

2009

# Wendell Berry and the politics of homecoming: place, memory and time in Jayber Crow

Drew Kennedy Thompson

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, dthom35@lsu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses)



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Thompson, Drew Kennedy, "Wendell Berry and the politics of homecoming: place, memory and time in Jayber Crow" (2009). *LSU Master's Theses*. 3862.

[https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool\\_theses/3862](https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3862)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [gradetd@lsu.edu](mailto:gradetd@lsu.edu).

WENDELL BERRY AND THE POLITICS OF HOMECOMING:  
PLACE, MEMORY AND TIME IN *JAYBER CROW*

A Thesis  
Submitted to The Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Political Science

by  
Drew Kennedy Thompson  
B.A., Murray State University, 2004  
August 2009

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my grandparents; in memory of Keith and Jean Smith Kennedy, and in honor of David and Ann White Thompson, and also to the memory of Elwood and Lula Grogan White, my great-grandparents. All of them were born into the agrarian way of life, and it is through their stories that I am able to envision Port William so clearly. Without them—their memories and their very lives—I would have had no idea of my place, my home in the world. They have been with me, close to hand and heart, along every step of this journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Like any prolonged research project, writing a thesis comes to be a process of self-discovery right along with the intellectual matters it addresses. While I already had something of an idea of this prior to beginning this particular project, I could never have foreseen the extent to which my journey into Wendell Berry's vision of community would become an exploration of my own self-understanding. During these two years, situated some five hundred miles and more downriver from my own native place, the town of Murray in Calloway County, Kentucky, I have come to a much deeper understanding and appreciation of my origins. This assurance has nourished and sustained me in a way nothing else could have. And so for me, like Berry's Hannah Coulter, this thesis has become "my story, my giving of thanks."

Along the way, a number of people have been kind enough to offer me their assistance and support. Lisa Polivick, a former teacher and current friend, was kind enough to edit a very rough early draft. Amy Ladley, a current friend and former classmate, offered comments and encouragement throughout this process that kept the boat afloat. The Department of Political Science and the Graduate Committee at LSU have been generous with funding throughout my master's study. Dr. Cecil Eubanks, my advisor, has provided good ideas and incisive criticism throughout this project. I have no doubt that I, as a student, and this thesis, have benefitted immeasurably under his supervision. Friends and relatives too numerous to mention here by name, both at home and in Baton Rouge, have kept me grounded and boosted my spirits. Finally, my parents, Tony and Krista Thompson, and my sister, Chelsea, have been my guiding lights and lifeline my entire life, but especially over the past three years. To them, I am grateful beyond words.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	v
CHAPTER	
1 FOUNDATIONS .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	7
A Brief Introduction to Port William .....	17
<i>Jayber Crow</i> : A Philosophical Overview .....	22
2 NATIVITY .....	37
Introduction .....	37
Rituals of Domesticity .....	42
Place: An Agrarian Vision of Community .....	44
Membership .....	51
Conclusion .....	55
3 ESTRANGEMENT .....	58
Introduction .....	58
Dismemberment .....	60
Modernity: “The War” and “The Economy” .....	69
Conclusion .....	75
4 RESTORATION .....	78
Introduction .....	78
Memory and Conversion .....	83
An Alternate Conceptualization of Time .....	92
Conclusion .....	102
5 CONCLUSION .....	106
Political Implications .....	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	120
VITA .....	122

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the “politics of homecoming” appearing in author Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*. The novel portrays the community of a small rural town, as narrated through the autobiography of its bachelor barber. The life-story of Jayber Crow is a journey of homecoming, progressing through three stages of nativity, estrangement, and restoration. These phases correspond and interact with philosophical motifs that can be traced throughout Berry’s corpus, but reaching their fullest expression in *Jayber Crow*. “Place” is the first motif, and facilitates a discussion of Berry’s contemporary agrarian vision of community. “Memory,” the second motif, becomes effective during the self’s estrangement, and enables its return to authentic community. Memory is discussed in the context of Berry’s critique of modernity. The final motif, “Time,” is important for its implications for membership, which is Berry’s ideal of the authentic community. This concept of membership appears throughout the essay, having both practical political, as well as metaphysical aspects important to the discussion. Ultimately, membership informs all political associations, as well as pointing to the proper relationship between man and creation. In this light, Berry’s politics of homecoming offers unique and bold insights into the nature and purpose of human society. His political vision is directed toward the restoration of health to the human soul, the reunification of authentic communities, and ultimately, the reconciliation of all mankind to the divine order of creation.

## CHAPTER 1. FOUNDATIONS

### Introduction

This thesis explores the writing of American author Wendell Berry. Berry, born in 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, has risen to prominence for both the quality and breadth of his literary output. In its entirety, Berry's corpus consists of at least twenty-five books (or chapbooks) of poems, sixteen volumes of essays, and eleven novels and short story collections. His publishing career now approaching the fifty-year mark, Berry has firmly established himself as a persistent and singular voice in American letters.

Berry writes in the tradition of agrarianism, a philosophic and literary movement concerned with the relationship between society and agriculture. For Berry, the regional perspective, emphasizing place as a necessary component of authentic culture, social order and personal obligation, draws his life *as well* as his work into contrast with some of the other figures of the agrarian tradition. Regarding the Vanderbilt Agrarians, whose *Southern Manifesto* is often cited as a landmark work in promoting agrarian values (along with apology for and celebration of the old southern way of life), Berry has been critical. Observing that the majority of their literary production was conducted in absentia, Berry is resistant to being unqualifiedly grouped among the Vanderbilt contingent.<sup>1</sup>

Berry's philosophic agrarianism differs because it refuses to restrict itself to mere literary concerns but provides the basis for a practical mode of living. Berry's preference for the term "series" over "succession" acknowledges his philosophical heritage with the agrarian movement

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wendell Berry, "A Practical Harmony," published in the collection, *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), p. 105. (Also, Allan Carson, "Wendell Berry and the Twentieth-Century Agrarian "Series," from *Life and Work*, 2007).

championed by Penn Warren, Tate and Ransom, but does not claim its legacy.<sup>2</sup> For Berry, fidelity to one's native place and people supersedes any imperative to relocate to more intellectually hospitable or gratifying environs. Moreover, the spirit of philosophical agrarianism advocated in *I'll Take My Stand* differs markedly from Berry's. Articulating his own view, Berry writes:

I've never 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 much more general way; they were arguing Agrarianism as a policy more than a practice. . . . They saw it [Agrarianism] 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 the 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.<sup>3</sup>

Berry, a farmer himself, finds inspiration in the natural cycles of fertility and renewal. Perhaps more importantly, his writing explores the way these cycles have continually shaped and reshaped human understanding of food, of labor, and above all, of the metaphysical binding of Creation. He has recently stated, "Hovering over nearly everything I have written is the question of how a human economy might be conducted with reverence, and therefore with due respect and kindness toward everything involved. This, if it ever happens, will be the maturation of American culture."<sup>4</sup>

Berry's writing carries a message of necessity and praxis. In keeping with his agrarian heritage, Berry is fearful of a widening distance between modern society and creation that is

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Vince Pennington, 1991. Published in *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 41. Cf, *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand, The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (Harper & Brothers. 1930., 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, "Imagination in Place" from *The Way of Ignorance*, (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker &Hoard, 2005), p. 50.

endemic to the industrial economy. The consequences of this rift, Berry argues, are dangerously misunderstood. He warns us that our society fails to see the interconnectedness between our selves and the ways and means of our subsistence. Our heedless overuse of natural resources mirrors our destructive and frequently bloody history, and both are symptomatic of a profound spiritual amnesia perpetuated by the disintegration of community life on the local scale. Accordingly, Berry's social insights are frequently expressed in unexpected terms. He draws parallels between religion and ecology, personal morality and public land use, the commoditization of energy and gender inequality; all illustrate how modern society's lack of a holistic vision of health has inaugurated an era of unprecedented waste and destruction. In his landmark essay, "The Unsettling of America," Berry's holistic vision emerges:

The first casualties of the exploitive revolution are character and community. When those fundamental integrities are devalued and broken, then perhaps it is inevitable that food will be looked upon as a weapon, just as it is inevitable that the earth will be looked upon as fuel and people as numbers or machines. But character and community—that is, culture in the broadest, richest sense—constitute, just as much as nature, the source of food. Neither nature nor people alone can produce human sustenance, but only the two together, culturally wedded.<sup>5</sup>

Berry offers up a lament for the changes in the political and economic orders of the world that have undeniably moved society from a way of life that promotes neighborliness, care and forbearance, to one that does not. In Berry's view, the entrenched structure of the current order has so divided man against and within himself that any capacity of humans to see beyond the current horizon is severely limited. The loss of civic and individual, of public and private character is the reason for so much of the absurdity Berry perceives in contemporary thought and behavior. It is also the reason that man seems so unable to do anything to correct it.

---

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Unsettling of America" from *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 40-41.

In his portrayal of the disintegration of family and community life in rural America, Berry speaks to an audience broader than exclusively those who have experienced it firsthand. For many, Berry's writing taps into a common anxiety that is best described as an estrangement of the self from the world around it, creating a profound sense of longing for a more authentic culture. This "crisis of modernity" is a political philosophical trope and a well-established theme in the literature of the academy. The intentional destruction of the land and its productive capacity can only be seen as the expression of a disordered and disconsolate soul in any human. Berry often speaks of a "destructive schism" between body and soul in the American mentality. This is often in response to dogmatic Protestant religion which places the full importance of life on gaining eschatological fulfillment in the world to come.

Considering Berry's writing within the context of political theory or political philosophy presents something of a challenge because Berry is avowedly not a political writer. Indeed, for all of his insight into the extent of a cultural and ecological crisis, he seems to have little or no hope of a practical political solution. "It is not from ourselves," he writes, "that we will learn to be better than we are."<sup>6</sup> And yet, after a thorough consideration of his entire corpus, it becomes impossible to mistake the political philosophical import. Fundamentally, Berry's grand undertaking is to point us toward a "deathlier knowledge"—a knowledge that we must wake up to the diminutive effects of our attempt to conquer nature through efforts to create an industrialized economic utopia, symptomatic of the "grace-denying character of our own striving."<sup>7</sup> Berry also call us to acknowledge the "fittingness of death in the process of life."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill" from *The Art of the Commonplace*, Ed. and Introduced. Norman Wirzba. (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, "Introduction" from *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. xv.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

For this reason, Berry's agrarian vision is particularly fertile for political inquiry. To accomplish this, however, some means of focusing in on his corpus is needed.

Berry speaks through three distinct literary "voices," the voice of the essayist, the poet, and the novelist. And while he deftly moves between them, each voice is distinct. In his essays, Berry speaks both imaginatively and critically to mostly practical topics. And though he is always deeply personal in his approach to the essay, he tends to reserve his deeper introspection for his verse. In these two formats, Berry speaks directly to his audience; the source of the idea is always bound to the voice of Berry as author. Because of this, reading Berry widely is bound to engender a sense of familiarity with the author and his vision that are inseparable.

The medium of fiction allows Berry to present his ideas and let them speak most independently. The experiences for Berry's characters of the loss of authentic community and culture, *dis-placement*, *dis-memberment*, and then, for some, the accompanying restoration, could never be articulated so fully or expressively outside of the fictional medium. Berry's prosaic style interweaves a highly particular regional setting with poetic intimations, enabling a more universalized expression of philosophy. Only here, in his fiction, do the politics of homecoming emerge: the recovery of a lost or damaged self, enabled by the recognition of place, through the use of memory which conjoins the experience of time in the temporal sphere to eternity. The personal effects of this phenomenon of the self have political analogs that are depicted in the life of the community itself and in the relationship between the two. Thus Berry portrays a philosophical view of the self that is inherently *political* as well as agricultural and ecological.

The novel *Jayber Crow* has been selected for focus because it contains the fullest expression of Berry's philosophy found in a single work. Philosophically, it is Berry's

paradigmatic work, if not his masterpiece. In *Jayber Crow*, Berry presents the life-story of an outsider who becomes a member of the community in Berry's fictional "Port William, Kentucky." Jayber Crow, the character, speaking to the reader directly, describes how the movements of his life took him away from his home and set him wandering in the world, only to bring him back to his origins. As the bachelor barber in Port William, Jayber lives on the margin of its society, giving him a unique vantage-point from which to narrate. The novel is divided into three parts and is narrated from a fixed position in the temporal present, looking backward.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the recounting of Jayber's life, the reader can perceive a series of departures and returns, in the physical as well as the interior life of the character. Just as Jayber makes a literal journey home, his consciousness of self, revealed mimetically, makes corresponding movements. Accordingly, this thesis, in tracing out a three-stage journey of homecoming, attaches to each stage a corresponding philosophical concept for illustration. If Nativity, Estrangement and Restoration are the literal movements of homecoming, Place, Memory and Time are attending concepts which inform them.

