

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

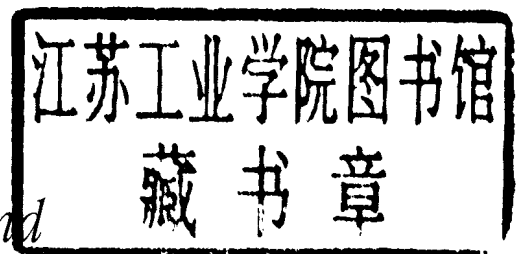
28

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 28

*Anna Sheets Nesbitt and
Susan Salas*
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Preface

P*oetry Criticism (PC)* presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, **PC** offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by **PC** supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, **PC** is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a **PC** volume.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Carol T. Gaffke (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1998), 37-40.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Wendell Berry 1934-?	1
Robert Bridges 1844-1930	46
G. K. Chesterton 1874-1936	92
Hans Magnus Enzenberger 1929-	132
William Meredith 1919-	169
James Merrill 1926-1995	218
Michael Ondaatje 1943-	290
Dorothy Parker 1893-1967	343
Gary Soto 1952-	368

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 407

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 479

PC Cumulative Title Index 481

Wendell Berry

1934-

American poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, and translator.

INTRODUCTION

In his poetry and prose, Berry documents the rural lifestyle of his native Kentucky. He often draws upon his experiences as a farmer to illustrate the dangers of disrupting the natural life cycle and to lament the passing of provincial American traditions. Like Henry David Thoreau, with whom he has been compared, Berry is also regarded for his pragmatic and even-tempered approach to environmental and ecological issues.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The son of an attorney, Berry was born and raised in a rural area of Kentucky. He attended college at the University of Kentucky, receiving his graduate degree in 1957. After a few years teaching at Georgetown College, he received a Wallace Stegner fellowship for fiction in 1958-1959. In 1961 he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, which took him to Italy and France. After briefly holding a teaching position at New York University, he followed the five previous generations of his family and began farming in Port Royal, Kentucky. It was not long before he rejected modern agricultural methods and farm machinery in favor of more traditional and conservational means; this concern for the land is a defining theme of his poetry and prose. He began teaching at the University of Kentucky in 1964, eventually resigning his position to work on his farm full-time. He now works as a contributing editor for *New Farm Magazine*, a periodical devoted to small farming.

MAJOR WORKS

In his verse, Berry utilizes conventional stylistic techniques to demonstrate how the ordering and healing qualities of nature should be allowed to function in human life. In such volumes as *The Broken Ground*, *Openings*, *Farming: A Handbook*, and *Collected Poems, 1957-1982*, he often adopts an elegiac tone to convey his agrarian values and appreciation of traditional moral concerns. Furthermore, he explores recurring themes such as the beauty of the countryside, the turning of the seasons, the routines of the farm, the importance of marriage, the cycle of life, and



the dynamics of the family. In his collections *Sabbath* and *Sabbaths, 1987-90*, Berry underscores the spiritual connection between man and the wilderness, perceiving nature as a place of meditation and rebirth for man.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although a few reviewers deem Berry's poetry antiquated and moralistic, most applaud his versatility and praise him for his appreciation of nature and ecological concerns. His poetry and prose appeals to a variety of readers, including environmentalists, but scholars often debate his emphasis on the relationship between "culture" and "agriculture." Some commentators classify Berry as a regionalist poet, in the sense that his work is deeply rooted in the concerns and cadences of his native Kentucky; however, his interest in ecological conservation and familial values are universal and topical themes. Berry is considered an eloquent and influential voice in twentieth-century American poetry.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

The Broken Ground 1964
Openings 1968
Farming: A Handbook 1970
A Country of Marriage 1973
Clearing 1977
Collected Poems: 1957-1982 1985
Sabbaths 1987
Sabbaths: 1987-1990 1992
Entries 1994
Selected Poems 1998
Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997 1998

Other Major Works

Nathan Coulter (novel) 1960
A Place on Earth (novel) 1967
The Long-Legged House (essays) 1969
The Hidden Wound (essays) 1970
The Unforeseen Wilderness: An Essay on Kentucky's Red River Gorge (essays) 1971
A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural (essays) 1972
The Memory of Old Jack (novel) 1974
The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (essays) 1977
Recollected Essays: 1965-1990 (essays) 1981
Standing by Words (essays) 1983
Wild Birds (short stories) 1986
Home Economics (essays) 1987
Remembering (novel) 1988
Harlan Hubbard: Life and Work (criticism) 1990
What are People For? (essays) 1990
Fidelity (short stories) 1992
Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community (essays) 1993
Watch with Me (short stories) 1994
Another Turn of the Crank (essays) 1995
Two More Stories of the Port Williams Membership (short stories) 1997

CRITICISM

Robert Collins (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: "A More Mingled Music: Wendell Berry's Ambivalent View of Language," in *Modern Poetry Studies*, Vol. XI, Nos. 1-2, 1982, pp. 35-56.

