place where the wife was held in servitude. (UNS, 115)

Both men and women were deformed by these changes in their roles and the idea of household disintegrated. The costly effects of such disintegration, in Berry's eyes, include the failure of marriage, which estranges the sexes, and the kind of social mobility that estranges people from the earth.

To fully understand these ramifications it is necessary to probe Berry’s idea of the household. It is a condition or process which embodies the perfect combination of idealism and pragmatism, two often
irreconcilable stances. The household is at once a
unifying ideal and a practical circumstance. It is
built upon mutual dependence and obligation. It
requires the couple’s useful work together and/or for
each other, since it is what people do and make
together that forms the strongest bonds:

The household is the bond of marriage
that is most native to it, that grows
with it and gives it substantial being
in the world. It is the practical condi-
tion within which husband and wife can
enact devotion and loyalty to each
other. The motive power of sexual love
is thus joined directly to constructive
work and is given communal and ecologi-
cal value...Work is the health of love.
To last, love must enflesh itself in the
materiality of the world—produce food,
shelter, warmth or shade, surround
itself with careful acts, well-made
things. (UNS, 131-2)

This sense of household is a holistic one which reduces
exploitation by emphasizing the role of all parts in
making the whole work. The household economy that
requires the couple’s combined skill and moral dis-
cipline, according to Berry, makes husband and wife
equal partners in an economic model that values quality
of life over quantity of cash. In contrast, the indus-
trial model which demands work done away from home,
separates out the parts of the household, making them
increasingly abstract, and unrelated, opening the door
for serious exploitation to occur. The more that
people divorce work from household, the less and less there remain practical and particular things that they can do for each other. The fewer elements there are to enact bonds with, the greater the pressure that is placed on the ones which do remain, such as children, legal obligations and sexual love. When sex is divided from the other functions of the household, thus made autonomous, it becomes oversimplified. Oversimplification makes sexuality vulnerable to the destructive ways it is used in advertising and in the lore of sexual romance.

Berry sees the contemporary American household as a place where consumptive couples consume, where no production takes place, and where whatever work is done profits the energy corporations. By contrast, he’d like households that are to some extent productive and have some measure of economic independence, self-protection, self-employment and freedom. These goals can be attempted through the common ground and satisfactions to be gained by such ventures as gardening, cottage industries, carpentry, woodcutting, and the domestic skills that used to be known as housewifery, to name a few possibilities. Berry asks us to consider why, as a society, do we assume that working away from home is the desirable state of affairs?
This query clearly runs counter to the prevailing "truths" of American life, especially raising the hackles of many who associate work at home by a woman to a condition of subservience. Berry experienced this fury when he wrote "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer" in 1987. In this essay, before giving his criteria for embracing any technological innovation, Berry remarks that his wife, Tanya, types and edits his writing on a 1956 typewriter. Seventeen of the twenty letters that Harper's received about Berry's essay were harshly critical of his opinion, including a few that denounced what they clearly deemed as Berry's exploitation of his wife. In "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," Berry responds to that charge in characteristic fashion, by addressing the personal and cultural values which he sees at stake in this issue.

Berry suggests that the feminist letters which accuse him of submitting his wife to conventional subservience deny two important possibilities that enrich life: one, that marriage can exist as a state of mutual help; and two, that the household can have a productive economy. His critics, Berry contends, know nothing of his marriage and household so they assume that Tanya does not labor by her own choice, nor as a full partner in their household economy. Berry observes:
If I had written in my essay that my wife worked as a typist and editor for a publisher, doing the same work that she does for me, no feminists, I daresay, would have written to Harper’s to attack me for exploiting her...It would have been assumed as a matter of course that if she had a job away from home she was a "liberated woman," possessed of a dignity that no home could confer upon her. (WPF, 182)

This is the same problem which faces farm women, who despite their integral contributions to the economic base of the farm, are often condescendingly asked, "What do you do?"

At the core of this difference in attitude is that the value American society places upon work is directly proportional to salary. Obviously, Berry quarrels with this formulation and with the entire set of its ramifications for human actions. The issue, Berry asserts, is not one of gender, but of beliefs:

I know that I am in dangerous territory, and so I had better be plain: what I have to say about marriage and household I mean to apply to men as much as to women. I do not believe that there is anything better to do than to make one’s marriage and household, whether one is a man or a woman. I do not believe that "employment outside the home" is as valuable or important or satisfying as employment at home, for either men or women. (WPF, 182)

While Berry is not insensitive to the reality that many people are not in the position to do an appreciable part of their work at home, nor might they wish to do
so, he does insist on asking society to reconsider whether its unquestioned belief in the superiority of work outside the home is indeed good, for individuals, for marriage, for communities and for society at large.

Berry argues that women's struggle to attain equity with men in the workplace masks the real problem, which is that our economy is exploiting both men and women, as well as our environment. He poses arresting questions, reminiscent of Thoreau:

Why would any woman who would refuse, properly, to take the marital vow of obedience...then regard as "liberating" a job that puts her under the authority of a boss (man or woman) whose authority specifically requires and expects obedience? It is easy enough to see why women came to object to the role of Blondie...but are we to assume that one may fittingly cease to be Blondie by becoming Dagwood? Is the life of a corporate underling—even acknowledging that corporate underlings are well paid—an acceptable end to our quest for human dignity and worth? (WPF, 193)

There is very little hyperbole here, for Berry's cynicism about the economy symbolized by corporate America and its effects on individual lives and households runs deep. Nor does he spare the men who willingly submit to this "feudal submissiveness and modern helplessness." Most American men, Berry contends, have accepted their loss of usable property and economic independence, of household and community, and
of their ability to do "anything for themselves or anyone else without money, and so for money they do whatever they are told." It is a dark vision in which Berry mourns that well-intentioned efforts at promoting social justice and equity are, in fact, propelling us further and faster along a destructive path:

It is clear that women cannot justly be excluded from the daily fracas by which the industrial economy divides the spoils of society and nature, but their inclusion is a poor justice and no reason for applause. The enterprise is as devastating with women in it as it was before...To have an equal part in our juggernaut of national vandalism is to be a vandal. To call this vandalism "liberation" is to prolong, and even ratify, a dangerous confusion that was once principally masculine. (WPF, 185)

It would be easy to accuse Berry of self-righteousness, of simple paternalistic chauvinism, and of being a sentimental reactionary who wishes to turn back the clock to pre-industrial days, for such elements can be found in his work. But to dismiss him on such grounds constitutes a serious devaluation of his challenges to contemporary society. Berry does indeed believe that a woman's place, to as great an extent as possible, is in the household; but so too is a man's. By simplifying their desires, reassessing their needs, discovering their strengths and capabilities, minimizing their dependence on those industries and attitudes
which do violence to the well-being of people and the environment, women and men can make the household not just a place, but a controlling vision of responsibility and meaning. Their combined mission there, in addition to love and fidelity, is to energize the bonds of marriage through the mutual building of a life that increases their economic independence, expands their productivity while decreasing their consumption, and fosters the satisfactions that follow from their reciprocal dependence as a couple and their self-reliance as a unit. Berry is not so naive as to believe that this can or will happen easily or soon. He knows that many people do not have or do not believe they have the resources needed, nor that this vision would hold attraction for many Americans, because it requires a fundamental shift in value systems, personal and national priorities. That is not to say, however, that for Berry it is neither feasible nor desirable.

"One who returns home," he believes, "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" ([UNS], 130–1). Certainly one of the most intriguing aspects of the belief that fidelity to the bonds of marriage and household makes one free is, as Steven
Weiland has commented, "their unity in a form of culture as traditional as it is, now, near revolutionary."4

The difficulty of living the kind of marriage that Berry espouses in his essays is underscored by his characters’ struggles to do so in his fiction. At their best these marriages emphasize the kind of friendship, partnership, and responsible parenting posited in the non-fiction. Berry mostly avoids presenting the issues of sexuality. As Jack Hicks remarks, "Berry’s farm marriages are more characterized by quiet respect, support, endurance, than by passion, intensity, or personal encounter."5 At their worst they demonstrate how costly selfishness and inequity can be. Either way, the importance of marriage permeates each work.

In The Memory of Old Jack, Jack Beechum’s failed marriage with Ruth Lightwood is the central tragedy of his life. Berry ascribes the failure to Jack’s inability to unite his farm, household, and marriage bed. Jack’s obsessive devotion to his land and to the satisfactions he derives from working it prohibit him from allowing Ruth full partnership in their household. Furthermore, it is clear that her vision of what that household should be differs considerably from Jack’s.
There is no mutuality of dependence, but rather a constant, quiet struggle to force the other partner to change. After their inability to share grief over their stillborn son, the rift between them widens into an impassable chasm. Consequently, Ruth becomes the classically trapped woman while Jack retreats further into his obsessiveness.

With their marriage reduced to the hollowness of obligation, Jack abandons fidelity for an affair with Rose McInnis. The relationship is passionately charged, yet while it makes Jack feel empowered once again, Berry denies its possibility of producing wholeness without marriage:

And with Rose too he was beginning to feel an incompleteness. His love for her led to nothing, could lead to nothing. As long as he might come to her he would come, however welcome, as a guest. It was as though he bore for these two women the two halves of an irreparably divided love. With Ruth, his work had led to no good love. With Rose, his love led to no work. With Rose he had come within the gates of Eden, but had found there no possibility for a worldly faith or labor. With Ruth he had made an earthly truth and travail that bore no delight; they had lost the vision of their paradise. (MOJ, 134)

Jack will remain suspended in his failure. Rose dies in a tragic fire; when Ruth falls ill her married daughter Clara removes Ruth from Jack’s house for her final days. Jack Beechum spends the seventeen year
interim until his death replaying his guilt and suffer-
ing. Despite his many attributes and the devoted cir-
kle of friends and surrogate children that fill Jack’s
life, his failed marriage prevents him from ever being
whole.

Equally incomplete in Berry’s novels are his
bachelors. Either by choosing to remain single or by
being chosen against, men such as Ernest Finley, Burley
Coulter, and Jayber Crow are simultaneously integral
members of Port William while remaining outside of the
domestic circle that forms the community’s core. This
distancing affects each one in a distinctly different
manner.

Ernest Finley provides the reader with the most
dramatic instance of experiencing a void in one’s life.
He returns to Port William in 1919, having served in
WWI and having spent almost a year after the Armistice
re recuperating in a hospital. He is permanently crippled
in one leg, sentenced to crutches for the rest of his
life. In his absence his parents died and the family
home was sold, adding further psychological injury to
his already deep wounds. When A Place on Earth opens
Ernest has been well established as a highly respected,
meticulous carpenter for more than twenty-five years,
yet his life echoes from emptiness. His greatest
period of satisfaction comes when Mat Feltner hires him to repair a barn and other outbuildings of the Crop farmstead that had been destroyed by flood. In the absence of the husband, Gideon Crop, Ernest works there for several weeks, taking his meals in the kitchen and becoming increasingly drawn to Gideon’s wife, Ida.

Although Ida’s fidelity to Gideon is unquestionable, Ernest takes great pleasure in his reveries of fulfillment:

He imagines himself living there with her, doing such farming as his lameness might allow. In this dream of his, his shop is lifted intact out of Port William and set down in place of Gideon’s old toolshed under the oak tree. Except for this holding on to the idea of the shop, one of the emotions of his dream is surprise at the ease with which his old life can be given up. (POE, 195)

His dream, while certainly inspired by Ida, focuses on the household they would make. Central to his plan would be bridging the gap between his work and his homelife, bringing them together and thereby adding a new qualitative dimension to his life. That the forty-five years of his current life could be so easily abandoned testifies to its hollowness. His fantasy has months in which to grow until Ida receives a letter from Gideon announcing his impending return. At the end of that workday Ernest retreats to his shop and takes his own life. With the collapse of his imagined
marriage to Ida he can find no other way to heal his life’s wounds or make himself whole.

Burley Coulter’s situation is both more subtle and complex. Burley is one of Berry’s most fully developed and admirable characters. He is an accomplished farmer, experienced woodsman, town comic, and a sensitive and compassionate man. It is Burley who becomes Nathan’s father when Jarrat Coulter abdicates that role. It is also Burley who spearheads the efforts to help Ida Crop when her daughter dies in the flood, and to comfort Mat Feltner in his attempts to handle Virgil’s death. Like a seismograph, Burley’s sensitivity to others enables him to pick up emotional tremors long before they surface in the community, allowing him to be there in word and deed when needed. Nonetheless, or perhaps because of his abilities, Burley is a loner. His life lacks precisely the measure of completeness that he tries to restore for others.

In A Place on Earth Burley often concludes personal or community celebrations in a drunken stupor accompanied by Port Williams’ dislocated and dysfunctional men. It is only much later, in the title story from The Wild Birds, that Burley’s intimate connections to the community of marriage are revealed. He appears in Wheeler Catlett’s office to have his will prepared. Much to
Wheeler’s surprise, Burley is not bequeathing his half of the Coulter farm to his surrogate son Nathan, but rather to Danny Branch. Wheeler had for years heard the stories of Burley’s relationship with Kate Helen Branch and her son, but had filed them in the stuffed folders of small town gossip. Burley’s will represents his need to atone for his failure to publically act upon his love for Kate Branch while she was alive. Although Burley loved Helen, fathered Danny, and provided for them with labor and money, he had remained faithful to the appearance that no relationship existed there. Wheeler eventually realizes,

What Burley is performing, asking him to assist in, too late but none the less necessarily, is a kind of wedding between himself and Kate Helen Branch. It is the secrecy of that all-but-marriage of his that has been his great fault, for its secrecy prevented its being taken seriously, perhaps even by himself, and denied it a proper standing in the world. (WB, 137)

The kind of unofficial marriage that Burley and Kate had lived robbed them of the communal value of joining the form. It denied them the possibilities of household, and turned many of the empowering energies of marriage into the debilitating entropy of guilt. Whether Burley’s public act of atonement will change anything about his life in Port William is unseen and unlikely, but it clearly is Berry’s intention to have
his commitment to cultural cohesiveness validated by one of his most attractive characters.

A third bachelor, Jonah "Jayber" Crow, Port William’s barber and closet intellectual, approaches marriage from a theoretical context. Unlike Ernest or Burley, Jayber does not feel that his bachelorhood creates a void in his life. He is, however, the staunch chest defender of marriage as an institution, "of what has come to be, for him, a kind of last-ditch holy of holies" (POE, 68). Jayber’s passion about marriage does not spring from the relationships he witnesses, but rather from his idealism. He holds up the ideal of marriage as a bulwark against the possibility that life is meaningless and worthless. Jayber is enough of a realist to know that the ideal is unreachable, that human efforts fail. But he believes that by maintaining a vision of the unblemished, people are afforded a standard with which to measure failure that will allow for "just grief and sympathy."

First, Jayber envisions the ideal:

In Port William, or beyond it or above it, Jayber imagines a kind of Heavenly City, in which each house would be built in a marriage and around it, and all the houses would be bound together in friendships, and friendliness would move and join among them like an open street. (POE, 69)

This is Berry’s community of marriage, people joined to each other and to their joining, producing a community
where cooperation replaces competition. But Jayber,
like Berry, dwells in this world, not in the ideal:

His living in Port William has been a bearing of the descent of the town from that ideal— as though at the end of each night, out of his mind and his desire, he gives painful birth to the new real morning and real town... But he is also the adulterer of his marriage, the servant of opposite houses, faithful to both and unfaithful to both— slipping away from his Heavenly City, to which he has sworn his devotion, to become the lover of all the perishing lights and substances of Port William... After so long, it seems to him that he is the native and occupant of both places, and passes freely between them, and in serving either serves both. (POE, 69)

Contained in Jayber’s confession is the realization that marriage is the earthly form of love, that it must exist in the particularities of everyday experience, and therefore it cannot inhabit an ethereal realm. Nonetheless, by holding fast to the ideal the married couple can plant and nourish their love’s earthly roots enough that it may grow heavenward. “Earth’s the right place for love:/ I don’t know where it’s likely to go better,” suggests Robert Frost; Berry insists on this truth and on marriage’s value as the most likely form for enacting it.2

The best marriages in Berry’s novels possess the virtues his essays stress: fidelity, good households, linkages to family history and the land, the ability to
work through impasses and the maintenance of stability in the community. They offer a vision of the good in a world that has slipped out of control. But they also are marriages which exist in the reality of Port William, thus they are necessarily imperfect. Despite the praise which Berry heaps upon the farmer/husband, the male domination in Port William is to some extent responsible for the imperfections.