The title of this thesis, the phrase "politics of homecoming," invokes a concept that emerged over the course of this research project. Berry's essential philosophy, the guiding impulse of his personal life as well as the philosophical underpinning of all his writing is the human necessity of returning home. The purpose of this essay, then, is to consider a particular journey of homecoming in Berry's fiction and identify within it themes of political significance.

*Jayber Crow* most clearly depicts this political vision of homecoming. Part I of the novel articulates a three-stage journey of homecoming which is then elaborated and expanded in the two subsequent sections. This interpretation forms the organizational backbone of this thesis,

---

<sup>9</sup> Berry's uses the mimetic layering of narratives to inform the larger philosophical program in the novel.

which is evidenced in the subsequent chapter titles of “Nativity,” “Estrangement,” and “Restoration.” Thus framed, the present inquiry fits into to a body of political and literary inquiry that engages Berry’s writing for themes related to the study of political philosophy.

### **Literature Review**

The secondary literature on Berry generally comes from English literature, political philosophy, and Christian theological circles. Scholars of American letters are drawn toward Berry as an agrarian or conservationist writer and poet, making comparisons between his work and that of contemporaneous writers Gary Snyder, Ken Kesey, or more canonical perspectives such as Thoreau. As a poet, Berry is often placed against the backdrop of the metaphysical and pastoral traditions, though there is also a strongly didactic strain noted in his work.<sup>10</sup>

Theologians are drawn to Berry for his sacramental vision of man and nature, since Berry often uses biblical allusion to frame his arguments for stewardship, fidelity and reverence.

Political scholars have approached Berry with a number of different theoretical lenses. The comparison most easily drawn, perhaps, is between Berry and the Jeffersonian ideal of a secure and enduring yeomanry at the heart of American culture. Berry’s agrarianism resonates this sentiment and then pushes beyond it to explore not only the possibilities of reinstituting the yeoman farmer in contemporary society, but also (and more poignantly) illustrates the consequences, both now and to come, for the absence of people on the land. Berry’s essays, explicitly directed toward social and political topics, point toward a strain of conservatism that has largely been abandoned in contemporary practice. The scholarship devoted to Berry centers around his critique of modernity and frequently attempts to gird it with familiar voices from the canon. The literature review follows a basic progression from the broadest treatments of Berry’s

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lionel Basney "Five Notes on the Didactic Tradition, in Praise of Wendell Berry" in Paul Merchant, editor. *Wendell Berry* (American Authors Series. Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence, 1991). p. 174-183.

work, beginning with Berry and the entire agrarian tradition, and moving to more acute and nuanced considerations of points germane to the politics of homecoming.

Political Theorist, Kimberly K. Smith's *Uncommon Grace: Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition* attempts to place Berry's rather novel approach to agrarianism into wider streams of political discourse. Smith offers a broad and thorough introduction to Berry by way of a weighty discussion of agrarianism, populism, and environmentalism in one of the few book-length commentaries on Berry's work. Here we find an exploration of numerous voices within the succession: Thomas Jefferson, John Taylor of Caroline, Thomas Malthus, The Twelve Southerners, and others.

Of particular interest to this study are Smith's fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters. In these, Smith explores the persistent charge of a thinly veiled utopianism latent in Berry's and in fact all agrarian thought. Smith defends Berry from this criticism. Drawing on Anscombe's postulation of character, Smith's approach dictates that we should "investigate how culture shapes our moral characters."<sup>11</sup> Placing Berry in the tradition of "virtue ethics," Smith's formula for interpreting Berry's novels is instructive. She writes:

I suggest we read Berry's novels and essays as offering contextual justifications for his moral and social theories. . . . His starting point is always our current social and political situation: a complex combination of cultural, ecological, and economic practices and institutions that are, he claims, resulting in ecological decay. He compares this state of affairs with his own richly imagined alternative, a set of social practices that embody a different moral vision, most fully drawn in his novels about the fictional Port William. He then suggests that his alternative is preferable to our current state of affairs—once we consider more thoughtfully what it is we really want.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Kimberly K. Smith, *Uncommon Grace: Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), p.117. (Cf, Smith's footnote #4 referencing G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

The social and moral theories Smith finds in Berry's work are not so clearly delineated as one might anticipate, most likely because Berry's so-called "moral vision" is an even broader philosophy of ecological, social and personal health. Smith does, however, provide a substantial insight into Berry's critique of "rugged" individualism. Long a cornerstone of the agrarian stance, Berry parts ways with other agrarians who embrace the rugged ideal of autonomy. Striking a juxtaposition between this individualistic mentality and that of "progressive" voices calling for federally mandated/sponsored social improvements, he criticizes the Homeric ideal, calling it "a more-than-ordinary level of independence and self-sufficiency achieved only by some heroic individuals."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, he complains that federal intervention "only increases dependence on government, opening the door for oppression."<sup>14</sup> Where, then, is the middle way?

As a possible solution, Smith invokes the Greek classics, saying that "the solution may well be a return to the classical virtue of *sophrosyne*."<sup>15</sup> "To be *sophrosyne*," Smith writes, "is to understand what humans' proper ends are, which in turn is to understand where we fit in the order of Creation."<sup>16</sup> Using this concept, Smith links Berry's version of agrarianism to the Greek classics. The hypothesis is never conclusively argued, however.

Smith relies upon Helen North's *Sophrosyne: Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature*. The idea of *sophrosyne* has merit as Smith presents it, for it captures the essence of a farming ethic of individualism without the unwelcome baggage of notions of autonomy or overreach. Citing the contributions of canonical Greeks and Romans (Plato, Cicero

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

and Horace) for the concept's development, Smith most cogently offers the following summation of Berry's vision of individualism. She writes:

Emphasizing *sophrosyne* rather than self-sufficiency and freedom of action changes the moral core of agrarianism in important ways: The moral value of farming becomes not its promise of freedom and power but its tendency to teach self-restraint and prudence. The farmer's dependence on nature, from this perspective, is valuable because it is a constant lesson in human limits and fallibility.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, Smith contends that Berry's agrarian perspective carries an unexpected weight for political philosophy. Framing the activity of farming in terms of its value in education toward moral character brings the farmer back into the scope of the city itself. Smith's knowledge of classical modes is helpful to situate the issues arising in Berry's thought within the context of political philosophy. And while she engages Berry in a more contemporary setting elsewhere in her book, this task is handled ably by other scholars. All in all, Smith's work offers a provocative but limited view of Berry's political philosophical vision. The limit is her failure to consider how Berry's fiction can offer fully realized applications of the concepts she observes in his essays. Berry does not offer a programmatic philosophy of politics. However, in creating a fictional community so richly described and thoroughly wrought, Berry brings philosophical concepts like *sophrosyne* directly to bear. Smith's analysis lacks a sufficient consideration of Berry's fiction. Only through such a hermeneutic can Berry's vision be limned in its full intensity.

Berry's agrarianism represents something of a departure within the tradition, as he was among, if not the, first prominent literary agrarian to incorporate the themes of ecology and environmental degradation into his core philosophy. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, Berry was considered a voice from the fringe; somewhere in the general province of Rachel Carson and Edward Abbey. As issues of sustainability have steadily crept into the foreground of mainstream

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

political discourse, Wendell Berry's influence continues to reach new audiences. What has set Berry apart both then and now, however, is his holistic vision of human society, agriculture, ecology, and the transcendent. The term "prophetic," often invoked in commentaries on Berry's criticisms, is not without reasonable cause. Drawing upon this, Janet Goodrich identifies five dimensions or "states of being" in Berry's work that are "recognizable in the language and conceptual patterns" with which Berry writes his own autobiography.<sup>18</sup>

Using this series as chapter headings—the Autobiographer, the Poet, the Farmer, the *Prophet* and the Neighbor—Goodrich explores each dimension to disclose the "unforeseen" self of Berry in his work. Describing Berry in his aspect as a prophet, Goodrich offers a slightly different interpretation of the story "Pray Without Ceasing," a story dealing with murder and retribution in the small farming town of Port William. In it, Goodrich finds a parallel with Berry's novel *A World Lost*, claiming that "in both, human mind and memory are the starting points in establishing the credibility between time and eternity."<sup>19</sup> Goodrich pursues Berry's biblical sensibility of time and eternity in an Augustinian sense.<sup>20</sup> Both stories, she indicates, approach "the relationship between time and the timeless through the agency of memory both remembered and inherited. Both assert memory as a means through which creatures of time participate in the timeless."<sup>21</sup> For Andy Catlett, the focal character in both pieces, Goodrich indicates that it is his "imagination that asserts the connection between the immortality granted

---

<sup>18</sup>Janet Goodrich, *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry*, (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>20</sup> Cf, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book XI.

<sup>21</sup>Goodrich, 2001. p. 113.

by memory and that granted by eternity—or, put another way, between the immortality of mind and the immortality of Mind.”<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting that in the passage on Berry’s prophetic voice (or state of being), Goodrich fails to mention the connection of this conceptualization of time to that of St. Augustine in book XI of his *Confessions*. It is also interesting that insofar as Goodrich considers Berry’s poetry in some detail, she fails to note this same vision of the interplay between imagination, memory and time in Berry’s poetic drama titled “The Bringer of Water.”<sup>23</sup> As indicated, this essay explores the concept of time in Berry’s work but considers different works in its effort to articulate a more clearly political vision.

Far from receding into the backdrop of contemporary discourse, Berry’s influence is observably growing, both in the academic world as well as the mainstream. As recently as 2007, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute held a national leadership conference devoted to “The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry.” This colloquium featured an array of scholars and fellow writers familiar with Berry and his work and coincided with the release of the most recent and arguably significant collection of scholarly essays devoted to Berry’s corpus. Titled, *Wendell Berry, Life and Work*, the collection largely mirrors the composite nature of Berry scholarship historically in both theme and approach.<sup>24</sup> Two pieces appearing in the volume are of interest to the present discussion.

In the essay “Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought,” Patrick J. Deneen cites Berry’s description of “two fundamental tendencies” in the

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 115.

<sup>23</sup>Published in Wendell Berry, *Farming: A Handbook*.(New York: Harcourt, 1970).

<sup>24</sup>*Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, Jason Peters, ed. (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

development of our national culture.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on this bifurcated model, Deneen asserts that the sources of these “tendencies” are the philosophical traditions based on “early modern” liberalism, the “tradition of colonization qua exploitation,” and another “contending republican or communitarian tradition that had its deepest sources in ancient philosophy and the biblical tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

Deneen delineates a “dominant tradition” within American Political Thought and criticizes it along the lines of other familiar critiques of Liberalism. This tradition, Deneen contends, is inextricably rooted in modern notions of “man vs. nature,” in the acquisition of property, which is a logical outcome of the old Cartesian dualism of *subject* and *object* or *self* and *not-self* (other). Bringing his argument forward up to the Declaration of Independence, Deneen characterizes the results of this line of thinking as a dangerous over-extension of ideas of natural right, saying:

A central presupposition among Americans is that the individual precedes, and in theory and practice is prior to, government and commonweal. In political terms, the theory of liberal rights leads to a stress upon individual liberty and suspicion of if not outright hostility toward government (cf. Thoreau’s claim, attributed to Jefferson and similar statements made by Thomas Paine, that “that government which governs best, governs least”). In economic terms, the theory of liberal rights lends itself to a fierce belief in individual agency in the use and disposal of one’s property. Liberalism’s base assumption that all human motivation arises from self-interest further undermines the claims for a common good and rather privileges the priority of individual choice and economic growth, regardless of the consequences to both moral and economic ecology.<sup>27</sup>

The alternative to this view, typified by Berry, Deneen argues, is more in line with classical political philosophy and the biblical and Christian tradition—with its “call to reverence toward

---

<sup>25</sup> Patrick J. Deneen, “Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought,” from *Life and Work*, p. 300.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 301.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 302-303.

the divinely created order, its injunction against avarice and self-aggrandizement, its insistence upon self-sacrifice, and its commandments enjoining humility and love,” says Deneen.<sup>28</sup>

Calling Berry a “Kentucky Aristotelian,” Deneen paints Berry in the terms of a common philosophical outlook. “Nature—of which humanity is a part in both Berry’s and Aristotle’s reckoning—is the whole that governs all of its constitutive parts.”<sup>29</sup> Among the similarities between the two lines of thinking, it is apparent that both value nature as the standard for politics. And while Berry, of course, has a twentieth-century understanding of nature (and therefore the term “ecology” is a more accurate descriptor), the two share a common value of the harmony of natural cycles and the observance of limits, so as to maintain these balances.