[In the following essay, Collins asserts that Berry's poetry and prose stresses the importance of poetry in a technological world.]

Ever since the appearance of *The Broken Ground* in 1964,¹ Wendell Berry has devoted a considerable portion of his work to the continuing evaluation of language and the function of art, especially poetry. Again and again in his prose, Berry emphasizes the importance of language, not only for the man of letters, but for every individual living in an increasingly technological world. His essay "In Defense of Literacy"² lampoons those American universities which have begun to teach language and literature as specialties. To teach our language and literature as such, according to Berry, is to submit to the assumption "that literacy is no more than an ornament" (*CH*, p. 170); but for Wendell Berry, literacy, far from being a mere ornament, is a necessity:

We will understand the world, and preserve ourselves and our values in it, only insofar as we have a language that is alert and responsive to it, and careful of it. [*CH*, p. 171]

Literacy is all the more important today because in our culture, we no longer have a vital and coherent oral tradition as primitive peoples and folk societies had; yet we are constantly bombarded by a kind of language, what Berry calls "prepared, public language" (*CH*, p. 171), which is trying to compel us to do something, usually, in his words, "to buy or believe somebody else's line of goods" (*CH*, p. 171). In Berry's view, our only defense against such a use of language as power is to know a better language, that is, we must know our literature, for "The only defense against the worst is a knowledge of the best" (*CH*, p. 172).

For Wendell Berry, the abuse of language is largely responsible for the cultural, physical, and spiritual wasteland in which Americans are living today. In *The Long-Legged House*,³ Berry acknowledges both the importance of language—"men fight when arguments fail" (*LLH*, p. 68)—and the way in which Americans have abused language. Our future is in jeopardy because we have lost our idealism, and ideals are the only real guides to the future. That loss of idealism has resulted in a loss of reality, for "Each is the measure and corrective of the other" (*LLH*, p. 48). While Berry views the constant migration of Americans from one part of the country to another or from part of a city to another as partly to blame for our loss of idealism, a cause just as significant is the abuse of language:

Much of the blame for the erosion of our idealism must be laid to the government, because the language of ideals has been so grossly misused by the propagandists. [*LLH*, p. 51]

Again and again, Berry notes how our language has deteriorated, largely because of the wide gap between what governments, churches, businesses, and individuals say and what they do, what he calls "a radical disconnection between our words and our deeds" (*CH*, p. 128).

Berry doesn't confine himself, however, to commenting upon the importance and the abuse of the everyday language we speak and write or upon the prepared, public speech of politicians. He also has much to say about po-

etry, about its importance and its abuse. Berry derives one of his definitions of poetry from Thoreau: "Poetry is nothing but healthy speech" (*CH*, p. 14). He borrows another one of his definitions from R. H. Blyth: "Poetry is not the words written in a book, but the mode of activity of the mind of the poet" (*CH*, p. 15). For Berry, at least in his essays, as for Thoreau and Blyth, poetry, in addition to being the sacred tie which binds all things, is a power which can help to change the world insofar as it is "conducive to the health of the speaker, giving him a true and vigorous relation to the world" (*CH*, p. 14).

While poetry could be one of the most important means of restoring life and health to the world, of making the wasteland bloom, the poetry of this century, according to Berry, has failed to do so. It "has suffered from the schism in the modern consciousness. It has been turned back upon itself, fragmented, obscured in its function. . . . It has often seemed to lack wholeness and wisdom" (*CH*, p. 15). Berry finds hope, however, in the work of a number of contemporaries, most notably Denise Levertov, Gary Snyder, and A. R. Ammons, in whose poetry he finds "a sustained attentiveness to nature and to the relation between man and nature" (*CH*, p. 1). Their poetry appeals to him particularly because it is not turned self-consciously back upon itself, but rather toward the external world. "It seeks to give us a sense of our proper place in the scheme of things" (*CH*, p. 16).

