

Birkin Gilmore

## SINGING TO KEEP THE MIND AWAKE:

Interview with Wendell Berry

This interview was conducted March 13, 2005 at Wendell Berry's home in Port Royal, Kentucky.

*[Traffic and the birdsong of nesting martins busy the air on the front porch where we both sit. Wendell Berry, having come in from mending fences, takes off his work-boots and makes himself comfortable on the porch-swing.]*

**BG:** I'd like to start off talking about your preface to *A Timbered Choir* when you say, "These poems were written in silence, in solitude, mainly out of doors. I should say that the poems presented here should be thought of as a series, not as a sequence, the poems are about moments when the heart and mind are open and aware. Such moments in my experience are not sequent or consequent in the usual sense. Such a moment is not necessarily the cause or result of another such moment." I'd like to center around what you feel characterizes these moments of awareness.

**Berry:** Well, that's hard to generalize about, and I don't try to generalize about it. Blake said that the arts are our way of conversing with paradise, and that's probably as good a generalization as could be made. There is time, and then there is timelessness. And if you're lucky, and if you can be still enough, observant enough, you may be able to know and speak about that intersection of time and timelessness, or time and eternity. And, of course, that's one of the possibilities contemplated in the biblical idea of the Sabbath. I may have oversimplified in my little forward you were reading from. If you take up that theme of the Sabbath you're going to take up also the theme of failure, of all the things in our life that obstruct such apprehension, and make it difficult or impossible. But maybe it's possible to have moments when you're just freely in place, apart from the clutter of what Shakespeare called the workaday world.

**BG:** Talking about the two types of awareness, the work-a-day, or the workings of the mind that categorizes experience and the world that you would be in that you're talking about: in the sequence "Window Poems" you use the window as a metaphor for consciousness, "a wildness looking out at the wild."

**Berry:** The poet *is* a wilderness looking out at the wild, isn't that what it says? I don't know whether it's consciousness or not, it's a metaphor for all the things that schematize. The many-paned window is a graph, like a sheet of graph paper, and he's seeing the world through that, and through the tendency of educated people to try to schematize the world and experience. I don't think poems come from that tendency. And I don't think much happiness comes from it, either. If you're going to deal with the world in terms of categories or schemes, then your poetry is going to turn out to be a compound of clichés about things that we've agreed to expect. What real poetry, I think, has always tried to do is shrug off expectations and confront again whatever reality there is to be confronted.

**BG:** Would you say that it is the expectation that affects the reality of the moment as much as what is actually there?

**Berry:** Expectation can obliterate the perception. You come determined to have a good time, and you have the good time you were determined to have, or else you don't. It's pretty much the same dullness, either way.

**BG:** Do you think that what Keats called negative capability — do you think that's trying to live outside of expectation?

**Berry:** It's been a while since I've thought about negative capability. It has to do with not being fretful over the possibility that two things may be true at the same time, isn't that right? That's not a term I use, and I probably have no business trying to deal with it. But opposite things, in fact, may be true at any given moment. You may find yourself very happy or joyful at a time when you think you ought to be sad. Or vice versa. It happens all the time.

*[A motorcycle accelerates on the two-lane road at the bottom of the hill.]*

**BG:** In another of your Sabbath poems you write, “Leave word and argument. Be dark and still / And come into the joy of healing shade. / Rest from your work. Be still and dark until / You grow as unopposing, unafraid / As the young trees, without thought or belief . . . .” What kind of awareness do you think is functioning in those moments of stillness? I was thinking of D.H. Lawrence’s idea of purely physical awareness, where he goes and does not think. Is that in any way the same?

**Berry:** The desire in that passage isn’t merely physical. It’s the wish to be present without qualification. I question whether or not that’s ever really possible. But it’s a wish that’s familiar to me from my experience here. This is a place I like to be. And I long just to *be* here, without qualification or the static that comes from my daily preoccupations, from having work to do.