Deneen expands his comparisons between Berry and Aristotle regarding their similar views on vocation and the foundations of life well-lived. However, Deneen’s essay overlooks important differences in casting Berry as the “Kentucky Aristotelian.” After all, the guiding premise of *The Politics* is how best to arrange for “good order” in society, which means that the gentleman should not be bothered with manual labor—this being the province of the lower classes. Berry, in his essay “Racism and the Economy,” is explicit in his view that a negative valuation of certain types of work as being beneath a person of a certain class has led to the necessity of creating the “nigger work;” work Berry describes as “the laborious jobs of caretaking,” the result of which has been America’s ongoing struggle and failure to come to terms with race.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 303.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 304.

<sup>30</sup> Wendell Berry, “Racism and the Economy,” published in *The Art of the Commonplace*, 2002, p. 48, 49.

Berry's "American Traditionalism," it seems, offers up a fairly popular avenue for discussion among political thinkers. In his essay, "Wendell Berry and the Traditionalist Critique of Meritocracy," published in the same collection, Jeremy Beer takes a slightly different tack in his exploration of Berry's political importance. Exploring possible placements for the traditionalist perspective in the present-day Liberalism to Conservatism continuum, Beer begins by acknowledging the more prominent view, stating:

the term is typically employed negatively as a worldview characterized by a non- or even antirationalist outlook in unshakeable thrall to the past. The traditionalist is supposed to be a superstitiously pious creature incapable of bringing critical reason to bear on his fears, beliefs, and actions. To him, what is not traditional is taboo. He represents the human race in its childhood, he is supposed to have been all but eradicated from the Western world, whose history consists precisely in the rationalization—and therefore detraditionalization or desacralization—of the cosmos.<sup>31</sup>

Beer's use of Berry's position within this tradition is next turned to confront the issue of meritocracy: "the distribution of social rewards according to an objective 'merit.'"<sup>32</sup> The liberal ideal—which favorably views meritocracy ("the rule of the talented or the skilled") because it is favorable to a society oriented toward individual freedom—will be forced to "eliminate, or at least to equalize social or environmental barriers to the development of talent."<sup>33</sup> This philosophy, if stringently upheld, will necessarily be favorable to eugenics or genetic engineering of humans to remove barriers of access if natural inequality is thought to amount to nothing more than individual initiative. Beer posits traditionalism as the alternative path to the "meritocratic ideal."<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>Jeremy Beer, "Wendell Berry and the Traditionalist Critique of Meritocracy," in *Life and Work*, 2007, p. 212-213.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 217.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

Beer's treatment of traditionalism, with Berry as a champion, offers a more humane view of human nature and society that embraces inevitable differences between people. This approach would "pursue a decentralized, producer- (rather than consumer-) centered social order as the best way of diffusing intelligence and competence through all classes."<sup>35</sup> The core of American traditionalism is philosophically attuned to embrace innate differences in ability and alleviating disparity through ancient practices: "traditional acts," as Berry calls them.<sup>36</sup>

It should not be more than apparent that in range, as well as scope, the scholarship devoted to Berry's work is necessarily very broad. From exegeses of his poetics to deconstructionist and formal critiques of his fiction and then on to explorations of his essays for political themes, scholars have found no shortage of entry points into the corpus. Trends emerge from the texts through comparisons, but often these are shadowy intimations at best. Concluding this section, I contend that the published work on Berry is deficient for the following reasons. First, it expends too little effort attempting to understand Berry on his own plane, preferring instead to treat Berry generally, co-opting his reputation instead of conducting serious exegesis of his thought.

Next, scholars who have succeeded in engaging Berry in-depth are content to use brief citations from his fiction to support their arguments, failing to analyze Berry's fictional craftwork as closely as is merited. This should not be taken as an outright dismissal. Rather, it is meant to offer support to my guiding assumption that Berry's political and philosophical vision is most fully expressed through a careful analysis of his fiction.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 225.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 222. (cf. Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays, Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981), 27. Note: In this essay same phenomenon at length in the context of "Nativity." The expression has been developed as "rituals of domesticity." (cf. Chapter 2).

A guiding assumption of this thesis is that the fictional medium is useful not only for illustrating Berry's core philosophy, but also because it offers a more thoroughly-realized vision of man's political nature. It speaks through narratives crafted directly from human experience, rather than through the voice of the critic. The task, then, is to approach the texts with care, locating within them descriptions of life and experience that illustrate and illuminate a discussion of political philosophy. Berry's use of symbol and metaphor, both in verse and prose, fictional or real, makes his work resistant to analytical modes dependent upon concreteness. For the commentator, there is an art to contextual framing. The trick, it seems, is to give the reader just enough of the narrative so as to acquaint him with the character or situation without belaboring the analysis. While this essay attempts to overcome this obstacle by focusing on the one novel, it must reach from time to time for other works. It will help, then, to provide the reader with some general introductory information about Berry's fictional community of Port William. This will ground the reader in some basic knowledge that will inform later discussions.

### **A Brief Introduction to Port William**

Berry's fiction portrays the lives of roughly five generations of families living in the community of Port William, Kentucky. It is fair to say that Berry's novels offer their reader a clear and detailed vision of this small country town, if only for the sheer number of lines he devotes to the telling. The town, if viewed across all of Berry's novels, is as completely realized as a reader is likely to encounter in American fiction. The specificity with which Berry describes the local terrain reveals a kind of familiarity that is only available to an author in lived experience, and this with good reason.

Berry's nonfiction offers an insight into his fictional community. He has, in many ways, re-wrought his hometown of Port Royal, Kentucky into the fiction of his novels. To this, Berry has offered the following comment.

In the course of my life and of my work as a farmer, I have come to know familiarly two small country towns and about a dozen farms. That is, I have come to know them well enough at one time or another that I can shut my eyes and see them as they were, just as I can see them now as they are. The most intimate "world" of my life is thus a small one. The most intimate "world" of my fiction is even smaller: a town of about a hundred people, "Port William," and a few farms in its neighborhood. Between these two worlds, the experienced and the imagined, there is certainly a relationship. But it is a relationship obscure enough as it is, and easy to obscure further by oversimplification.<sup>37</sup>

Berry's statement here is borne out in the pages of his essays and novels. Port William, whatever its similarity to any real place, is presented in-full in Berry's stories. Whatever its correspondence to contemporary reality may be, it does not depend on it; therefore, it can be treated to independent analysis.

Port William is very similar to most other small farming communities of its day. It is situated on a hill overlooking the Kentucky River in the knobby northern portion of Kentucky's Bluegrass region. Hilly but fertile, the region is one of wooded ridge-lands divided by spring-fed stream branches, just some few miles from the Ohio River and also the state capitol of Frankfort. In Port William, like most of the rest of Kentucky historically, every row-crop farmer maintains a tobacco patch, a tradition that arrived in the region with the first white settlers. The cultivation of tobacco as a cash crop is an enterprise requiring great skill, labor, and luck, all in equal measure. In pre-automotive times, tobacco cultivation in this region required an education encompassing the breadth and depth of wisdom acquired in a particular place. This is an important fact to understand as one considers certain aspects of Berry's work because it

---

<sup>37</sup> Wendell Berry, "Imagination in Place," from *The Way of Ignorance* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), p. 40.

incorporates the idea of history and place; the combination of these two elements leads the discussion inevitably to the topic of memory.

The idea that certain traditions containing detailed knowledge of a particular place, persisting there as a part of the local history, is expressed in Berry's novels about Port William in two distinct ways. Typically, Berry addresses a memory in personal language, the more familiar sense: a narrator will describe the memories of past events as they belong to the individual who possesses them. Here, a character describes that "it used to be asked, by strangers who would happen through, why a town named Port William should have been built so far from the river. And the townsmen would answer that when Port William was built they did not know where the river was going to run."<sup>38</sup> The colloquialism expressed here should not distract from an important insight into all of Berry's fiction.

In Berry's universe, the community-singular may have memories also. Berry is very concerned with the role of memory in shaping a community's awareness and critical understanding of itself. The oral tradition that spawns such colloquial humor contains an instrument of preservation that Berry's narrator goes on to intimate, saying:

The truth is that Port William no longer remembers why it was built where it is, or how. In its conversation the town has kept the memory of two or three generations haphazardly alive. Back of that memory the town was there for a long time—there are a few buildings still standing that are surely twice as old as anybody's certain knowledge of them. But the early history has to be conjectured and assumed.<sup>39</sup>

It will be helpful, here, to note the description of the human relationship to the town of Port William. Buildings "twice as old as anybody's certain knowledge of them," are not assigned any specific age or fixed, temporal description. The town, for its residents, has simply always been

---

<sup>38</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Place On Earth* [1983 revision], (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

there. In Port William, the prevailing idea *of* Port William is that it has always been itself and not necessarily a part of any other social or political organization, movement, or settlement. This idea will remain an important consideration for this essay as it helps develop familiarity with the style and approach of Berry's novels. Continually, the time-less nature of Port William and its membership will be emphasized in this study as it pertains to Berry's overall philosophical vision of homecoming.

Another of the most striking features of community and civic life is the absence of the state; particularly as the agent of coercive authority. Occasionally characters representing the state, the economy or the "order of the world"<sup>40</sup> make appearances, but these scenes fairly uniformly read as an unnecessary (but perhaps inevitable) intrusion. This is not to say that the text omits the government, but rather that in the world of Port William, an "unofficial place,"<sup>41</sup> the focus of public life is depicted in person-peripheral language. In imagining Port William, one finds a pre-industrial agricultural community whose members understand themselves to be a part of a larger communal whole that is not only connected to the particular place and time but also overlapping it. In one sense, this describes really nothing more than a sort of clannish holdover—valuing one's allegiance to familial bonds and ancestral lands over any larger body politic. Berry's fiction offers no shortage of examples that support this historical fact of Appalachia's Celtic cultural roots. There is no formally acknowledged civil code or social contract specific to Port William; if the United States' Constitution is acknowledged here, it exists in *spite* of this town. One assumes that all the typical forms of American civic activity are present, but they

---

<sup>40</sup> Phrase is used in Wendell Berry "Fidelity," *Fidelity: Five Stories*, (New York & San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1992), p.164.

<sup>41</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (New York: Counterpoint Press, 2000), p. 300.

receive little to no importance in the text. In their place Berry paints very intimate scenes of human communal and private life. The following passage from *Jayber Crow* is illustrative.

In its conversation, its consciousness of itself, its sleep and waking, Port William has always been pretty much an unofficial place. It has, really, nothing of its own but itself. It has no newspaper, no resident government, no municipal property. Once it owned and maintained part of the road that passed through it, two dug wells with pumps, and a stout-walled, windowless jail in which one malefactor had spent one night. These were all of its public domain. . . . But all of that was a long time ago. Mostly Port William would remember bits of it occasionally, but mostly it forgot. Mostly the town's history had become its ways, its habits, its feelings, its familiarity with itself.<sup>42</sup>

As the passage indicates, Port William lacks knowledge of its precise origin; it *became*, when it became aware of itself. In the local mind, Port William was not founded so much as it became self-aware at some point. Like the place itself, human life, labor and experience are preserved perpetually in the narrative memory. Berry's work often mentions Port William's memory in personified metaphors. This sense of self-awareness communicates the power of narrative, in Port William, to inform the individual as well as a corporate sense of identity.

Author and literary scholar Caroline Rody discusses a very similar concept developed in the work of novelist Toni Morrison, in which *communal subjectivity*, the sense of self-awareness of communal body is significant to the discussion. Rody observes that "writing that contacts collective memory conflates the personal and the communal, works to open the 'interior life' of the individual into the 'anterior life of the people.'"<sup>43</sup> This element, shared by Berry's work, is clearly evident here. The frequent use of personified language when discussing Port William indicates that community, for Berry, is not simply a political designation shared by individuals living within a defined territorial boundary. It is a deeper sense of the community's own self-

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Caroline Rody, "Tony Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss.'" *American Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Spring, 1995), p. 97. Cf. Walter Clemons, "A Gravestone of Memories." *Newsweek* 28 Sept. 1989: 74-75.

understanding. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated through Berry's frequent mentions of Port William's memory.

### ***Jayber Crow*: A Philosophical Overview**

In his introduction to *The Art of the Commonplace*, a recent collection of Berry's essays, Norman Wirzba comments on the significance of the agrarian perspective to ongoing discussions of the philosophical and political responses to modernity. Drawing on familiar strains of discontent, Wirzba contends that the modern self is searching for a home in the world which it cannot find in the present order. Somehow, in this age of rapid technological achievement and unprecedented possibility for global interaction and exchange, mankind's sense of alienation from the world around us has grown in tandem.