Of all the poets of this century, however, Berry most admires William Carlos Williams, primarily because Williams' poems are so much concerned with the importance of place:

His poems and stories and essays record the lifelong practice, the unceasingly 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. [*CH*, pp. 56-57]

Berry also admires Williams for his insistence upon the concrete ("No ideas but in things") and for his insistence upon the necessity and usefulness of poetry. What Berry finds in Williams as well as in the work of the other poets mentioned above is, again, a power which moves toward the world and toward "a new pertinence of speech" (*CH*, p. 35).

As we have seen, for Wendell Berry, poetry, more than the words written on a page, is a power which has a good deal more to do with the way a person lives than with anything he might write. This definition, suggesting a kind of poetry other than that which takes the form of language, is the first hint in Berry's work of a growing ambivalence about the value and power of language, especially poetry. As we might expect, the view of language and poetry which we find in Berry's poems is both similar to and different from that which we find in his essays. At least early in his career in his essays and his poems, poetry is one of the most important means of restoring a world laid waste

by men and of ushering in a new era in which there would be new contact between people and the earth; yet, at the same time, we can observe a paradoxical development in his poetry which increasingly emphasizes the importance of silence and increasingly stresses that poetry is not the words written in a book, but "the mode of activity of the mind of the poet."

A number of poems from *The Broken Ground*, Berry's first volume of poetry, demonstrate the way in which Berry, at least early in his career, values song, especially human song. In "A Man Walking and Singing," he admires the ability of people to sing not in spite of but because of their knowledge of death, the oppressive climate in which they live. In keeping with what he says in his essays about the importance of place to his own writing, we can observe in this poem how the stuff of the world, what the speaker sees and hears, becomes part of his song, his footsteps, in a phrase Williams no doubt would have admired, "beating the measure of his song" (*BG*, p. 29). Berry further underscores the importance of human song here by the way he contrasts it with "the mockingbird's crooked / arrogant notes" (*BG*, p. 30). The man in the poem sings not in spite of but almost because of his awareness of death while the bird sings "as though no flight / or dying could equal him / at his momentary song." Not only is there a kind of triumph in human singing, but the poem also suggests that it is song which separates men from beasts, an idea which figures prominently in Berry's later work, significantly enough in almost the opposite way.

In "To Go By Singing," a poem similar to the one we have just discussed, again Berry emphasizes the importance of human song. Here the singer who walks the street is "a rag of a man, with his game foot and bum's clothes" (*BG*, p. 44). Still, the speaker admires him, for he is not the stereotyped, panhandling wino. He sings neither for love nor money, "his hands / aren't even held out." This man "sings / by profession," and, because of the religious connotations song has in other poems in *The Broken Ground*, most notably in "Canticle," we must understand "profession" not only as a man's calling or occupation, but also as his declaration or avowal of faith in life.

In the second stanza of the poem, Berry juxtaposes singing with the noise and movement of the city:

To hear him, you'd think the engines
would all stop, and the flower vendor would stand
with his hands full of flowers and not move.

The suggestion is that the man's singing goes largely unnoticed, even though the speaker finds it extraordinary; yet he also finds something admirable in the fact that the man sings even though no one listens to him, that "there's no special occasion or place / for his singing." The parallels we might draw here between the nature of this man's singing and the function of poetry would seem to be significantly at odds with what Berry says in his essays about poetry. There, in addition to the necessity and usefulness

of poetry, he emphasizes the importance of writing out of a deep awareness of place.

Here, however, if we allow that when Berry writes about song he also means poetry, the suggestion would seem to be that poetry derives its importance and its strength precisely because there is no special occasion or place for it, that it thrives and somehow is admirable because it lacks an occasion or an audience or a home. Furthermore, even the usefulness of poetry appears to be in question here, for, aside from its importance to the man in the poem as his way of going, his singing has little impact upon the world: "His song doesn't impede the morning / or change it, except by freely adding itself." If only implicitly, the power of poetry to change the world would appear to be in doubt.