The virtues and flaws of these good marriages emerge most clearly when impasses threaten the households. A brief look at three such examples reveals a consistent pattern. Mat and Margaret Feltner (POE), Gideon and Ida Crop (POE), and Andy and Flora Catlett (REM) have built households that Berry admires. These couples are loving, disciplined, hard-working, and skilled. Their independence (excepting the Crops who tenant farm) has been won by creating sustainable subsistence farms in which each member is a full economic partner. Their roles are consistent with traditional ideas of gender- the men work in the fields and barns, the women in the home and garden- but Berry convincingly portrays the economic integrity and value that both provide for the household. The couples are integral parts of their communities, sharing in the communal efforts such as harvests and looking after one
another, while retaining their own spaces. It is only when disaster strikes that inherent weaknesses are revealed.

Disaster takes the form of violence from external events: the Feltners lose their son in WWII, the Crops lose their daughter in a flood, and Andy Catlett loses his right hand to a threshing machine. In each case the men turn away from their wives and households. Gideon and Andy literally leave, while Mat withdraws into himself and his work. In each case the women remain steadfastly in control of themselves and their commitments. Berry endows them with an intuitive understanding of suffering which the men must struggle to learn. By his idealizing the inner strengths of these women, they become more like embodiments of principle and less like earthly partners in marriage. This denial of the full treatment of the interior lives of these women undercuts the equity Berry established in his couples' economic lives.

The focus shifts, in the cases of Mat and Andy, to the men's protracted efforts to restore meaning to their lives. Gideon simply drops out of the novel for 150 pages, and while Ida remains, we view her through the eyes of Mat and Ernest Finlev. Thus it is their suffering about which Ida's situation elicits the most
commentary. The healing process which allows for Gideon’s return is never disclosed. For Mat and Andy it is a connection to place which reinvigorates their lives and returns them as husbands. While this sense of place includes their love for their wives, it is more clearly devotion to the land, the male community of membership, and the meanings attached to their way of life that brings them home again.

Despite this lopsided treatment of emotional struggles, Berry does create marriages which animate his belief in fidelity. It is fidelity to the form of marriage which keeps the value of devotion alive in both members of each couple. It prepares them for the return of the convergence between what they have and what they desire. Furthermore, by staying they do learn something of the truth of their lives. Both *A Place on Earth* and *Remembering* end with a sense of peace earned through a heightened awareness of self that has been made possible by the bonds of marriage. Both novels emphasize that marriage and household are dynamic processes, not static states, or as Berry writes in "The Dance":

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What is fidelity? To what
does it hold? The point
of departure, or the turning road
that is departure and absence
and the way home? What we are
and what we once were
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are far estranged. For those who would not change, time is infidelity. But we are married until death, and are betrothed to change...
Love changes, and in change is true. (CP, 262-3)

To recognize that change is both inevitable and necessary in one’s marriage is to acknowledge two cardinal truths about the relationship: it exists in the real world and its meaning is communal. Thus Berry asserts:

What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go. It is going where the two of you—married, time, life, history, and the world—will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a way. (SBW, 200)

The way is one critical component of Berry’s vision of the simple life. The ultimate value of marriage is that it seeks unity through responsible commitment and love. It is sustained through careful hard work and respect. Its good works serve more than the two people involved. If this sounds a lot like farming, the similarity is intentional, because for Berry, the two forms are analogues. They are part of the way of an organic model of the simple life.
Notes to Chapter IV

1. Berry is not categorically against divorce. He acknowledges that some marriages are wrong and that divorce is the right course to pursue, but insists that divorce is not one of marriage’s proposed results. It is the contradiction of marriage because the breaking of a vow can reveal little about the maintaining of one.

2. The essay was originally published in The New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly and then reprinted in Harper’s and The Utne Reader. Berry includes the essay, some of the letters that Harper’s received, and his response in WPF, 170-77.

3. Some who have read articles Berry has published in magazines like The Atlantic and Harper’s have responded in this fashion in letters to the editors of those magazines. I have not found any journal articles and only one review where such stances have been advanced. For that review see Edwin Fussell, “Farm Poets and Garage Critics,” Parnassus 2(Spring/Summer 1974): 25-32.

There is a story that Wendell Berry likes to tell about an old galvanized bucket that has been hanging on a fencepost near his farm for many years. It has collected leaves and twigs, rain and snow, insects, and animal droppings, which over time have produced several inches of rich black humus in its bottom. This soil, Berry reminds us, is the medium through which all creatures sustain their lives and to which all contribute with their deaths. This bucket’s passive accomplishment metaphorically describes what Berry’s vision of human community must actively achieve. A community must "collect leaves and stories, and turn them to account...must build soil, and build that memory of itself- in love and story and song- that will be its culture" (WPF, 154). A beloved community is the larger context within which commitments to place and family can extend their meaning. For Berry, this means that community is defined as common experience and effort, on a shared ground, by members who willingly belong. Such members’ actions and attitudes aspire toward stability by attempting to balance change and constancy. To do so they must share certain values: the
integrity and continuity of family life, respect for the old and instruction of the young, neighborly love, local loyalty and ecological balance. In other words, community members must resist those public institutions whose abstractions divide thought from feeling, and embrace instead those unofficial, redemptive institutions of marriage, family, household, friendship, and neighborhood.

Defining Community

Berry’s sense of an organic community is based upon his personal experience, but its elements are supported by various traditional definitions of community. The prolific sociologist Robert Nisbet has eloquently captured Berry’s emotive stance on community with a definition built upon deeply rooted inclusiveness:

Community is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one or another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in a social order. It draws its psychological strength from levels of motivation deeper than those of mere volition or interest.... Community is a fusion of feeling and thought, of tradition and commitment, of membership and volition.¹

Nisbet continues by suggesting that the archetype for community is the family, a perception that Berry certainly shares. Within this traditional conception
the network of social relations among community members is marked by emotional bonds and a profound sense of mutuality. Members share both understandings and obligations; self-interest is subordinated to the common good. Community seen in this fashion, Thomas Bender suggests, "is an elemental fact of one's emotional life."

Among sociologists and historians throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, as well as in the popular imagination, community has also been territorially based. While this notion of proximity as a determinant of community has received many challenges in the past two decades, Berry insists that it is intrinsic. For Berry, the idea that people can achieve communal values from the work of institutions or the intellectual mutuality of shared specializations is nothing short of disastrous self-deception. For him, proximity gives birth to the possibility of community:

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives.

(LLH, 61)

Community, Berry argues, rests upon and builds off the same disciplines of faith and fidelity that marriage requires. If marriage necessitates staying in place,
community does so to a much greater extent, for the dedication to work and hope that it needs extends beyond more than one’s lifetime. "This work," Berry suggests:

consists of the accumulation of local knowledge in place, generation after generation, children learning the visions and failures, stories and songs, names, ways, and skills of their elders, so that the costs of individual trial-and-error learning can be lived with and repaid, and the community thus enabled to preserve both itself and its natural place and neighborhood. (SBW, 208)

This is not to suggest that any small town or neighborhood will necessarily be a community, nor that communal values spontaneously arise from proximity; it is the suggestion that without a shared place, however, meaningful community cannot exist.

Further insights into Berry’s vision can be gained by briefly looking at some contemporary notions about community that surfaced in the recent sociological study, Habits of the Heart (1985). Here four sociologists and a philosopher examine how the firmly enshrined American commitment to individualism undermines the effectiveness of commitments to others, a basic ingredient of community. Robert Bellah and his colleagues perceive a split in American culture between "expressive" and "utilitarian" individualism. Expressive individualism has a therapeutic focus on personal
growth, which easily reduces a person’s choices to ones that promote private benefit with no common set of moral standards. Utilitarian individualism reflects the culture of the workplace, where bureaucratic organization and technical expertise define the spheres of activity. What is missing, the authors conclude, is a middle ground of cultural practices in which public and private behavior combine in a common devotion to the good. They argue that the dual realms of individualism prevent true community. In order to reconstruct coherent community life, as well as a secure sense of selfhood, they advocate that people must adopt the forms and language of civic culture that unite public and private selves. This middle ground is precisely where Berry’s community is located, for he consistently maintains that the impoverishment or enrichment of either one’s public or private self necessarily has a concomitant effect on the other.

Furthermore, Bellah et al. suggest that modern American cultural emphasis on autonomy pushes most people to assume that their sense of self rests almost solely upon the choices that they make:

...The notion that one discovers one’s deepest beliefs in, and through, tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans. Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one."
Berry also sees the belief in autonomy as a harmful illusion. True autonomy, he argues, does not exist. Since no one's actions occur in a vacuum, there is only responsible or irresponsible relationship to community, place, and posterity. People who act out of a belief in such autonomy make themselves and their communities vulnerable to exploitation by those forces for whom community has no value, including the bureaucratic and corporate structures which pursue profit, power, and influence. Equally threatening are those individuals whose pursuit of the American Dream sends them blindly trampling the livelihoods, interests, and landscapes of others. Jackson Lears refers to such an attitude as "cultural amnesia," for when people "lack continuities with the past and loyalties outside the self,...[and] their only abiding commitment is to their own personal growth," they serve the interests of managerial elites. "The cult of self-development," Lears continues, "helps to satisfy the corporate need for free floating units of 'human capital.'" It is critical to acknowledge that faith in complete autonomy is "destructive and illusory." Believing that one's choices, not limited or restricted by tradition and community, determine one's selfhood is what used to be called hubris. Berry cautions that, "Both the Greeks and the Hebrews told us
to watch out for humans who assume that they make all
the patterns" (HE, 5).

The antidote to hubris is membership in what for
Berry is simply a true community, and which Bellah
terms a "community of memory." A community of memory
keeps its past alive through the retelling of its cru-
cial narratives of the lives of men and women who
embody the values and traditions of the community, and
through the practices and rituals that keep those
values alive. The stories in such a canon emphasize
both the character and virtue of exemplary people, as
well as the shared grief and suffering which also form
deep ties among people. "And if the community is com-
pletely honest," Bellah advises, "it will remember
stories not only of suffering received but of suffering
inflicted—dangerous memories, for they call the com-
munity to alter ancient evils." The presence of the
past allows communities and individuals to think about
the future with optimism, to become communities of hope
as well. In Berry's words:

...the community is an order of memories
preserved consciously in instructions,
songs, and stories, and both consciously
and unconsciously in ways. A healthy
culture holds preserving knowledge in
place for a long time. That is, the
essential wisdom accumulates in the com-
munity much as fertility builds in the
soil. (SBW, 73)
Fertility, in either soil or community, posits futurity and potentiality.

The implications for an individual member of such a community are profound. One is able to articulate a sense of self by referring to those stories which exemplify long-term commitments rather than ephemeral desires, thus establishing a context for defining a good life. There is a concreteness to such identification, as opposed to the wistful longing for some vague and abstract terms such as freedom. Finally, there is the recognition that community is the solidarity of individuals who enact and enjoy the responsibility of caring for others because this creates a good life. In stressing the importance of this civic vision, British cultural historian Raymond Williams remarks, "In its definition of the common interest as true self-interest, in its finding of individual verification primarily in the community, the idea of solidarity is potentially the real basis of a society." The alternative to a person’s active membership in a community of memory and hope is to be a part of what Bellah calls a "lifestyle enclave," the massing of the similar as opposed to the sharing of solidarity. All too often, Thomas Bender suggests, America "markets the illusion of community while evading the realities of modern social life."
Berry’s beloved community, then, is one where "Gemeinschaft" prevails through a commitment to place, a sense of belonging generated by shared values, understandings, and obligations, the fusing of public and private selves, and a respect for tradition. This staunchly "conservative" vision of a culture of fidelity is clearly exemplified in Berry’s essays on economy, cooperation, and personal responsibility, in his fictional portrayal of the Port William Membership, and in his poetic renderings of the uses of tradition and the past.

Community and Economy

Berry’s fundamental explanation for the eclipse of community in contemporary American life rests upon the erosion of local economy. Without practical and economic value, community becomes an abstraction whose dimensions have been reduced to only the emotional and spiritual realms. Important as these dimensions are, they are readily subject to the kind of vocal pieties that are common to discussions of community. Without clear economic ties to one another, people lose the motivation and the necessary understandings of mutuality that are critical for community. "Can people
be neighbors," Berry asks, "if they do not need each other or help each other?" Superficially, one can answer this question with a "yes," but in a profound sense of neighborliness one must reply "no." Played out broadly, this means that a community must shape itself internally, by depending upon itself for a great many of the essential needs of life. A good local economy establishes the context for the kind of commitment that a good community requires.

Berry’s models for the good community are small rural agricultural ones of both the past and the present. In each of these the emotional and spiritual components of community are indistinguishable from the economic factors. They are, in fact, economic assets which produce tangible economic results. Because economy and community are essentially synonymous, the economy "cannot prev" on community, as Berry sees it doing elsewhere in American life.

Berry’s hometown provides one clear example of the influences that have shaped his thinking about community. In the late 1930’s the Port Royal neighborhood of Berry’s youth was comprised of nine farming households within walking distance of one another. It was a subsistence economy, admittedly poor by the nation’s standards of wealth, but richer than many by
standards of true health. Rural subsistence economies, to this day, draw their strength from being elaborate and diversified. In Port Royal, families grew their own vegetables and fruits, which were consumed as well as canned and preserved for winter. Milk, butter, eggs, and meat came off the farm, as did some cash from the sale of milk and cream. Hunting, fishing, and gathering added to what appeared on the table. The major cash crop was tobacco. Reciprocal cooperative labor among the families of the neighborhood was standard practice, whether in harvesting tobacco, building a barn, or making a quilt. Whenever they worked together they ate together, mingling work and amusement. Balanced here were the needs for independence and neighborliness, with the economic imperatives inextricably woven into the social fabric. This pattern was repeated throughout the countryside and in town, where the dictates of commercial life brought people together. Many of the goods and services needed were available within Port Royal and its environs.12

According to Berry, such a local economy of subsistence produced a community which far from being complete or perfect (its many shortcomings will be discussed later), was effective and successful. It fostered local strength and independence. It trans-
mitted culture-borne knowledge and skills to the young, prized family and neighborhood solidarity, charity, and fidelity, dignified labor and saw no rift between work and life. It supported itself, amused itself, and in times of grief or tragedy, consoled itself. These intangible assets, which while not reflected in the GNP or other abstractions used for measuring economic strength, are meaningful standards by which to judge the health of a community. The principle of subsistence, Berry asserts, "is bad for the industrial economy and for the paper economy of the financiers; it is good for the actual, real-world economy by which people live and are fed, clothed, and housed" (HE, 185). The consumer economy which replaced it, with its reliance on distant markets, transported manufactured goods, and credit is by Berry's evaluation both totally dependent and weak.

Furthermore, the economic shift has held serious implications for those intangibles mentioned above. As farmers around Port Royal literally and figuratively bought into the industrialization of farming, much of the nature of family and neighborhood dynamics changed. Farmers borrowed vast amounts of money to invest in machinery, which in turn, required more land and different (often destructive) farming techniques in order
to make a profit. Berry notes that "many thought it better to own a neighbor’s farm than to have a neighbor." Competition among farmers replaced cooperation. The economic roles of family members were altered, too. When family members and neighbors were no longer useful to one another in direct economic ways, community began to erode. People became increasingly dependent upon exterior economics, organizations, and institutions. Berry finds the price tag for this modernizing change extremely high:

Port Royal...now exists for 'the economy'- that abstract accumulation of monetary power that aggrandizes corporations and governments and that does not concern itself at all for the existence of Port Royal. (HE, 185)

In effect, Berry and others suggest that rural America has become little more than a colony.