To frame the relevance of Berry's agrarian vision within current political, philosophical and cultural contexts, Wirzba concludes by presenting the reader a series of open-ended questions. He writes:

As should be clear from reading, these essays touch on themes of perennial interest. They return us to the fundamental questions of human existence: Who are we? How does our life with others affect this self-understanding? What is a properly human desire? What are the limits and possibilities of communal life? How do we form an authentic culture? What are the conditions for a life of peace and joy?<sup>44</sup>

It is here that the present essay takes root. To search out a politics of homecoming in Berry's work, this thesis uses Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* as a touchstone to explore possible responses to questions like Wirzba's. The novel (full title is *The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself*)—is paradigmatic because it contains not only the full spectrum of Berry's mature philosophy—but also the structural foundation up which Berry constructs themes of self and community, of home lost and home regained. The

---

<sup>44</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, Edited and Introduced by Norman Wirzba (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. xx.

philosophic themes explored will draw from Berry's work broadly to develop theories of place, memory and time, discussing each within the context *Jayber Crow*'s fictional narrative. The organizational framework of the thesis is built around a three-stage process of homecoming revealed by the text.<sup>45</sup> The chapters, titled "Nativity," "Estrangement," and "Restoration," will focus on the philosophic implications for each stage successively.

*Jayber Crow* is one of Berry's first-person-narrated novels. In it, Jayber presents a loose chronology of his life, wandering in and out of his own recollections, a style which represents something of a departure for Berry.<sup>46</sup> For this reason, *Jayber Crow* is a book within a book. Two observations can be made here regarding the form of the novel. The first is that Jayber is self-consciously crafting a literary artifact and therefore the narrative displays a high level of intentionality. Jayber is motivated to present his story, even as a character in its plot, and he has editorial control of the details. Second, because the narrative is completely self-contained (there is no mention of a reader or an audience), the reader should assume that Jayber does not intend this to be a published work. It is a record of his thoughts and memories, not a *memoir*. For this reason it is reasonable to characterize this mode of autobiography as a form of confession.

Immediately, the reader senses that there are two planes of being converging in this narrative: the first plane, events happening in time, and the second one reaches beyond time into the eternal. The easiest way to view how Jayber is working this out in his own consciousness is to

---

<sup>45</sup> Thus I have committed one of what are sure to be numerous trespasses upon the author's literary domain (See "Notice" at the front of the Counterpoint edition: "persons attempting to find a 'text' in this book will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a 'subtext' in it will be banished; persons attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise 'understand' it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers.").

<sup>46</sup> In his first published attempt at the first-person-narrator style, the novel *Nathan Coulter*, the reader follows the title character through childhood unto his adolescence. The character's narrating voice, coming from no fixed temporal location, speaks with childlike naïveté of events occurring around him. In many ways the narrator ages with the action of the novel, and yet, the narrative is presented in past tense—always looking back into the past. *Hannah Coulter*, Berry's second first-person novel finds the title character addressing herself to a biographer. Occasionally, throughout the text, Hannah addresses Andy Catlett directly, and so the reader gains a sense of her editorial sensibility.

consider his preoccupation with the Kentucky River. Of its many properties, Jayber seems most attracted to its aspect of moving and sitting still all at the same time. This is similar to the way Jayber describes his own memories. His narrative includes accounts of remembered events both from the fixed “first-position” of the narrative, as well as accounts of himself as being a younger man or boy, remembering still earlier (or “last-position”) events. The process of mimesis on anamnesis or rememory<sup>47</sup> is an important insight for consideration because it links the Berrian visions of time and place.

For purposes of introduction, and to acquaint the reader with the plot of the novel, a brief synopsis is necessary. Emphasis, however, must be reserved for only Part I of *Jayber Crow* because it details the title character’s initial journey of homecoming explicitly. In the novel’s first nine chapters, Jayber Crow narrates his physical movement through the three stages theorized by this essay. Brought up native to the world of the Kentucky River near Port William, Jayber is taken away and experiences his formative years in the context of a pair of institutionally-structured visions of community. Free of these, and now an adult, he wanders around through the harsh realities of a placeless existence pulled by an unknown yearning until finally he realizes the epiphany that leads him back to the cosmology of his childhood. This synopsis is now presented in greater detail.

Although he was born in the neighboring community of Goforth, “over on Katy’s Branch, on August 3, 1914,” Jayber confesses that “I don’t remember when I did not know Port William, the town, and the neighborhood. My relation to the place, my being in it and my absences from it is the story of my life.”<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Term originates in Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume-NAL, 1987). Cf, Rody, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 1999), p. 11, 12.

After losing both parents to the flu and being adopted by an elderly aunt and uncle, Jayber Crow (born “Jonah”) describes a few flashing images of a life upset by “the welter of that time: a war off somewhere in the dark world; a river of ice off somewhere, breaking the trees and boats; sickness off somewhere and then in the house, and everything changed.”<sup>49</sup>

Change, in this sense, is synonymous with the term “disruption,” or “dis-order.” For Berry, a well-ordered or rightly-structured community is necessary not merely for the promotion and transmission of its values, but for its very survival as a commonwealth. Because the world of his childhood has been disordered, Jonah Crow must learn the rituals of domesticity from his foster parents.

Jonah is adopted by his “Aunt Cordie,” and “Uncle Othy” Dagget and moves with them to their home at Squire’s Landing, some “two miles and a little more from Goforth, and about four miles from Port William,”<sup>50</sup> Jayber lives out the rest of the winter and finally the greening and warming up of the spring. He concludes: “I began to feel at home.”<sup>51</sup>

With the Daggets, Jonah Crow’s world regains a sense of structure that includes both the natural topography of the place itself and the rhythms of their home-making there. Describing his being Aunt Cordie’s helper, Jayber writes:

We went steadily from one thing to another, from can’t see to can’t see, and then on by lamplight, and I helped her with everything: keeping up the fires, maintaining the lamps, cooking, cleaning fish, dressing poultry, washing the dishes, washing the clothes, cleaning the house, working in the garden, putting up food for the winter. Aunt Cordie was good company and always kind, but she saw to it that I did my work right. The best part of my education, and surely the most useful part, came from her.”<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 13. Interestingly, this “sickness” would correspond to the harsh winters around and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

This passage suggests that the industry of home life, a mixture of work and conversation, was useful. The significance of this early scene in Jayber's story should not elude Berry's reader because it intimates Berry's conception of a community, working outward from the most mundane and familiar to the extended world of the Daggets' general store, and the larger neighborhood.

Calling Aunt Cordie's instruction "the best part of my education and surely the most useful part,"<sup>53</sup> Jayber's outlook does not consider a life of hard work to be disagreeable. Having considered how the rituals of domesticity, the familiar and habitual practices of meeting the needs of home, form the structural basis of order, it is now more apparent that the simple tasks of the household economy translate outward. This model implies basing larger economies on that of the household. This ideal is upheld, but Berry never gives any indication that it could be universalized. The beauty of the particular, Berry shows, is that it permits people to know intimately the elements within their care. The kitchen or farmstead model of economy is not promoted in the hope of its universal application, but rather to offer an illustration of the extent to which human excellence can be responsibly exercised or, for that matter, trusted.

In Jayber Crow's story, the elderly aunt and uncle eventually die, leaving young Jonah (now ten years old) orphaned yet again. To inaugurate this second phase, Jayber offers the following transition: "And so I went out of the hands of love, which certainly included charity as we know it, into the hands of charity as we know it, which included love only as it might."<sup>54</sup> Jonah is taken to live at "The Good Shepherd," an orphanage in Kentucky located some distance from the universe of Port William.

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

It is at The Good Shepherd that Jonah (now shortened to “J.”) Crow first begins to discuss the function of his memory. A reader may observe here the layering of memories at work in the narrative up unto this point. The first level is the textual one—the autobiography. The second layer of memory begins to emerge and become active during the confusion of Jayber’s early days in the orphanage. Here we find recollections of remembrances: “I have all of this in mind *again* now, as I remember myself remembering in my first years at The Good Shepherd. I was just a scantling boy, scared and *out of place* and (as I now see) odd.”<sup>55</sup> The memory of Jayber’s native place, which marks the extent of his estrangement, is highly significant. He feels estranged from home because he knows so clearly where home is and it is not the orphanage.

Berry’s vision of place is progressively disclosed somewhat in this passage. Humans, giving up on this attachment to the particular, do not necessarily feel the sting of its absence. And yet, one may wonder the price of being *placeless*. If it is in human nature to seek home, as Berry’s vision indicates, then this journey of the soul is odyssey, not emigration. Man’s home in the world does not lie somewhere before him but behind him. But what are the possibilities of this in time? How can the self ever hope to return to a homeplace that exists only in memory? As surely as the change of season, the topography of one’s “Native Hill” is being pushed and pulled, beset by the blind force of time. The irreversible sequence of events in time ensures that nothing stays the same. For all of its romantic appeal, the journey back to the place left behind is an impossible one, for the place does not endure in some fixed state any more than the concrete reality of the person who once beheld it. And yet, somehow, Berry’s characters succeed in “Making it Home.”<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 38. (emphasis is mine).

<sup>56</sup> Phrase comes from Wendell Berry, *Fidelity: Five Stories* (New York and San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1992).

Had the trajectory of his life been different, say, one of continuity, then Jonah's native condition of the self might have persisted; however this is not the case. With the emigration of the self out of and away from its native place, the progression of homecoming enters a new phase. This second stage is best characterized by a lost naïveté and a fruitless search for community. Also, the intransigence of familiar rituals and the structural norms of society growing out of a life of care toward a particular place are lost during this period. The self must now construct a new constellation of norms from its newly imposed autonomy. This task ultimately proves impossible.

The movement away from Squires Landing to Port William marks the beginning of the estrangement phase in Jayber Crow's journey of homecoming. Having been relocated to The Good Shepherd orphanage, Jonah Crow has his name taken from him, signifying that his disruption is total.

I remember waking up in my dormitory room the first several mornings," he recounts, "for maybe a minute or two not knowing where I was, and then knowing. . . . And I would be filled with a strange objectless fear, as if in the twinkling of an eye I had been changed not only into another world but into another body.<sup>57</sup>

This "out-of-body experience" is depicted in other noteworthy scenes in which Berry toils with the self and objectivity while setting it against the physical being.

The disrupting effects of the change to an institutionalized existence are visible in Jayber Crow's narrative almost immediately. Confronting the first "authority figure" of his life, Jonah describes the experience retrospectively: "I remember walking around saying my name to myself—"Jonah Crow, Jonah Crow"—until it seemed that it never could have belonged to me or to anybody else."<sup>58</sup> The significance of this experience is meted out on the same page:

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

At Squires Landing everything seemed to be held close in mind—in my mind or in some older or larger mind that my mind belonged to. The world was present when I shut my eyes, just as it was present when I opened them. At The Good Shepherd I entered for the first time a divided world—divided both from me and within itself. It was divided from me because it did not seem to be present unless I watched it. Within itself, it was divided between an ideal world of order, as prescribed and demanded by the institution, which was embodied most formidably by Brother Whitespade, and a real world of disorder, which was brought in with us as a sort of infection. Though of course I could not sort it all out until afterward, not, really, until I had come back to Port William—I know that order was thought to emanate from the institution, and disorder from nature. Order was of the soul, whose claims the institution represented. Disorder was of the body, which was us.<sup>59</sup>

In this passage, a number of themes significant to the discussion of the phase of estrangement are introduced. First is the immediate recognition of the communal subjectivity endemic to authentic community in Berry's vision: "a larger mind that my mind belonged to." The second theme is the language of division (synonymous with estrangement) that the narrator employs to describe the community of the institution (which, paradoxically, is also the *institutionalization* of the community). Whereas the language of nativity is colored with descriptions of wholeness, the watchwords of the institution's mistrust of nature and people are impersonal and institutional in tone, and Berry depicts this setting as anathema to authentic community. Thus, Jonah (now "J.") Crow enters into what will be a series of institutions and other social structures that serve as manifestations of the inauthentic community. Like the orphanage seeking to purge "the real world of disorder" from its students "with a net of rules tightly stung between ourselves and the supposed disorder and wickedness of the world," Jayber finds a similar condition of separating the real from the ideal when he confronts organized religion.

In a chapter titled "The Call," J. Crow recounts how his curiosity and general desire to get along with the culture of the orphanage led eventually to a tenuous belief that he had received a divine signal to pursue a life in ministry.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

Though I knew that actually I had heard no voice, I could not dismiss the possibility that it had spoken and I had failed to hear it because of some deficiency in me or something wrong that I had done. My fearful uncertainty lasted for months. . . . Finally I reasoned that in dealing with God you had better give Him the benefit of the doubt. I decided that I had better accept the call that had not come, just in case it had come and I had missed it.<sup>60</sup>

And though he is a good student at “Pigeonville Theological Seminary,” J. Crow’s uncertainty about the origin of his calling persists, taking various forms. “The trouble started because I began to doubt the main rock of the faith, which was that the Bible was true in every word,” Jayber confesses as he begins to explain the cause of his eventually decision to terminate his studies. The seeking out of this question, as we will see, becomes one of the dominant motivating forces of his narrative and his life itself.

