

The Placed Person

by Stephen L. Tanner

Fidelity: Five Stories

by Wendell Berry

New York: Pantheon;
201 pp., \$20.00

Sabbaths, 1987-1990

by Wendell Berry

Golgonooza Press: Ipswich, England
(distributed by Gnomon Press of
Frankfort, Kentucky);
48 pp., \$9.50



For about 30 years Wendell Berry has been writing fiction, poetry, and essays motivated by what he identifies as “a desire to make myself responsibly at home in this world and in my native and chosen place.” I think the “world” he has in mind is that of mortality in general and of our chaotic urbanized, technologized, and morally problematized contemporary society in particular. It is also the world of nature, which is a primary concern of his writing. His “native and chosen place” is a region of Kentucky settled by his great-great-grandfather 190 years ago. Being “responsibly at home” seems for him to mean recognizing and honoring obligations both to the natural world and to other persons. It means responsible stewardship of land on the one hand and, on the other, a communal life that allows, in his words, “great loss to be recognized, suffered, and borne, and that makes possible some sort of consolation and renewal.”

In the bookstore I frequent, Berry's books are located in a variety of sections: novels, short stories, essays, general nature, environmental studies. But though versatile in genre, his writing is surprisingly uniform in subject, theme, and tone. This uniformity is at least partly due to a center of values fostered by region and generation.

Berry studied writing at Stanford in the late 50's, a place and time that happened to bring distinguished writer-teachers like Wallace Stegner, Richard

Scowcroft, Malcolm Cowley, and Frank O'Connor together with talented students like Wendell Berry, Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, Robert Stone, Tillie Olsen, and others. Ken Kesey once likened this class to the Green Bay Packers under Vince Lombardi. It is an interesting generation of writers because it embodies a major transition in American life. Consider Berry, Kesey, and McMurtry as examples. Born in the 30's in rural areas, they passed through childhood before TV and the electronic age. They knew something of the Depression, of the austerity of the war years, and of the rural afterglow of frontier life. All three have written warmly about frontier values in their regions: Kentucky, Oregon, and Texas. Even Kesey, who became a charismatic figure in the psychedelic counterculture of the 60's, has never strayed far from his roots, and his first two novels, which established his literary reputation, are glorifications of old-fashioned frontier self-reliance. Perhaps these writers have prized older ways of American life because as adults they have been bombarded by perplexing newer ways that make their lingering rural memories even more appealing. All three have written of persisting rural frontier values in conflict with urban technological society.

It may merely be coincidence that their teacher, Wallace Stegner, was also preoccupied with region and past. In any case, Wendell Berry, to narrow the focus again, writes with respectful love about rural communal life, and all the more movingly because he sees clearly how that life is endangered, just as certain species of natural life are endangered. His stories of the Port William membership, his fictional Kentucky community, reveal a process of old members dying and the young moving away to urban centers.

In one of his essays, Berry remarks that “whereas most American writers—and even most Americans—of my time are displaced persons, I am a placed person.” And the obvious concern of much of his writing is with how to make the most of a sustained relationship with one particular place. He is alert to the dangers of condescension and animosity to-

ward one's origins. He enjoys a situation most Americans do not. He farms land that has been in his family for generations. This stability in location and continuity in relationships with family and neighbors—dead as well as living—contrasts with the general transience and disjointedness of American society. It provides Berry with a canvas for depicting what he has called the tragic nature of community life. Community life is tragic, he says in a recent essay titled “Writer and Region,” “because it involves unremittingly the need to survive mortality, partiality, and evil.” The relatively stable continuity of his world brings into relief the ancient cycle of loss and grief, hope and joy, and allows for a depiction of the forms and ceremonies of community that “return us to a renewed and corrected awareness of our partiality and mortality, but also to healing and to joy in a renewed awareness of our love and hope for one another.”

Both of these books are continuations, additions to a body of stories and poems about the same places, characters, and habits of responding to nature. The five stories of *Fidelity*, though satisfying when read independently, resonate even more fully when read in the larger context of his stories about the Port William membership. Taken together they portray a community over several generations. Like the earlier stories, those of *Fidelity* are quiet, gentle, unassuming in style and traditional in technique. A family forgives a killing; a husband displays thoughtful concern for an ill wife; a soldier returns to his farm from war; a man removes without authorization his dying father from the sterile and alien environment of a large hospital so he can breath his last in his home woods; and neighbors check on the welfare of each other in time of high water.