The evidence for domestic colonialism is clear. All of the products of rural America—food, fiber, timber, mining—make much more money for people in other places than they do for the rural people and communities who do the work and bear the consequences of the work. The most dramatic examples of colonial exploitation occur in the coal strip mining operations which have destroyed the lives and land of innumerable Appalachian communities, while making handsome fortunes for those who live far away. Less visible, but no less
indicative of the pattern, is the economic shortchanging of the farmer. For every dollar that American consumers spend on food, only thirty-one cents goes to the farmer who produced it, while processors harvest forty-six cents and wholesalers and retailers split the remaining twenty-three. The exploitive effects of such colonization on community are manifested in two critical ways. First, colonialism destroys local self-sufficiency and to some extent, local culture. Most of the necessities and services of the communities which used to be local and relatively inexpensive—food, education, transportation, entertainment, etc.—must now be purchased at high cost and with little or no local control. Second, since the exploitive interest is absent, it doesn’t pay the true costs of production. By denying the development of a strong local economy, colonialism usually produces instability of the local ecosystem as well as the local community. Good care of people and land has rarely been a concern of those who draw their profit from, but do not live in, rural America.

Why rural communities continue to sell out to such exploitation is consistent: the promise of ready cash. Whenever a distantly based employer arrives with the pledge of creating a hundred new jobs, most communities
leap to accommodate him with waivers on everything from
taxes to environmental regulations. After awhile some
recognize what has happened:

There has never been as much cash
forthcoming to the local people as to
people elsewhere—not by far. The supply
of ready cash has tended to be
undependable or temporary, and it has
usually come as a substitute for things
more permanent and dearer than cash, and
harder to replace, once lost. (HE, 191)

Bewilderment and confusion about a direction for the
future predominate in such places, making them more
vulnerable to the next colonial agent who arrives with
a similar pledge.

Berry’s alternative to this reductive cycle is the
model proposed by E.F. Schumacher: "local production
from local resources for local use," to as great an
extent as possible.” If there are to be strong com-
munities, there must be viable local economies that
foster practical bonds among people. Needed is a new
mindset, a fresh imagining of the meaning of community
which attempts to define it at its core. In Berry’s
mind the definition is clear. People must:

...choose one another and their place,
over the rewards offered them by outside
investors. The local community must
understand itself finally as a community
of interest—a common dependence on a
common life and a common ground. And
because a community is, by definition,
placed, its success cannot be divided
from the success of its place, its natu-
ral setting and surroundings... The two economies, the natural and the human, support each other; each is the other's hope of a durable and livable life. (HE, 192)

Berry is asking for the use of a new standard for measuring economic success. Rather than mere productivity, he envisions the health of our communities, both human and ecological, as the proper yardstick for economic strength.

Imperative for Cooperation

Any discussion of the functioning of community must inevitably address the interplay of competition and cooperation among community members. For Berry, it is all too clear that American society has thoroughly subordinated the cooperative instinct to the competitive. In addition, he laments that much of the kind of religious and political thought that was instrumental in shaping American life and institutions has been replaced by almost purely economic reasoning. In several of his jeremiads Berry denounces a society which has allowed economics to become the ultimate justifier of decisions and actions in both public and private life. Furthermore, that competition has been "enshrined as the sovereign principle and ideal of eco-
nomics" constitutes a nightmare for Berry's dreams of community. He fully agrees with Christopher Lasch's assessment that our "culture of competitive individualism...has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of all against all...."¹⁰ For most Americans, Berry asserts, economic postulates have been elevated to the status of universal laws, making economists the ultimate authorities in society.

Berry's fundamental criticism of competition as the economic ideal is that it is destructive of both nature and human nature. By definition, competition requires dividing any community or society into classes of winners and losers. The ranks of the displaced, dispossessed, and powerless grow while power and wealth become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Not only has American society never figured out what to do with the legions of "losers," it has decided that creating them is an acceptable trade-off for "growth." "There is no limit," Berry offers, "to the damage and suffering implicit in this willingness that losers should exist as a normal economic cost" (WP, 131). For if one accepts this economic premise, then one will not hesitate to pursue self-aggrandizement at the expense of the life of a family, a community, or the earth. Controlling the market, driving the competition out of
business, capitalizing on someone’s misfortune are attitudes that have become so entrenched as acceptable that all sense of the human costs of such actions has been lost.” As a moral philosopher, Berry finds this unconscionable. An economy void of morality is drastically reductive of life: “Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy” (WPF, 135). Conspicuously absent from the language of competition’s ardent proponents, Berry notes, are words like compassion, honesty, community, or ethics.

A symptom of our collective myopia concerning competition, Berry further suggests, is the failure to see that ultimately there will be no winners at all. The more that power is concentrated, the more that unrestrained competition is allowed, the more certain it is that the costs will not be borne purely by those who appear to have lost. Berry believes that winners exist only by “their temporary ability to charge their costs to other people or to nature.” But the bills will, and already have started, coming home. Economic victory that comes at the expense of community and nature becomes everyone’s cost.

Furthermore, Berry finds it maddening that the realities of competitive thinking are often couched in
terms of altruism. Ever since the industrialization of farming in America, the advocates of agribusiness have rallied behind the seemingly commendable mission that their productivity can feed the world, and do it less expensively. While productivity has indeed increased, the ruthlessness of the competitive model has forced most of this nation’s independent farmers out of business, concentrated agricultural land holdings in a few dozen national corporations, ruined the economic base of untold hundreds of rural communities, devastated the land and water in many regions, and insured that our food, processed and preserved, travels an average of 1300 miles before it reaches our dinner tables. Meanwhile, agribusiness corporate profits have soared. Berry concludes from such evidence:

> The strangest of all the doctrines of the cult of competition, in which admittedly there must be losers as well as winners, is that the result of competition is inevitably good for everybody, that altruistic ends may be met by a system without altruistic motives or altruistic means. (WPF, 134)

That such an equation can exist seems highly unlikely. The alternative vision which Berry embraces is the communitarian model emphasizing cooperation, mutual aid, and the exercise of restraint. He does not deny that competition can play a useful role in the lives of individuals and communities, but only if it is con-
tained within limits. These limits should not be mandated by government regulation, but should emerge out of the practical and moral understandings of people who recognize their shared ground and aspirations. To be neighborly is to place some restraint on one’s competitiveness so that the greater community may thrive. Rather than pit neighbor against neighbor and both against nature, Berry advocates an acceptance of the standard of health above that of wealth. It is a vision that is still lived in many rural towns today, in religious communities like those of the Amish and Mennonites, and in many ethnic enclaves in urban America. Berry believes, as did Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett earlier this century, that even in the midst of the most impersonal larger environment, the sense of neighborhood can be cultivated and made to serve communal needs. 21

A common example of cooperation which Berry cites in his own life and displays in his fiction is the communal harvesting of tobacco in Kentucky. 22 From late August to early October each year neighbors join together in a crew to harvest the crop on each farm in the neighborhood. They work and eat together daily for weeks. This common effort is more than a practical means of gathering a cash crop, it is a rite of com-
munity which binds people together, as well as to their past. Berry explains:

The crew to which I belong is the product of kinships and friendships going far back; my own earliest associations with it occurred nearly forty years ago. And so as we work we have before us not only the present crop and the present fields, but other crops and other fields that are remembered. The tobacco cutting is a sort of ritual of remembrance. Old stories are re-told; the dead and the absent are remembered...The conversation, one feels, is ancient. Such talk in barns and at row ends must go back without interruption to the first farmers...We only know that while it lasts it can carry us deeply into our shared life and the happiness of farming. (WFF, 142)

Competition exists here, too, but it is not among farmers to see who can monopolize the market. It is among family members, between generations, and among friends to see who can cut a row the fastest, work the steadiest in the stifling heat, or tell the best story.

That the occasions for such communal efforts may be harder to recognize or structure in non-agricultural communities, and certainly in urban America, testifies to how thoroughly we have accepted the market and competitive model in our economic and social relations. It also reveals our acquiescence in the belief that institutions are responsible for developing a sense of community. That there is much significant work that could be cooperatively done to benefit people and their
communities, especially in urban centers, is self-evident. It requires attitudinal change and a different standard of measure. The passionate belief that such change is necessary for American culture permeates Berry’s work. He maintains his hope that we can make the effort to change the way we think and live. Raymond Williams has effectively captured the personal implications of the cooperative alternative: "If one cannot believe in men, and in their common efforts, it is perhaps only in caricature that one can believe in oneself." 

Community and the Individual

An important consideration in any communitarian vision is the need for an individual to balance independence and interdependence, self-reliance and mutual aid. Berry believes that taking either the individual or the communal emphasis to extremes will result in loneliness. The person whose rigid impulses toward community allow for little individuality will eventually find himself lonely in conformity. Similarly, one’s rejection of community in pursuit of uniqueness will lead to the loneliness of singularity. The desired middle path is to be both free and a member at the same time.
While Berry acknowledges the difficulty of this path, he has mapped it out. He begins by stressing that part of his definition of being human is independence of character, while the other part is the common ground of community and culture. Given this orientation, Berry guards against what he perceives as the cult of individual genius in American life. Such genius, whether scientific, artistic, or of another nature, is valuable in Berry's eyes when it reveals how community has erred. When, for example, customs that are empty and meaningless are still enforced the rebellion of the individual serves a productive, corrective role. On the other hand, when individual genius attempts to replace community it oversteps its bounds. "Individual attempts to change cultural form [e.g. marriage]...are nearly always shallow or foolish and are frequently totalitarian" (SBW, 210). Change, Berry's conservative argument suggests, should follow a biological model. It should occur by necessity, as in adaptation, over time and through the efforts of communities, rather than by novelty through the work of the individual. While Berry clearly does not believe that the status quo is necessarily good, he prizes stability and equilibrium over rapid change. Furthermore, when change does occur, he believes that it
should be directed toward renewing rather than destroying the community’s or culture’s traditional forms. Like sociologist Robert Park, Berry believes that society may be said to exist when stability and cooperation predominate.24

In order to achieve the balance suggested by the middle path, Berry would have individuals monitor whatever disciplines they cultivate for their linkage to those of the greater community. In other words, to be valuable any discipline needs a proper sense of use, a perspective which places it within the context of the good of the commonweal. This emphasis on community responsibility is not aimed at curbing individuality or even eccentricity, but rather at marshalling those energies for purposes beyond self-interest. It is the difference between a career and a calling. Berry argues that one cost of the fragmentation of work that occurs in industrialized society is the difficulty of perceiving any direct contribution to the whole that one’s labor makes. It is easier to see one’s job as a self-interested activity whose purposes do not extend beyond personal satisfaction and/or the family’s standard of living. Instead of this sense of one’s work as a career, Berry embraces the more traditional vision of a calling. Bellah et al. explain this distinction:
In the strongest sense of a ‘calling,’ work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person’s work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it. Such unification of activity and character, of moral belief and practical action liberates an individual to pursue personal gratification because it will also contribute to the welfare of all. Walking this middle path is consonant with how Robert Frost defined freedom, "moving easy in harness." 

Berry asserts that by viewing work as a calling, by donning the harness of community discipline, people are accepting the challenge of asking a fundamental ecological question: "What is the effect, on our neighbors and on our place in the world, of what we do?" 

He advocates the kind of scrupulous self-examination found in the religious roots of American culture and which received eloquent treatment in the works of the major Transcendentalist writers. Acknowledging this debt, Berry cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s distinction in "The American Scholar" that "Man Thinking" should not be a thinking specialist, but rather a person whose thoughts commit him or her to actions. Berry reminds us that Emerson saw thinking as a partial
act, while living constituted a total act. For Berry, the implications are clear:

There can be disembodied thought, but not disembodied action. Action—embodied thought—requires local and communal reference. To act, in short, is to live...And one does not live alone. Living is a communal act, whether or not its communality is acknowledged. (WPF, 85)

Consciously acknowledging communality is the first step toward accepting personal responsibility for communal well-being. Berry phrases his question of self-scrutiny in ecological terms for that is the broad perspective that includes all other spheres of human behavior.

Berry maintains that recognizing the inevitability of local and communal consequences for one’s actions should prompt one to the practical application of personal moral principles. He insists that whether one lives on a farm in Kentucky or a street in Brooklyn, one cannot rely upon specialists, experts, or officials to address the problems of one’s community. “One must begin in one’s own life the private solutions that can only in turn become public solutions” (UNS, 23). It is the same imperative for individual responsibility that fueled Thoreau to call for personal initiative to foster change from the bottom up. Like him, Berry remains outside the conventional political system which
he believes, on both sides of the spectrum, exalts increased productivity and power rather than sustained inquiry into a simpler, saner life. If people want healthy communities, Berry urges, they must envision what those communities would be like, and then begin in their own backyards to act accordingly.

The Port William Membership

The argument for a healthy, organic community that pervades Berry’s essays is complemented by his depiction of one in his fiction. Port William is Berry’s beloved community, a small farming enclave patterned after his native Port Royal, Kentucky. In telling Port William’s story through the interwoven narratives of four novels and one short story collection, Berry illustrates the profound effects of community on the lives of individuals. These narratives demonstrate work as a calling, the bonds of neighborliness, the generational transmission of cultural knowledge, the love and care of place, and the relationship of personal growth with membership in community.

In “Writer and Region,” from What Are People For?, Berry offers an interpretation of the ending of Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn which actually reveals the underlying assumption of the Port William works. The novel concludes by suggesting that Huck
sees only two choices: the corrupt society of slaveholders, killers, and victimizers or an escape to the Territory. Berry comments:

It is arguable, I think, that our country’s culture is still suspended as if at the end of Huckleberry Finn, assuming that its only choices are either a deadly ‘civilization’ of piety and violence or an escape into some ‘Territory’ where we may remain free of adulthood and community obligation. We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. (WPF, 75-6)

Berry suggests that what is missing in Huckleberry Finn and in American literature in general, is another possibility, that of the beloved community in which people can experience “the coming to responsibility that is the meaning, and the liberation, of growing up” (WPF, 76).³⁷ This kind of community has received little attention in American literature, while the society that stifles and mistreats people, forcing the protagonist’s flight (usually into some variant of the wilderness) appears in many of the cardinal works in the national canon. For Berry, this constitutes a failure of imagination in our culture. There is, he maintains, a middle ground, a vision of responsible, enriching adult community life. This is what he portrays in the world of Port William.

This middle ground is characterized by a deep sense of tragedy. Each book in the Port William series
dramatizes the efforts of individuals and the community to recognize, suffer, and bear loss and pain. The ability to do this is crucial to human growth and understanding, and is one of the enduring attributes of true community. Berry suggests:

Community life...is tragic, and it is so because it involves unremittingly the need to survive mortality, partiality, and evil...A boy can experience grief and horror, but he cannot experience that fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy and still remain a boy. Nor can he experience tragedy in solitude or as a stranger, for tragedy is experienceable only in the context of a beloved community. The fulfillment and catharsis that Aristotle described as the communal result of tragic drama is an artificial enactment of the way a mature community survives tragedy in fact. The community wisdom of tragic drama is in the implicit understanding that no community can survive that cannot survive the worst. (WPF, 77-8)

Thus the fulfillment and cohesion which typify the endings in Berry's fiction are mellowed, autumnal ones, achieved through struggle, and grief, and the adult acceptance of responsibility for self and others. Most of the characters come to maturity and stay to do the hard work of community. Those who leave, return of their own volition to re-claim their membership in a life of meaning and connection.

According to Raymond Williams, membership in a community occurs when one feels that one's values and pur-
poses are the same as those of the community and when
the community is seen as a natural means by which one’s
purposes will be promoted. A member must have con-
fidence in the community’s institutions, accept the
basic way life is conducted there, and believe that if
change is necessary, he or she can contribute to the
process that will effect such change. Finally, one
should perceive that the conflicts and tensions within
the community can be resolved through the use of its
fundamental means and values, therefore preserving its
essential unity. Berry illustrates these principles
most clearly through the network of relationships among
seven key Port William families: Feltner (Ben, Mat and
Margaret); Coulter (Jarrat, Burley, Nathan and Hannah);
Catlett (Wheeler and Bess, Andy and Flora); Penn (Elton
and Marv); Beechum (Jack); Rowanberry (Arthur, Martin);
and Branch (Danny and Lyda). These families form a
tightly knit neighborhood, a kinship forged through
time, habit, tradition, and intimate knowledge of a way
of life.