How can we account for this discrepancy? A number of plausible explanations suggest themselves. First, perhaps we should not draw the connection between song and poetry so readily, a weak explanation, I think, in light of the title of the poem, which suggests, more than a walk through city streets, a way of life, and also in light of the way Berry views song in other poems in the collection as a kind of human design which makes the parallel with poetry unavoidable. Second, Berry wrote the poem earlier than most of his essays which discuss poetry, before he had returned to settle in Kentucky and, perhaps, before he had consciously formulated his view of the function of language, a plausible explanation when we realize as we shall see that Berry's view of the function of language and poetry as he expresses it in his poems, though it has changed and developed, remains ambivalent as recently as *A Part*,⁴ his latest collection. Third, Berry is talking about the only kind of song possible in the city where it is impossible to sing out of strong sense of place, a kind of song which he finds admirable, but inferior to poetry rooted in place, a possible but unlikely explanation, given Berry's admiration for the author of *Paterson*. Fourth, the poem suggests that Berry has doubts about the function of poetry and about his own poetry having any effect upon the world, an idea which appears significantly in *Clearing*,⁵ his sixth collection. A combination of these last three explanations, with reservations about the third, helps to account for the view of song this poem expresses.

Two other poems in *The Broken Ground* in which Berry asserts the importance of song are "An Architecture" and "A Music." In each, he further suggests in different ways that song functions as a kind of design which can provide order and meaning. In the former poem, it is the song of a bird opening "Like a room . . . among the noises / of motors and breakfasts" (BG, p. 36). The obvious suggestion here is that the bird's singing creates the world in which it lives: "Around / him his singing is entire." Again, the parallel between the power of the bird's song and hence the power of poetry to create order and meaning, and even a world in which one can live, are all but obvious. Song is an architecture, both a plan or vision and the enactment of that vision. Rather than being created out of an awareness

of place, the song, or poem, creates the place in which one lives, although one could argue that the bird's song certainly originates in the place in which it is sung.

In the latter poem, the song is that of a blind mandolin player whom the speaker employs by proffering a coin. The song of the mandolin player, like the song of the man in "To Go By Singing," becomes all the more significant because of the place in which he plays—the subway station where all is transient. Here again, song is a unifying principle. It connects the speaker with the mandolin player and each of them with the place. And again, perhaps because of the nature of the place or perhaps because of Berry's view of song at this point in his life, the music of the mandolin player clearly supercedes the place in which it is played. "Nothing was here before he came," the speaker tells us, and "The tunnel is the resonance / and meaning of what he plays" (BG, p. 43). The tunnel enriches and intensifies the music, but it is supplementary, not its source. The speaker further emphasizes the value of human song when he declares in the last line of the fourth stanza: "It's his music, not the place, I go by."

The importance of music as a human design and as a means of perception is underscored in the last two stanzas, where the speaker calls the blind man's mandolin, "the lantern of his world," where "his fingers make their pattern on the wires" (my emphasis). Berry suggests, as he does in "A Man Walking and Singing," that song is a kind of triumph, for it takes shape in an alien clime, in a twofold darkness. In fact, the song lights up the stranger to the city and to the darkness of the subway. The song becomes a means of perception: "This is not the pursuing rhythm / of a blind cane pecking in the sun, / but is a singing in a dark place." That Berry finds human song all the more important in the city is borne out by the last phrase of the poem, for the metro and the city are symbolically dark places in Berry's scheme of things. It is borne out as well by the generally negative view of the city which Berry expresses in *The Broken Ground* and by the way in which he admires how nature, that is, anything living, manages to hang on there despite waste and ruin.

Nevertheless, Wendell Berry does not always view song in such a positive light in *The Broken Ground*. In "Canticle," for example, he distinguishes between different kinds of song of which humans are capable. Here he values the concrete song of the coal merchant over the abstract, spiritual music of the moribund priests, precisely because the former consists of the stuff of this world:

He mentions the daily and several colors of the world.
His song is part of a singing into which the trees
move, and fill themselves with all their living
and their sounds. Dirt and offal assail the dead
with music, and they vanish out of their bodies

(BG, p. 39).

This distinction makes the title of the poem all the more significant, for it provides insight into Berry's sense of the

sacred and it emphasizes what Berry believes the proper focus of religion should be—the things of this world, not of the next.

