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WENDELL BERRY'S METAPHYSICS OF *SABBATH*

Tom Pynn

Atlanta, Georgia

The dark around us, come,
Let us meet here together,
Members one of another,
Here in our holy room,

Here on our little floor,
Here in the daylight sky,
Rejoicing mind and eye,
Rejoining known and knower,

Light, leaf, foot, hand, and wing,
Such order as we know,
One household, high and low,
And all the earth shall sing.
(*Sabbaths*, 58)

In a written interview conducted by James Hepworth and Gregory McNamee, Wendell Berry explains his reference to himself as a “forest Christian:”

I used the phrase “forest Christian” to suggest what has been, for me, a necessary shift in perspective on the *New Testament*: from that of the church to that of the whole Creation. I don't want to sound too positive or knowing about this, because I hope to understand the problem better than I do, but 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 institutions 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 of one another: humans (ourselves and our enemies), earthworms, whales, snakes, squirrels, trees, topsoil, flowers, weeds, germs, hills, rivers, swifts, and stones—all of “us.”¹

For Berry, to be near-spiritual is to be materialist. Berry, however, qualifies materialist as a spirituality of *caring for the material*: “If you were really a conscientious, thorough materialist,” Berry has stated, “you

would take care of material things. You would be very close to being spiritual."² Berry's idea of "true religion" also consists in this mode of *caring-for*. In his essay "The Gift of Good Land," an attempt by Berry to find "a Biblical argument for ecological and agricultural responsibility," the mode of *caring-for* as the concern of "true religion" is what in Buddhism is called "right livelihood." Berry's complaint with traditional Judeo-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—it must have a material result."³ Furthermore, the author has written that ecology as a religious consciousness is revealed "by the *practice* of a proper love and respect for them ("the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field") as the creatures of God."⁴ The poetry of Wendell Berry communicates a joining of transcendent and immanent in an intertwining the poet describes in images of song, dance, work, and rest. As John Lang has observed, Berry's poetry celebrates the presence of the sacred within nature.⁵ Lang's choice of the verb "celebrates" is on target, for it calls attention to the joy intrinsic to the experience of natural revelation. It is the ecstatic celebration of God's grace revealed in the natural setting which founds the poetry collected in Berry's most recent volume *Sabbaths*.

In *Sabbaths*, published by North Point Press in 1987, the celebrations take place on Sunday; a succession of sabbaths from 1979 to 1986. Berry sets the tone for the collection of poems quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures book of the prophet Isaiah: "The whole earth is at rest, and is quiet: they break forth into singing" ("Isaiah," 14:7). The context of this fragment is the Babylonian captivity and the vision of a cessation of a bleak existence: "When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon..." ("Isaiah," 14:3-4). Berry reads this passage in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition of the sabbath, when through the week he has labored at honest work, comes Sunday when he resumes "the standing Sabbath/ Of the woods, where the finest blooms/ Of time return."⁶

Berry's connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition is explicit in many of his works, but most recently in his essay "God and Country," where he writes "...to those of us who are devoted both to the biblical tradition and to the defense of the earth..."⁷ The question of what is the Judeo-Christian tradition is much too involved a topic to explicate in this space, but suffice to note that I am using Judeo-Christian tradition and biblical tradition interchangeably to reflect what I think

Berry's position on the subject is. A manageable question might be what Berry's position is regarding both biblical tradition and American Transcendentalism. Again, this is a deep river to step into, but some brief comparative remarks may be made in so short a space. The primary difference between biblical tradition and Transcendentalism is that whereas Transcendentalism is a philosophical and literary movement, the Judeo-Christian tradition is a religious movement (the interest of some transcendentalists in Eastern religions notwithstanding). Berry, however, can be understood as drawing from both worlds, for both are of the (agri)cultural. The conjoining of transcendent and immanent is present in both worldviews and may be understood as incarnational as well as romantic/transcendental; emphasis placed on the *flesh* of the world as what is most *immediate* to human beings. It is not clear, however, whether Berry accepts a wholly transcendent God as the Judeo-Christian tradition does, and, hence, its dualistic metaphysics. As for Transcendentalism, Berry does not reject tradition, nor does he advocate Emersonian self-reliance and radical individualism to the point that Emerson and Thoreau do. Instead, Berry offers a vision of a shared *community* more in line with the Pauline conception of Koinonia, or "community" based on a spritual value system.