Berry’s kinship network, born of common roots and
ancestry, shared experience and values, provides each
of his characters with a sense of personal identity
that includes a responsibility for the welfare and con-
tinuity of the community. Membership is a cultural
form for Berry, and as such it requires fidelity. One way he depicts this is through a series of surrogate relationships, where one man fills the void in a younger one’s life by becoming his mentor, his father figure. The older man transmits the network’s practical knowledge about farming and love of place, while modelling the balance between self-reliance and mutual interdependence. This is what Ben Feltner does for a confused young Jack Beechum. Jack, years later, does the same for Mat Feltner, Wheeler Catlett, and Elton Penn. Mat, in turn, fathers Nathan Coulter, who subsequently takes on Danny Branch and, finally, Wheeler, after Jack’s death, assumes the responsibility for Elton Penn. Through this process four generations of Port William families are linked in a line of succession. One gets into the line by being chosen; one stays in by choice. When Elton protests that he will never be able to repay this kind of debt, Wheeler explains:

> it’s not accountable, because we’re dealing in goods and services that we didn’t make, that can’t exist at all except as gifts. Everything about a place that’s different from its price is a gift. Everything about a man or woman that’s different from their price is a gift. The life of a neighborhood is a gift...Once the account is kept and the bill presented, the friendship ends, the neighborhood is finished, and you’re back to where you started. The starting
place doesn’t have anybody in it but you. (WB, 72-3)

The starting place, Elton realizes, is before the line of succession.

The nurturing that occurs in these relationships of succession has both personal and community consequences. For the individual it provides a foundation for building values, confidence, and security. For the community it provides the possibility that a way of life which has become increasingly marginalized might yet survive. Andy Catlett, on the eve of his departure for college, reflects on the upbringing he received in the hands of the Coulters, Elton Penn, Mat Feltner, and Jack Beechum:

Since the beginning of his consciousness he has felt over and around him the regard of that fellowship of kinsmen and friends, watching him, warning him, fondling him, correcting him, teasing him, instructing him, not so much because of any ambition they have for him as because of where he comes from and because in him they see, come back again, traits and features of dead men they loved. (MOJ, 140)

At that critical moment in his life when Andy had become old enough to join the communal work crew, membership in community, appropriation of his heritage, concepts of manhood, and a vision of the good all indissolubly bonded in his spirit:

For Andy this was a time of trial that put him in touch with the depths of his
Andy does go to college, has a successful career as a journalist in Chicago, but at age 30, feeling unfulfilled, returns to Port William, to farming, and to membership in the community. Remembering dramatizes Andy’s cycle of departure and return, tracing his path through loss and suffering, ending with his joyful but chastened reclamation of his place on earth.

In addition to providing support for individuals, the Port William Membership makes possible the continuation of a kind of life that anthropologist Rhoda Halperin calls “The Kentucky Way.” It is, Halperin suggests, “primarily a system of local knowledge and practices that allows people to exercise control over their livelihood and that provides them with a sense of autonomy.” Characterized by commitments to family and neighborhood, hard work and self-sufficiency, generosity and reciprocity, freedom, land, and practical knowledge, this lifestyle confers dignity and self-esteem on rural working class people. Its Holy Trinity is family, land, and community. The families in this kind of support network not only help each other with
the affairs of daily life, but also with sustaining the simple life vision that work should be oriented toward meeting the basic needs of life, not profit or over-consumption. "The goal of the familial economy is not to ascend the ladder of social stratification. Rather, it is to make ends meet economically and psychologically and to keep the kin network intact...."31

Obligations to family and community are paramount, so making a living must contribute to family well-being. In Berry’s Port William stories members help one another to desire less, to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to make ends meet in the local environment, to avoid dependency on cash, and to be at once self-reliant and generous. In this regard Halperin asserts:

In this region self-reliance does not serve to isolate people. It is not individualistic or self-serving. Rather, it is a form of outreach to kin and neighbors...In sum, the essence of the Kentucky way is not a romantic notion; it is fundamentally practical—meticulously tailored to fit the local economy, ecology, and family structure.32

The interactions of Berry’s key Port William families keenly depict such practical dimensions of community life.

A certain spirit of egalitarianism is another aspect of community promoted by membership networks.
Berry’s fiction reveals three forces which contribute to this sentiment. First, the Gemeinschaft quality of relationships in Port William de-emphasizes differences in income, education, and skill. That Wheeler Catlett is a well-educated lawyer with a solid practice is inconsequential in his day to day interactions with friends and farmers, all of whom think of him as one like themselves. Second, since labor and resources are freely exchanged among families regularly, not just in times of crisis, it becomes easier to minimize issues of wealth or status. A reader of Berry’s five Port William books has little or no awareness of the characters’ comparative land holdings nor does one detect that such distinctions might concern anyone. Finally, the society’s resistance toward specialization reinforces feelings of equality. The Kentucky Way requires that people be skilled and knowledgeable amateurs in many fields, rather than specialists or experts who deal narrowly with knowledge and who often do not stay around to live with the consequences of their actions. People in Berry’s novels, like most small farmers, are typically competent in a myriad of skills.

An obvious discrepancy in this portrait of egalitarianism appears, however, when one examines gender roles. Port William is undeniably a patriarchal
society which upholds traditional divisions of labor. This is consistent with research findings that modern families with membership in strong Gemeinschaft networks reinforce segregated roles for men and women. Since such communities emphasize stability, changes in gender roles will occur more slowly than in places where Gesellschaft predominates. Despite Berry’s insistence upon women’s equal partnership in the household economy and despite Halperin’s finding that women contribute "comparable, although not identi-
cal work" to the maintenance of the network, women do not inhabit public spaces in Port William. They are forceful presences in the home, but remain in the back-
ground, if seen at all, outside of it. Everyone has accepted a woman’s station as wife, mother, household partner. They are farm wives but there are no women farmers, merchants, or professionals, nor any women who have chosen not to marry. Neither is there an indica-
tion in any of the Port William books that a woman might not be satisfied with this arrangement.

This absence of conflict with the status quo is evident throughout Berry’s portrait of Port William. The price tag for its organic unity seems, to some extent, to be the omission of many elements which others might define as integral aspects of community.
Missing here, for example, is diversity. There are no outsiders, no ethnic populations who offer the insights and values of a different language and culture. There is a paucity of intellectual life. Jayber Crow is the only character who is ever seen reading a book, and he does so in the privacy of his room above the barbershop in order to avoid the distrust of intellectuals found in many rural communities. There is no public discussion or debate of issues, policies, or events; in fact, no political life is evident at all. Similarly, one can easily envision that the same support network which nurtured Andy Catlett could suffocate the non-conformist. Solidarity is subject to rigidity. That any tightly bound community will exert two different pressures on its members—channeling individual initiative toward some common good and applying strong pressures for conformity—is not in evidence in Port William.

This is not to suggest, however, that because of its homogeneity and consensus Port William should be dismissed as a valuable vision of community. It does posit a supportive and ethical model for people to live together in the felt mutuality that makes where one lives a part of one’s being and purpose. It succeeds in offering what neither Huck Finn nor most students of
American community have been able to find. As sociologist Roland Warren comments, "...our local communities today fail miserably in measuring up to this simple image [a sense of caring and being cared about] of what human life might really be, if we took it— and some of our other professed aspirations— seriously." Port William also raises serious questions about the course community life in America has taken since the abandonment of the rural town model. The cohesiveness of Port William leads Berry to ask of other places, how much diversity and/or conflict can a community absorb and still retain its coherence? Is the economic, racial, and ethnic segregation that occurs in most heterogeneous American communities a preferable vision? Does competitive anonymity lead to a more fulfilling existence? Berry injects a dose of perspective about the scorn commonly directed toward factors like the gossip and proprieties of small town life when he reminds us that, "gossip occurs only among people who know one another and that propriety is a dead issue only among strangers" (WPF, 80).

The Uses of the Past
Any discussion of community in Berry’s work inevitably contains some reference to the past. The history of a community and of the families who have been its members are a living presence in Berry’s consciousness, and therefore in the minds and hearts of his characters as well. For Berry, as for Faulkner, the past is neither dead nor necessarily even past. It can and should continue to shape both the present and the future of community life. Indeed, Berry believes:

...the past, unsatisfactory as it is, is the source of nearly all our good. Maturity sees that the past is not to be rejected, destroyed, or replaced, but rather that it is to be judged and corrected, that the work of judgment and correction is endless, and that it necessarily involves one’s own past. (SBW, 210)

By integrating the more abstract generalizations and consciousness of collective history with the concrete details of his personal history, Berry demonstrates how identity emerges out of a fusion of person and place. In his poem, "The Handing Down," for example, Berry writes:

The town, its white walls gleaming among black shadows and green leaves, stands on the surface of the eye. And the town’s history is the eye’s depth and recognition— is the mind’s discovery of itself in its place in a new morning. (CP, 39-40)
He insists that in order to understand both the self and the community, one must assimilate the heritage of the past and then employ it as a guide to build a sustainable life.

History, then, becomes a "form of moral archeology" which can uncover sources of communal strength that existed before the rapid changes of the past few decades. To do such digging and then celebrate those values and customs that one finds productive of human goodness is not to indulge in sentimentality or nostalgia. Rather, Berry finds it consistent with Christopher Lasch’s rejection of just such charges:

Having trivialized the past by equating it with outmoded styles of consumption, discarded fashions and attitudes, people today resent anyone who draws on the past in serious discussions of contemporary conditions or attempts to use the past as a standard by which to judge the present. Current critical dogma equates every such reference to the past as itself an expression of nostalgia.

Berry asserts that the past can indeed be used to measure the present; in fact, that is one of the functions of tradition. The excavations he has performed in his family and community history are the sources for the vision represented in the Port William books and in his poetry. The memories and discoveries of a cooperative, subsistence model become the cornerstones of a simple life alternative that Berry offers as a moral and ecological corrective to contemporary society.
Remembering, for Berry, is a critical personal and cultural act. It is only by doing so that people and communities can avoid the ahistorical, linear world view that dominates American public enterprises. Consciousness of history is necessary in order to repudiate the exploitative illusion that resources of all kinds are unlimited. To be a nurturer, one has to have a memory. Remembering cultural customs and traditions, such as that of self-help, prevents the erosion of commonplace competences. When these disappear one’s dependence on specialists, corporations, bureaucracies, and governments increases dramatically. A community’s memories of practices, rituals, and values can provide it with the confidence to renew itself. In "At a Country Funeral" Berry writes:

But our memory of ourselves, hard earned,
is one of the land’s seeds, as a seed
is the memory of the life of its kind in its place,
to pass on into life the knowledge
of what has died. 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.
The community of knowing in common is the seed
of our life in this place. (CP, 159)

Common memory makes possible effective communication among people since the background for every remark need
not be explained. When there is deep and wide possession of shared memories a community possesses what Raymond Williams calls the "structure of feeling." This is the intangible lens that focuses individual action toward the common good. It can't be taught and it doesn't seem to be learned in any formal fashion. It grows naturally in communities of memory.

The medium for its growth is the telling and re-telling of the community's stories. Like Quentin and Shreve in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!, Berry's characters create between them "out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking" a richly detailed understanding of their collective and individual pasts and of the forces that shaped Port William's present. Berry does the same for his own life and the life of Port Royal. He perceives a clear line of causality between storytelling and a community's structure of feeling:

...when a community loses its memory, its members no longer know one another. How can they know one another if they have forgotten or have never learned one another's stories? If they do not know one another's stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another? People who do not trust one another do not help one another, and moreover they fear one another. (WPF, 157)

Thus in every Port William work characters re-tell the community's history, trace the lines of succession, re-
live memorable harvests, survive once again tragic floods, recite the deeds of companionship, celebrate the character of fields and people long gone.

Every volume of Berry’s verse recalls those who inducted him into the line of succession, as well as those whose heedless actions have scarred the land and the values that he seeks to restore. Berry opens "Elegy," a tribute to Owen Flood, a beloved neighbor and mentor, with this imperative for remembering:

To be at home on its native ground
the mind must go down below its horizon,
descend below the lightfall
on ridge and steep and valley floor
to receive the lives of the dead. It must wake
in their sleep, who wake in its dreams. (CP, 234)

And in "Rising," dedicated to Owen’s son, Berry reveals how memory both confers immortality upon the dead and purpose in the living:

   Ended, a story is history;
it is in time, with time lost. But if a man’s life continue in another man,
then the flesh will rhyme its part in immortal song.
   By absence, he comes again. (CP, 244)

This process of remembering and enacting, repeated hundreds of times by members in a community, creates a rich compost for the growth of solidarity. As Robert Nisbet counsels, "Such values as love, honor, and loyalty do not, cannot, thrive in a sociological vac-
The nurture and transmission of human values from one generation to another depends upon groups small enough, intimate enough, and trusted enough to provide the medium of learning. Berry’s beloved community evaluates its past to alter those practices which proved destructive of land and membership, while maintaining those values and rites which support them. His explicit message to his readers might be stated: If you seek to know yourself and your community, if you need an anchor that can hold you in place while you consider the future, then learn about and from your past.

The Possibility of Local Culture

The broadest measure of healthy community life in Berry’s vision is the creation and maintenance of local culture. For him, culture is both a source and a product of self-conscious community activity. Since few terms are as slippery as the word ‘culture,’ one can fruitfully approach Berry’s use of it by borrowing a theoretical context from Raymond Williams. He outlines three ways of defining culture: ideal, documentary, and social. Ideal culture is a state or process of human perfection, identifiable in terms of certain absolute
or universal values. Analysis of ideal culture involves the discovery and description of those values that are timeless and illustrative of the human condition. Documentary culture is a body of intellectual and imaginative work that details human thought and experience. Analysis of this culture takes the form of artistic, literary, and historical criticism. Thirdly, social culture is a description of a particular way of life which expresses meanings and values in art and learning as well as in institutions and ordinary behavior. Cultural analysis here seeks to clarify those values implicit and explicit in a way of life, including scrutiny of the family and societal institutions."

An adequate theory of culture, Williams maintains, must include references to all three categories, since none is comprehensive enough.

Berry makes careful judgments in all of Williams' styles of cultural criticism. Commenting on the extensive coherence of Berry's thought across three genres, Steven Weiland suggests:

His, therefore, is an unusually comprehensive display of cultural criticism but without the apparatus of professional theorists. Berry has no general theory of cultural analysis, only the particular instruments of its practice: a commitment to high ideals of human behavior, analytical interest in the arts and learning including attention to literature and history, and daily atten-
tion to the traditions and routines of everyday life, especially of agricul-
ture. ¹

Thus Berry’s sense of culture stresses the equal contributions of writing a novel, plowing a hillside, and making a loaf of bread. For him, culture cannot be reduced to the documentary notion of the creation of art, for that easily leads to widespread passivity. If people perceive culture as the activity found in libraries, museums, and concert halls, then it bears little relation to their daily lives, their work, and their actions. Culture and art both, then, become "a collection of consumer products to be used at discre-
tion and then ‘disposed of’ when the world seems to call for action" (SBW, 87). On the contrary, Berry sees 'living' culture "rise from and return to action, the slightest as well as the grandest deeds of every-
body’s everyday life" (SBW, 87). The implications of the distinction are critical. The belief that culture is the aggregate performance of daily life leads to craftsmanship, pride, respect for self and others. Believing that culture is something of a different nature allows people "to make peace with the shoddy, the meretricious, and the false." Paraphrasing Gary Snyder, Berry suggests, "The lesser truths are also true" (SBW, 88).
Therefore Berry believes that culture is a practical necessity, which when healthy is a communal order characterized by a familiar list of attributes: memory, value, work, insight, reverence, aspiration, neighborliness. Properly seen as a process rather than a conclusion, culture should help to define human needs and limitations. It should elucidate one’s connections to other people and to the earth. Finally, culture should ensure that work is done well and restraint is applied. A healthy culture should foster coherence among its disciplines, so that there is no gulf between a society’s ideals and its actions. This is impossible, Berry maintains, when economic considerations become the primary determinants of principle and action:

...a culture disintegrates when its economy disconnects from its government, morality, and religion. If we are dismembered in our economic life, how can we be members in our communal and spiritual life? We assume that we can have an exploitive, ruthlessly competitive, profit-for-profit’s-sake economy, and yet remain a decent and democratic nation, as we still apparently wish to think ourselves. This simply means that our highest principles and standards have no practical force or influence and are reduced merely to talk. (HE, 169)

In other words, the political, social, and ecological crises of American society are at root cultural. This suggests to Berry that the solutions lie in the creation and maintenance of local culture, where it is
easiest to perceive the direct connections among eco-
nomic activity, ethical values, ecological and
spiritual health.

