Spring 1996

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Interview with Wendell Berry

Vince Pennington

In December of 1991 I had the privilege of spending most of a Sunday afternoon on Wendell Berry's farm, along the Kentucky River in Henry County. I found Mr. Berry just as a previous interviewer, Fenton Johnson, had: sitting beside the wood stove in his living room dressed in work clothes and a worn pair of sock-moccasins.

For an hour and a half, we discussed a range of issues but focused on Berry's vision of the "historical community" (a small, agrarian community whose families have lived, worked, suffered and celebrated together on the same land, generation after generation). An English professor, Mr. Berry took great interest in my academic experiences at Dartmouth College; his fondness for young people was obvious. He also talked about London, Florence and New York City—where he lived as a young man for two years and which he still finds "exhilarating"—with as much excitement as he did about farming communities like his own Port Royal.

After finishing the interview that follows, Mr. Berry and I spent another hour doing chores on his 125 acre farm. We examined a hillside that is recovering from misuse during the early part of this century, and we fed his draft horses, Nick and Doc. We even devoted a few minutes to training his sheep dog. Mr. Berry, clearly in his element, mentioned that training an animal to work for you is one of the great pleasures of life. Occasionally, he would return to a question I had posed inside his house and would add to his answer or make it more precise.

The following interview is a partial record of our talk.

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VP: If the past is to serve as our ethical guide, as Aeneas tells his son it must, what, do you believe, are the ethical responsibilities of the grandfather?

WB: Well, where else would you look? You can't look to the future for instruction; there's nothing there. The only place we get
anything from is the past. We get our language from the past; we get the knowledge of what works and what hasn’t worked only from the past. So if you’re thinking about practical issues of how you settle in a place, how you establish a human community in a place, and bring about some kind of preserving relationship with that place, the members of the community would have to remember the past. They would have to remember what worked and didn’t work in a given place. And then they would have to have an appropriate affection for the dead. By “appropriate” I mean they would have judgments to make and evaluations to make. They would have to be critics. But they would have to care about the people who preceded them.

VP: I wonder whether that looking to the past is somehow a gender-specific endeavor. Richard King’s A Southern Renaissance claims that the grandfather-father-son relationship is central to Southern Literature. Do you think that in a community’s “remembering” the grandfather plays a different role than the grandmother?

WB: I certainly learned from my grandfathers, but many of the things I know I learned from my grandmothers. Now that may just be a family accident: my grandmothers both lived with their mothers-in-law, so they heard a lot of family stories. I was the kind of little child who liked to listen, so a lot of things I know came from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law to grandson. Mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers are apt to remember different things. It depends on how the occupational lineages are set up. I think that a woman in a community would be tremendously enriched by what she learned from her mother and grandmother about childraising, for instance. If the housewifely business runs down the female lineage, then that’s the way that would pass. If it’s a farming community, another kind of knowledge would come down the male line, although in this country fieldwork was never exclusively done by men. Women worked too. I know that people have to remember. How it will be in the future, I don’t know. But you can’t imagine a community maturing until there are at least three generations native to it. The connection between grandchildren and grandparents is vital.
VP: How is that relationship different from the relationship between children and parents?

WB: Relationships between children and parents are more anxious. By the time you’re a grandparent, you’re a little more mellow. You know how wide the margins are around bringing up a child. You know how much room there is to make mistakes. And if you’re a grandparent, you’re not with the child all the time. Older grandparents have more time, time to sit around and tell things that parents often don’t have time to tell. But the important thing to me is that this sort of handed down knowledge is *practically* necessary. If you don’t remember the history of fields, for instance, you’re going to make the same mistakes over and over again, and they’re going to be costly mistakes. If people ever did stay settled long enough—which we haven’t done in Kentucky, and we’re worse off now than we were a generation ago—but if we ever did stay settled long enough to learn the best ways of land use, the best ways of forestry, for instance, we could establish a preserving forest economy. That would depend on memory. We would have to have people learning young, and I think that people don’t understand how important it is to learn young. We know that it is important to teach musicians from very young. But my experience has been that you’ve got to teach farmers from very young. People who do hand labor, who work with materials, have to have a kind of physical sympathy with the materials that they’re using and the motions of the work and the tools, and so forth. And that comes hard late in life. It has to be learned before the child realizes that he or she is learning.

