

Wendell Berry's Vision of the Sabbath, Ecology and Poetry

By E. Graeme Sharrock

*There is a day
where the road neither
comes nor goes, and the way
is not a way but a place.
—1997, VII*

Not since Rabbi Abraham Heschel's vision of the Sabbath as a temple in time¹ have we read poetry or prose about the sacred day as evocative as Wendell Berry's recently published volumes.² In our manic world, the Sabbath is a quaint religious ritual but, seen through Berry's eyes, the rhythms of time stimulate in us a healthy delight in and a holy defense of life. He is a poet who makes us feel we are part of creation, as if for the first time. Farmer, prize-winning writer, professor of English and vigorous ecologist, Berry is probably best known for his trenchant *The Unsettling of America*.³ As one of the leading voices in the American environmental movement, he has challenged the divorce of culture from agriculture, promoted a radical return to stewardship of the land and advocated a new model of responsible citizenship. His writings and moral vision are deeply rooted in his farming practice in northern Kentucky where he enjoys the "ancient happiness of slow work." (1992, VIII) Since 1979, some 125 pristine poems have sprung from these fields and woods, bearing a new post-modern theology and poetics of the Sabbath.

Reading them, we first picture Berry heading into the forests and fields, ignoring the town bell that calls his neighbors to indoor worship:

*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.
—1979, IV*

Instead, he gently walks on Sunday mornings across the bottomlands of his farm, watching, listening, smelling. His meditations log his encounters with creatures whose existence stands as continuing testimony to the Edenic Sabbath, the ancient time of comfortable co-existence between human, animal and plant:

*For as I walked the wooded land
The morning of God's mercy,
Beyond the work of mortal hand,
Seen by more than I see,*

*The quiet deer look up and wait,
Held still in quick of grace.
And I wait, stop footstep and thought.
We stand here face to face.*

—1980, II

Continuing to walk, we are immersed in a profusion of wild bluebells, light breaking through large trees, the crunch of brittle grass, the smell of cut cedar and rain resting upon shining leaves. For a moment, humanity perceives itself in the context of the natural—that is the power of deep reflection, of great poetry and of the Sabbath.

What is Berry's experience of Sabbath? First comes the six days' work in which we impact nature with our plans, efforts, tools and technologies. Berry never devalues the work week in favor of the Sabbath; work grounded in a positive evaluation of life must precede the day of rest if the latter is to be meaningful. Instead, the Sabbath is a return to *being with* after a week of necessary *doing to* nature. Only then does mental and physical rest become transcendent, allowing us to briefly experience a "healed harmony" between the world given to us and the world we must someday return to our children and to our Maker. (1979, VII) Refreshed in body and spirit, we return to our work, but with a compassion for all that is, as it is.

Sabbath is also a joyful submission to the limitations of human experience. Unlike the devotees of the myths of industrialization and progress, Sabbath-keepers can acknowledge their limits in the face of uncompleted tasks. Ultimately, they can fall back onto God's creative action, prior to their own, as the ground of all they do and is done to them. As a bird's song becomes lost in the

thicket, so human achievements disappear into the long lines of cause and effect we call history. By paying attention to the vast domain of life outside human intentions, the human mind turns momentarily from its narcissism. Even the desperate craving for knowledge has a terminus in the givenness and greatness of the created order.

*The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.
Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.*

—1979, II

*All orders made by mortal hand or love
Or thought come to a margin of their kind,
Are lost in order we are ignorant of*

—1980, VI

In Berry's understanding of time, Sabbaths are sacred rests in the ongoing rhythms of life. If we are aware, there are experiences of time as large as the "pulse of the great sea" or as small as the "steady counting in the wrist." (1987, III, IV)

*Out of disordered history
a little coherence, a pattern
comes, like the steadying
of a rhythm on a drum, melody
coming to it from time
to time, waking over it,
as from a bird at dawn*

—1982, VI

Berry analogically extends the experience of Sabbath rest to time periods beyond the literal week: moments of loss, stillness, silence, winter and death. In the act of non-action, of pausing, of meditation, we momentarily feel the luminosity of life; in our own sorrows, we discover the limits of our expectations. Even after a long and useful life, the Sabbath of final rest is unavoidable; we all must surrender to the great cycle of life.