**BG:** Do you think memory functions in those moments in the usual sense?

**Berry:** In those perhaps fictive moments of pure awareness? It probably does in some sense. I’m unwilling to conceptualize about this too much. The question you’re asking, really, is are you *ever* apart from memory. And that’s what I’m questioning, that’s why I’m saying that this moment of pure awareness may never happen. It can’t happen without happening to you, and you are, among other things, this person you remember. I don’t know how to deal with that. Maybe the best thing is not to deal with it. I’m not sure. You’re a college student, you’re under pressure to be able to say something about these questions, and I’m not in college anymore. I don’t want to run the risk of theorizing until I am babbling. If you’re going to be talking about this moment of awareness, you’ve got to tie it down somehow; you’ve got to talk about what you’re aware of. And the need to speak or write brings back into this awareness everything that you’re longing to be free of, so it’s a cluttered business. You’re making a poem—well, that’s like leaving a track, a physical thing that exists. It’s not a state of mind or a thought. One thing you know, if you’re a writer, is that words are a very tentative, approximate, clumsy medium, like any other medium. Once an experience has become words it has ceased to be what it was before. And there are a number of things that simply are not expressible.

**BG:** Talking about the physical act of, as you said, “speaking,” but song comes up again and again in your writing, and one thing that caught my attention was a quote from Ruth Murray Underhill about the Papago Indians in your “Notes for the Unspecializing of Poetry.” It says, “The Papago sternly holds to the belief that visions do not come to the unworthy, but to the worthy man that shows himself humble there comes a dream, and the dream always contains a song.”

**Berry:** I remember that.

**BG:** In another part of the “Window Poems” you say, “The mind must sing of itself to keep awake.” [*A car passes on the road below.*] What’s the importance of song there?

**Berry:** Well, if you’re a poet, you’re always interested in the difference between poetry and prose, and that takes you into another something that’s almost impossible to conceptualize about or speak about once you get away from the technical differences. Poetry is written in lines, which is a very considerable difference. And one of the things that poetry draws from more forthrightly than prose is music. We know this from the time when poets actually wrote songs to be set to music and sung. The songs in Shakespeare’s plays for example. A poet of wonderful clarity and purity such as George Herbert is often very close to song. I’ve always wanted to keep my own poems somewhere in the neighborhood of music. I’ve wanted a kind of tension in my lines that would hearken back to the old singability. That occupied me for a long time, the question of song and what a song was, and how close a poem ought to be to song, or to singability, and how far it might be permitted to stray. Some of mine have strayed pretty far, but I’ve always felt that was dangerous. Music’s a kind of standard. You can tell if a line is iambic pentameter or not. You can tell in free verse whether or not a line has tension or tensile strength between beginning and end. Such things are objectively verifiable. You can tell, in a free verse poem or a poem in traditional form, how the syntax and the line structure play against each other. That, too, is verifiable enough. But then there is a kind of subjective standard that has to do with what *you* think song or singability or musical quality might be, and that’s going to be harder to get at. All you can do is what

Pound recommended, and that is to put one example beside another, see the differences and talk about them insofar as they can be talked about.

**BG:** What do you think it is about song that has to do with encapsulating experience, with keeping things here? In this example of vision coupled with song, and the mind singing of itself to stay awake — what do you think is going on there?

**Berry:** I suppose you're talking about continuity. The music in a song or in a poem is its continuity, what keeps it coherent and alive. It then becomes a sort of metaphor for whatever it is that keeps us alive in the world, all of us creatures together. But what you're trying to do in any kind of writing is to keep the thing continuous from end to end. You can interrupt a continuity for certain effects, if you want to — you can put a caesura somewhere in the middle of a line — but if the continuity isn't strong enough to accept the interruption and carry through it, then you've lost more than you've gained. A novel is an attempt to ride out continuously to its end the impulse of a story. That's how you know when to stop. When you can't continue, when the impulse is exhausted, you put down the final dot.

**BG:** Another instance of song that comes spontaneously from the wind is from *A Continuous Harmony*, from “Notes from and Absence and a Return”: “When one lives as a creature within the creation, aligned with it, then one's life passes through the world as a creative force or agent, like a stream of water. Then one can hear the songs that travel through the air like the Indians at the peyote meeting.” I've read some of Carlos Castaneda's writing about that, and those instances when he talked about the songs came as a teaching or protective agent, as a lesson. Is that what you had in mind?