VP: In *The Memory of Old Jack* the community seems to have only a tenuous grasp of its history. Does that explain the presence of surrogate grandfathers and male figures in the novel such as Ben Feltner, who in some ways operates as a father figure for Jack? Is the substitution of these men a last-ditch attempt to preserve the community’s awareness of its history?

WB: It’s pretty clear that I’m aware in writing my books that the family is not a large enough vehicle for passing these things down. When it works it works, but it may not work, and you may lose parents or grandparents. In that case you’ve got to have other people who can step in and do the job. In my own life the influence
of parents and grandparents has come to me from people outside the family who were influenced by my parents and grandparents. Being a child in a somewhat established community is like being in a roomful of mirrors: things are reflected back toward you from many different directions. You can learn about your parents by seeing what your parents have meant to other people, for instance, and the same for your grandparents. And there are certain things about your parents that you won’t learn from them, that other people will tell you. So it would be extremely difficult to mark the real lineages of a person’s consciousness. You sit down and try to think, by the time you’re my age, who’s responsible for the making of your mind, and you face a bewilderment of influences that have been important to you.

VP: And thus the importance of the community.

WB: That’s right. The community is the vessel of inheritance. Families die out, families come and go, parents and grandparents die, people are orphaned. There are too many bad possibilities. But the community is an adequate vessel.

VP: At one point in *The Memory of Old Jack* a man enters the general store and speaks to Jack. The narrator tells us that Jack cannot remember the man’s name although Jack “has known him for five generations, from his grandfathers to his grandsons.” Do you think that our society entirely denies this possibility: that a person must be known in relation to his ancestors and descendants? Or do you see any indications that, as a society, we are once again beginning to understand and appreciate these relationships?

WB: As a society we’re not. As a society we’re disintegrating, we’re destroying those relationships. That doesn’t mean there aren’t individuals and families in the society who understand the relationships and value them and try to preserve them; but the society proceeds on a crude, a very crude, understanding of what goes into the making of a human being. This society proceeds on the assumption that a child is a kind of bottle and that people fill that child up with various ingredients, and that it’s all done consciously. It isn’t all done consciously. Some of it is, but if we were operating strictly according to the capacities of consciousness, we wouldn’t amount to very much. There’s much more to it than
that. We just don’t know how to live, as a people, with good fortune or misfortune or blessedness or chance. We don’t know how to deal with mystery; we don’t know how to deal with ignorance. All we want to do is draw a little circle around what we are conscious of and try to control that—and, of course, the results are disastrous.

VP: We limit ourselves to just what we can control.

WB: Well, we can control up to a point, but we are blind to the effects of our control. So you can control an atom, within limits, or you can control a coal-fired power plant, within limits, but then the influence of that thing enters the world at large. We’re not in control of it anymore. We don’t even understand what the effects are anymore. It’s like the Gulf War, which was supposed to be an exercise in conscious control, and the results of it have been haywire from the beginning.

VP: That was how the War was advertised, as being a controlled experiment.

WB: That was how it was advertised, and, you see, the advertisement, the public relations part of it, ought to give you a kind of index of what our society is all about: it thinks that pretense is an adequate substitute for reality.

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VP: You’re often compared to the Southern Agrarians for obvious reasons, but I wonder how similar you actually are to that group. Your novels, at least, portray the Port William community in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and one can’t help but get the feeling that—despite the community’s problems—it still represents a cultural ideal. The Southern Agrarians, on the other hand, reach back to the “Old South” for their vision of the good life, something you never do. Do you consider this a major difference between the Southern Agrarians and yourself?