*Where human striving ceased
The Sabbath of the trees
Returns and stands and is.*

—1989, II

In his later poems, such as those that mourn the passing of his friends, Berry writes as “a man learning / the limits of time.” (1997, VI) Just as Sabbath makes time for reflection upon and repair of the previous week, old age provides for remem-

brance and reconciliation. In his maturity, Berry has reached the age when he is “remembering the world / once better than it is . . .” (1988, I) In fact, Berry’s creation-centered spirituality places the metaphor of the Sabbath, with its nostalgia for

The Poetics of Time

Unlike his earlier experiments with free verse, Berry’s Sabbath poems embody a special poetics of time. “One of the great practical uses of literary disciplines,” Berry writes, “is to resist glibness—to slow language down and make it thoughtful . . . Verse checks the merely impulsive flow of speech, subjects it to another pulse, to measure, to extra-linguistic considerations.”⁴

*Who makes a clearing makes a work of art,
The true world’s Sabbath trees in festival
Around it. And the stepping stream, a part
Of Sabbath also, flows past, by its fall
Made musical, making the hillslope by
Its fall, and still at rest in falling, song
Rising. The field is made by hand and eye,
By daily work, by hope outreaching wrong,
And yet the Sabbath, parted, still must stay
In the dark mazing of the soil no hand
May light, the great Life, broken, makes its way
Along the stemmy footholds of the ant.
Bewildered in our timely dwelling place,
Where we arrive by work, we stay by grace.*

—1983, IV

By using periods and commas to great effect, Berry here brings a literary experience of Sabbath to the reader. The first comma, where we expect a period, links the first line to the idea of the trees which surround the clearing. By the time the sentence ends, we have been “around” the words and back at least twice, so that we intuitively sense the tree-lined space in the woods. In the next sentence, the stream of alliterative “s” sounds, interrupted six times by a comma, evokes the sound of a falling brook as it steps down the hillside, mimicking the

six days of work, before it reaches the field, its place of rest. The comma after “musical” suggests that we emphasize the last syllable: “by its fall / made musical.” If we don’t, we completely miss the rhyming sound. That’s the point: if we don’t take the time to pause and listen we will miss the music of life, the “song / Rising.”

The field, like the clearing among the trees higher up, is man-made, but, unlike the clearing that requires only one cutting, a field requires ongoing instrumental action by the farmer: “by . . . by . . . by . . .”. In the next few lines, the commas, periods and line endings almost confuse the reader. The subject of the thought, “the Sabbath, parted” disappears somewhere in the “dark mazing of the soil” and turns somehow into “light, the great Life, broken.” We are buried for a few seconds at ant-level, in the mysterious workings of the soil where warmth and moisture invisibly nourish growth. Yes, as humans we *are* momentarily “bewildered” (note the *wild*) and grateful for the return to stability and form provided by the neat rhyming of the final couplet.

In this immaculately-crafted poem, we have cascaded down a hillside from a high clearing to the deep world of the soil. At the start and at the end of our journey, the Sabbath is present. In the metaphor of the clearing, the Sabbath provides a natural and necessary border to human effort, especially our consumptive behaviors; in the figure of the field, Sabbath is a life-giving power that secretly complements human effort and enhances human productivity. Like the weekly cycle, the falling waters link the two, engaging in the “making” of the world while constantly falling into “rest.” The Sabbath evokes a sense of en/closure to the human week and reminds us of the grace by which we are sur/rounded.

perfection, at the heart of several theological themes: grace, resurrection and divine mystery.

*Remember the body's pleasure and its sorrow.
... Remember the small
secret creases of the earth—the grassy,
the wooded, and the rocky—...
Remember the great sphere of the small
wren's song, through which the water flowed
and the light fell.*

—1990, III

For those readers who can recall the Sabbath commandment, it is no surprise that we are asked to *remember*. In the Sabbath we are both given and called back to the source of our being, lest we forget.

It is impossible to follow Berry into these sacred places and times without hearing a prophet, like William Blake, tirading against the excesses of industrialization and aggressive urbanization. In this poem, Berry has married his ecological concerns to the courage of the Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder:

*Hail to the forest born,
that by neglect, the American benevolence,
has returned to semi-virginity, graceful
in the putrid air, the corrosive rain,
the ash-fall of Heaven-invading fire-
out time's genius to mine the light
of the world's ancient buried days
to make it poisonous in the air.
... we must pray for clarity to see,
not raw sources, symbols, worded powers,
but fellow presences, independent, called
out of nothing by no word of ours,
blessed, here with us.*

—1982, IX

Some poems, combining traditional religious language with a bold irreverence, express anger at modernity's squandering of its stewardship of the natural world. Suburban developments and the intrusion of highways with their "shiny cars speeding / to junk" seem to drown out nature as a place of peace. Listen to his biting satire directed at the "Stranger with Money," whose new buildings on scraped earth "seal and preserve the inside/against the outside:"

*The highest good of that place was the control of temperature
and light. The next highest was to touch or say
no fundamental or necessary thing. The next highest
was to see no thing that had not been foreseen*

*Where the Sabbath of that place kept itself in waiting,
the herons of the night stood in their morning watch,
and the herons of the day in silence stood
by the living water in its strait. The coots and gallinules
skulked in the reeds, the mother mallards and their little ones
afloat on the seaward sliding water to no purpose I had foreseen.*

—1987, III

Since the recent rise of ecological consciousness, keeping Sabbath means standing in solidarity with an abused creation against environmental pollution, sprawling urbanization and irresponsible capitalism. Even to sing to our Creator, like the water thrush at sunset—"the Sabbath of our day"—requires "Air worthy of the breath / Of all singers that sing . . ." rather than a tainted atmosphere. (1983, III) Sabbath also needs quiet, the kind that returns at the end of vacation when "The fume and shock and uproar / of the internal combustions of America / recede . . ." (1985, V) Instead of focusing on matters of *observance* (an unfortunate word that perpetuates the spectator stance of modernity), this poetic theology of the Sabbath values *participation* with nature and *protest* against the abuse of creation.