**Berry:** Well, I now think we have to be pretty careful about how we resort to Castaneda, or any other writer, about a culture that's radically different from our own. The old Indian don Juan in Castaneda's books comes from a culture that prepared him to know when and how to do the things that he did. Our culture, such as it is, prepares us differently. I remember Gary Snyder saying that the action of LSD or peyote on an unprepared mind is like the action of chemical fertilizer on an infertile piece of ground. The alignment

between our life and the life of the world — in my work that’s more of a goal than a realization. You may be having moments, you may be able in parts of your life to get yourself fairly aligned with the creation. But how are you going to do it in any profoundly meaningful way when, for instance, you’re utterly dependent on fossil fuels? [*The sound of a car passing on the road.*] But I do talk about that alignment as a goal in some of the Sabbath poems, and that idea is the central one in my agricultural essays. I got started on that line of thought by reading Sir Albert Howard, the English agriculturalist, who wrote *An Agricultural Testament* and *The Soil and Health*. [*The sound of birdsong rises.*] It was a very important thing for me to meet Wes Jackson, who had taken up in his own place and way exactly the same question that Howard asked: How do we adapt farming to the nature of a given place? Howard was saying if you want to know how to farm, look at the forest. And you see my little farm, rough and marginal as it is, is surrounded by the woods. So I have Howard’s paradigm in front of me every day. Wes Jackson says if you want to know what’s the matter with the Midwestern grain fields, lay them side to side, so to speak, with the native prairie, and note the differences — much as Pound says to do with poetry. And, of course when we don’t align our methods of agriculture and forestry with the processes of the local ecosystem, then we get all kinds of trouble: soil erosion, chemical pollution and so on. The hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico is the continuation of agricultural error in the Midwest. Howard said that we had to see the health of soil, plants, animals and humans as “one great subject.” You can see how close that is to an old preoccupation of the arts and religion when you consider that “health” belongs to the same family as “whole” and “holy.” And so maybe it’s not inappropriate to refer, in the context of this preoccupation of mine, to American Indian sayings about songs that pass through the air.

**BG:** You were talking about making moments impossible as we go along and creating with fossil fuel usage these other problems that absorb any kind of surplus energy that we might have to observe or be aligned [with]. Something like what Thoreau was getting at when he said “simplify” and do without. In *A Continuous Harmony*, in “Notes from an Absence and a Return,” which is a series of journal entries, you recount a walk when you had a magnifying glass, looking into some bluebell flowers . . . .

**Berry:** That's in *A Continuous Harmony*? Really. I don't know what's in those books (laughing). I've used a lens that way lots of times. I didn't know I started so early.

**BG:** It made me think that when you have enough desire or energy to do things like that, the more you look, the more you see. To me it seems that is a possibility only when, as you say, the usage of resources is in equilibrium. In that context, what are the limits of human possibility when we're released from our own entrapments?

**Berry:** I don't know. I don't know what it would be like to be out of this trap of industrialism and the fossil fuels. What we've made is a damned mess. I've put in a lot of work here in trying to use this old place well, and I've put in a lot of work writing about agriculture and other issues, trying to find a way out of the mess. But you have to qualify Thoreau a little bit. He said "simplify, simplify." That meant to do without things, and so far he's OK. But finally you don't do without things by simplification. The mind that does without things is in fact a lot more complex than the mind that doesn't do without things. I lived a far simpler life when I lived in New York City than I live here, because the life of a mere consumer is essentially simple. If you want anything, then you go buy it, if you have the money. If you don't have the money, then you don't go buy it. Suppose you undertake to raise — and Thoreau quit on this part of his experiment — suppose you undertake to raise the food you eat rather than buy it at the store. That's much more complex. Suppose you undertake to raise your own meat and milk as well as vegetables — that makes eating enormously complex — and if you eat without destroying the ground you're eating from, it becomes even more complex. But when you do manage to work without destruction, those moments are indispensable, just as patches of unspoiled wilderness are indispensable. They teach you. They give you a standard. Sir Albert Howard found his standard in the woods, Wes Jackson finds his in the native prairie. Good work, by those standards, becomes itself a standard. I use those standards to think about the practical problems of farming, but I use them also in my work as a poet and fiction writer. I'm using my own moments of good work, "Sabbath moments" I call them, as a standard. And so when I'm working at the mess I at least know what for; I know what I'm hoping for.

**BG:** That brings up Wordsworth's idea that the source of poetry is the spontaneous overflow of emotions that takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. So the moment recollected informs the whole of the life. I was interested in how sustainability would transform itself to function in the moment of the spontaneous powerful emotion.