WB: I’ve never really thought of myself as a Southerner in a doctrinaire way. And I think one difference between the Southern Agrarians and me is that I’m much more local than they were. My work comes out of the study of one little place, really just a few
square miles. In some senses, it comes out of the study of just a few hundred acres. The Southern Agrarians were approaching the issue of Agrarianism in a more general way; they were arguing Agrarianism as a policy more than as a practice. But I have obvious debts to them. I read *I'll Take My Stand* when I was a student, and I still often go back to it and to Allen Tate’s essays about the South and about regionalism. To me, that’s an unfinished agenda.

VP: These Agrarians espoused a fairly convincing argument for an agrarian way of life, but I don’t get the impression that they particularly lived it.

WB: Well, you see, they saw it as a system of values, as a system of political choices. But it all has to rest on practice. If you’re going to be an agrarian, you finally have to ask how you farm, how you use land, how you maintain a rural community. These are all practical questions, and I really don’t think the Southern Agrarians ever got to such questions.

VP: John Crowe Ransom writes that one major problem with our concept of “Progress” is that it “never defines its ultimate objective, thrusts its victims at once into an infinite series.” So if you’re thinking about having a community that is aware of its history, a cohesive community, what would be its goals or ideals?

WB: The standard is the health of the community, but you have to have a comprehensive enough idea of community. The community is not just the human bunch that has established itself in a place. It is not just the human neighborhood. It includes everything that’s there. And if the community is going to be a healthy community and hope to endure for any length of time, everything that’s there has to be healthy. So that’s the standard.

VP: Don’t you think, then, that many contemporary problems of the human community, such as divorce and the disintegration of the family, are very similar to or related to problems in the larger community, such as pollution?

WB: If all the other relationships disintegrate, then the human relationships finally disintegrate. So, you see, you can think of divorce as a kind of principle that we’re operating on here in this society: things that ought to be together are separated, or permitted
to be separated. We tend to think—the people in Washington, for instance, the people in state houses, in capitals—that there can be a distinction between people and the air they breathe, for instance, or people and the food they eat, or people and the water they drink. And obviously this is an absurd distinction: there is no line that you can draw between people and the elements they depend on. That’s why this term “environment” is so bothersome to me. “Environment” is based on that dualism, the idea that you can separate the human interests from the interests of everything else. You cannot do it. We eat the environment. It passes through our bodies every day, it passes in and out our bodies. There is no distinction between ourselves and the so-called environment. What we live in and from and with doesn’t surround us—it’s part of us. We’re of it, and it’s of us, and the relationship is unspeakably intimate.

VP: In your work one central aspect of a couple’s marriage is their mutual relationship with the land they live on. Does this mean that a couple must only share and enact a similar attitude toward the land—or does it suggest that the man and woman ought to have grown up in the same region?

WB: Well, I married a woman who was born in Berkeley, California. I think you have to be practical about these issues. The first thing that I want to do is go to see what the practical issues are. It seems to me that if you are going to be practical, a marriage is in many ways an economic relationship, or it ought to be. In other words, if a family is not held together by a family or household economy, then there really isn’t any reason for the family to stay together. The same way with a marriage. People who love each other need to have something they can do for each other, and it needs to be something necessary, not something frivolous. You can’t carry out a relationship on the basis of Christmas and anniversary and birthday presents. It won’t work. You have to be doing something that you need help with, and your wife needs to be doing something that she needs help with. You do needful, useful things for each other, and that seems to me to be the way that the union is made. You’re not in control of a union that’s made partly as an economy, as a domestic economy. You’re being shaped by it, you’re not shaping it. You’re being made into a partner by your partner’s needs and the things that you’re required to do to help. Our society assumes that a profound human connection can
be made on the basis of psychology, which somebody is going to dope out, and I don’t believe it. Love is not just a feeling; it’s a practice, something you practice whether you feel like it or not. If you have a relationship with anybody—a friend, a family member, a spouse—you have undertaken by the terms of that relationship to do things for those people, and you do them whether you feel like it or not. If you don’t, it’s useless. You’re not always going to feel like it. This is what you learn as soon as you become a farmer, for instance. Once you get into a relationship with even so much as a vegetable garden, you realize that you have to do the work whether you want to or not. You may have got into it because of love, but there are going to be days when you are sick and you’re going to have to do your work anyhow. With animals, the work is even more inescapable. There’s no way out if you have a milk cow, no reprieve. A cow doesn’t know that you’re sick. She doesn’t say, “Well, since you’re sick I just won’t make any milk.” She makes the milk, and you’ve got to go get it.