Abraham Heschel was the first modern Jewish writer to make the seventh day accessible to urban, educated Americans. "Judaism teaches us to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year. The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals."⁵ Using familiar Western architectural figures, Heschel symbolized sacred time as a central, protected space within a tolerable modern civilization. But he barely hinted at the importance of the natural world.

A generation later, after the ecological crises of the '60s and '70s, Berry places the Sabbath back in its original relation to nature, at the metaphoric edge of our modern technological experience. There are other important differences. Heschel focuses on a specific time, the seventh day of the week, the biblical Sabbath. Unlike Heschel, Berry is not writing from within a specific historical and religious community such as Judaism. He contem-

plates the Sabbath in a generic way—arising from Sundays enjoyed exploring the hills of Henry County, Kentucky, but extending far beyond.

In Judaism, the Sabbath is a bride, a queen, an object of desire within the human community. For Seventh-day Adventists, continually rehearsing their lives before a cosmic audience, keeping Sabbath is a great performance in the theater of salvation. For Berry, it is a deer, threatened by human intrusion, yet capable of fixing our gaze upon what is vulnerable and evocative in our world.

Rather than the architectural, artistic images of Heschel, Berry's poetic voice is unified by his agricultural and organic metaphors, such as the "brotherhood of eye and leaf." (1985, V) At one moment, Berry's *Sabbaths* seem as solitary as Thoreau's *Walden*, isolated and insulated from the world of human productivity. Yet the poems are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian thought (Psalms, Genesis, apocalyptic and wisdom literature, St. Francis) and the English literary tradition (metaphysical poets, Milton). As a writer he is also a representative of American naturalism (Jefferson, Emerson, Dillard), affirming the value of the world as creation and with an emphasis on the unity of soul and soil, but the first to include the Sabbath in the celebration of nature.

In his essays and poems, Berry combines ancient traditions with a current concern for both natural and human communities, for "traditions . . . have always bound poetry to the concerns and values of the spirit."⁶ The Sabbath exists alongside the wheel of life, the cycle of the seasons, the ancient circle of the dance, the ascent and descent of gravity—other cyclical metaphors linking time and spirit. Berry incorporates Native American ethics and Hindu cosmology as easily as Judeo-Christian symbols and criticizes Western Christianity's preference for the spirit when it derogates the body and nature.

What is less clear is how the Sabbath can be authentically experienced by those living within a highly urbanized and technologically-savvy culture. Very few American families today reflect Thomas Jefferson's agrarian ideal of a nation of small farmers. Is one's experience of Sabbath dependent on the nature and dynamics of one's environment? Is Berry's kind of Sabbath available to a city-dweller? To an ER nurse on the p.m. shift? To those living within "the order of spending and wasting?" (1990, III) Yes, he seems to say, but

only in "moments when heart and mind are open and aware."⁷ It is by knowing some place in nature with attention and care *some* place in nature, that we can develop our spiritual sensitivities.

Although many poets and writers have disclosed the ecological crisis to our minds, Berry is the only contemporary American poet, Jewish or Christian, to present the Sabbath and its meaning for the environmentally conscious. What is new in Berry's poems is his elucidation of the Sabbath theme and its association with a critique of the human (mis)use of nature within a specific bio-region. It is inescapably apparent that Berry has lived his poetry, that his *Sabbaths* are deeply literate meshings of the natural and metaphysical worlds. Seventh-day Adventist and other Sabbath-loving readers will find here a clear and ringing affirmation of the weekly holy day as an experience of "inextinguishable delight." (1997, VI) In polishing these eloquent jewels, Wendell Berry has shown us that our most evocative theological expressions may come not from systematic or reason-driven thought but from the meditative, Sabbath-like space of poetry.

Notes and References

1. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar 1951)
2. Berry's Sabbath poems have been published in *Sabbaths* (San Francisco: North Point 1987) and *Sabbaths 1978-90* (Ipswich, U.K.: Golgonooza 1992). His new volume *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath poems 1979-1997* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1998) reprints almost all the poems from the earlier volumes, along with those written in the last seven years. Quotations from the poems are year/poem # (eg. 1989, V).
3. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977.
4. *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 28.
5. *The Sabbath*, p. 8.
6. "The Specialization of Poetry," *Hudson Review* 28 [1975]: 11-27.
7. *A Timbered Choir*, p. xviii.

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