**Berry:** Well, if you lived in a sustainable society, one thing you'd feel initially, before you got used to it, would be relief. It would be a hell of a big relief. And it would be a kind of freedom. It would be freedom from the knowledge that, by living in it, you're helping to destroy the world. Imagine how free you would feel if you knew for sure that you weren't doing that, and if there was a way laid out for you and other people to quit doing that. But we're perceiving these moments from the perspective of the mess we're in, and we're also perceiving the mess we're in for what it is because we have these moments. But theorizing about the origin of poetry seems to me a little bit futile. I don't think Wordsworth knew very much about it. I don't think I know very much about it. In the first place, when you're at work on these things, when you're really at work, you're not paying attention to how it's happening; you're just making it happen. It would be like a quarterback stopping in the middle of a play and explaining to himself what he's about to do. That's not the way it's done. Something you're not conscious of is happening. It happens to poets, it happens to athletes, it happens to horsemen, it happens to good workmen of all kinds. Why did you make this choice and not that one? Poets and artists in interviews love to be asked questions like that, and then they love to tell you exactly why. If they're any good, I don't think they know. I think all that's fiction. I don't trust it. Wordsworth said a number of things I don't trust very much. He said some very good things, too.

**BG:** Do you think poems like "Work Song" from *Clearing* are instances of singing to keep the mind awake? Writing poems, I mean; do you think they might be in some instances the songs that come through the air?

**Berry:** I don't know. You're always asking yourself to be alive. That's why you don't enjoy being sick, it's why you don't enjoy being depressed, it's why you don't enjoy being in a mess. You want to be as alive as you possibly can be.

And probably the arts at their best have this power of making us alive, making us alert. But how they do it, how that serves an artist — again, it's like thinking about how you think. I've been thinking a lot, writing a lot, about our limitations, our ignorance. There are just some things that we're not going to know. The most available example of how poetry works for a poet is yourself, and yet you'll probably be the last one to know exactly how you're serving the art and how the art is serving you. If it's any good, it's happening pretty far beyond the sort of scrutiny that interviewers' questions suggest.

**BG:** We talked about dreams before. Don Juan puts a lot of emphasis on bringing experience into dreams, and we've been talking about thinking about thinking about thinking and the sort of ensnarement that brings. In "Standing by Words" you say, "The right use of any discipline leads out of it." If a scrutiny or a poem is brought to fruition, where is the "out" that it leads to?

**Berry:** I remember writing that; I don't remember the context. Well, there are several ways you can go with that, but I would say that the right use of art leads back to life again. When you think of the right use of any discipline in the university, if it's really alive it will call in the other disciplines sooner or later. How long can you think about American history without thinking about agriculture, for instance? How long can you think about agriculture and the history of agriculture without thinking about chemistry or geology? But I suppose I was thinking there about the possibility that you would somehow come under the influence of your own work, that there should be some attempt to do as you say.

**BG:** Is there, do you think, an essential discipline that is common to all things?

**Berry:** Probably there's a kind of master discipline. If you know how to work at one thing, you'll be tremendously helped in working at something else. Knowing how to work as a farmer has helped me a lot as a writer. You don't, for instance, have such a thing as "farmer's block." If you've got animals to take care of, you take care of them. But maybe it's useful to think of art as

having a purpose. Love poems certainly have had a purpose always, unless the poet was a total dilettante. They were written to bring about a result. Mine certainly have been. You get something understood in a poem, that ought to affect your life, and vice versa.

**BG:** I think it was in *Women in Love* where D.H. Lawrence says that physical labor keeps a man sane. How do you see the relationship between the work of poetry and the physical work that goes on outside of it?

**Berry:** Again, it's hard to say. Thoreau said that hard work with the hands is of direct usefulness to a writer. But you don't have control plots in experience. If you could somehow subtract farming from my life, then we'd know, we could compare. But there's no way to do that. My life has had labor in it, and I'm sure that the things I've written would have been written differently if I'd had a different life, but I can't prove that. I do know that some kinds of physical work — emergency fencing, say, in a cold rain — will make you happy to sit down to write.

**BG:** I'd like to shift into the social sphere and talk about these moments of solitude you described in the forward to the Sabbath poems, and how these moments of solitude relate to interactions — immediate and premeditated — with other people. Specifically, in *Jayber Crow*, when World War II comes around and he decides that he doesn't believe in it, but then he decides that, for the sake of his community — someone else would go in his place if he abstained — then he goes, but you know he gets held back. So what pull does the community have — it's not the same in every case — but what belongs to the community and what belongs to the individual?