VP: In *The Unsettling of America* you claim that the disintegration of marriage completes the disintegration of community. Might this be equally true the other way around? Might the disintegration spread from the family outward?

WB: You could argue it the other way, and I can kind of see how you could do it. But marriage happens because of the community. In our rather superficial approach to the issue, we think marriage happens because people fall in love. It doesn’t happen because people fall in love. It happens because the community steps forward and asks us, if we love each other, to be responsible, to take responsibility—not just to each other, but to the community. In marrying, a young couple marries the community, saying, “We will keep our vows to each other, not just because we love each other, but out of respect for the community.” So, to me the community is the vessel in which marriage is made. The expectation of the community surrounds a marriage with a kind of pressure, like the atmospheric pressure that balances the internal pressure of our bodies. One thing that marriages do by nature is generate pressure, and if you remove the community the marriage naturally blows up.

VP: Several times you have depicted a hierarchical view of society using concentric circles. I’ve wondered whether that model is at all
similar to the Great Chain of Being. One difference between the two models, I think, is that a given circle in a series of concentric circles affects both the circles inside and outside it, whereas with the Chain of Being only everything below a given point is affected by a given incident.

WB: I’m no authority on the Great Chain of Being even though I wrote at some length about it once in an essay called “Poetry and Place.” Humans, at least, have responsibilities that go above and below. We’re supposed to be humble and reverent toward the things that are above us and magnanimous to those things that are below us. Any representation of the real order is going to oversimplify it. The Chain of Being is an oversimplification; so are those concentric circles that I drew. All you’re doing is representing graphically some aspects of the relationship. You’re drawing out what you understand. It’s invariably more complex than that.

VP: You frequently use the metaphor of marriage to describe the relationships between the various circles. How could you define those connections in religious terms?

WB: Of course the Chain of Being is a religious idea: it goes up to the throne of God. There are other ways to look at it, and they probably aren’t diagrammable. The 104th Psalm says, “Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created.” And there’s a verse in Job that says that if God “gather unto himself his spirit and breath; all flesh shall perish together, and man shall return again unto dust.” And Genesis says that we are living souls made of dust and God’s breath. So if everything participates, as those passages say, in the being of God, there really isn’t any diagram that’s adequate. According to that, each thing lives to the extent that it participates in God’s life. That’s an idea that makes all the diagrams crude.

VP: What do you think are the shared characteristics of all these types of marriages: between husband and wife, farmer and field, an individual and his community?

WB: Well, marriage is something that in the first place is lived out, acted out. It’s a practical connection between man and woman. A practical agreement, making its vows and promises. It’s a contract. And, as I said, by implication it’s a contract with the human
neighborhood. From then on, when you talk of marriage of other things, you’re speaking metaphorically. But the idea does have metaphoric power and so the relationship between a man and a woman is a very proper and instructive metaphor for anything else that a person keeps faith with or attempts to live in any kind of ultimate loyalty to.

VP: Why do you think that, as a society, we have such a hard time making these lifelong, or even short-term, commitments and then living them out?

WB: One large reason is that the educational system is geared to individual careers. In general, the educational system doesn’t educate people to be members of communities. The educational system is not saying we must teach these people what they must be loyal to, or how to be loyal to the things they want to be loyal to. There is no loyalty. How could you be loyal to a corporation, for instance, that you know will fire you as soon as you become dispensable?

VP: Is that loyalty not taught because, from an industrial or career-oriented point of view, it is limiting? To teach a person loyalty to his community to some extent restricts the “career track.”