Deeply troubled by his doubt, J. Crow seeks for some meaningful resolution for his troubled conscience. At this point in the narrative, Jayber’s final conversation with Professor Ardmore at Pigeonville illustrates the second manifestation of inauthentic community appearing in the text; that of conditional acceptance. Realizing that the community of the seminary (if not the church generally) will require him to surrender many of the theological questions troubling his conscience to a type of passive resignation. Jayber’s quest for community has arrived at yet another dead end.

In the next phase of Jayber’s life, the narrative jumps very quickly between a series of jobs as a day-laborer, and life as a general vagrant. Being hired as a barber’s apprentice in Lexington, Kentucky gives him the opportunity to indulge his love of books as a college student at the university while earning a living. Here again, however, Jayber confronts a world that includes him without requiring of him that unknown thing at the root of his restlessness. He muses:

Along the fall of 1936, after the weather got cold, about the time I finished figuring out that all the institutions I had known were islands, the whole weight of my unimagined, unlooked-for life came down on me, and I hit the bottom – or anyhow I hit what felt

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

mighty like the bottom. For the first time, maybe, since my early days at The Good Shepherd, I felt just awfully lonesome. I felt sad beyond the thought or memory of happiness. Maybe I had felt those feelings before, but before I was by myself I would think again and again of myself running barefoot over the frozen grass the morning Aunt Cordie died, and I would cry. When I was crying I would be hearing in my mind Aunt Cordie's voice saying, "I don't know. Honey, I just don't know."<sup>61</sup>

Bewildered, disoriented and estranged, Berry's character Jayber Crow is emblematic of a lost soul recovering its place in the world.

In a scene occurring during the historic flood of January 1937 wherein "present-day Jayber" recalls an earlier time in his life in which he remembered his childhood, he describes the coming to mind of memories which, having previously been something of a mixed-blessing for his sense of self, now effectuate his conversion experience.

That old life had come to be like a little painted picture at the bottom of a well, and the well was getting deeper. The picture that I had inside me was more real than anything outside, and yet it was getting ever smaller and farther away and harder to call back. That, I guess, is why I got so sad. I was living, but I was not living my life. So far as I could see, I was going nowhere. And now, more and more, I seemed also to have come from nowhere. . . .

. . . It took me a long time to see what was happening to me then. . . . But I know now that even then, in my hopelessness and sorrow, I began a motion of the heart toward my origins.<sup>62</sup>

The experience described here is emblematic of the homecoming experience described in Berry's writing. Jayber Crow, having grown up in an orphanage and then having defined himself exclusively within the limits of institutional religion and education, now finds himself "without a loved life to live,"<sup>63</sup> and, realizing it, is revealed the necessity of returning home to whatever familiarity might remain for him there.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 71-72.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 72-73.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

Making his return to Port William, Jayber encounters Burley Coulter—a familiar and friendly acquaintance from his former life—and through this fortuitous meeting, Jayber (still “J. Crow” at this point) gains both a friend and a client. With Burley’s connections in town, Jayber becomes the new barber of Port William, buying the shop and the apartment above it with a roll of money he’d been hiding in the lining of his coat since he’d left Squires Landing.

The second part of the novel describes Jayber’s coming to be at home in Port William. In his account of his life as the town’s barber, Jayber comes to know the places, faces and names that color the never-ending conversation among the loafers in the barbershop. It is also in this time of his life that Jayber (now his familiar nickname among the Port Williamites, due to its being easier to pronounce than “Jaybird”) meets Mattie Keith, the young girl who will eventually become the love of his life.

The story of Jayber Crow’s love for Mattie Keith, culminating in his eventual symbolic vow of marriage to her, is interspersed throughout his narrative. Though she is younger by a decade or more, Mattie has a hold on Jayber’s mind and affection that, as he watches her grow up, begins to shape his own development of character. Through the tangled circumstances that cause their lives to continually intersect, the reader comes to accept the validity of Jayber’s decision to wed himself to Mattie (now officially “Mrs. Troy Chatham”) in a private vow that he never admits to anyone else his whole life. The reason for this silent promise of fidelity is in Mattie’s real-life marriage to Troy Chatham.

The figure of Troy Chatham in the novel is significant because he comes to embody everything that is contrary to the agrarian ideal. A juvenile dandy and playground show-off grown into an undisciplined and over-leveraged farmer of the modern ilk, Troy Chatham’s total disregard for fidelity to community, place, family, or even his wife, stirs in Jayber a deep sense

of indignation, fomenting in him a deep conviction that justice, somehow, must answer to love. Encountering Troy in a bar one night, dancing in the arms of another woman, Jayber has a realization of mind, body, and soul that once again puts him into the dark of the self's estrangement. In this scene, turning away from the freedom of his own bachelor ways—ways that have come to include a casual relationship with a woman in another town—Jayber finds himself at another moment of conversion. On leaving the bar, he reflects:

I had to go. It seemed that my way in this world had all of a sudden opened up again (like a door? a wound?) and was leading me on. I was thinking, "Oh, I have got to change or die. Oh, I have got to give up my life or die."

Maybe I was wanting to get to a place where I could not be mistaken, at least in my own mind, for Troy Chatham. I thought, "I am *not* like him." But that thought didn't detain me long. I was thinking also of Mattie. I was going to have to choose. I was going to have to know what I was going to do.<sup>64</sup>

Deciding what to do, Jayber's eventual restoration comes through biding his fate to yet another difficult cause—an impossible and wholly imaginary marriage to Mattie Chatham. Reflecting on this, Jayber confesses: "What I needed to know, what I needed to become a man who knew, was that Mattie Chatham did not, by the terms of life in this world, have to have an unfaithful husband—that, by the same terms in the same world, she might have a faithful one."<sup>65</sup> In a conversation with his own thoughts, Jayber Crow concludes Part II of his autobiography with his second act of homecoming, his second moment of giving something of himself over to the world, with no hope of any reciprocation. This final moment is worth quoting at length.

"You love her enough to be a faithful husband to her? Think what you're saying now. You're proposing to be the faithful husband of a woman who is already married to an unfaithful husband?"

"Yes. That's why. If she has an unfaithful husband, then she needs a faithful one."

"A woman already married who must never know that you are her husband? Think. And who will be never be your wife?"

"Yes."

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 239.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 241.

“Have you foreseen how this may end? Can you?”

“No.”

“Are you ready for this? Think, now.”

“Yes. I am ready.”

“Do you then, in love’s mystery and fear, give yourself to this woman to be her faithful husband from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death?”

“I do. Yes! That is my vow.”

I tremble to say so, but when I had given this assent, it seemed that there were watchers watching in the dark who all of a sudden could see me.

. . . But though I felt the whole world shaken underfoot, though I foresaw nothing and feared everything, I felt strangely steadied in my mind, strangely elated and quiet.<sup>66</sup>

Jayber’s marriage to Mattie Chatham restores a sense of place (read: belonging) within him, as well as in his ideal of the community—a marriage of marriages itself. As her faithful husband, Jayber’s love for Mattie enables an even greater restoration for him. “I knew (I knew beyond any proof) that the faith that carried me through the waterless wastes was not wasted.”<sup>67</sup>

The new vision of love that emerges in Part II of the novel is carried on and further developed in Part III. In this section, a number of the various strands of narrative and sub-plot come to their ends. Most significantly is Jayber’s forced retirement which is due to his non-compliance with the state board of health concerning the need for running water and a lavatory in his barbershop. Here, Jayber describes how the values of the particular community have come into conflict with those of the state.

I wasn’t mad at the inspector. I wasn’t mad, period. I had progressed enough to know there was nobody to be mad *at*. The inspector was a hand in a glove. The hand wasn’t responsible, really, and the glove without a hand in it was merely empty. What I felt, properly speaking, was just a sinking or an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach every time I thought about that ruled sheet of paper with the check marks on it. I could feel change coming and I didn’t want it to come. I didn’t know what it would be. Like, I suppose, every stray dog and cat, I would like a change for the better, but I fear changes made by people with more power than I’ve got.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 249.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 291.

And so, after thirty-two years in the barbershop of Port William, Jayber decides to close his doors, hang out his sign, packs his things and moves out of town, moving into a “retirement cottage” owned by his friend Burley Coulter, down on a little wooded bend of the Kentucky River, some two or three miles from town. The relocation to the river marks the final stage of Jayber Crow’s autobiography. From his little fishing shack he continues to cut hair and accepts donations (his customary manner of doing business all along), and forges a new community among the folks who live closer by.

During the time of Jayber’s relocation to the river, Troy Chatham—finally out from under the restraint of his father-in-law, Athey Keith—and free to leverage his entire farm in an effort at expansion, sees his entire life’s work (and his wife’s family inheritance) arrive at its inevitable conclusion. It comes to naught. Lacking both wisdom and restraint, Troy finally is compelled to clear-cut all of the old growth timber from a small tract of land Mattie’s father had always called his “nest egg.” For Athey Keith, the value of the farm had always laid in its ever-increasing potential, for Troy Chatham however, it symbolizes a set of obsolete values and antiquated notions better forgotten. Troy can only accomplish this logging because his wife Mattie lays dying in the hospital and is finally unable to stop him from undoing her father’s life’s work. Here we arrive at the conclusion of Jayber Crow’s autobiography.

In the novel’s final scene, the unspoken love between Jayber Crow and Mattie Keith Chatham is finally acknowledged in a scene of world-redeeming power and tender simplicity. Arriving at the hospital, Jayber finds Mattie sleeping.

When she saw me, she said, “Jayber. Oh, he’s cutting the woods.”

And so she knew.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she said quietly, “I could die in peace, I think, if the world was beautiful. To know it’s being ruined is hard.”

Then, in the loss of all the world, when I might have said the words I had so long wanted to say, I could not say them. I saw that I was not going to be able to talk without crying, and so I cried. I said, “But what about this other thing?”

She looked at me then. “Yes,” she said. She held out her hand to me. She gave me the smile that I had never seen and will not see again in this world, and it covered me all over with light.<sup>69</sup>

The conclusion of Jayber Crow’s autobiography does not depict the end of his life, though the reader expects that having been fulfilled in his marriage and kept faith to his vision of love for a woman, and for the world, that he is now ready to face it. The homecoming theme and its progression from nativity, through estrangement, to restoration, is repeated in more symbolic terms again and again in the novel, with the concept of love looming ever larger; the concept of authentic community being fairly subsumed into it.

With the synopsis now complete and, with these philosophical concepts in mind, it is now possible to begin the exposition of Berry’s politics of homecoming outright. The first phase—Nativity—is discussed in Chapter Two, which follows immediately. Here, the philosophical importance of place establishes an essential linkage. The native experience of home life informs the political life of the larger community, which in Berry’s Port William, is termed “Membership.”

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 363.

## CHAPTER 2. NATIVITY

A proper community, we should remember also, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, and an economy. It answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members—among them the need to need one another.<sup>1</sup>

A community knows itself and knows its place in a way that is impossible for a public (a nation, say, or a state). A community does not come together by a covenant, by a conscientious granting of trust. It exists by proximity, by neighborhood; it knows face-to-face, and it trusts as it knows. It learns, in the course of time and experience, what and who can be trusted. It knows that some of its members are untrustworthy, and it can be tolerant, because to know in this matter is to be safe. A community member can be trusted to be untrustworthy and so can be included. (A community can trust its liars to be liars, for example, and so enjoy them.) But if a community withholds trust, it withholds membership. If it cannot trust, it cannot exist.<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

A journey of homecoming must necessarily begin at home; from this it undertakes a corresponding journey of emigration. Nativity, then, is the self's orientation toward its original place. This chapter traces out the first stage of the three-part journey of homecoming that frequently manifests in Wendell Berry's writing. Nativity is the primeval state of the self. Place functions in this schema as both metaphoric and literal philosophical construct. In its metaphoric aspect, place connotes the home, or the being at home, from which the self must depart and to which it will eventually return.

In the Port William fiction, place is a metaphorical apparatus of the highest importance because it exposes some of the channels through which Berry's larger vision infuses the narrative. To understand place (or place-ness) in the Port William narrative (or narratives) is to

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, "Racism and the Economy," from *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," from *The Art of the Commonplace*, (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 174.

appreciate how inextricably the land and the community are bound. The binding is not so much oppressive, as it is uniting. The *place* of Port William is integral to the construction of the personal as well as the communal self.

In Berry's writing, descriptions of place delve into the particular with profound specificity. Here, personality is formed in relation to a certain place and through this experience come the earliest impressions of society, of order. At this moment come the first inklings of responsibility. To understand place in the Berryian constellation of symbols, it is important to note that man's place is only properly understood in its relationship to nature. But the converse is also true: natural places belong to humans. Detailed in this chapter are several different formulations of the idea that man lives *toward* his place. These symbols arrive at their fullest expression in the sacramental bond Berry sees in Creation between man and the earth.