There is no clear prescription for local culture,
nor does Berry believe that cultural solutions can be
deliberately invented. Instead he asks two interre-
lated questions: is change for the better possible, and
who has the power to make such change? His response is
that the possibility of change relies upon the exist-
ence of people with the power to do so, and that those
people most likely will not come from the federal
government, national corporations, major universities,
nor probably from urban areas. In rural communities,
Berry argues, lies the possibility of hope. Because
the remnants of membership and self-help skills exist
there, because there is land and access to materials,
and because of a sense of place, country towns are
Berry's choice of where to begin rebuilding local cul-
ture. The process of integrating cultural disciplines,
of developing people's sense of good care will be the
product of generations of people living and working in
the same places. They must draw deeply on the
resources of the community to turn it into a healthy
home for their aspirations. Cultural solutions can't
be mandated or taught through the mass media; they must
grow out of daily life. Local culture would begin in work and love, Berry writes, adding:

People at work in communities three generations old would know that their bodies renewed, time and again, the movements of other bodies, living and dead, known and loved, remembered and loved, in the same shops, houses, and fields. That, of course, is a description of a kind of community dance. And such a dance is perhaps the best way we have to describe harmony. (SBW, 79)

This is neither idyllic escape nor bucolic pastoralism. It is an argument for an idea of community that stresses Gemeinschaft relationships, cooperation, membership, local production and use of local resources, and personal responsibility. It is necessarily vague because the specific components would vary in any given locale. It suggests a change in the metaphor that the idea of culture rests upon, from one of efficient mass production to the tending of natural growth. It also posits a shift from isolation and segmentation toward the inherent and necessary connection of all things in a shared environment.
Notes to Chapter V


2. Bender, p. 8.


5. Ibid., p. 65.


8. Berry’s conclusions about the value of community for the individual are corroborated by some who approach the subject from a widely different perspective. Edward Schwartz, "Economic Development As If Neighborhoods Mattered," in John C. Raines, Lenora E. Benson, and David McIntire, eds., *Community and Capital in Conflict: Plant Closings and Job Loss* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), suggests: "It now appears certain that a strong local community is essential to psychological well-being, personal growth, social order, and a sense of political efficacy. These conclusions are now emerging at the center of every social science discipline" (264).


10. Bender, p. 144.

11. "Gemeinschaft" is Frederick Tonnies term for the somewhat idealized kind of rural community whose social relations were marked by group solidarity. In contrast, "Gesellschaft" refers to urban life, or an impersonal and competitive social structure that Tonnies saw as artificial rather than organic.

12. Berry describes Port Royal in "Does Community Have A Value?" (*HE*, 179-192). In addition, it serves as the model for Port William, the community of his five works of fiction.
Anthropologist Rhoda Halperin in *The Livelihood of Kin: Making Ends Meet "The Kentucky Way"* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 22-23, states that before the mechanization of tobacco harvesting there was an egalitarian division of labor within families according to gender and age. After mechanization, women, the young, and the elderly all had virtually no productive role.


This common Berry lament appears in virtually every volume of his non-fiction.

Daly and Cobb, in *For The Common Good*, emphasize the crucial essence of Berry’s and Schumacher’s formulation for the health of a community: "If economics is re-conceived in the service of community, it will begin with a concern for agriculture and specifically for the production of food. This is because a healthy community will be a relatively self-sufficient one. A community’s complete dependency on outsiders for its mere survival weakens it. It is often unable to develop the policies it desires for the sake of its own members, since its survival depends on terms dictated by others" (268).


Daly and Cobb offer: "...the individualistic model of economic theory leads to advocating policies that weaken existing patterns of social relationships. Since relationships among human beings are not part of the model with which the theory begins, the damaging of those relationships is not signalled by the theory. The destruction of existing societies does not count against the success of policies designed to increase aggregate goods and services" (163).

This distance figure is from the Rodale Press, quoted in *The Land Stewardship Newsletter* (Winter 1991), p. 4.

Much has been written about the settlement houses and neighborhood organization movements around the turn of the century. For examples of what was attempted in
Chicago and Boston respectively see Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), and Mary Parker Follett, *The New State* (New York: Longman’s, 1920). During a 1983 interview Berry stated, “In city and in country, the most necessary job of work now is to recover the possibility of neighborliness between ourselves and the other people and other creatures who live where we do—both on the earth and in the local neighborhood.” The full text of this interview is in Gregory McNamee, ed., *Living in Words* (Portland: Breitenbush Books, 1988), pp.23-33.

Berry is keenly aware that tobacco is a crop which is highly inconsistent with his emphasis on health. In Carol Polsgrove and Scott Sanders, “Interview with Wendell Berry,” *The Progressive* v.54 (May 1990): 34-37, Berry affirms that tobacco growing is indefensible except in one small dimension— it has kept some small farmers alive. Relieving the small farmer of his dependency on it would be good for everybody. The way Berry suggests to accomplish this is local food self-sufficiency. “If we were feeding Louisville, we wouldn’t need tobacco, probably,” he comments.

Williams, p. 319.

Robert Ezra Park, “Human Ecology,“ in Warren, *New Perspectives on American Community*, pp. 45-57. Park’s view of the life cycle of a community suggests that when its equilibrium is shattered by the introduction of an external intrusive factor or the normal course of life-history fluctuation, there follows a period of rapid change and divisive competition. It is only when this stage passes and stability returns that community can function again.

Bellah et al., p. 66.


Berry’s analysis of the flight to Territory option includes a discussion of the metaphoric territories in which people seek refuge when they do not have community. He suggests six non-literal territories, including retribution against one’s origins, self-righteousness, historical self-righteousness, despair, abstraction, and artistic autonomy.


The realism and significance of Berry’s family networks is corroborated by contemporary anthropological studies of Appalachian community, most notably Rhoda Halperin, *The Livelihood of Kin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) and Patricia D. Beaver, *Rural Community in the Appalachian South* (Lexi-
ngton: University of Kentucky Press, 1986). Beaver
suggests, "Kinship and family in the rural mountain
community are a highly valued and central part of life.
Kinship...is a cultural idea through which relation-
ships are expressed and from which community
homogeneity is derived" (p. 56).
30. Halperin, p. 11.
31. Ibid., p. 144.
32. Ibid., pp. 1115.
33. See Ronald Eller, Miners, Millhands, and
Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian
South (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982);
Robert L. Hall and Carol B. Stack, eds., Holding on to
the Land and the Lord (Athens: University of Georgia
Press, 1982); Morgan D. Maclachlan, Household Economies
and Their Transformations (New York: University Press
of America, 1987); Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers
(New York: The Free Press, 1962); also Beaver, Rural
Community in the Appalachian South and Halperin, The
Livelihood of Kin.
34. Halperin, p. 18.
It Be?" in Warren, p. 536.
36. "Moral archeology" originates with Casey Blake in
his discussion of Lewis Mumford's sense of a usable
past in Beloved Community (Chapel Hill: University of
39. Robert A. Nisbet, "Moral Values and Community," in
Warren, p. 91.
40. Williams' categories of culture are woven
throughout his work, but are given explicit treatment
in The Long Revolution, p. 41ff.
41. Steven Weiland, "Wendell Berry: Culture and Fidel-
ity," The Iowa Review 10 (1979): 104.
More than twenty years ago Wendell Berry began to articulate his most comprehensive understanding of a commitment to place. Beyond the geographical sense of a loved spot of earth and the social sense of love for the family and community which inhabit that spot, lies a broader framework which encompasses the other two. Berry’s third conception of place refers to humanity’s role in the grand scheme of the world, the place of a human being in the Creation. What was clear to Berry then, and remains so now, is that by failing to understand or acknowledge our proper place we have acted ignorantly and destructively toward the entire world, ourselves included. In the 1969 essay "A Native Hill," from The Long-Legged House, Berry identified the issues and the stakes:

We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us....We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits.
But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.

(LLH, 196)

In the decades since he articulated these beliefs, Berry has devoted himself to the effort to know the world, to cooperate in its processes, to recognize its limits, and to act with reverence. This effort has involved a fusion of practicality, ecological common sense, and religious devotion. It has yielded him a firm conception of humanity’s appropriate domain, a comprehensive view which encloses and informs his commitments to land and people by placing them in the context of relationship to nature and mystery. Such knowledge of place, Berry argues, is a precursor to personal responsible moral action in the world because it reveals humanity’s inescapable connectedness to everything else.

The Chain of Being

Berry’s struggle to locate a place for humans stems from the fundamental faith that the universe is
ordered. That one can never fully understand or perceive the order, and that events often seem random, is to Berry an indication of the limitations on our perceptions. What many call randomness, he prefers to label as mystery. The difference is more than semantics. For Berry, what passes as randomness in human life may well be part of a pattern within a more inclusive realm. Therefore, "to call the unknown by its right name, 'mystery,' is to suggest that we had better respect the possibility of a larger, unseen pattern that can be damaged or destroyed and, with it, the smaller patterns" (HE, 4). To respect mystery one must operate slowly and carefully from modest assumptions about purpose and power. The model that Berry employs to inform his assumptions is the ancient vision of the Chain of Being.

The hierarchical paradigm suggested by the Chain of Being has come under severe attack from both feminists and radical ecologists who attribute to it the root causes of the oppression of women and nature. Hierarchical thinking, suggests "eco-feminist" Elizabeth Dodson Grav, is central to the patriarchal conceptual framework which operates from a logic of domination. It is a view of diversity so controlled by a vertical metaphor that "greater value is always attributed to
that which is higher."¹ This legitimizes inequality and leads to either/or thinking, the dualistic approach that opposes humans to nonhumans, men to women, mind to body, self to other, reason to emotion. Value-hierarchical thought subordinates women, nature, and the body to men, culture, and the mind. This, eco-feminists argue, has made possible the wholesale destruction of the natural world since people have been taught to emotionally disconnect themselves from nature and to perceive it in terms of resources to be mined. Similarly, "deep ecologists" advocate biocentric equality, the assigning of equal importance to all elements (organic and inorganic) in an ecosystem.² They see the abolition of the patriarchal hierarchy as one of the critical changes which must occur for there to be a new kind of relationship between humans and the non-human world.³

Berry is in the unusual position of sharing most of the eco-feminists’ and deep ecologists’ displeasures with the effects of dominant paternalistic culture while maintaining the essential validity of a hierarchy. In his view, understanding the hierarchy is what can lead human beings to actions which affirm the indispensability of all things, including those small and unknown. In "Poetry and Place," Berry insists:
Implicit in the Chain of Being is the idea that creatures are protected in their various kinds, not by equality, but by difference; and that if humans are responsibly observant of the differences between themselves and the angels above them and the animals below, they will act with respect, restraint, and benevolence toward the subordinate creatures; this is their duty toward the subordinate creatures, and it is part of, inseparable from, their duty to the higher creatures and to God. If one is properly humble before Heaven, then one’s earthly conduct must be properly careful and restrained; if one loves the Creator, one must love His creatures which, after all, live by His will and by sharing His life. (SBW, 168)

This is an attempt to define the limits of responsible action, which in Berry’s mind cannot be undertaken until people are willing to acknowledge their power. Recognizing that, in fact, humans have imperial powers of dominion, that we can destroy everything below us on the Chain, demands that we do not do so, but practice self-control, reverence, humility, and good care instead. The image of an unbroken Chain of Being appears before Berry as an ancient reminder of the human condition and a current call to ethical behavior, or as Adrienne Rich has suggested, "The continuing spiritual power of an image lives in the interplay between what it reminds us of—what it brings to mind—and our own continuing actions in the present."~

Furthermore, Berry draws a distinction between a hierarchy of power and one of value. "A good human is
higher than the animals on both scales; an evil human is high on the scale of power, but at the very bottom of the scale of values” (SBW, 135). Beyond this, he affirms that something’s inferiority in either power or value does not suggest its dispensability. Rather, it is the indispensability of such things which argues for the Chain’s continuance beyond humanity toward God. Our inability to understand all that constitutes our world makes us aware that we are subjects in a greater creation. Therefore:

What the old believers in the Chain of Being have to say to us is that if we conceive ourselves as the subjects of God, whose law is in part the law of nature, then there is some hope that we can right ourselves and behave with decency within the community of creatures. We will be spared the clumsiness, waste, and grave danger of trying to make up our own rules. (SBW, 136)

This is a conservative vision deeply steeped in the Judeo-Christian heritage of humans as fallen creatures who must labor penetentially to mitigate their condition. Its truth, in Berry’s eyes, was widely abandoned with the advent of the scientific and industrial revolutions of the last three hundred years, yet it remains firm today.³

Knowledge of his place in the vertical orientation of the Chain of Being leads Berry to turn the system on its axis to posit a horizontal order as well. This
scheme can be pictured as a series of widening concentric circles, like the ripples emanating from a stone tossed into a pond (SBW, 46). At the center, the smallest circle is a person, who is then enfolded in the consecutively larger circles of family, community, agriculture, and finally, nature. That outermost circle is the one controlled by mystery. It becomes the task of religion to maintain this focus. The system operates safely and seeks the health of all involved as long as each smaller circle is contained within the next larger one. If at any point a smaller one were to control the larger, destruction of the entire model would result. In other words, despite Berry’s placement of the individual at the center of the scheme, this view is the antithesis of anthropocentrism.

People are not the source of all value or the measure of all things, but rather they rightly belong to the coherence of nature. The one measure of difference, however, Berry’s vision cautions, is that people can only belong by the conscious decision to join. As Berry’s persona in "On the Hill Late at Night" testifies:

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.
(CP, 113)

Humanity's domain lies between heaven and earth, firmly rooted to the natural world with which our destinies are intertwined. Knowledge of place in the vertical hierarchy allows for perception of place in the horizontal order, a place which must be secured and maintained by volition. Volition will be demonstrated by one's actions, by right livelihood.

How to determine right livelihood grows naturally out of Berry's insistence upon knowledge of human place. The process involves examining questions of freedom, power, limitation, propriety, and interdependence. All of these issues must be considered in a unified context, however, the single comprehensive value of the life and health of the world. Given this framework, moral values are inseparable from practical, spiritual, economic, ecological, and aesthetic ones.

"Ecology," Berry offers, "is long-term economics...Morality is long-term practicality" (CH, 164-5). Many of Berry's questions address proportion and scale, as in appropriate amounts of power, proper range of activity, and methods of determining such proprieties.

His usual starting point concerns the interplay of freedom and limitation. Similar to the argument that Berry offered for marriage, that true freedom comes
from fidelity to the form, is his larger vision of freedom in human life. It is conferred upon us only when we acknowledge and abide by the limitations of our definition and place. Thousands of years of history and most of the enduring works of art from all cultures point us, Berry asserts, to the realization that we are not Creation’s equal, much less its master. To act out of a belief in uncontrolled freedom eventually results in the tyranny of the most powerful, and the unleashing of powers far beyond our ability to contain. Rather, Berry embraces Milton’s definition of freedom as responsibility:

To be free is precisely the same thing as to be pious, wise, just, and temperate, careful of one’s own, abstinent from what is another’s, and thence, in fire, magnanimous and brave.”