WB: Yeah, the idea of community loyalty removes the whole glamour of ambition from education, and it makes education a desperate undertaking. If you’re trying to teach people to maintain the indispensable things of human culture, you know immediately that it’s a desperate business. You’ve got to teach like fury. Most teachers now don’t want to teach very hard. So they learn to teach literature, for instance, as if it were simply a matter of curiosity—what people thought in other, less enlightened historical periods.

VP: In The Wild Birds Wheeler Catlett is referred to as the “preserver and defender of the dead.” You write of him concerning the inheritance of the Coulter farm: “How, thinking of his own children and grandchildren, could he not insist on an orderly passage of these frail human parcels through time?” Now, it’s easy enough here to see how Wheeler tries to maneuver to protect the farm, but in general how does Wheeler
or anybody go about promoting an “orderly passage of these frail human parcels through time?”

WB: There are two commitments involved in that story. That story is almost a controversy between the spirit and the letter, love and the law. Burley knows that the inheritance is wayward, as he says, that it comes down wanderingly. Wheeler, as a lawyer, is a man of order. He’s trying to see that it does come down in an orderly way. Burley says that it doesn’t, and it can’t, and therefore you have to do the best you can, for one thing. For another thing, finally, Burley says we have to forgive each other. That’s all. The two points of view are necessary. I think that Wheeler’s argument is valid: you have to try for order. Burley’s argument is valid: as far as human order is concerned, it’s a failure. It doesn’t work, what we consciously want; other things happen. Burley is really, in a profound way, Wheeler’s teacher in that story. He says, “The way we are, we are members of each other. . . . The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t.” And then he says that they’ve got to forgive each other.

VP: I could be wrong, but I think I remember your saying somewhere that Wheeler had to leave his way of life to protect it. But it doesn’t seem to me that Wheeler has left his way of life, although he often wishes that he were on his farm rather than in his law office. Wheeler strikes me as being a terribly important character because, reading your work, one sometimes wonders whether one can be a good person without being a farmer. Wheeler is a good man.

WB: Yeah, and Wheeler is conscious of the losses, and he has a political consciousness. And I think he’s very important. I don’t remember where it says that, Vince, but I’m not a very good expert on my own work.

VP: Is there much autobiographical material in The Wild Birds? I know, for instance, that, as lawyers, both your father and brother have represented agrarian interests.

WB: I return over and over and over again to the question of what is the proper relation between imagination and reality. In one sense it’s true to say that there are autobiographical things, that things get
into my stories that really happened. On the other hand, you imagine stories because you know that reality never gives you a complete story. You never know enough and so you imagine, and once you give yourself over to imagination it’s a different story. In a sense, some things in my stories have happened before; in another sense, they never happened at all until I wrote them down: what’s written is something else. The story of “The Wild Birds” never really happened, so far as I know.

VP: But it would be impossible, wouldn’t it, to separate entirely the events of your life from some of the episodes in your stories? These events made you the person you are, and you made the stories what they are.

WB: If I hadn’t known my father I would have never written about Wheeler. There’s no real life counterpart to Burley Coulter, though.

VP: A person often hears that it is good to go away from home to learn about home, and I’ve thought about that a lot since going away to college. But you’ve written that you learned far more about Kentucky when you returned than while you were away. What is the difference between what you learned about Kentucky while you were away and what you learned upon your return?