The idea of sabbath is etymologically traceable to the Hebrew *shabbat* which is translated as "to desist" or "to rest" from work or labor.⁸ Louis Jacobs, in his article for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, cites two senses of *shabbat*: one, a repressive sense which understands the sabbath as an instance of the fear of God occasioned by a command-coercive deity issuing the imperative to keep holy the sabbath; and a second sense, an interactive sense, in which the sabbath is a joyous celebration of the love of God. Berry's understanding resonates with Jacobs' outline of the interactive sense of the celebratory nature of *shabbat*. Jacobs speculates that sabbath "may mean that by resting in the day on which creation was complete, man acknowledges God as Creator."⁹ Furthermore, Jacobs writes that "by refraining on the Sabbath from creative manipulation of the world, people demonstrate that they enjoy their talents as gifts from God, the creator. They are there not by right but by permission. People have a stewardship for which they will be called to account by God."¹⁰ Berry echoes this sense of sabbath and human existence in the awareness that "Bewildered in our timely dwelling place,/ Where we arrive by work, we stay by grace" (*S*, 67). In celebrating the sabbath we join in an intertwining sustained by grace of work and rest, creatures and creator.

Certainly the history of the idea/theology of sabbath within the Judeo-Greco-Christian tradition displays a polarization concerning the ontological mood in which the sabbath is observed: fear and joy. The consensus among the scholars I have researched indicates that the occasion of sabbath is meant for celebration. R. North, in his essay for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* entitled "Sabbath," corroborates Jacobs' interpretation when he notes that "the Sabbath was indeed a sort of fast from certain activities; but it was insistently called joyous."¹¹ M. G. Glazebrook, in his article for the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, concurs with Jacobs and Norton while adding additional reasons for observing Sunday, one of which is that "the spiritual life of the individual requires a recurrent leisure time, in which he may read or meditate, may do acts of charity, and commune with his friends, with nature, or art."¹² In *Sabbaths* the poems collected reveal Berry's interactive sabbath activities in celebrating the glory of God's grace in the world. The beginning poem opens the volume in a contemplative/meditative mode:

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water (S, 5).

Poems V, VI, and VIII from the "1982" section manifest Berry's reverence for and love of his friends and family. These poems are dedicated to Mary, Den, and Tanya respectively. As the many other poems which Berry has dedicated to friends over the years reveal a deep-seated bond, so do these three poems emphasize the membership they share with one another. The setting for the membership is, for Berry, the natural setting with which we are inextricably bound up with: "We are members of one another." Finally, Berry fulfills Glazebrook's new reasons for observing Sunday, in communing with art, in the writing of the poems. Berry admits that it is "the work of the imagination" to understand our connection to the natural setting.

At this point we have begun to understand that, in his poetry, Berry treats the sabbath in an interactive mode, celebrating the grandeur of God's presence in the world in several ways: 1) meditation/contemplation; 2) communing with friends and family; 3) communing with nature; and 4) communing with art.¹³ The question to be attended to is "How does Berry's collection of poems, *Sabbaths*, constitute a metaphysics of sabbath?" Indeed, the metaphysical question is one which 2700 years of Western Philosophy and Religion have yet

to provide a response that is consistent, comprehensive, and coherent. One version of the metaphysical question is "What is the identity and nature of ultimate reality, that self-sufficient cause/reason why anything is?" As the study of ultimate reality, metaphysics seeks: 1) the answer to ultimate reality's nature and identity; 2) to demonstrate the dependence of everything else upon it; and 3) to reveal its general manifestations on different levels and in different kinds in existence. Working within the Judeo-Greco-Christian tradition, Berry *seems* to accept its dualistic metaphysics, but it is his highlighting of God's grace continuously incarnated in the natural setting which forms the foundation for the participation between the transcendent and the immanent spheres of reality. Berry's metaphysics *cannot* be interpreted as strictly dualistic in the sense that there exist two *separate and distinct realities*. The moment of incarnation, continuously present, rather than indicating a separation and distinction between God and Creation, reveals the interaction between God and Creation which human beings experience as a moment of wonder and joy. The mystical moment of ecstasy is articulated by Berry in the IVth poem of the "1979" section:

I leave work's daily rule
And come here to this restful place
Where music stirs the pool
And from high stations of the air
Fall notes of wordless grace,
Strewn remnants of the primal Sabbath's hymn. (S, 11)