Probably the most ambivalent poem about the value of song in this collection is “**Nine Verses of the Same Song**,” a group of loosely connected lyrics of which a number are concerned with song, speech, and the possibility of perfection in a finite world. Here Berry distinguishes not only between the different kinds of song of which humans are capable, but also between human song and the song of the world, between the world as humans know it and the world as it is. In the first section, Berry presents these themes in only seven lines. The ear, he tells us, is finely attuned “to the extravagant music / of yellow pears ripening . . . as if the world / were perfect” (*BG*, p. 19); but the ear also hears the sound of a cicada bursting its shell, breaking in upon that extravagant music. The distinction is between two kinds of music which humans are capable of hearing: the ideal, perfect music which the ear prefers; and the real, imperfect music which the ear cannot avoid. Berry’s suggestion appears to be that in order to have perfection, humans must ignore reality, or at least pay attention only to certain parts of it, but the image of the whirring cicada in the last line suggests that the real will always break in upon and destroy that illusion of perfection.

Section two, which appears to be little more than a loose collection of images, distinguishes between human music and the music of the world. Here the human music, consisting of trumpets on a phonograph, which “hold the globed gold light / bell in the mirror’s corridor / time out of time” (*BG*, p. 20), is juxtaposed with “the morning-red cockerel’s / burnished crowing.” Whereas the former is a human design which gives the illusion of stopping time, the latter is “counter-measure / to clocktick,” that is, to another man-made, artificial way of measuring time. The crowing is heard by the quiet man of stanza one not merely with the ears, but “loud / in the quick of his wrist.” The trumpets, like the yellow pears of section one, produce an extravagant, ideal music which contrasts with the sparer music of the cock, a kind of music of which the man is capable because it flows in his own veins. It is the real stuff of the world and as such it does not seek to impede the flow of time as human music does.

One other section of the poem is pertinent here. In section four, Berry juxtaposes two kinds of music in order to show which is most appropriate for humans. Here music is clearly analogous with speech. The two kinds of music are that which is all flesh and that which strives to be all soul. Berry finds both kinds unsatisfactory:

it is a more mingled music
we are fated to
a speech breaking categories
to confront its objects

(*BG*, p. 22).

This part of “**Nine Verses of the Same Song**,” along with “**The Apple Tree**,” in addition to suggesting the funda-

mental importance of music and speech, also provides a definition of poetry which applies to Berry’s own work. Poetry is, first of all, in a definition Williams would have liked, “a speech breaking categories / to confront its objects,” a speech which turns us toward the things of this world. Furthermore, as Berry asserts in “**The Apple Tree**,” a poem which John Ditsky has admired for its congruence of subject and form,⁶ it is a kind of necessary or an essential prose. As Ditsky has observed:

The tree becomes “poem”—though the word is not used—because of the way it “stands up, emphatic” among “accidents” and establishes its “necessity.”⁷

Poetry, then, like the tree, which is “a major Fact or statement of nature,”⁸ should endeavor to be a major human design, a major statement which stands against the background of all other kinds of utterance. It should be as rooted in its place as the tree in the poem is, and, while its growth or composition should be casual, the form it achieves should be unalterable and necessary.

In *Openings*⁹ and *Findings*,¹⁰ Berry’s subsequent two collections, music, language, and poetry are not especially important as subject matter, although one of the “**Window Poems**” from *Openings* further hints at that ambivalence about the value of language and poetry which we have seen the seeds of the *The Broken Ground*. There, in section fifteen, in one of his many poems in which he writes admiringly about a tree, Berry asserts how a person’s perceptions of the world and his language, his way of expressing and sometimes of discovering those perceptions, are subordinate to the world, represented here by a sycamore tree. The speaker makes us aware that the tree is independent of human perception, that perception can distort and even falsify reality, and that language can come between him and the objects he seeks to know. He wants to see the sycamore “beyond his glances,” and “to know it beyond words” (*O*, p. 50) while he denies any part that imagination, and therefore art and poetry, might play in creating the tree and ultimately the world in which he lives: “It is not by imagining / its whiteness comes.”

Berry brings this hint of a diminishment in his estimation of the power of language more to the fore in his fourth collection, *Farming: A Hand Book*.¹¹ In this volume, just as in *The Broken Ground*, language, most often, takes the form of song, although at times Berry contrasts the mere language of which humans are capable with the song the world sings. In “**The Silence**,” for example, in answering his central question “What must a man do to be at home in the world?” (*FHB*, p. 23) Berry indicates that it is necessary for a person to efface himself before the world to be at home here. That effacement involves abandoning all human designs, words as well as thoughts, which stand between him and reality in favor of a mystical communing with nature:

There must be times when he is here
as though absent, gone beyond words into the woven
shadows
of the grass.