WB: Well, when you’re away you’re going to generalize, almost inevitably, and there’s nothing to measure your memories against. As a child growing up you do the same thing, you generalize. You don’t pay conscious attention to anything. You know it so well, you don’t pay any attention to it. As a child your sense of things is subordinate to your parents’ sense of things, to your elders’ sense of things. What happened to me when I came back in 1964 was that I just suddenly saw the country as if for the first time. I saw it in detail. I saw that there was just more here than I had ever dreamed there was, and I really liked it. It has been really important to me to do my work right in the presence of what I’ve been writing about. That has spared me the illusion, for instance, that a work of imagination could be an adequate substitute for the world. It isn’t. What’s here is immeasurably more complicated and immeasurably dearer, finally, than what I’ve managed to write down. And also it’s important for somebody who

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writes about agriculture to be involved with it. I probably wouldn’t have written about agriculture if I hadn’t come home. Being here has been a necessary discipline and corrective throughout all that because farming is easy to sentimentalize. We’ve got a tradition for the sentimentalization of farmers and we’ve got another tradition—these always go together when you’re dealing with oppressed people—for the denigration of farmers. They exist side by side, and they’re very dangerous to somebody who has farming as a subject. So it has been a godsend that I’ve had farmers right in front of me all my life, and that I have, in a small way, been a farmer. I don’t think that I’ve sentimentalized. There is a sense in which my work idealizes certain relationships. I’ve tried to ask myself sometimes, not what the actual community that I know is like, but what it would be like if people were to keep fully conscious of, say, the worth and obligation of their friendships to each other. That’s what I was doing in that long story, “The Wild Birds.” Suppose I have an argument between two people who know very well that they love each other, and that they’re not going to do anything but love each other if they can help it. That kind of problem in an imagined story is going to press you a little toward idealization. The last thing I was worried about there was what two actual people would actually say to each other.

VP: The “Mad Farmer” encourages us to “Be joyful / though you have considered all the facts.” Do you often find that hard to do?

WB: Sure. But it’s an obligation. What a horrible thing if you gave up on joy just because of facts. Joy is possible, you see, and it is possible in astonishing circumstances sometimes, astonishingly bad circumstances. So to give up on joy is really to give up on life. You never know when joy is going to hit. People have been joyful in the bitterest of circumstances. See, we think we can plan joy, get all the terms and circumstances together—and we’re terribly disappointed. It doesn’t happen that way. That’s why people are in such trouble now, I think. People are terribly disappointed. It seems to me that most people realize in their career as teenagers that when they try to plan the most wonderful party that they’ve ever had, it turns out to be a bust; and sometimes parties happen because people just happen to be together, and they have a marvelous time. It’s a mystery.
VP: Many people are disappointed and frustrated when joy doesn’t come according to the terms they anticipated, but never acknowledge the joy of pleasant surprises.

WB: That’s right, and they’re just unwilling to live loose enough to take it when it comes. My friend Wes Jackson has a friend who argues, really very well, that we must not pursue happiness. I guess his language comes from the Declaration, and I don’t think he was quarreling with the political principle. But he says if you pursue happiness, you just never find it. It just doesn’t happen. I’ve tried to write about this a time or two. Some of the best parties I’ve ever been to have taken place when we were at work in tobacco barns or tobacco patches in miserable conditions, and all of a sudden everybody gets a big joke going, and everybody is laughing and happy right in the midst of what the modern world would consider the most miserable conditions: sweaty, hot, no air conditioning, no rest, everybody tired and smelling bad. So it happens.

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WB: I’ve got old enough that a lot of people have died who have meant a lot to me. You think, “Well, pay attention to these old people and get them to tell you everything they know,” and one of these days they’re dead, and you think, “Why didn’t I ask?”

VP: You always want their opinion.

WB: That’s right. But one of the mysteries of community life, I think, is that you don’t get the essential learning by anybody’s intention. If you stay around, things turn up in conversation. I’ve learned things about my family, things that I never would have had sense enough to ask about, simply because I was on hand when people were talking. For instance, I learned that my mother’s grandfather used to carry a pocketful of locust seeds, and every time he passed a damaged spot or a washed spot on his land he would throw down a few seeds. You can work your way to an ethic, a whole pattern of insights that he’d had, from that, and it’s very important for me to know. The organizations of learning assume that you can give somebody a tape recorder and they can dash out in the country and talk to all the old people and get the vital stuff. They don’t know the questions to ask. Mary Austin said, “You must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions.” You don’t make the occasions, you see—that’s her point. The occasions come.