Berry's metaphysics of sabbath describes, poetically, the way in which ultimate reality, God, participates with Creation, and the way in which human beings, as both a part of Creation and the stewards of Creation, participate in God. The constituent elements of Berry's metaphysics of sabbath are: 1) the dialectic of work and rest; 2) resurrection, song, and dance; and 3) the experience of joy or ecstasy. Sabbath is the occasion in which the work/rest of human beings is justified by the Creator God in the presence of the Sabbath Spirit. Sabbath, in another sense, is harmony of Creator and Creation. As John Lang points out, Berry "considers nature the primary sphere of God's activity."¹⁴ Furthermore, "Berry has consistently sought to convey his double vision of nature's physical presence and the divinity manifest in nature."¹⁵

The related question of how we come to know God is not strictly an epistemological concern for Berry; we know/experience God in the participation with God *in Creation*. For Berry there is a necessary

connection between a made thing and its maker. This connection is mediated in the act of participation. Berry refers to as stewardship or charity. The conceptual foundation of stewardship is ecology which Berry locates in biblical tradition. In his essay "God and Country" Berry writes that

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 by 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?¹⁶

When Berry refers to St. Paul's insight in his letter to the Corinthians that we "Are members one of another," he is not simply making a quaint statement on the interconnectedness of being; rather, Paul is pointing to the interdependency of beings in the body of Christ as a symbol of God's Love. As creatures, Berry points out, "all creatures live by God's spirit, portioned out to them, and breathe His breath."¹⁷ Care or charity or stewardship is the mode of human being acting in the task of stewardship to safeguard Creation. When we fulfill our task we are blessed by the Sabbath Spirit, are participating with God and, hence, *know* God.

The components of Berry's metaphysics of sabbath are presented in the subject matter of the poems collected in *Sabbaths*. The first element of Berry's metaphysic, the dialectic of work and rest, is the concern of at least eight of these poems. In the "1979" section, poems I, VII, and X all reveal aspects of the dialectic. In poem number I, the images of encounter between Berry and Creation is contingent upon the "I" (self)consciousness leaving the world of work, a world of dread/anxiety, and entering into the sabbath unhindered. Berry writes:

I go among trees and sit still
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle (S, 5).

Once the "I" has moved out of the mode of work he is free to *encounter* Creation. The encounter is purified of fear, the residue of anxiety, and each, Creation and Berry, is ready to hear the song each sings. The song each sings, Creation and Berry, is the song of Being. It is a joyous singing of the interconnectedness of all life as a part of God's Creation. In the last stanza of the poem, Berry returns to the notion of the laying aside of labor in order to encounter Creation:

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

As this passage describes, it is the anxiety of work as a mode of being in the world combined with the bewilderment of existence which causes Berry to be "muted in my consternations." Yet, after he has labored well, he rests in the Sabbath Spirit and is able to regain consciousness of the sacred part he plays within the larger picture of Creation. This understanding of his vital and living connection to Creation as steward and servant of God is the song he sings. As the poet sings "the day turns, the trees move": all in all is well.

Poem "VIII" in the "1979" section reveals another dimension of the work/rest dialectic: our work contributes to Creation and is the springboard to the Divine. It is "Disharmony" which "recalls us to our work;" a disharmony "Of waste, the agony of haste and noise." The return to work from rest is not an easy return, but there is consolation in "Returning, less condemned in being blessed/ By vision of what human work can make:/ A harmony between wood-land and field." It is the vision of harmony that sustains us in our anxiety, as well as the awareness that

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 (S, 15-16).

As John Lang suggests, "nature both blesses and is blessed. It receives God's grace and in turn mediates that grace to mankind."¹⁸ The

blessing manifests when the harmony of wood and field acts as a mnemonic trigger of "the whole/ First Sabbath's song" which "no largess of time/ Or hope or sorrow wholly can recall" (S, 16). The harmony of earth as a whole is "Heaven-made," but Heaven's promise and our prayer intertwine in "A little song to keep us unafraid" (S, 16).

The "Xth" poem in the "1979" section describes the partnership, "the Giver and the taker/ Joined the taker blessed," of human beings and God which can be understood as a third component of the work/rest dialectic. Harvest will come, redemption will come, but in order for it to come, "The hand must ache, the face must sweat" (S, 19). Work is hard labor. The farmer tills the field, but the rest is "left to grace": "That we may reap/ Great work is done while we're asleep" (S, 19). Berry concludes this poem by referring to the fulfillment of work that the sabbath offers: "When we work well, a Sabbath mood/ Rests on our day, and finds it good"(S,19). The allusion to the first book of "Genesis," of God finding what has been created *good*, is intentional on the part of the poet; Berry wants to demonstrate the dialectic of work/rest as somehow analogous to Divine Creation. As the previous lines suggest, however, participation in Creative Activity by human beings is limited; God is the only *fully Creating*. John Lang supports such a reading when he notes "that nature surpasses human making is one of the poet's central themes."¹⁹