In the silence which follows, he becomes one with the world through a kind of death in which

his bones fade beyond thought
into the shadows that grow out of the ground
so that the furrow he opens in the earth
opens in his bones.

Having abandoned all human design, he begins to hear the song of the earth.

Berry repeats the same idea in slightly different fashion in two other poems in *Farming: A Hand Book*—"A Letter" and "Meditation in the Spring Rain." In the former, a poem dedicated to writers Ed McClanahan and Gurney Norman about a trip Berry made to visit them in California, Berry acknowledges the bond which language creates between people and between people and the earth: "our bond is speech / grown out of native ground / and laughter grown out of speech, / surpassing all ends" (*FHB*, p. 103). At the same time, he emphasizes how speech pales before the things of this world, here a blue flower in the woods:

Speech can never fathom
the flower's silence. Enough
to honor it, and to live
in my place beside it. I know
it holds in its throat a sweet
brief moisture of welcome

(*FHB*, p. 104)

The failure of speech to capture reality or even to free it through knowledge is further emphasized in "Meditation in the Spring Rain." As the poem begins, the speaker describes how in April in a light rain he climbed up a hill to drink of the water flowing there. Atop the hill, he undergoes an experience similar to that which Wordsworth describes in the Snowden episode toward the end of *The Prelude*, and he is left with a similar dilemma, although the experience in Berry's poem is much less apocalyptic. Awed by the scene before him, the speaker declares: "The thickets . . . send up their praise / at dawn" (*FHB*, p. 105). Immediately, however, he feels compelled to examine what he has said. The question which arises in the poem as a result is a gloss upon the entire body of Berry's poetry:

Was that what I meant—I meant
my words to have the heft and grace, the flight
and weight of the very hill, its life
rising—or was it some old exultation
that abides with me?

The speaker, like Wordsworth on Snowden, is unsure whether what he is feeling and experiencing results from the external scene or from something within him, which leads him eventually to question in its entirety the value of language.

Before he does that, however, he embarks upon what appears to be a long digression to recount the story of crazy old Mrs. Gaines who stood one day "atop a fence in Port

Royal, Kentucky, / singing: 'One Lord, one Faith, and one / Cornbread'." Most of the time, the speaker tells us, Mrs. Gaines was allowed to roam about town freely; but occasionally, when she became wild, the townspeople put her in a cage which was nearly as big as her room in which they had constructed it. One day, however, Mrs. Gaines wandered farther away than she ordinarily did and the town had difficulty finding her.

While this anecdote demonstrates the way in which Berry uses folk materials in his poetry, he seems to dwell on it out of all proportion to its importance in the poem; but what Mrs. Gaines teaches the speaker is the importance of going beyond what is normally accepted and known. That is the one way that people can be truly free: "For her, to be free / was only to be lost" (*FHB*, p. 106). Berry sees a similarity between himself and Mrs. Gaines, realizing that in order to be free, to go beyond what he knows, he must relinquish all human designs, even language itself. For Berry to be free, he must be not crazy but silent, although he is aware that such a step would surely suggest madness to his public, his colleagues, and his contemporaries:

For I too am perhaps a little mad
standing here wet in the drizzle, listening
to the clashing syllables of the water. Surely
there is a great Word being put together here.

Unlike Wordsworth, who denies apocalypse, Berry denies the self.

In "Meditation in the Spring Rain," more emphatically than in any previous poem, Berry contrasts the language of men with the song of the world, to the detriment of the former. In order to hear the assembly of the great Word, he must become silent, and give up his own language which intrudes between him and reality. Paradoxically, that silence and the fact that the speaker begins to hear the great Word restore his confidence in his own ability to speak, so that he is able to declare again without the doubts which plagued him earlier: "The thickets, I say, send up their praise / at dawn!"

The process has been a complex one. In order to affirm the world and the value of his affirmation of it, Berry has had to question that affirmation, to relinquish the very language in which he made it, so that he could be certain that he was speaking accurately and not imposing upon reality "some old exultation" from within. This process, involving as it does the abnegation of human vision and human design, is similar if not identical to the effacement of the self through a descent into darkness evident in Berry's first two collections. The abnegation of a language which limits the way in which the speaker might know reality leaves him with a feeling of oneness with the world:

For a time there I turned away from the words I knew,
and was lost.
For a time I was lost and free, speechless
in the multitudinous assembling of his Word

(*FHB*, p. 107).