**Berry:** I really don't think you can draw that line. Even your solitude belongs to the community. C.S. Lewis says somewhere that the worst mistake a person can make is to think that he belongs to himself. I think that's absolutely true. There are gifts that come from solitude, but they are given gifts, which means that the connections remain. You have to suppose that a lot of solitude went into the making of the *Divine Comedy*. But you certainly can't say that

the *Divine Comedy* doesn't belong to any community. People go into solitude, and they come back with a kind of news, sometimes. People who go into it and don't come back are a different order of creature. That's another matter. I'm not confident to deal with that. Thoreau might have liked at one time to try that. My friend Harland Hubbard always thought he might like to try it, but that's not what he did. He functioned as part of the community.

**BG:** Could Jayber have — well, he didn't, obviously — but could one still function as part of the community by being an impedance to the rest, in the war setting?

**Berry:** Sure. That was exactly Thoreau's stand on the Mexican War. Sure. Jayber's dilemma is defined to some extent by my inability to imagine anything else within the terms of the time and place. Nobody I know in the little towns around here thought of civil disobedience or even of conscientious objection. If Port William had been a little town that had a Mennonite or a Quaker inheritance, the situation would have been different. I don't want to be completely bound by realism, but you can't push a story too far. For Jayber to have been a pacifist would have been beyond belief. I couldn't have believed it. The question of the single individual and the community is a difficult one, but of course you can't even be solitary without a community, because you can't live entirely alone. You have to have some kind of a support system. To think of an entirely self-sufficient person just defies imagination. And then there are people like Robert E. Lee whose lives wouldn't have meant anything to them apart from their community. Lee, you know, opposed slavery. On the other hand, people have sometimes chosen to take a personal stand that they felt was absolutely necessary. It's a question of what constitutes your integrity and of how to maintain it. This is an interesting pattern of questions and answers. What I'm trying to keep you from doing is getting me to talk about something that *can't* be talked about! Over and over again you've brought me to that point.

**BG:** Using the image of the magnifying lens again, I'm pretty sure it's in the Sabbath poems when you say, "There are / no worlds but other worlds . . . every world exists / because the others do." In the writing of a poem, do you

think that the making of images — weaving them together, instead of being an interpretive device — could actually be the receiving of what is there? I guess what I'm asking is if everything is connected and reacting to itself, then wouldn't there be symbolic things happening all the time that were milestones, so to speak, and that somebody that was looking that knew what to look for would — the poem would write itself, in a sense?

**Berry:** That's right, in a sense. I do believe in inspiration, with patience. Things come that are not accountable. They come when you're not expecting them. They come when you're not trying for them. But you can't make a poem just out of symbols, or images or meanings. Mallarmé said a poem's not made of ideas, it's made of words, and he was right. Ideas, I think, have their part to play, but you make poems with words, and you dare not forget that. Important ideas cannot invest a poem with importance.

**BG:** I'd like to hear your thoughts on poetry, about its similarities to and differences from music or painting, for example. How the frame of a poem — the vantage point — is similar and different from the way a painter would choose his scope.

**Berry:** Well, I think that if you're a poet you can learn something from the art of painting, but I'm not so sure that you'll ever know what it is, because a poem has to be made of words, and a painting has to be made of paint. I've worked hard at times to try to understand what I thought a painter was doing. But I don't find anything there that's directly transferable. The thought of old Cézanne going back and back to his native landscape has been immensely encouraging and consoling to me. He kept going back, asking that landscape to reveal itself to him. "Were it not that I am passionately fond of the contours of my native country, I should not be here." I could say that, but I'll never be a painter. Music is probably more directly analogous to poetry. The poem has to hang together as a pattern of sound; it has to have some kind of rhythmic integrity. I'm sure of that. But I'm less competent as a listener to music than as an observer of painting. In painting there is the issue of framing, which is the issue of what to put in and what to leave out, and of course there's a lot to be

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learned from that, but again I'm not so sure it's directly transferable. A painter can only look in one direction, but a writer can look 360 degrees if he wants to, so the issue of framing — of what to put in and what to leave out — is a different kind of question for a writer. I've become more and more preoccupied with the issue of economy in writing, trying to leave out everything that isn't absolutely necessary, and maybe I've gotten better at it over the years. I've sometimes thought that if I could get enough written, I could cut it until it was good. I don't know if that's true or not.

**BG:** That sounds sort of like what Michelangelo would say about how he would look at the block of marble and see what he was going to cut away.

**Berry:** Cut away everything that doesn't look like a statue. For a writer, that's the issue of details, of significance, of how much dialogue is necessary. I think that's where realism can mislead you. You can put in a lot of stuff that is perfectly realistic and completely insignificant at the same time.