In Berry's agrarian vision of place, the self does not perceive boundaries between home and work, life and livelihood. The natural setting that includes the home and the work is not cut off at the periphery of any sort of property line or limit. It is, at its core, a communal existence in the fullest sense. These are the impressions that Berry is using to characterize 'home' in his fiction: the running narrative of life, work, interaction, imagination and care. Membership is informed by place due to the demands and rhythms of farm labor. The pre-automotive mode of agriculture demands a working community capable of supplying the necessary labor and resources for subsistence. Because an agricultural life demands care of land and animals, farming communities tend to be very small, insulated and close-knit. The lives of Port William neighborhoods transcend the term "inter-connected;" they are fully-*interdependent*, for better or for worse. Estranged from these concrete identifiers of his self and seeking to return it to its home, Jayber Crow

will rely heavily on his memory of this native state of being. His self, longing for the ground of an *authentic* community, uses memory to enable its return.

Pursuing this, the experience of nativity, as I interpret it, provides a platform for discussing how the philosophical components of place interact during the self's formative years. It is in the pristine fullness of nativity that Jayber Crow's story of homecoming begins and, consequently, ends. "Rituals of domesticity" function as the structural agent of home-making in *Jayber Crow*. The term "rituals" in this sense suggests rehearsed acts familiar to the individual who, through their performance, reconnects to a deep sense of security and comfort. In the context of Berry's agrarianism, they become the means through which perceived boundaries between a person, a place, and livelihood are dissolved. The second section, "Place: an Agrarian Vision of Community," expands in focus to explore the broader vision of place as a vital and pervasive concept in Berry's comprehensive vision of political life. The concept is examined broadly, allowing the inquiry to articulate the various strata of meaning connoted by the term. The agrarian philosophy of community, its composition and life, is dominated by the idea of locality. In the third section, titled "Membership," the discussion turns to one the most politically provocative terms to appear in Berry's fiction. Membership, as will be shown, is a concept that flows into all three of this thesis's conceptual focal points, informing them in different ways. At its root, membership invokes the ancient Greek word *Mnemosyne*, which also shares an origin of the English word "memory." Just as membership involves a critical act of choice, another core element of membership, precipitating this choosing, is best described as *recognition*. The term is thus related to membership etymologically as well as philosophically.

For Jayber Crow, remembrance of his life at Squire's Landing—the shape and rhythm of the community and its activity there—will be the magnetic pole of which he speaks when

realizing how suddenly, in the midst of his disorientation, “I pointed to Port William as a compass needle points north.”<sup>3</sup> In this scene the rituals of domesticity function as the object of Jayber’s remembering, they will later come to serve as the practical means through which his self can apperceive its regained nativity and thus come to be at home in the political community.

Agrarian philosophy promotes cultural values derived in a particular place and textured by its regional character. For Berry, “place” is more than merely “locale.” Rather, Berry’s understanding of place is conceptually vibrant and abundant with nuance.

If the word *community* is to mean or amount to anything, it must refer to a place (in its natural integrity) and its people. It must refer to a placed people. Since there obviously can be no cultural relationship between a nation and a continent, “community” must mean a people locally placed and a people, moreover, not too numerous to have a common knowledge of themselves and their place.<sup>4</sup>

Capturing this philosophically expressive term, ‘place’ within the context of Jayber Crow’s nativity-experience and beyond is a daunting venture. Therefore, it will be useful to extricate some of the various threads and detail their implications. It should be noted here that the political hallmark of the native place is *pre-authentic* community. The journey home, to be complete, fundamentally involves an act of choice. The self, upon its return, must make the choice to re-member itself through remembering its rightful place in the community. In a moment of realization, Jayber Crow expresses it thus: “I could no longer imagine a life for myself beyond Port William. I thought, “I will have to share the fate of this place. Whatever happens to Port William must happen to me.”<sup>5</sup> Because the self in its “native” state, however, is a member by default instead of by desire, the term *pre-authentic* is the most useful descriptor.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Wendell Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community,” from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington D.C., Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 178.

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 143.

An “authentic” community is not merely one that consists of a certain group of people living in a certain place. As will be shown, one of the principal elements of authentic community is an act of volition. The commitment to unite the self with a membership requires a clear and rational act of will.

Membership, in this paradigm, is a “community of memory”<sup>6</sup> by definition as well as by description. It includes both the living and the dead, and combines this mimetic aspect with the agrarian ethic of communal labour and hence “commonwealth.” Thus, Berry’s vision of “The Port William Membership” is something of an icon for the study of political philosophy and literature. In this term, and more importantly in his development of it throughout his novels, Berry realizes his most provocative political statement. But it resists definition. Here in Chapter 2, Berry’s use of the term membership is framed within the context of nativity. The discussion engages Berry’s philosophy from the plane of his fiction and will reach to the novel *Jayber Crow* and elsewhere for illustrations. Other views of membership will manifest in the context of later stages in the homecoming progression. It should be stated definitively, however, that the phrase “Port William Membership,” appearing throughout Wendell Berry’s fiction is, for purposes of this thesis, singularly emblematic of the ideal of authentic community. The discussion of nativity begins, appropriately, at the center of all political and social life for Berry’s fiction—the home. Home, both the place and its activity, comes to be seen as a vibrant philosophical concept in the course of *Jayber Crow*. In the following discussion, rituals of domesticity are the activities behind the experiences comprising the everydayness of home life. This phenomenon is examined for its importance in constituting the earliest and most basic perceptions of order and identity for the self.

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Introduction to *Individualism and Commitment in American Society* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1987), p. 6.

## Rituals of Domesticity

Rituals of Domesticity are the multitude of daily tasks, encounters—mindlessly confronted, thoughtlessly completed—that subtly shade and contour the personal experience of a human lifetime. They are the means through which place and human activity are merged. This relationship represents the foundational action of home-*making* and is intimately tied to the formation of identity in Berry's conception. Whether in the chores of a farmyard, or the tidying of a studio-flat, humans come to recognize themselves in the daily completion of their specific tasks, albeit subconsciously. For a child, the familiarity of working through daily tasks with parents is pleasurable, engaging both the hands and the imagination. Through these daily rituals, a young boy like Jonah Crow forms an ingrained connection to his place in the order of the world.

Jayber Crow's autobiographical style narrates his childhood experiences as though he were reliving them. This convention assists the philosophical progression of the novel through combining childish innocence and honest, wide-eyed observation to set a constellation of vivid experiences to which the self will later have access through memory. Against these intuitions and predilections, later experiences can be aligned, establishing a continuity of narrative for the self and, in the case of autobiography, for the reader.

Jayber's description of the little world of Squires Landing expresses how he and his guardians functioned together and managed a household economy. Through their daily care, the Daggets maintained "the little store at the landing and had a farm of a dozen or so acres—a shelf of bottomland and a scrap of hillside—on which they grew a little tobacco crop and a garden, and kept a horse, a milk cow, meat hog, and flocks of chickens, turkeys, guineas, and geese."<sup>7</sup> This

---

<sup>7</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 17.

activity leaves a lasting impression on Jayber. “The life of that place had an amplitude I had not known before.”<sup>8</sup>

Later in his life, thinking back on his origins, Jayber reflects that even in his absence, “when I heard or read the word *home*, that patch of country was what I thought of.”<sup>9</sup> Getting reacquainted to Port William and habituated to his life there, he feels pulled to go back to both of his old homes and having arrived, finds that “there was nothing there even to recognize—just a patch of weeds and tree sprouts with a chimney sticking up in the middle.”<sup>10</sup> And here Jayber arrives at his deepest meditation on the meaning his memories of the old domestic rituals still hold for him, even in the final years of his life:

This is one of the things I can tell you that I have learned: our life here is in some way marginal to our own doings, and our doings are marginal to the greater forces that are always at work. Our history is always returning to a little patch of weeds and saplings with an old chimney sticking up by itself. And I can tell you a further thing that I have learned, and here I look forward to the resting of my case: I love the house that belonged to the chimney, holding it bright in memory, and I love the saplings and the weeds.<sup>11</sup>

The significance of this “little patch of weeds” is the emphasis of activity (“doings”) over life itself, which is most easily defined as “being” in this context. Another formulation of this phrase might read: “Our being here is less important than the sum of our labor.” For the agrarian, being has his industry, his livelihood, at its core. This is acknowledged by Jayber’s tying it to all of creation—“the greater forces that are always at work.” The universal implication of the phrase “our history is always returning,” tied to the particulars of Jayber Crow’s experience, is an early expression of the necessity of homecoming in the novel. The house, held “bright in memory” is gone, but through remembrance of the homemaking enacted there, it remains such that a man who

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 37-38.

has returned to its ruin would love even the weeds that have replaced it. Expressed in a negative formulation, when place is consciously connected to memory, then the loss of place must indicate the loss or concealment of memories.

One's place must be learned as well as experienced. The orientation and disposition of the self toward the requirements of its life and livelihood, a relationship between humans and nature, is not innate. In Berry's work, human excellence is expressed in the willing acceptance of the yoke of fidelity to community and place. One's place is not just the "where?" response. It is found in the movement of the self (or the soul) from "where?" to "here." As will be shown, there are no places without humans—"places" *become* through human interaction.

### **Place: An Agrarian Vision of Community**

Throughout Berry's fiction the reader persistently confronts the word and idea of "place." Place is employed to reference a particular location, a colloquialism denoting a farmstead (as in "The Jack Beechum place"), or further still, a more esoteric description of selfhood or self-understanding. These manifold uses of the single word indicate the author's level of preoccupation with place as a concept. This section will discuss place's significance as a concept informing the journey of homecoming. The agrarian vision of community, as Berry presents it, is a society governed by a sense of its place both in terms of the land, as well as in terms of its history, and its cultural norms.

Geographically, Port William is a place in and of itself, as is a farm or a home, a church, a law office, a field of wheat, or a favorite wooded bend of a river. These locations, however, are made places by their being known and acknowledged by humans—through particular relationships of living *toward* them, a relationship that implies a certain bond of care. Pondering Berry's arguments for ecologically sound land use, Kimberly Smith describes his outlook thus:

“Places accordingly figure prominently in the thoughts and affections of his characters, and his novels are centrally concerned with ‘how a place and person can come to belong to each other—or, rather, how a person can come to belong to a place.’”<sup>12</sup>

The idea of living toward places, by endowing the relationship with an understanding of mutual dependence, elevates it out of a simple notion of property rights and bestows it with a deep sense of reverence. “There are no unsacred places;” Berry says in a poem. He continues, “there are only sacred places / and desecrated places.”<sup>13</sup> Belonging to a place—recognizing and being beholden to both the material as well as the unworldly realities of Creation—is the cornerstone of agrarian thought. From this springs a renewed and more profound translation of “place,” elevating its normative function. In terms of social values, then, it is most-closely linked to the idea of *propriety*. In the paragraphs to follow, various application of the term “place” from Berry’s fiction are examined to enlarge the discussion of its philosophical relevance.

A steadfast fidelity to place means riding out the storms of fortune in obligation to the land and community. Berry’s sympathetic characters embody this virtue. Port William’s farmers are good husbands in the older sense of the word. They have staked their lives on narrow margins and court ruin as a matter of course. To survive, they must answer a “calling” of sorts, a beckoning of the land to honor it and thus ennoble themselves. A passage from *The Memory of Old Jack* punctuates this formulation of the farm and its possibilities inwardly calling out for the farmer’s response. In this brief scene, representative of much of Berry’s work, a husband of the land is depicted in relation to his “place:”

---

<sup>12</sup> Kimberly K. Smith, *Uncommon Grace: Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003) p. 141-142. (cf. footnotes 40 and 41. Second quote comes from *The Memory of Old Jack*, p. 72).

<sup>13</sup> Wendell Berry, “How To Be A Poet (*to remind myself*)” *Given, New Poems* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), p. 18.

He had known no other place. From babyhood he had moved into the openings and foldings of the old farm as familiarly as he moved inside his clothes. But after the full responsibility of it fell to him, he saw it with a new clarity. He had simply relied on it before. Now when he walked in his fields and pastures and woodlands he was tramping into his mind the shape of his land, his thought becoming indistinguishable from it, so that when he came to die his intelligence would subside into like its own spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Through this passage, Berry illustrates the tremendous advantages only available through an attunement to one's nativity. The price of extending oneself over the purview of individual care is symptomatic of a kind of bad philosophy that threatens the land, the community, and man himself in Berry's fiction. A carelessly maintained bottom field or an overworked hillside patch can sustain catastrophic and near-permanent damage in just a handful of crop seasons. An awareness of this precarious balance, of risk, and of care required for a farm's health, is the hallmark of a good or true farmer in Port William. It is unsurprising, then, that Berry and his commentators have acknowledged a certain analogy between farming and marriage. Both are covenantal bonds implying restraint. But in Berry's vision, this yoke of obligation (and the daily practice of fulfilling its requirements) is somehow mystically linked to mankind's creative capacity. In a poem titled "The Farm," Berry gives voice to this holy vision of obligation.