In his fifth volume of poetry, Wendell Berry names that place where humans arrive having sailed beyond the utmost bounds of human thought. It is, as he calls the collection, the country of marriage.¹² Just as in Tennyson's poem, that place is fully and permanently reached only in death, but one can occasionally arrive there in life as Berry does through his marriage to his wife and to the land.

In one poem in this volume, Berry views human song almost as favorably as he does in the early poetry. In "**Zero**," despite the severity of the weather, the speaker tells us that "the wren's at home / in the cubic acre of his song" (*COM*, p. 10). Here, Berry clearly intends us to understand song as analogous to human design, for like songs, the farm buildings in the poem, each a kind of human design, "stand up around their lives" against the cold; and the speaker also tells us that like the wren he has "a persistent music" in him. Here, however, song is not the sturdy structure that it was in "**An Architecture**." Rather it is "a flimsy enclosure," little more than a hope in the midst of winter "that says the warmer days / will come." That song remains important nonetheless, because, just as in "**A Man Walking and Singing**," it is sung in the face of death. It is a singing "not to dread the end." The speaker here finds the zero-degree weather appealing because it brings the end, "the climate we sing in," more to the fore. It creates an environment "in which nothing lives by chance / but only by choosing to and by knowing how" (*COM*, p. 11), which stresses the importance of human vision and will.

Virtually every other poem in *The Country of Marriage* which deals with song as a kind of human design either emphasizes its limitations or subordinates it to the song of the world. "**The Strangers**," for example, while it emphasizes the importance of vision in a world where men *do* act by design and the value of language which grows out of a deep awareness of place, suggests as well that language, rather than creating a bond between people, divides them. As the poem begins, the speaker hears the voices of lost travelers trying to find their way calling out to him. They are lost because they have ceased to know the country directly. They know it only through language: "For them, places have changed / into their names and vanished" (*COM*, p. 37). The speaker further realizes that the travelers will not understand his language because it grows out of a deep relationship with the land which has vanished for them. His is a speech which "is conversant with its trees / and stones." The language he speaks is that of a native of the place. Because their lives and languages are so different even though they appear to speak the same tongue, he realizes that they are lost to one another because the travelers will not be able to understand him.

Three other poems in *The Country of Marriage*, "**The Silence**," "**A Song Sparrow Singing in the Fall**," and "**Song**," express the superiority of the world to any human expression of it, the limitations of language, the intrusive nature of language, and the necessity of going beyond language in order to be one with the world. More importantly, they suggest for the first time an idea which Berry

elaborates in *Clearing*, his sixth collection, that he is about to abandon poetry altogether for the joy and peace of full communion with the world. "**The Silence**," a different poem from the poem of the same title in *Farming: A Hand Book*, is reminiscent in theme if not in tone of Williams' "Portrait of a Lady." It expresses the poet's dissatisfaction with his inability to stand silent before the world. As the poem begins, the speaker laments the way in which he prefers his own words to the song of the world, "Though the air is full of singing" (*COM*, p. 25). More concretely, he is upset by the way he "hungers for the sweet of speech" even though real fruit is readily available. The distinction between the world and the human view of it is rendered all the more forcefully in contrast between the way in which Berry characterizes the utterance the world makes, that is as song, and that of which humans are capable, mere words or speech. Human utterance, however, is not only inferior to the song of the world. It is also a temptation and a distraction which turns human attention away from reality:

Though the beech is golden
I cannot stand beside it
mute, but must say
"It is golden," while the leaves
stir and fall with a sound
that is not a name.

The speaker further suggests that hope for the world lies not in poetry, not in the creation of a new speech as Berry has suggested earlier, but rather in silence:

Let me say
and not mourn: the world
lives in the death of speech
and sings there.

Berry repeats the same idea in "**A Song Sparrow Singing in the Fall**" where he declares that he will abandon all other singing and "go / into the silence / of his songs" (*COM*, p. 20), so that he might hear the song of the world more clearly; and in "**Song**," where the speaker perceives the finite nature of poetry, that he tells his love "in rhyme / In a sentence that must end" (*COM*, p. 46). The latter poem, however, while it too emphasizes the inferiority of language to the world, suggests as well that something about the world compels men to speak and that language, and presumably poetry, will be around as long as the world is. Also, implicit in the poem is the idea that our preoccupation with words might in some way be responsible for the world's demise:

We will speak on until
The flowers fall, and the birds
With their bright songs depart.
Then we will go without art,
Without measure, or words.