Accepting these conditions admits us to the community of life in the world and keeps us from the hubris or arrogance that has marked so much of human history. The argument is exacerbated in Berry’s vision by the awesome magnification of our technological capabilities since Milton’s day. More than ever we need to be cognizant of the limitations inherent in our position below the angels:

We can appropriate and in some fashion use godly powers, but we cannot use them safely, and we cannot control the results. That is to say that the human
condition remains for us what it was for Homer and the authors of the Bible... We only do what humans can do, and our machines, however they may appear to enlarge our possibilities, are invariably infected with our limitations... The mechanical means by which we propose to escape the human condition only extend it; thinking to transcend our definition as fallen creatures, we have only colonized more and more territory eastward of Eden. (HE, 66-7)

The necessary reminders and correctives that prevent such colonization must be culturally transmitted. It is the responsibility of a culture to provide instructions for human beings that will help them establish the assumptions upon which to act. Berry believes that the Chain of Being performed this function, but since its displacement no other comprehensive system has prevailed. As a result, people lack a fundamental definition of identity and location within the Creation. This, in turn, leaves people without knowing how or when to restrain or deny themselves. Simply put, "In order to be good you have to know how— and this knowing is vast, complex, humble, and humbling...." (GGL, 275). It is vast because it is the work of a lifetime; complex because it requires the use of the mind, the heart, the soul, and the hands, none of them singularly; humble because it necessitates everyday proprieties in the care and use of parts of Creation; and humbling because it demands the
understanding that the world is much greater than our knowledge of it. Berry has no doubts that people can be good and that our culture contains, scattered here and there, sufficient instructions and models. Appropriating the cultural heritage that makes right livelihood possible is every person’s task and marks the path to morality. “A live and adequate morality is an accurate perception of the order of things, and of humanity’s place in it” (CH, 166).

Berry’s argument is on behalf of unity, which he calls “ecological intelligence.” Ultimately the question of human limitations and relationship to Creation rests upon attitudes toward our biological existence. Berry perceives a clear parallel between the way people treat and use their bodies and faculties with human treatment of the earth. The objectification of the body, its separation from the soul, which Berry accords to organized western religion and the specialization born of the industrial revolution, has led to the body’s isolation and devaluation. Berry charges that people have learned to despise manual labor, while handing over the care of their bodies to doctors, grocers, pharmaceutical companies, and advertisers. Similarly, they have invested the churches with the business of taking care of the spirit. This isolation
of the body has made it possible to degrade the concerns of the body, those of nurture, thus denying them status among "higher things" of the mind and soul."

Calamity has resulted:

You cannot devalue the body and value the soul-or value anything else. The prototypical act issuing from this division was to make a person a slave and then instruct him in religion...Contempt for the body is invariably manifested in contempt for other bodies- the bodies of slaves, laborers, women, animals, plants, the earth itself. Relationships with all other creatures become competitive and exploitative rather than collaborative and convivial. The world is seen and dealt with, not as an ecological community, but as a stock exchange.... (UNS, 105)

Similar ends emerge from the mind's disembodiment:

...a mind that elects itself a place maintains itself as such by the ruin of earthly places. One cannot divide one's mind from its earthly place, preferring the inner place to the outer, without denying the mind's care to the earthly place. (SBW, 153)

Thus division is inimical to life in any of its manifestations:

All pure and separate things are in some sense out of control. Spirituality and materiality, body and soul, need each other, live in each other; divided, they come to nothing. Or they become destructive of each other. (SBW, 154-5)

It is unity, harmony, and balance that mark the definitive relationships in the Creation, since all life is the study of dependences.
The exercising of ecological intelligence (composed of mind, body, and soul, instructed by culture) reveals the impossibility that humans ever truly act or live alone. When this recognition of necessary interdependence with all aspects of the world is coupled with Berry’s fundamental belief that humans are fallen creatures, it produces his vision of humanity’s proper stance, that of atonement. Atonement (spelled at-one-ment in his earlier works) presupposes that moral authority originates outside and above humanity, therefore demanding that people constantly examine their actions to insure that they contribute to the sustaining unities of the world. Its controlling metaphor is that of relationship, for "...it may be that our marriages, kinships, friendships, neighborhoods, and all our forms and acts of homemaking are the rites by which we solemnize and enact our union with the universe" (HE, 118). Having an authentic relationship of atonement with the world means practicing daily proprieties which insure that we take no more than our "beseeching share," a portion that according to Berry is usually less than we believe necessary. Atonement is enacted through invoking moral principle as the standard of both public and private behavior. The true test of one’s faith in propriety and discipline comes from the consistency between principle and behavior.
Berry argues that this critical understanding is clouded for many Americans by our society's confusion of means and ends. We are, he maintains, a people who focus much more on ends than means, believing that "once we have reached the desired end...we will turn back to purify and consecrate the means" (CH, 130-31). This is a vicious illusion. Berry cautions us:

...the discipline of ends is no discipline at all. The end is preserved in the means; a desirable end may perish forever in the wrong means. Hope lives in the means, not the end. Art does not survive in its revelations, or agriculture in its products, or craftsmanship in its artifacts, or civilization in its monuments, or faith in its relics.

(CH, 131)

He suggests that one of the dominant and timeless themes of human wisdom is that bad means must inevitably corrupt or destroy good ends. By focusing on the means of daily life that contribute to the health of the world, each individual can make meaningful progress in what is good. This insistence on personal moral responsibility is both a burden because of its difficulty and a source of true hope, because it suggests that the answers are personal and spiritual, rather than public and political. In other words, they are within the ability of each one of us to control. For Berry, the guiding principle that informs his daily actions, his means, is stewardship. A complex blend of
spirituality and practicality, Berry's sense of stewardship can be traced first through his ideas on Christianity and then through his related vision of economy.

Forest Christianity

Berry's arrival at what he calls being a "forest Christian" marks the most recent station on his spiritual journey of the past twenty years. In the early 1970s Berry's thinking was clearly characterized by a deep dissatisfaction with what he considered traditional Christian doctrine. In the 1970 essay, "A Secular Pilgrimage," Berry declared:

I begin...with the assumption that perhaps the great disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerting of the Creator from the creation. (CH, 6)

In Christianity's medieval legacy of a contempt for the world and concomitantly of the earthly aspects of humanity (i.e., the body), Berry saw a blueprint for spiritual disorder and ecological exploitation. Rejecting this model, his secular pilgrimage has been a religious quest for the world of Creation, one in which the "formative and quickening spirit" of the
Creator is still "immanent and at work" (CH. 6).
Berry’s path meandered through centuries of great
nature poetry in English, from that of Chaucer to Gary
Snyder, translations of Oriental poetry by R.H. Blyth
and Kenneth Rexroth, essays and journals of Emerson and
Thoreau, treatises like John Stewart Collis’ The Tri-
umph of the Tree and Sir Albert Howard’s An
Agricultural Testament, and Native American literature,
especially creation myths and visionary accounts like
Black Elk Speaks.” Throughout this time, however, the
Bible did not stray from his consciousness either. As
a result, Berry’s poetry from Openings (1968) through
Clearing (1977) reveals a certain vacillation between a
powerful naturalistic faith and a more traditional
Judeo-Christian perspective. John Lang suggests that
this dual movement constitutes a dialectical develop-
ment of Berry’s concept of mystery. In Berry’s poems,
Lang argues, “The sacred re-enters the world and is
incarnate there, but the world also reveals a spirit
that transcends it— which is ‘the same as itself, and
greater.’” 17 Berry’s efforts focused on acknowledging
and celebrating the presence of mystery, while attempt-
ing to define humanity’s appropriate response to it.

By the end of the 1970s Berry had come to believe
that the Judeo-Christian tradition, if properly inter-
interpreted, could provide that response. He maintains that Christianity's conflict with the world and its ecological health is not scriptural, but rather results from the failures and errors of Christian practice. In his 1979 essay, "The Gift of Good Land," Berry launched a biblical argument for ecological responsibility that defines the conception of stewardship which he forcefully advocates today. Beginning with his "long held belief that Christianity, as usually presented by its organizations, is not earthly enough—that a valid spiritual life, in this world, must have a practice and a practicality," (GGL, 267) Berry sought out such a vision in Christian teachings.

Critics of the environmental ethics of the Judeo-Christian tradition tend to focus heavily on Genesis 1:28, where Adam and Eve are authorized to "subdue" the earth.11 Berry argues that this passage is not the definitive formulation of humanity's relation to nature. In fact, Berry contends, the majority of the Bible contradicts this. Beginning with the instructions in Genesis 2:15, that Adam and Eve were placed in Eden "To dress it and keep it," Berry cites a multitude of passages which characterize humanity's proper role as stewards of the earth. The argument follows from the belief that the Promised Land was given to the
Israelites as a gift, not of ownership, but of tenancy (Leviticus 25:23). The gift was accompanied by certain conditions, including warnings against hubris and imperatives for usufruct, "the right of temporary possession, use, or enjoyment of the advantages of property belonging to another, so far as may be had without causing damage or prejudice to this" (WPF, 99). The owner in this instance is God. For Berry, the moral and practical implications of this are clear:

The ecological teaching of the Bible is simply inescapable: God made the world because He wanted it made. He thinks the world is good, and He loves it. It is His world: He has never relinquished title to it. And He has never revoked the conditions, bearing on His gift to us of the use of it, that oblige us to take excellent care of it. If God loves the world, then how might any person of faith be excused for not loving it or justified in destroying it? (WPF, 98)

It follows, then, that humanity’s proper role in relation to Creation is one of stewardship.

Berry’s argument for stewardship extends beyond the call to care for land and natural resources. For him, the Biblical injunction to love God’s world also encompasses elements outside of human economy. Passages like Revelation 4:11, "propose an indispensable standard for the stewardship both of things in use and of useless things and things set aside from use" (WPF, 100). The standard is responsibility. Since humans
have the ability to use well the things of Creation, the character necessary to forbear from using what they should not, and dominion over other creatures, they must understand that the responsibility that accompanies these powers is to "safeguard God’s pleasure in His work." There is but one way to accomplish this, "by safeguarding our pleasure in his work, and our pleasure in our own work" (WPF, 100). Thus, stewardship is a comprehensive stance toward Creation which intertwines moral, economic, ecological, religious, and aesthetic considerations.

Berry is quick to point out that scriptural imperatives toward the world are violently contradicted by the realities of organized religious practice. He reserves some of his harshest criticism for the organized church, an institution which he claims has made peace with and become dependent upon our destruc-

tive economy:

...it cannot survive apart from those economic practices that its truth forbids and that its vocation is to correct. If it comes to a choice between the extermination of the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field and the extermination of a building fund, the organized church will elect—indeed, has already elected—to save the building fund. The irony is compounded and made harder to bear by the fact that the building fund can be preserved by crude applications of money, but the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field can
be preserved only by true religion, by 
the practice of a proper love and 
respect for them as the creatures of 
God. (WPF, 96)

A shift in perspective is needed, Berry contends, one 
that would move the New Testament out of the church and 
into Creation. In a 1979 poem he wrote:

The bell calls in the town 
Where forebears cleared the shaded land 
And brought high daylight down 
To shine on field and trodden road. 
I hear, but understand 
Contrarily, and walk into the woods. 
I leave labor and load, 
Take up a different story. 
I keep an inventory 
Of wonders and of uncommercial goods. 

(SAB, 10)

In an interview four years later, Berry attempted to 
define this "forest Christianity":

I feel more and more strongly that when 
St. Paul said that 'we are members one 
of another,' he was using a far more 
inclusive 'we' than Christian institu-
tions have generally thought. For me, 
this is the meaning of ecology. Whether 
we know it or not, whether we want to be 
or not, we are members one of another: 
humans (ourselves and our enemies), 
earthworms, whales, snakes, squirrels, 
trees, topsoil, flowers, weeds, germs, 
hills, rivers, swifts, and stones— all 
of 'us'...And to live here very long or 
very well, humans now have to understand 
it. For us, it is not a question of 
whether or not we shall be members one 
of another, but of whether or not we 
shall know that we are and act accor-
dingly."

To see oneself as a member of the Creation places 
demands upon the individual similar to those inherent
in membership in a community. It forces the recognition of mutual purposes and the immediacy of respect, care, and neighborliness. To acknowledge that all things connect ultimately leads to altering one’s fundamental assumptions about living. Unity, balance, and health emerge as the standards of behavior, rather than efficiency, expediency, or gain.

Berry’s forest Christianity leads him to ask once again the question that has dominated the last three decades of his life, “How does one live properly in the world?” His search for answers inevitably returns to the need to figure out an appropriate relationship with nature, since that is the governing context for all human action. Berry seeks to understand what membership in Creation really means for human life.

Getting Along With Nature

With increasing regularity Americans are dividing themselves into opposing camps concerning their relationship with the natural world. On the one hand are those defenders of nature and wilderness who often fervently oppose virtually all encroachment by people. Equally impassioned are the defenders of economic progress and growth who argue that natural resources can
and should be utilized for human gain. In Berry’s eyes, both are wrong.

He believes that the nature purists err in their advocacy of biospheric egalitarianism, in their failure to draw those necessary distinctions that do exist between people and nature. Berry would place deep ecologists in this category, despite the remarkable coherence of his views with almost all of theirs. In *Deep Ecology*, Bill Devall and George Sessions summarize the movement’s criticism of the dominant worldview, the position of the opposition, by outlining its characteristic attitudes as: “Dominance over Nature; Natural environment as resource for humans; Material/economic growth for growing human population; Belief in ample resource reserves; High technological progress and solutions; Consumerism; [and] National/centralized community.” Berry agrees that these prevailing attitudes (known in his terms as the characteristics of the industrial economy) have wrought wholesale destruction upon the natural world and human life. In contrast to such attitudes, Devall and Sessions offer deep ecology’s alternatives: “Harmony with Nature; All nature has intrinsic worth/biospecies equality; Elegantly simple material needs; Earth ‘supplies’ limited; Appropriate technology/monodominating science; Doing
with enough/recycling; [and] Minority tradi-
tion/bioregion." Again, Berry's agreement with these
ideas is widespread, excepting a crucial dissension on
biospecies equality. While assenting that all life has
intrinsic value independent from its usefulness for
human purposes, Berry, nonetheless, charges the
champions of egalitarianism with standing aloof from
the question of the proper human use of nature. They
denigrate stewardship, whereas Berry sees no other
appropriate relationship." He chooses to locate him-
self between the polarized extremes, suggesting, "I
would prefer to stay in the middle, not to avoid taking
sides, but because I think the middle is a side, as
well as the real location of the problem" (HE, 138).

The boundaries of Berry's middle ground are
sketched out by a series of assumptions about the rela-
tionship of humanity and nature. These are: 1) a
sobering sense of scale, or the knowledge that we live
in a wilderness in which we play a very small part; 2)
the world is somewhat hospitable to humanity, but also
absolutely dangerous to it; 3) we are completely
dependent upon it; 4) there are no clear solutions to
the problem of being endangered by what we depend upon;
5) possibilities do exist of achieving some measure of
harmony with the wilderness, but the process won't be
easy, perfect, or permanent; 6) people cannot further their own good without doing the same for their place in the world; 7) since we have no choice but to use nature, the questions to ask are how and to what extent, and the answers must be worked out in local practice; and 8) human good and natural good are not simply synonymous (HE, 138-9). These assumptions culminate in the conclusion that humans are at once indivisible from nature, while remaining different from it. Thus the human condition "is a spiritual predicament, for it requires us to be properly humble and grateful; time and again, it asks us to be still and wait. But it is also a practical problem, for it requires us to do things" (HE, 139).

The imperatives to act and to restrain from action must both be instructed by the two sources of understanding available to people—nature herself and cultural tradition. Out of a dialogue between culture and nature can emerge the alliance crucial to the health of the world. As creatures ourselves we are half wild, driven by reflexes, instincts, and appetites. But we differ from other creatures because we are also cultural beings who are made and shaped into who we are. The great task of culture is to instruct us in the duality of allegiance and
responsibility that we have for nature, thus bringing under control our vast power to be destructive. It can accomplish this by measuring itself by nature and by its own best work. Berry believes that a dialogue with nature will lead us to ask two indispensible questions of our actions: Will this be good for us? Will this be good for our place? Conscious choices must be made at the point of reference, the immediate place or neighborhood, the ecosystem where we dwell. We have to choose to engage in a partnership with nature. This dictum rests upon the perception of an essential paradox:

The awareness that we are slowly growing into now is that the earthly wildness that we are so complexly dependent upon is at our mercy. It has become, in a sense, our artifact because it can only survive by a human understanding and forbearance that we now must make. The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity. (HE, 143)

Therefore, the domestic must always be contained within the wild- the wild must be the larger concentric circle- but both can only be safeguarded by our domestic behavior.

One such safeguard widely promoted by conservation associations is the wilderness preserve. Through the efforts of various groups millions of acres of wilder-
ness have been protected from destructive use. Courtroom battles rage on behalf of the spotted owl, the lousewort, or any of the countless other endangered species. Berry clearly promotes wilderness preservation, for the reasons that one might protect any sacred grove. The wilderness must be respected and left alone because we do not understand very much of what happens there, and because an important sense of perspective is rendered to us by admiring what we cannot make. Wild places can also help us to evaluate the health and economy of where we live.