The second part of Berry's metaphysics of sabbath is the interrelated notions of resurrection, song, and dance. For Berry, resurrection "Is in the way each maple leaf/ Commemorates its kind, by connection/ Outreaching understanding" (S, 7). Lang points out that in Berry's poetry "resurrection is a fundamental principle of nature, not simply a religious doctrine."²⁰ The "connection/ Outreaching understanding" manifests as Creation Music; the song Berry hears in Creation and locates in himself as a part of Creation, once the anxiety of labor has been left behind and the residue of work, fear or dread, has been expunged from his consciousness. The movement from work to rest is presented again in the second poem of the "1983" section as

The year relents, and free
Of work, I climb again
To where the old trees wait,
Time out of mind (S, 63).

When the quiet arrives, as "a cleft in time," "thought is song" in the "Sabbath economy"(S, 63). "All labor is a dance"(S, 63). Berry hears "the ancient theme/ In low world-shaping song/ Sung by the falling

stream" (S, 64). The stream is "a part of Sabbath also," Berry writes in the fourth poem from this section of the volume, in its falling it is musical, it is musically "making the hillslope by its fall, and still at rest in falling, song/ Rising"(S, 67). In sabbath, linear conceptions of space and time dissipate. Motion as an abstract correlative of space and time is confused as in the paradox of the stream "still at rest in falling." When sabbath alights in Creation, "all the earth shall sing" (S, 58).

The moment of Creation Music is an ecstatic moment, a moment of joyous celebration of Sabbath Light. This moment is the third and final component of Berry's metaphysics of sabbath. The cessation of work, the dissipation of anxiety and its intrinsic fear, and the way made clear to the eruption of the sacred in song and dance culminate in an ecstatic gesture of life-affirmation: *incarnation*. What is *affirmed* is the *good* of Creation participated in partnership by human beings and Divinity. The fullest presentation of the ecstatic moment is found in the final poem of the collection. Written in 1986, "Slowly, slowly they return" encapsulates many of Berry's thematic concerns: absence and return, the sanctity of the natural setting, the blessing nature bestows as a mediating phenomena between humans and God, and the glory of resurrection in the cyclic movement of the seasons. In this poem the trees are a *synecdoche* for Nature:

Slowly, slowly they return
To the small woodland let alone:
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light. (S, 95)

The identity of the trees as apostles, those who speak with *authority of God*, reinforces Berry's idea that nature is the primary sphere of God's activity. The trees *are* "the advent they await." Berry continues by writing that the trees confer "a blessing on this place" and that "their life's a benefaction made,/ And is a benediction said/ Over the living and the dead" (S, 95). In Fall, the splendor of resurrection and God's grandeur when

their brightened leaves released
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed.
O light come down to earth, be
praised! (S, 96)

BERRY'S METAPHYSICS

NOTES

¹James Hepworth and Gregory McNamee, "The Art of Living Right: An Interview with Wendell Berry," *The Bloomsbury Review*, (June/July/August, 1983).

²"Wendell Berry," *Whole Earth Review*, (Winter, 1989), 14-15.

³Wendell Berry, "The Gift of Good Land," *The Gift of Good Land, Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco, 1981), p. 267.

⁴Ibid.

⁵John Lang, "Close Mystery: Wendell Berry's Poetry of Incarnation," *Renascence* 35 (1983), 259.

⁶Wendell Berry, "II," *Sabbaths* (San Francisco, 1987), p. 7. Hereafter, all poetry cited from this volume will be abbreviated *S* with page number, in the text of the essay.

⁷Wendell Berry, "Wendell Berry, "God and Country," *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, 1990), p. 95.

⁸Louis Jacobs, "Shabbat," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), p. 189.

⁹Ibid, 190.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹R. North, "Sabbath," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967), p. 779.

¹²M. G. Glazebrook, "Sunday," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York, 1928), p. 110.

¹³In *Standing By Words*, Berry makes it clear that one's acts of charity, or, inversely, one's acts of debasement, are not the subject matter of poetry; such acts, and the narcissistic dwelling within the memory of such acts, violates poetic decorum.

¹⁴Lang, pp. 262-263.

¹⁵Ibid, 263.

¹⁶Berry, "God and Country," p. 98.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Lang, p. 263.

¹⁹Ibid, 261.

²⁰Ibid, 261.