Be thankful and repay  
Growth with good work and care.  
Work done in gratitude,  
Kindly, and well, is prayer.  
You did not make yourself,  
Yet you must keep yourself  
By use of other lives.  
No gratitude atones  
For bad use or too much.

This is not work for hire.  
By this expenditure  
You make yourself a place;  
You make yourself a way  
For love to reach the ground.

---

<sup>14</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Memory of Old Jack* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), p. 30 (my italics).

In its ambition and  
Its greed, its violence,  
The world is turned against  
This possibility,  
And yet the world survives  
By the survival of  
This kindly working love.<sup>15</sup>

The poem suggests a classically agrarian sense of commitment to the land, but with an incorporation of sacramental language. It is representative of a strain of didacticism or pietism latent in all of Berry's work and similar to one readily apparent throughout *Jayber Crow*. Its message to "keep yourself / By the use of other lives," hints at Berry's ideality of membership, a community's addressing of the need of its members "to need one another."<sup>16</sup> This idea is developed in detail in the section which follows. The idea of love "reaching the ground" in this sense, is connotative of Berry's overall philosophy of homecoming within the context of this essay.

A final observation informing this discussion relates to the way in which Berry's vision of place includes both the material sense as well as the normative sense of its indicating propriety. A poetic interplay between the two levels of meaning, informing their philosophic bearing on the concept, is visible in the lines quoted above. The repetitive language in the phrases "You make yourself a place / You make yourself a way / For love to reach the ground" unites the two thrusts of meaning into a single image. The motif of love *reaching the ground* suffuses the bundled ideas of particularity and propriety into an ontologically suggestive expression. Place, in this formulation, moves from being the object of human interest to the subject. Put into a peroration: An agrarian keeps fidelity to, and for the sake of, his place.

---

<sup>15</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Farm," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 45th Anniversary Issue (Spring, 1993), p. 128.

<sup>16</sup> See epigraph at the beginning of this section.

In his narrative, Jayber Crow resourcefully enlarges the “farm as form” conceptualization of place to include the whole of its activity through the unfiltered perception of children.<sup>17</sup> Like the poetic excerpt above, the following passage illustrates how, perceptibly, the familiarity of the farm is not specific to its terrain or layout, but rather (especially for a child) a sort of comprehensive awareness of the land, the people, and the commonwealth of livelihoods. Describing a boy he knows, Jayber remembers how “from the time he could walk, and maybe before, Jimmy Chatham wanted to be with his grandpa. . . . The attraction was not just Athey himself, though I judge that might have been enough. Jimmy loved Athey’s place and his ways of working.”<sup>18</sup> Jayber’s choice of language in describing the child obviously comes from a similar personal experience—a memory of a life that was absorbed in the place where it made its livelihood. These two examples, taken together, intimate a more concrete expression of place that can be uttered as “home.”

Home, taken symbolically, has fascinated the poetic and philosophic imagination since the dawn of Western civilization. The longing that gives Homer’s *Odyssey* its emotional appeal is not a response to any glorious victory or loss in battle, but the desire of the beleaguered Odysseus “to see the hearthsmoke leaping upward from his own island.”<sup>19</sup> Home is a poetic expression encompassing both the household and the community. Home is what distinguishes *this* place from any other. It is the subjective point of origination and return. Home, in the Port William experience, is the place of the family and of the self. Jayber Crow’s narration very clearly articulates the significance of the colloquial “homeplace” in the construction and maintenance of

---

<sup>17</sup> Jeffery Alan Triggs, "Farm as Form: Wendell Berry's *Sabbaths*." In *Wendell Berry*. Ed. Paul Merchant. (Idaho: Confluence Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 261.

<sup>19</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, From Prentice Hall’s *Literature of the Western World: The Ancient World Through the Renaissance*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Vol. 1. p. 277.

the community and thus, the self. Similar to the biblical Promised Land, home makes requirements of the Port Williamites. To remain in the place, they must uphold a natural obligation to each other and creation that Berry frequently expresses in the term “fidelity.”

Place is of primary importance to understanding subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in Port William. Indeed, any political vision or philosophy that may be traced in Port William must remain constantly rooted in the concept. Observing this, it becomes imperative to set forth a framework for understanding place conceptually, in a manner that does not reduce or diminish it; but explores a self that is conscious *of* and *in* its proper place, and of this self’s place among other selves. Here again, the most readily available descriptor is the word “propriety” in describing the concept’s normative value. An illustration from another of Berry’s works is helpful on this point.

In the opening scenes of “Pray Without Ceasing,” Andy Catlett’s consciousness and imagination cooperatively serve as a vehicle for the plot when merged by the memories of his grandmother, Margaret Feltner. Compelled by the accidental discovery of a past local tragedy, Catlett is drawn to his grandparent’s home in a search for the family’s connection to the local narrative, this being the story of his great grandfather, Ben Feltner’s murder. Encountering his inquisitive grandmother upon entering the house, Catlett’s recounting offers a deeper connotation of place.

She asked exacting questions that called for much detail in the answers, watching me intently to see that I withheld nothing. She did not tolerate secrets, even the most considerate ones. She had learned that we sometimes omitted or rearranged facts to keep her from worrying, but her objection to that was both principled and passionate. If we were worried, she wanted to worry with us; it was her *place*, she said.<sup>20</sup>

As Margaret Feltner views it, “her place” implies a connection between her familial obligation and the overall shape and location of her sense of self. The place of her life, to

---

<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry, “Pray Without Ceasing,” from *Fidelity: Five Stories* (New York and San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 10. (italics are mine).

extrapolate, is the individual's subjective definition, the choice of one particular self over others, however improbable or unlikely these may seem. Her chosen place is to worry with her family, a fidelity that precludes all other contingencies. Margaret's maternal role carries this same fidelity with it, but "role" is insufficient to explain her particular sense of "place." "Place" does not articulate any specific attitudes or activities as "role" does, and thus is not gender, age, class or race-specific. Place, seen as propriety, is informed by morality. In the community, it serves as a model for behavioral determination, informed by pre-established social norms. Berry's attachment to the idea of place, then, is a good entry point to his corpus (particularly the novel *Jayber Crow*), as it is so foundational to his vision. For the agrarian imagination, place signifies the social importance of human attachment to particular, concrete, and familiar relationships, and it also connotes more politically effective notions of order and conduct.

The agrarian vision of community is inherently a political one. The self is constructed from the natural environment of which the human community is wholly a part. The correspondence of obligations between members, as well as between man and nature, strengthen the bonds of a community within itself and toward its place. The term *authentic*, which will be seen again and again in this essay, is entirely appropriate here to describe the vision of a rightly ordered community. An authentic community is ideally "a place and all of its native or benevolently naturalized inhabitants," as Berry expresses it.<sup>21</sup> The human component of community: "would be responsibly conscious of the having-in-common of which the community is composed."<sup>22</sup> In Berry's mind, a community requires a particular geographic location, but it

---

<sup>21</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Short Answer: An Exchange with Wendell Berry" *Preservation* 57.2 (March/April 2005), p. 49. Published in *Conversations With Wendell Berry*, Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

also requires a choice on the part of the citizen. His agrarian vision of community does not require nativity, “but we need to have settled into [a place] conscientiously as our permanent home. We have to give up the idea of going to ‘a better place’ or of ‘going west’ to escape our troubles and our messes.”<sup>23</sup> This idea of the community’s consciousness of its *having-in-common*, as well as the conscientious decision of joining and staying, are hallmarks of the communitarian strain found in Berry’s work. In the section which follows, the focus shifts from the significance of place to that of membership.

### **Membership**

Berry’s fiction is centrally concerned with the life and times of the Port William Membership. Membership is difficult to define succinctly—frequently it is used to intimate experiences or emotions that transcend temporality—the here and now of the world. A perfect illustration of this occurs in Jayber Crow’s narrative. The night Jayber leaves his barbershop/apartment in Port William to a retirement home, of sorts, in his friend Burley Coulter’s fishing shack on the river, he relates a vision of Port William that can only be described as metaphysical.

It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William; it was of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another’s love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 205.

Jayber Crow's vision, poetic and sentimental as it may be, expresses powerfully the very essence of the relationship between membership and community and their correspondence to a transcendental reality—this being time.

If the membership of a community (or “commonwealth”) can be “perfected beyond time,” then some political deductions are possible. Membership is fundamentally a relationship of shared-interest, but in Berry's vision it also transcends this simplistic formulation. Membership embodies justice, but subsumes it in love; it is in joy built on the family, but freely blurs the lines of kinship, marriage and succession. It is, in Berry's vision, the embodiment of authentic community.

Because the self in its native state is a member by default instead of by choice, the term “pre-authentic” is a better descriptor. An *authentic* community does not simply consist of a certain group of people living in a certain place. As will be shown, one of the requirements of membership is personal choice. Berry makes his definitive statement to this effect in a short story titled “The Wild Birds.”

In the Port William fiction, the unofficial originator of the idea of membership is Berry's familiar character Burley Coulter. In the story, another of Berry's most familiar characters, Wheeler Catlett, a man who though his occupation as a country lawyer, has “been the keeper of the names that bear hope of light to the human clearings, and an orderly handing down,” is confronted with Burley's desire to name Danny Branch—his illegitimate son—as the soul heir in his will.<sup>25</sup> Describing the reasoning that has led him to this conviction, Burley tells the others that “we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a

---

<sup>25</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Wild Birds” found in *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007) p. 349. (Italics are mine).

member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't.”<sup>26</sup> The colloquial expression used here is straight-forward and succinct, and yet it captures the volitional aspect of authentic community as well as invoking the timeless quality Berry sees in the idea. Knowing it, which is to say, acknowledging the holistic unity of the membership’s bond, is only possible for those who, mindful of its succession, join hands with all of the past and future members across time. One cannot *know* the membership and be outside it.

Hannah Coulter, who is present in the scene just described, expounds upon this concept in her own autobiography, the novel *Hannah Coulter*. She develops Burley Coulter’s idea further incorporating the concepts of place and time.

The membership includes the dead. Andy Catlett imagines it going back and back beyond the time when all the names are forgotten. The members, I guess you could say, are born into it, they stay in it by *choosing* to stay, and they die in it. Or they leave it as my children have done. . . .

. . . My children were born into that story, and into the membership that the story is about, and into the place that was home to the membership, and home to them too as long as they wanted such a home. We brought them up, teaching them as well as we could the things the place would require them to know if they stayed. And yet . . . they chose to go.<sup>27</sup>

Hannah’s acknowledgment of the eternal extension of Port William’s membership is key to understanding Berry’s vision. The default, pre-authentic membership of those “born into it” later gives way to an act of choice. She indicates that her own children have left the membership, and, considering both passages, implies that their choice to leave involved forgetting, or *dis-remembering* their own story. Finally, being taught “the things the place would require” intimates that although Hannah’s children assuredly have learned

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 356.

<sup>27</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004) p. 94-95 (italics are mine).

their place through the enactment of domestic rituals, they have broken this bond of fidelity in favor of the world outside the membership. They will attempt to establish themselves somewhere other than their home. Hannah's sadness in indicating this expresses Berry's doubt as to their possibilities for success.

Membership functions on an observance of time that is removed from any linear conceptions and, while rooted in particular place, abstracts the idea of that place from any kind of contingency based on that linear conception of time. To fully illuminate membership—experience in this way—requires a different way of conceptualizing time. This time-less quality of membership places Berry's application of the term into stark contrast with more familiar or contemporary contexts. Somehow, membership in Port William is a political and economic association that functions to “keep the memories even of horses and mules and milk cows and dogs,” living and dead, along with the human community in an eternal moment of shared consciousness.<sup>28</sup> Thorough individual and communal remembrance of the membership's own story, the political community strengthens and clarifies the bonds of affiliation. In Port William, the sense of belonging within the corporate identity is intensified by the understanding that one's place is not lost even in death. Thus, as a political concept, membership expresses both a sense of unity, and of continuity. Through *mnemosyne* its etymological root, membership is equally connotative of the term “memory.” This is critical to understanding Berry's politics of homecoming

At the surface level, Jayber Crow's memories of an authentic community are what facilitate his first inclinations of returning. Beneath this, however, lies an interplay of philosophy and metaphor, revealing a much more intricate political vision in Berry's prose. The

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

formation of identity through homemaking establishes both the self's initial attachment to place as well as expanding the concept of community to include a place, its people, and their livelihood. The idea of unity is characteristic of the native state of being. The wholeness of the self is merged in the greater unity of all creation. The etymological linkage of membership and memory includes other expressions that approach *mnemosyne* from the negative. These formulations, characterized by the self's forgetting, are discussed in the next chapter in the context in which they most frequently appear in the novel. Berry sees the effects of modernity on the self as causing deep feelings of restlessness, the desire for individual autonomy, and the *forgetting* of essential truths; truths that enable to the self to locate, recognize, and *be* at home.