But Berry is adamant in his belief that preservation is not enough, and will ultimately prove fruitless without an understanding of the wilderness’ dependence upon our domestic economic behavior:

> We are going to have to see that, if we want our forests to last, then we must make wood products that last, for our forests are more threatened by shoddy workmanship than by clear-cutting or by fire.  
*HE*, 143

Poor workmanship grows out of the economic view of nature as merely raw material for human use, coupled with the drive for speed and high profit. Good workmanship, Berry asserts, makes one examine the whole process (natural and cultural) involved in the making of things:

> The good worker loves the board before it becomes a table, loves the tree
before it yields the board, loves the forest before it gives up the tree. The good worker understands that a badly made artifact is both an insult to its user and a danger to its source. (HE, 144)

This is stewardship of the highest order. It recognizes that the proper care of the material world is necessarily an ethical and spiritual matter, as much as a practical concern. Preserving wildness cannot be the province of conservation specialists, nor can it be restricted to a few patches of landscape. It is a function of everyone's right relation to the world, which can only be enacted through a re-vision of our ideas on the economy. That is the arena where Berry believes that humans must come to terms with their relationship to nature and place in Creation.

Two Economies

In order to think clearly about economics, Berry begins with the larger perspective of dialectical understandings of human life and experience. In "Discipline and Hope" he characterizes two contrasting views:

one holds that though natural processes may be cyclic, there is within nature a human domain the processes of which are linear; the other, much older, holds that human life is subject to the same cyclic patterns as all other life.
The linear model, which Berry names the Road, describes the doctrine of progress which has dominated western civilization for the past few centuries. It prizes rational movements of discovery and expansion across space and time, constantly replacing the old with the new. The cyclical model, or the Wheel, conversely stresses the endless repetition of certain patterns deemed basic and necessary. It values harmony over growth. The fundamental dichotomy of these two approaches breaks down into opposing pairs in Berry’s vision:

LINEAR/CYCLIC

Progress. The conquest of nature./ Atonement with the creation.

The Promised Land motif in the westward movement./ Black Elk’s sacred hoop, the community of creation.

Heavenly aspiration without earthly reconciliation or stewardship. The creation as commodity./ Reconciliation of heaven and earth in aspiration toward responsible life. The creation as source and end.


Possession./ Usufruct, relinquishment.

Quantity./ Quality.

Newness. The unique and 'original.'/ Renewal. The recurring.
This scheme, similar to Henry Adams’ Dynamo and Virgin dialectic, suggests that the linear path is flawed because it is partial, not comprehensive enough. It values and justifies all things on a scale of utility; anything not obviously contributing to use is endangered. This leads to the reduction of education to training for specific, immediate purposes. It justifies waste and disposability, since the entire model is predicated on the absence of return. The future stretches out in front of one like a highway to be conquered with ever-increasing technological expertise and speed. Humanity sits at the controls, while the natural world is an enormous resource to be mined for progress.

The cyclical vision of life represented by the Wheel, on the other hand, is more comprehensive, more humble, and more accepting of mystery. It recognizes that all things have intrinsic worth regardless of their utility to humans, acknowledging that their worth may lie beyond our understanding. Its emphasis on the essential principle of return cautions the utmost care in the use of the world, fearful that we may disturb the great interlocking dependencies that constitute life. It follows, in Berry’s reasoning, that these
oppositional approaches to existence would engender different theories of economics. The Road fostered and is maintained by the industrial economy, while the Wheel's revolutions call for what Berry dubs the Great Economy.

A reader of Berry's essays quickly becomes familiar with the catalogue of calamities which Berry attributes to the success of the industrial revolution. It has produced an economy built upon abstraction and specialization that reduces everything to marketable quantities. The dominant metaphor for this industrial economy is mining—the act of withdrawing from a limited fund until the fund is depleted, at which point one merely moves to a new mine. Production, efficiency, and profit take precedence over all other concerns. Its unbridled faith in technological problem solving has made the economy dependent upon mechanical solutions which usually isolate and oversimplify problems. Thus each solution produces a host of other problems, some of whose effects will not be apparent for many years. Since utility is the basis for determining all value, the economy tends to label as worthless and eventually destroys what it doesn't understand. The consequences of this myopia have been borne by traditional communities and the environment.
Herman Daly and John Cobb in *For the Common Good* (1989)

remark:

Just as the absence of acknowledgement of community in economic theory has led to the destruction of human community in economic practice, so also the neglect of the physical world in economic theory has led to its degradation in economic practice.¹

The arrogance of the industrial economy propels it to ignore what Berry calls the First Law of Ecology, "that justice is always done—though not necessarily to those who deserve it. Ecological justice, in fact, falls most often on later generations, or on the people who live downwind or downstream" (*ECC*, 247).

Berry cites the economy's obsession with control as a contributing factor in its blind destructiveness. The desire for mastery is evident in the continual use of the verb "to control" in connection with growth, the market, inflation, deflation, money flow, consumer spending, and other money-centered abstractions. Berry sees two problems with such thinking. First, control is based upon division, upon separating things, people, and processes and then setting them in opposition to one another. This is inevitably costly to the "losers" in these conflicts and produces further isolation and abstraction of the materials of reality. Second, he finds an inherent contradiction in our desire to con-
control what we refuse to limit, thus rendering control useless: "If we will not limit causes, there can be no controlling of effects. What is to be the fate of self-control in an economy that encourages and rewards unlimited selfishness?" (HE, 68) Or more powerfully, "You cannot affirm the power plant and condemn the smokestack, or affirm the smoke and condemn the cough" (GGL, 281).

Furthermore, Berry contends that the industrial economy and the linear worldview have altered many of the traditional assumptions of our cultural heritage. From the Bible through the Ancient Greeks on up to the nineteenth century, Berry finds a heritage which stresses that good derives from goodness, restraint, and balance. The proponents of the industrial economy, however, have been seductively urging that this cultural inheritance can be adequately replaced by information, energy, intelligence and money. "No idea," Berry warns, "could be more dangerous" (HE, 20). The change has absolved individuals of responsibility for stewardship and neighborliness, as well as for independence and self-reliance. It has sacrificed the small to the large, the personal to the impersonal, the good to the cheap. It has moved people away from the identities that their histories, associations, affec
tions, and places had earned for them.

Finally, Berry argues that we are witnessing how little distinction there is between contemporary warfare and the industrial economy. How, he asks, would you describe the difference between bombing terrain or strip mining it, between using chemicals as agents of war and chemicals as agents of industry? His response offers little comfort:

The difference seems to be only that in war the victimization of humans is directly intentional and in industry it is 'accepted' as a 'tradeoff.'

Were the catastrophes of Love Canal, Bhopal, Chernobyl, and the Exxon Valdez episodes of war or peace? They were, in fact, peacetime acts of aggression, intentional to the extent that the risks were known and ignored. (WPF, 202)

This is an indictment of the most serious proportion, for it suggests that we are accomplices in our own destruction, under the guise of creating a better standard of living. It is all too evident to Berry that our standards and our assumptions governing the economy must be reformulated.

His reformulation has its origin in the religious idea of the Kingdom of God, the most comprehensive system available because everything is contained within it. Berry offers it a more neutral term, the Great Economy, without reducing its scale. He is describing that outermost circle that circumscribes all activity,
human and otherwise. In it all things are joined to each other, forming an order that lies beyond our ability to perceive. As Daly and Cobb remark:

The industrial economy is only a part of what Wendell Berry has called the Great Economy—the economy that sustains the total web of life and everything that depends on the land. It is the Great Economy that is of ultimate importance.

While this concept has appeared elsewhere in Berry’s work as Creation or mystery, his most recent essays (Home Economics and What Are People For?) recast it in more insistently economic language. The Great Economy, Berry posits, is indeed an economy, for it has principles which govern the distribution and exchange of power, necessities, and values. The task for humans is to bring their economic activity into harmony with the Great Economy by learning to live in it on its terms. This does not mean abandoning the chief economic means by which Berry believes that people operate now, those of factual information, calculation, and manipulation, but it does require broadening our repertoire to include imagination, generosity, sympathy, forbearance, and humility.

The addition of these characteristics would bring people closer to enacting Berry’s definition of a good human economy. This is a version of the simple life
ideal, or in E.F. Schumacher’s words, “the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption.” It is an economy which defines and values human goods while conserving and protecting them. It rewards good work and care through a particular love of local material things. The recognition that humans have an awesome capacity to destroy suggests that a good human economy must fuse practicality with the tempering force of spirituality. Just as spirituality needs to be more earthly, practicality needs to be more pious. In Berry’s eyes, the two must be made one:

Alone, practicality becomes dangerous; spirituality, alone, becomes feeble and pointless. Alone, either becomes dull. Each is the other’s discipline, in a sense, and in good work the two are joined. (HE, 145)

Finally, a good human economy is one which understands that it deals with materials, powers, and processes that it did not and cannot make itself. It can “evaluate, distribute, use, and preserve things of value, it cannot make value. Value can originate only in the Great Economy” (HE, 61).

To exemplify this crucial difference, Berry cites topsoil as a key primary value. People cannot make it nor any substitute for it; neither can we do what it does. Berry notes that people talk about “building” topsoil, but in essence that is at most “asserting to,
preserving, and perhaps collaborating in its own processes" (HE, 62), as opposed to creating it by our own devices. Scientific language can describe and analyze its inert components, but only religious tones can capture its essence as a living entity which accomplishes what no other substance on earth can—it makes life out of death:

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life....Within this powerful economy, it seems that death occurs only for the good of life. (UNS, 86)

Topsoil is the foundation for all creatures that live on land, making it, not money or energy, the critical quantity in agriculture. A true understanding of this reveals the contrast between the industrial economy and the Great Economy.

The industrial economy treats topsoil purely as a raw material that poses problems to be overcome, such as water retention and drainage. Berry argues that a healthy topsoil's complex and wonderful ability to both hold water and drain well simultaneously is lost on industrial logic. It views retention and drainage as opposing functions, which must necessarily then be approached separately. By their isolating and over-simplifying problems, Berry contends that industri-
alists become dependent upon mechanical solutions. These solutions invariably call for such devices as dams to facilitate retention and tiles to accomplish drainage. It is an engineering model which will require the continual application of short-term "solutions."

A good human economy that operates within the context of the Great Economy proceeds in a dramatically different fashion. Starting with the assumption that topsoil is "among other things, a graveyard, a place of resurrection, and a community of living creatures," the problems of retention and drainage can only be correctly addressed by improving the soil. This may require careful human action and, undoubtedly, some inaction. Berry explains:

The proprieties of soil husbandry require acts that are much more complex than industrial acts, for these acts are conditioned by the ability not to act, by forbearance or self-restraint, sympathy or generosity. The industrial act is simply prescribed by thought, but the act of soil building is also limited by thought. We build soil by knowing what to do and by knowing when to stop. Both kinds of knowledge are necessary because invariably, at some point, the reach of human comprehension becomes too short, and at that point the work of the human economy must end in absolute deference to the working of the Great Economy. This is the practical significance of the idea of the Sabbath.

(ME, 66)
Husbandry and stewardship demand human collaboration in natural processes, not the alteration or overpowering of them. This perspective leads one to see that long-term solutions built upon harmony and balance must direct human efforts. Needed are methods of production that preserve the sources of production and loving workmanship whose durable goods conserve the materials of the world. It is the work of a lifetime and generations of lifetimes.

Even though one's life may seem insignificant within the complete comprehensiveness of the Great Economy, or even if one denies membership within it, one's actions are vital. "Even insignificance," Berry cautions, "is no escape, for in the membership of the Great Economy everything signifies...If we do not serve what coheres and endures, we serve what disintegrates and destroys" (HE, 74-5). Berry's call to service, then, encompasses the stewardship of Creation through understandings and disciplines that are as close to natural processes as possible. The guiding precept to this simple life alternative is the standard of health.

The Alternative

By the early 1970s Berry's voice was part of a growing chorus that was pressing American society to
consider the costs of unrestrained economic behavior, especially industrial growth and wasteful consumerism. The mid-decade energy crisis galvanized public attention, at least briefly, on the possibility of alternatives to a growth economy. Prominent among these alternatives was the theory of a "steady-state" economy, one which sought to balance needs and resources. One of its leading proponents, William Ophuls, echoed Berry's developing line of thinking that traditional virtues such as humility, frugality, and reverence needed to be applied to the practices of daily living. The "steady-state" theory called for a fluid equilibrium between consumer demand and environmental concerns. Far from calling for primitivism, Ophuls and other "steady-state" advocates, envisioned a redirection of economic activity that mirrored Berry's cardinal issues, including "the preservation of a healthy biosphere, the careful husbanding of resources, self-imposed limitations on consumption, long-term goals to guide short-term choices, and a general attitude of trusteeship toward future generations."

More recently Herman Daly and John Cobb have called for a more sweeping change in economic thinking, a paradigm shift that brings them very close to Berry. Daly and Cobb suggest that a realistic alternative to
either capitalism or socialism is possible, but in order to conceive of it one must extend beyond the narrow confines of economic theory to include biology, history, philosophy, physics, and theology. Classical economics is not comprehensive enough and a broader view, like Berry’s Great Economy, is essential for understanding the ramifications of one’s actions. They argue that economics is structured on a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, Alfred North Whitehead’s phrase for mistaking abstract concepts for concrete reality. Daly and Cobb contend that the market, price theory, means of measuring economic success, and land value are all abstractions which have led to egregious policies. Needed is a new model based on concern for the human community and the natural world. By redefining ourselves as persons-in-community, individuals can more readily abandon the purely self-interested dictates of current economics in favor of actions which support the health of one’s local community (however broadly defined) and the larger community of the ecosystem. Membership in both communities is necessary to redirect economics toward a sustainable world.

The coherence of the Daly and Cobb proposals with much of Berry’s thinking, including their underlying agreement that the fundamental crisis is one of charac-
ter, is striking. Berry regularly reiterates that we must first stop deifying the present system so that change can be envisioned. Once we recognize that the major problems of our day are not political, but cultural, then we can see what must be done:

We must achieve the character and acquire the skills to live much poorer than we do. We must waste less. We must do more for ourselves and each other. It is either that or continue merely to think and talk about changes that we are inviting catastrophe to make.

The great obstacle is simply this: the conviction that we cannot change because we are dependent on what is wrong. But that is the addict’s excuse, and we know that it will not do. (WPf, 201)

To throw off addiction people must stop thinking of themselves as consumers, a term which by definition means one who uses things up. Instead, we can apply the standard of real need and then relinquish what we have used "in a way that returns it to the common ecological fund from which it came" (CH, 111). This means that everyone has to begin drawing the line on consumption. Berry’s advice on where to begin the process is characteristically direct:

It is plain to me that the line ought to be drawn without fail wherever it can be drawn easily. And it ought to be easy (though many do not find it so) to refuse to buy what one does not need...If you don’t have a problem, why pay for a solution? (WPF, 196)
In Berry's own life, for example, this means doing without a television, computer, second home, recreational machinery, frozen dinners, and other "counterfeit" food or beverages. At the same time, he acknowledges his continued dependence upon his car (a 70 mile commute to the university), airplanes, and chainsaw, among others. His point is that a second line drawing, at a place where it is not easily done, is incumbent upon everyone. "We are going to have to learn to give up things that we have learned (in only a few years, after all), to 'need'" (WPF, 196).

One area where Berry believes that Americans face great difficulty in drawing lines involves technological innovation. Our culture is enamored of technological "solutions" to problems both big and small, maintaining a quasi-religious faith that the application of enough money and intelligence will yield whatever is needed. "The appeal of a techno-fix is simple," states Sharon Begley, "it promises to cure problems without requiring society to change the habits that caused them in the first place." In Berry's view, the advantages of most technologies are to a great extent illusory. Each one carries with it a price tag and penalties that at least equal, if not surpass, its ameliorations. Furthermore, the defenders of technological progress,
Berry asserts, invariably frame their arguments quantitatively, with no attempt to determine the qualitative net results of such progress.