The above passage illustrates as well as any of Berry's poems his ambivalence about language, since, as I've suggested above, it can be read either positively or negatively.

The value of human song and ultimately of language and poetry continues to be a central concern in *Clearing*, Ber-

ry's sixth collection of poems, as the titles of two of the poems suggest, **"Work Song"** and **"Reverdure."** (The title of the latter is drawn from the French *"reverdier"* meaning to grow green again, but also suggesting a kind of old French song signaling the return of spring.) In this volume, while Berry's attitude toward human song is more positive in some poems than it has been in the two previous collections, he remains at best ambivalent, for, where he is negative, he is more so than in any previous poem, suggesting for the first time the real possibility that he is on the verge of abandoning poetry altogether. Moreover, here old-fashioned, hard work replaces song and the creation of a new kind of speech as Berry's hope and means for restoring a world laid waste by men.

"History," the first poem in the collection, while it expresses the superiority of the world to all human design including song, suggests, nevertheless, that human song can have value as long as it grows out of and remains deeply rooted in a place on earth. In the first section of the poem in late autumn after the crops have been harvested, the speaker in the third year of living in that locale sets out on a walk which takes him beyond all human design:

Beyond the farthest tracks
of any domestic beast
my walk led me, and into
a place for which I knew
no names. I went by paths
that bespoke intelligence
and memory I did not know

(C, p. 3).

There he tries to become familiar with the place, not through language, but by "Learning / the landmarks and the ways / of the land." Once again, abandoning his own designs enables the speaker to begin to discover the designs of nature. He finds himself close to song precisely because he went into the place "wordless and gay as a deer."

In section two of **"History,"** the speaker informs us that he returned many times to the place he ventured to in section one until he came "with a sharp eye / and the price of land" (C, p. 4) and purchased it. Once he becomes its "owner," he recognizes the wide gap between any ideal vision of the place he might have had on that first day and the real condition of the land whose history has almost ruined it irreparably. His journey, then, to be fully and truly in that place is mental as much as it is physical. He must perceive the difference between the ideal and the real, between vision and the enactment of vision; and he must be attentive to the history of the place in order to make that farm which he intends to be his "art of being here" (C, p. 5). Berry concludes section two declaring that until his song arrives in that place "to learn its words," his art "is but the hope of song." These last lines suggest not only the importance of place to song and poetry, but also the importance of song and poetry to the enactment of his vision and ultimately to the place itself, for farming is his art as much as poetry is.

Ultimately what Berry is aiming for, as we discover in section three, is union with the place, but he desires more than a physical union. He recognizes that he is already united with the place physically:

All the lives this place
has had, I have. I eat
my history day by day.
Bird, butterfly, and flower
pass through the seasons
of my flesh.

While that union is important, he desires as well a more mystical union, a union of mind as well as body, so he prays that "what is in the flesh, / . . . be brought to mind" (C, p. 6).

The process of **"History"** is a familiar one for Berry. Vision not rooted in reality is renounced by the speaker's act of turning toward the world, here as elsewhere the earth. That attention to reality produces a new, adjusted vision, one which is more in harmony with things as they are. That new vision is more firmly rooted in reality and is constantly readjusted to bring it more and more into harmony with the earth as the speaker learns more about it.

With **"Work Song,"** however, Berry's attitude toward language becomes more ambivalent. In section two, entitled **"A Vision,"** he foresees with delight the real possibility of song which is truly rooted in place: "Families will be singing in the fields / In their voices they will hear a music / rise out of the ground" (C, p. 32). In the following section, however, he expresses fears about the genuine nature of his words, and suggests the possibility that he is about to cease composing poetry altogether. As section three begins, the speaker tells us that "an ancient passion" singing in his veins beneath speech has brought him to his place, presumably the farm he has been writing about in previous poems. That passion has led him beyond speech and beyond books

to stand in this hillside field
in October wind, critical
and solitary, like a horse dumbly
approving of the grass

(C, p. 33).

He wonders whether that passion is leading him away from books and speech because some days he stands "empty as a tree / whose birds and leaves have gone" (C, p. 34), lines which are reminiscent of those quoted above from **"Song"** about the lasting quality of language. He wonders further whether that condition might become permanent so that

one day my poems may pass
through my mind unwritten
like the freshening of a stream
in the hills, holding the light
only while they pass, shaping
only what they pass through,
source and destination