Pretty tame stuff in our world of tabloids and “reality” and “docudrama” television. But Berry's genius lies in his ability to make commonplace goodness interesting. Even Tolstoy, that great guru of goodness, found unhappy families more interesting than happy ones. Berry is not ashamed to treat happiness, because in the context of his stories it results when the work and suffering of the

community are fully confronted and recognized. The community is happy in that it has survived its remembered tragedies, reshaped itself coherently around its known losses, and embraced its eccentrics, invalids, sinners, and fools.

Sabbaths, 1987-1990 continues a pattern of poetry begun in an earlier volume titled *Sabbaths* that included poems from 1979 to 1986. It is nature poetry of the kind Berry himself describes in his essay "A Secular Pilgrimage." Such poetry is secular in its detachment from institutionalized religion but a pilgrimage in its worshipful valuing of what is not entirely understood and in its religious aspiring beyond what is known. It is intensely responsive to the physical presence of the natural world and at the same time stimulated by the immanence of mystery or divinity in that physical presence. Berry suggests two important generative influences for such poetry. One is Oriental poetry, with "its directness and brevity, its involvement with the life of things, its sense that the poem does not create the poetry but is the revelation of a poetry that is in the world." The other is the prose writings of Thoreau, characterized by "a painstaking accuracy of observation, a most unsolemn and refreshing reverence, a sense of being involved in nature, and a rare exuberance and wit."

These influences are clearly discernible in Berry's own poetry. Following Thoreau, who said "the true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible

and indescribable as the tints of morning and evening," Berry writes, "I keep an inventory / Of wonders and of uncommercial goods." This inventory is kept primarily on Sabbath walks in nature, and he imbues "Sabbath" with rich metaphorical significance. He alludes to the first Sabbath, in which God rested while the Creation sang a hymn. It is echoes of that hymn that he seeks in his Sunday ramblings. The poems imply that when "field and woods" (farm and wilderness, cultivated and uncultivated land) are in harmony they awake reverberations of that first Sabbath anthem. And he mentions a final Sabbath with its song of the death of time and pain. These poems are variations on the theme of Sabbaths—from first to last, from literal to figurative.

The principal thread of analogy is that Sabbath is to workday as the solace of nature is to the sweat and labor of human society. The poems hint at a possible harmony in which the two elements complement each other:

Then workday
And Sabbath live together in
one place.
Though mortal, incomplete, that
harmony
Is our one possibility of peace.

Berry, as a farmer-environmentalist, is concerned with redeeming the land, being a partner with nature in healing the effects of harmful practices. He uses the notion of Sabbaths in these poems to express a rhythm of work and rest that informs the agrarian ideal.

Some nature writing is little more than pandering to our modern alienation from the natural world, verbal nature walks to quiet the conscience of an indoor society implicated in environmental depredation. Wendell Berry's engagement with the natural world transcends mere description, or even the kind of appreciation that finds pleasant correspondences between nature and the human mind or soul. His is a daily tactile involvement that shapes his moral, aesthetic, and social values. The quiet gentleness and apparent simplicity of his writing is as hard won as his reclaimed land. He once alerted his readers to this:

I am
a man crude as any,
gross of speech, intolerant,
stubborn, angry, full

of fits and furies. That I
may have spoken well
at times, is not natural.
A wonder is what it is.

We have more than enough displaced writers providing us with fits and furies. We can benefit from a placed writer like Berry providing us with a practical voice concerning how to be responsibly at home in our world.

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Straight Talk by David Gordon

Paved With Good Intentions: The Failure of Race Relations in Contemporary America
by Jared Taylor
New York: Carroll & Graf;
416 pp., \$22.95



A reviewer of Jared Taylor's impressive new book faces a dilemma. If a book's principal thesis is valid, a critic must of course say so. But a difficulty arises in the present instance. According to Taylor, public orthodoxy inhibits discussion of race relations in our country. Dissenters from this orthodoxy face retribution. With remarkable courage, Taylor has defied the conventions whose existence he decries. It is exactly at this point that the problem I have referred to takes shape. The sanctions that Taylor has risked threaten not just him, but those who tender him their support. Reviewers who praise him must, it seems, partake of his temerity. Now the difficulty strikes home, in a way I cannot ignore. I entirely lack Taylor's boldness: what, then, am I to do? I can only hope that this review does not fall into the wrong hands, since any honest reader must recognize the genuine worth of *Paved With Good Intentions*.

Taylor identifies a fundamental error at the heart of most discussions of American blacks and their difficulties: the assumption that "whites are responsible for the problems blacks face." Whites bear this responsibility because they en-

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POLITICAL ORATORY, 1993

"This is a little tiny chunk of a huge plateful of stuff we'll have to deal with."

—Senator Alan K. Simpson,
Republican from Wyoming, on the
defeat of President Clinton's
economic stimulus bill.