Berry’s views can best be understood in the context of his ideological kinship with some contemporary critics of technology who label themselves as Neo-Luddites. They evaluate a technology on the basis of how it affects human and environmental health, as well as its effects on societal institutions and traditions, human dignity and values. Neo-Luddism has three fundamental principles, all of which Berry shares. First, Neo-Luddites are not anti-technology per se, but strongly oppose those kinds of technologies that are destructive of human lives and communities, or that promote material acquisition as the central aspiration in human life. Second, they stress that all technologies are political. The belief that a technology is neutral and therefore dependent upon how people employ it must be understood as a harmful myth. Rather, one must recognize that all technologies have been structured to reflect and serve specific powerful interests. Third, the personal view of technology is dangerously limited. An individual’s insistence on the indispensability of some personal technology (e.g. computer) denies the wider consequences of that technol-
ogy's use. David Noble has proposed tentative criteria for making evaluations:

Technologies might be opposed if they degrade people and diminish their freedom and control without any apparent economic or other compensating benefit; if their technical and economic viability is ambiguous, but they pose serious social problems; or if they are clearly viable in the narrow technical or economic sense but are nonetheless destructive for society as a whole.

Berry believes, as did Lewis Mumford, that technology reflects a worldview which encompasses how people perceive the nature of their lives, their relationships to others, and their place in the world. The worldview represented by our contemporary technological culture is dominantly mechanistic, prizing rationality, utility, efficiency, and detachment. The kind of technologies that result, like nuclear plants, centralize and consolidate power while harming both communities and nature. Consequently, Berry has fashioned his own criteria for evaluating technological innovation, ones which support his worldview. He employed them publicly in a 1987 Harper's article, "Why I Am Not Going To Buy A Computer." Computers, Berry maintains, have not served to advance those values he favors most: "peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work" (WPF, 171). His standards for technological innovation are:
1) The new tool should be cheaper than the one it replaces.
2) It should be at least as small in scale as the one it replaces.
3) It should do work that is clearly and demonstrably better than the one it replaces.
4) It should use less energy than the one it replaces.
5) If possible, it should use some form of solar energy, such as that of the body.
6) It should be repairable by a person of ordinary intelligence, provided that he or she has the necessary tools.
7) It should be purchasable and repairable as near to home as possible.
8) It should come from a small, privately owned shop or store that will take it back for maintenance and repair.
9) It should not replace or disrupt anything good that already exists, and this includes family and community relationships.  (WPF, 171-2)

The list is vintage Berry. It represents his concerns for the concrete, particular, and local. He emphasizes decentralization, human scale, and a distaste for the faddish or ostentatious. He reveals his love of simplicity, coupled with the imperative for accountability and responsibility. Also, the list suggests his understanding that each of our actions ramifies far beyond us into our community and Creation. Finally, the criteria remind us of the scrupulous self-examination that is a continual element of the simple life.

Berry’s standards for technological innovation are a subset of his broader alternative standard of health.
He defines true health as connection and wholeness. Berry argues that our society is built upon disconnections between mind and body, male and female, individual and community, community and earth, words and deeds. At each disjunction he sees profit-making enterprises which produce further dismemberment. Healing needs to occur through the restoration of connections among the parts, which will reveal the ultimate simplicity of unity. The healing process begins with the premise that things are already together, therefore humanity's task is to keep from destroying the unity of life by segmenting it. One can perceive wholeness through examining the relationship of context and meaning in human life:

Nothing is meaningful or valuable alone... Nothing can be its own context. Meaning and value are not generated by parts, but are conferred by the whole. The only safe contexts are, first, the natural order and, second, a human culture formed in respect for natural order. (SBW, 167)

To operate in a safe context requires that we exchange the industrial economy's single standard of productivity for the comprehensive standard of nature.

We must first admit, Berry demands, that productivity has failed as a standard of measure, as evidenced by the current state of human community and ecological disorder. "We have been winning, to our
inestimable loss, a competition against our own land and our own people," Berry chides (WPF, 206). His metaphor for such a single standard is that of a monologue. One voice speaks incessantly without concern for how its words are being received or whether any real communication is occurring. Without the benefit of response, the speaker confidently continues assuming the truth of his words. The standard of nature, on the other hand, Berry characterizes as an eternal conversation which works toward "an atonement between ourselves and our world, between economy and ecology, between the domestic and the wild" (WPF, 208). Engaging nature in conversation means asking questions about our actions and hers, and waiting patiently for replies. It means studying her processes to see how ours might be brought into coherence. Conversation provides connection and mitigates arrogance and loneliness. It leads to work that is healthy and fulfilling:

We are working well when we use ourselves as the fellow creatures of the plants, animals, materials, and other people we are working with. Such work is unifying, healing. It brings us home from pride and from despair, and places us responsibly within the human estate. It defines us as we are: not too good to work with our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone. (UNS, 140)

Regardless of which point of entry Berry takes in scrutinizing the problem of human relationship with
Creation, he arrives at the same solution: living responsibly at home. Personal responsible action is the unifying theme of Berry’s simple life vision and the one that emerges most prominently in every one of his works.

This emphasis on personal action combines with his distrust of the oversimplification inherent in movements to bring him into conflict with the prevailing environmental philosophy, "think globally, act locally." Global thinking, despite its good intentions, is a dangerous abstraction. In The Atlantic Monthly Berry declared:

Abstraction is the enemy wherever it is found. The abstractions of sustainability can ruin the world just as surely as the abstractions of industrial economics. Local life may be as much endangered by 'saving the planet' as by 'conquering the world.' Such a project calls for abstract purposes and central powers that cannot know, and so will destroy, the integrity of local nature and local community."

The most effective global thinkers, Berry suggests, have been imperialistic governments and multi-national corporations. Calling a problem global defines it in a way that makes it impossible to solve, reduces it to statistical shallowness, and opens it to treatment by the same organizational patterns and quantitative measures that most likely caused it. The problems, if
accurately described, are all "private and small. Or they are so initially." Berry explains:

The problems are our lives...It was not just the greed of corporate shareholders and the hubris of corporate executives that put the fate of Prince William Sound into one ship; it was also our demand that energy be cheap and plentiful...To fail to see this is to go on dividing the world falsely between guilty producers and innocent consumers. (WPF, 198)

The scale of the solutions must also be private and small. People must think, feel, and act locally in order to bring the issues within the scale of our competence. By asking the right local questions, which Berry defines by the Amish standard, 'What will this do to our community?' the right global answers will be generated. One cannot effectively act for the ecological good of the planet, but "Everyone can make ecological good sense locally, if the affection, the scale, the knowledge, the tools, and the skills are right." People can care for the planet by not asking too much of it and by learning to address it through each of its millions of human and natural neighborhoods. This is most easily accomplished by living at home as independently and self-sufficiently as possible.

Possibilities for taking an action that is local, independent, and responsible abound, but Berry’s favorite is organic gardening. In gardening Berry finds the
metaphor of humanity’s proper relation with the world. It is a conversation, a collaboration between a person and nature. A garden is neither wholly the province of nature, nor wholly the creation of humans, but a combination of efforts and good care. Furthermore, gardening does much more than yield some fresh food. It offers the gardener some measure of independence from the food industry. It improves a patch of the world by giving one’s "interest a place, and it proves one’s place...worthy of interest" (GGL, 167). It offers the mind a continual challenge in problem-solving, and puts the body to use in the dignity of working to support itself. It makes one’s health a private responsibility rather than a governmental one. It reduces the trash problem by putting food on the table without disposable containers. By providing the gardener with an agricultural and ecological education, gardening can help to erase the cheap energy mentality. Importantly, it teaches one to ask what Berry calls "the most urgent question" of our day, "How much is enough?" And finally, it provides enjoyment, pleasure, and a sense of accomplishment.

Gardening embodies the characteristics of the kind of personal responsibility that Berry labels a "complete action." A complete action is one freely taken
in one’s own behalf, that is real and not symbolic, particular and complex, can be accomplished on one’s own, and for which one can accept full responsibility, (GGL, 167). Complete actions which grow out of a conversation with nature, occur in one’s own place, and support one’s family and community add up to living responsibly at home. They paint a portrait of a life simple in means, rich in ends.


2. Berry has little use for the ecological notion of biocentric equality. He sees it as fanciful and false: "No such principle exists in nature. As a human principle, it either proposes suicide by starvation or it must be routinely and frequently broken. It does not tell us how to act" (SBW, 135).


4. Berry's entire argument would be considered both specious and naive by eco-feminists. Gray, in Green Paradise Lost, labels such thinking as benign paternalism.

5. Berry is fond of referring to the example of Dante to help explain this connection between religious faith and reverence for mystery, seeing in The Divine Comedy a model for how people should approach Creation. In Dante's work, the higher his vision ascends, the greater the unseen grows. "The longer the radius of vision, the wider the circumference of mystery" (SBW, 108). Thus the symbol of the outermost circle suggests simultaneously a sphere that encloses all life and a boundary that people can never see or touch.


9. Here Berry is clearly in agreement with both eco-feminists and deep ecologists about the disastrous effects of the dualistic thinking found in hierarchies.

10. In particular, two essays in A Continuous Harmony, "A Secular Pilgrimage" (3–35), and "Discipline and Hope" (86–168), reveal some of the texts which
influenced Berry during this time.


12. Many feminists take exception to such reasoning, arguing that this patriarchal Christianity inevitably leads to man's domination of both women and nature. Judith Todd, "On Common Ground: Native American and Feminist Spirituality Approaches in the Struggle to Save Mother Earth," in Charlene Spetnak, ed., The Politics of Women's Spirituality (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), urges caution because if one is a steward, this implies that others are stewarded. More strident repudiations are found in Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). Stewardship is staunchly defended in Loren Wilkinson, Earthkeeping: Christian Stewardship of Natural Resources (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans', 1980) and Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Redeem the Earth (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

13. Quoted in McNamee, Living in Words, p. 29.


15. Ibid., p. 69.

16. Devall and Sessions, for example, praise Berry's work in general, but cite his shortcomings as his interest in stewardship and his lack of active advocacy of wildlife preservation.


18. Even though social scientists have long since moved beyond the term "industrial" to describe the contemporary American economy, Berry maintains his use of it as a label suggestive of a mechanistic, dehumanizing process.

19. Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., For The Com-

\footnote{Ibid., p. 18.}


\footnote{Daly and Cobb, For the Common Good.}

\footnote{One can hear the echo of Thoreau’s formulation that a "man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can do without."}

\footnote{Sharon Begley, "On the Wings of Icarus," Newsweek, May 20, 1991, p. 64.}

\footnote{Marshall Berman, in All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, explains the conscious structuring of a technology and public reaction to it, in his description of the "expressway world" of post-WWII America: "The developers and devotees of the expressway world presented it as the only possible modern world: to oppose them and their works was to oppose modernity itself, to fight history and progress, to be a Luddite, an escapist, afraid of life and adventure and change and growth. This strategy was effective because, in fact, the vast majority of modern men and women do not want to resist modernity: they feel its excitement and believe in its promise, even when they find themselves in its way" (p. 313). Neo-Luddites hope to change this unquestioning acceptance of technology.}

38. Ibid., p. 63.
Amid the chaotic scramble for wealth that dominated the imagination of many Americans in the 1980s and the equally frenetic search for identity that has inaugurated the 1990s, Wendell Berry has consistently offered an alternative voice of simplicity. It has not been, and never will be, one that fires the imagination of the majority culture, nor is it likely to marshal any political clout. Berry will, however, continue to influence the lives of those countless individuals within whom he plucks a responsive chord. They recognize his critical commitments to place, community, and Creation as essential ingredients in a life of meaning and connection. In part, Berry is valuable precisely because he has no specific program to offer, only a prescription for personal responsible action that can be assumed by almost everyone regardless of location and circumstance. As Nelson Bryant suggests in his New York Times review of What Are People For?, Berry’s ideas are not restricted to rural inhabitants:

There is no way that all of us can move to a hill farm, as Berry has done, in order to live in better harmony with ourselves, our loved ones and the natural world. But we can, with those goals in mind, pare away damaging excesses.1
The necessary prasing tool is a change in perception and commitment.

For Berry, much of the process of change is a function of remembering. Buried in America’s traditional ideals of individualism and self-reliance, in the centuries-old practices of agriculture, and in the ancient notions of stewardship and reverence for what humans cannot know, he finds insights to guide contemporary life. Throughout his fiction and poetry, Berry’s characters regain perspective, re-define their priorities, and renew their vows of commitment through the act of remembering. As a writer, Berry remembers the traditional role of the artist as moral consciousness in society, encouraging memory in others, insisting “through narrative that humans remember who they were and where in the cosmos they stood.”3 Berry looks back in order to move forward, finding in the past certain verities and limitations of the human condition that must be respected. His criticism of American society runs the risk that any tradition-based view does in a culture that has broken many of its connections to tradition. Yet it does not suffer from what Jeffrey Stout calls the “terminal wistfulness” of many traditional critiques of contemporary culture, for Berry accepts neither despair nor impotence.”7 Rather,
he asks that people study what tenets of morality and responsibility that culture has in the past afforded, and apply that knowledge to the circumstances of the present. Perhaps he thus exemplifies Thomas Mann’s notion that "the best servitors of the new may be those who know and love the old and carry it over into the new."

What Berry seeks to carry over from the past is an eclectic simple life vision that helps to define a person’s appropriate role in the world. He is concerned with the health of individuals, communities, culture, and the planet, and health is Berry’s ultimate standard for evaluation. Unlike "standard of living," which he sees as at best misleading and more often pernicious, health is concerned with quality of living. Some elements of health can be scientifically measured—air and water quality, topsoil toxicity—but most resist such objective analysis. Meaningful work, good marriages, cohesive communities, personal independence, and communion with the natural world cannot be statistically determined. They can, however, be felt, as can the health they produce. Their absence is being felt everywhere throughout the nation today.

Berry’s personal path to health through simplicity has been cut upon the land. His farming has instilled
in him a knowledge of and intimacy with place which has inspired and sustained the other dimensions of his life, including his artistry, marriage, commitment to community, and sense of ecological responsibility. Berry’s insistence upon the interconnections among all of these aspects of his life underscores the organism that defines true health.

Furthermore, his recognition of the farmer as an endangered species lends urgency and poignancy to Berry’s work. It is not mere nostalgia for an agrarian society that he feels, but rather a pervasive sense of the loss of wholeness that occurs when human interdependence with nature is no longer keenly experienced, and no longer helps to determine individual action and public policy.

Berry is neither so naive nor so arrogant as to believe that everyone could or should follow his model. Although he would like to see farmland reclaimed and lovingly stewarded, rural communities re-populated and thriving, he acknowledges that there are considerable economic obstacles that compound the attitudinal ones. While a family can “take a bountiful subsistence” and some cash income from farming today, Berry warns that “at least in the present economy, this should not be attempted without a source of income other than the farm” (REC, 338).
More important for him than having others return to the farm is the immediate need for a change in the cultural and economic values that will encourage the population at large to adopt the necessary attributes of respect, restraint, and care. These simple life attitudes, Berry believes, can ultimately liberate American society:

For a long time now we have understood ourselves as traveling toward some sort of industrial paradise, some new Eden conceived and constructed entirely by human ingenuity. And we have thought ourselves free to use and abuse nature in any way that might further this enterprise. Now we are facing overwhelming evidence that we are not smart enough to recover Eden by assault, and that nature does not tolerate or excuse our abuses. If, in spite of the evidence against us, we are finding it hard to relinquish our old ambition, we are also seeing more clearly every day how that ambition has reduced and enslaved us....To be free of that end and that ambition would be a delightful and precious thing. Once free of it, we might again go about our work and our lives with a seriousness and pleasure denied to us when we merely submit to a fate already determined by gigantic politics, economics, and technology.

(WPF, 209-210)

The liberation he envisions would permeate society, altering the lives of individuals, communities, institutions, and ultimately the planet. It is not beyond our ability to imagine or enact, but it has, thus far, been beyond our desire or willingness.
Berry admits to having plenty of hope, but little optimism that such sweeping change will occur. Nonetheless, he will continue his personal cherishing of the earth, his commitment to living responsibly at home, his attempt as an artist to compel others to do the same. In short, to live a simple life of difficult but satisfying wholeness.
Notes to the Conclusion

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