### **Conclusion**

Agrarian writers commonly dwell at length on the self-referential aspect of labor, of tillage. There is a supposed virtue inherent in individual toil—man becomes the symbolic mediator between the fertile ground and the heavens above. Berry's perspective embraces this image though he does much to humanize and expand it. Though he often explores the image of the farmer in poetic language, Berry's vision is deeply philosophical, embracing not just the lone man in the field, but the life of the family that must support and contain this ideal and any virtue that it carries.

The generations of families depicted in the Port William fiction maintain, with varying success, in what some would call the Jeffersonian Ideal of the independent American farmer. This designation is somewhat disingenuous, however. While Berry clearly expresses a certain affection for the yeoman ideal, his philosophical attunement resists praising it unqualifiedly. Berry's vision of agri-culture identifies the self-referential quality of domestic industry. "Workaday" tasks, though physically demanding, are also a means of maintaining a tightly-knit

family, or even a community of families. They facilitate communication, even imaginative communication. The telling and retelling of local history and legend engenders the living memory of the community, and its communal subjectivity. The shared experience of a particular place grounds memory or narrative in a concrete, fixed setting. If “home-making” is an action, it is an activity oriented toward the particular. In an early essay, Berry articulates precisely this idea of living *toward* place in his own life. He writes:

And so what has become the usual order of things reversed itself with me; my mind became the root of my life rather than its sublimation. I come to see myself as growing out of the earth like the other native animals and plants. I saw my body and my daily motions as brief occurrences and articulations of the energy of the place, which would fall back into it like leaves in the autumn.<sup>29</sup>

The implication of this statement for Berry’s fiction is that for his ideal community, which is by no means a utopia, the person-peripheral sphere of civic life is sufficient for the reader’s understanding. Further, these same observations lead to the conclusion that beyond the scope of the familiar, moving from the particular to the general (or from *actual* relationships to abstract *theoretical* ones), society begins to lose its capacity to understand the delicate interweaving of man, nature, and community.

Throughout Berry’s corpus, the virtue of meeting the needs of one’s home is consistently affirmed. It is not simply that the task brings joy, but rather that the willing submission to one’s place opens the self *toward* joy. Berry’s agrarian perspective does not heap praise on the virtues of pre-automatic life out of romantic nostalgia. Rather, Berry focuses on these “antiquated” practices because they promote certain forgotten ancestral values; these being associated with care, with patience, with sufficiency, with home’s economy and providing for its sustainability. That the modern economy disparages these labor-intensive, time-consuming, and un-profitable

---

<sup>29</sup> Wendell Berry, “A Native Hill,” from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002) p. 7.

tasks as “outdated,” does not render the human experience of them any less valuable. They remain, in Berry’s view, an older and deeper knowledge, one that has the bearing of wisdom.

Nativity, as this chapter has shown, is the original state of the self. In terms of the politics of homecoming, it represents a home lost, but in terms of community life, it is not precisely home *regained*, the latter only being available through the process of restoration. The home lost, however, resembles the home regained and this is most clearly evident in the way the basic and most simple rituals of domesticity are the first things Jayber begins to miss when taken to the orphanage. This phenomenon is explained by Berry’s vision of agrarian community. Place, both the actual physical location of a home or a commonwealth, also connotes one’s responsibility and, in a powerful sense, one’s identity within that community and away from it. It is significant that Berry uses the word ‘place’ throughout his writing to connote both a geographical sense of the word, as well as a sense of propriety. Finally, the inclusion of the concept of membership to the discussion of place establishes the political importance of authentic community. It is toward this unconditional and timeless bond of neighborliness that the self will eventually turn when, having lost its place and its way, turns back toward its origins.

The consequences of displacement are explored in the chapter to follow. Estrangement, for Jayber Crow, begins with his being uprooted from pre-authentic community at Squires Landing, and being thrust into the inauthentic community of an institution, the orphanage. What had been available to him, were he offered the choice of remaining, disappears instantly. What follows this physical transplantation is a synchronous unraveling of his self’s unity. As will be shown, the divided self is a prominent component of Berry’s overall vision. The division of the self, of the community, and the destruction of creation itself are emblematically the fundamentals of Berry’s critique of modernity.

## CHAPTER 3. ESTRANGEMENT

I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Jayber Crow's period of estrangement begins when he is taken from his home at Squires Landing to live at The Good Shepherd Orphanage. Having been cut off from its origins and separated from its native place of being, the self experiences its estrangement, or "dismemberment," paralleling the disintegration of the community itself, through its being abandoned "dismembered" and forgotten "dis-remembered." Historically, this process is accelerated by the advent of modern industrial reality. This chapter addresses the second phase of Jayber Crow's homecoming progression. Broadly, it develops philosophical concepts that become most clearly effective within the context of the self's estrangement. Its substantive sections, "Dismemberment," and "Modernity: The War and The Economy" develop distinct but interrelated arguments. Throughout, the parallel effects of dismemberment on the self and on the community remain centrally important.

"Dismemberment," the chapter's first section, examines the connection between an inward disruption or disordering of the self to the historical decline of a small country town. This motif, omnipresent in Berry's corpus, depicts the perpetual decline of Port William and the membership residing in it. Analogous symbols appear in Jayber Crow's mimetic rehearsal of his life story as well as his meditative homilies on Port William. Through these, the framework for Berry's

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry "Health is Membership" in *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p.146.

comprehensive critique of modernity emerges. Foremost among the symbols developed is that of a community's living memory, addressed in the previous chapter.<sup>2</sup>

Port William's perpetual state of decline, its loss of members and, consequently, its loss of "rememberers," is Berry's fictional rendering of one of the more familiar tropes in his nonfiction. Politically, Berry is a writer and public figure who challenges the morality and practical consequences of modernity's prevailing outlook on mankind and the natural environment. Yet Berry is also deeply concerned with the underlying philosophical assumptions that guide destructive and wasteful human acts. As a critic, Berry has devoted vast tracts of essays to explorations of the causes and effects of America's agricultural and social "unsettling."<sup>3</sup> And though his essays question the substance of human reasoning, Berry's philosophizing in them is attenuated by the nature of the medium. The scope of practical language and experience limit the expression of Berry's deeper humane vision. Through his fiction, however, and in the character Jayber Crow in particular, Berry is able to tap the entire universe of subjective experience, thus illuminating an event's inner truth.<sup>4</sup> In *Jayber Crow*, Port William's spirit is animated as fully as any single character. Like any human, Port William is conscious of both its living and its dying, both in and out of time. Its dying is the product of the greater forces of history and time, external events beyond Port William's comprehension or control.

History is crucial to this chapter's second section. In "Modernity: 'The War' and 'The Economy,'" the analysis works closely with a distinct pair of concepts that are peculiar to *Jayber Crow* in Berry's corpus. Witnessing a period of disintegration in Port William, Jayber unleashes

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Introduction to *Individualism and Commitment in American Society* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Here I borrow a term from the title of Berry's essay "The Unsettling of America."

<sup>4</sup> Phrase comes from David Luban, "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory." In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 98. ,

a polemic about the duo of “The War” and “The Economy.” In the passage quoted below, Jayber speculates on their coming into being, evidenced in view of the ravages they have jointly visited upon Port William and the world.

I know it is somewhat objectionable to capitalize such things and speak of them as if they were freestanding creatures. But The War and The Economy were seeming more and more to be independent operators. . . .

It seemed that The War and the Economy were more and more closely related. They were the Siamese twins of our age, dressed alike, joined head to head, ready at any moment to merge into a single unified Siamese, when the crossed eyes of government should uncross. The War was good for The Economy. There was a certain airy, wordy kind of patriotism that added profit to its virtue.<sup>5</sup>

To offer further insight, the discussion then expands to include related scenes found in others of Berry’s works. Through these, it becomes feasible to examine Berry’s overall critique of modernity in sharper detail.

The estrangement phase of the politics of homecoming sees the self depart its native place, either by choice or by circumstance, and turn away from its origins. The effects of dismemberment are plainly visible in Berry’s writing, both for individuals as well as for the community itself. And while dismemberment, is an inevitable phenomenon in the life of any community, its natural wax and wane contrasts sharply with the advent of modernity, and its twin heads of “The War” and “The Economy.” Between its two sections, this chapter depicts the destruction and dissolution of the self and of community life endemic to a world of changing values; a world characterized by homelessness.

### **Dismemberment**

Dismemberment is not a classically political term. In common use it connotes violence or injury, the division of a body into its constituent parts; a mutilation leading to death. Its relevance is clarified if considered in terms of its linguistic roots, becoming “Dis-*memberment*.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* p. 273-274.

Considering Berry's view of community, however, the word is oddly appropriate in describing the violence done to communities in an effort to adapt to the modern environment.

Dismemberment, in the story of Jayber Crow, inaugurates a series of encounters that serve to further distance him from his native place. Considered collectively, a fuller image of the political self in Berry's writing emerges. Between them, the institutions of the orphanage, the seminary at Pigeonville College, and the other experiences of Jayber's life during the phase of estrangement share a common flaw: they represent inauthentic community, as opposed to the one Jayber had known at Squires Landing. Through Jayber's experiences of estrangement, Berry's political philosophical vision of man and community comes into focus. During his absence from home as a child, Jayber Crow's true identity, in his cognitive attachment to his name and to his place, is forgotten (dis-remembered). The impact of this estrangement on his selfhood is paralleled in the text with the disintegration and abandonment of the community of Port William and its membership.

The first intimation of a dis-membering experience in Jayber Crow's life story occurs at The Good Shepherd orphanage during a scene in which Jayber (now having had his name shortened to simply "J. Crow," per the headmaster's dictate) reminisces about the sensation of no longer feeling as though he belonged to his own name. "I remember walking around saying my name to myself—"Jonah Crow, Jonah Crow"—until it seemed that it never could have belonged to me or to anybody else."<sup>6</sup> Names are important to self-apperception in Berry's universe. Just as domestic rituals acquaint the self to the active component of home-making, the named self exists in correspondence to the spoken name as well as the affirming gaze of another.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 32.

Once again, Berry's agrarian vision of the self is inherently political because in it, identity is wholly embedded in community. The self requires more than the presence or gaze of another individual, but rather that of a recognized member. This idea is vaguely sketched in the scene just mentioned. In this same episode, Jayber remembers "waking up in my dormitory room for the first several mornings, for maybe a minute or two not knowing where I was, and then knowing. . . . And I would be filled with a strange objectless fear, as if in the twinkling of an eye I had been changed not only into another world but into another body." For the entity that had come to know itself and be known by the name "Jonah Crow," the loss of native forms and the security of membership does not simply divorce his being from its attachment to the name, it nullifies the name's very historical existence. The newly dubbed "J. Crow" is sent into exile for reasons beyond comprehension or control. In this new and strange place, among a provisional community of exiles (who have also had their names standardized), J. Crow and the other orphans become "not quite nameless, but also not quite named." He continues:

The effect was curious. For a while anyhow, and for how long a while it would be hard to say, we all acted on the assumption that we were no longer the persons we had been—which for all practical purposes was the correct assumption. We became in some way faceless to ourselves and to one another."<sup>7</sup>

This out-of-body experience of the self, treated in this excerpt from *Jayber Crow*, is analogous to a companion scene found in Berry's novel *Remembering*. Here, Andy Catlett, prominent among the fourth-generation of Berry's Port William characters, has been maimed in a farming accident. Having lost his right hand, he has been physically dismembered, but also, due to the emotional effects of confronting his new disability, has become estranged and dismembered from his family and neighbors. Leaving home to attend a conference in a far-away city, and therefore no longer having any concrete identifiers of his place, Andy wakes in a

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

strange hotel room (not unlike Jayber waking for the first time in his bed at the orphanage) and experiences a powerful subjective state of obscurity and alienation.

The feel of the bed, the smell of the room seem compounded of the strangeness of all the strangers who have slept there: salesmen, company officers, solitary travelers, who have entered, shut the door, set down their bags, and stood, weary and silent, afraid to speak, even to themselves, their own names. A man could go so far from home, he thinks, that his own name would become unspeakable to him, unanswerable by anyone, so that if he dared to speak it, it would escape him utterly, a bird out an open window, leaving him untongued in some boundless amplitude of mere absence.<sup>8</sup>

The loss of name is significant here again because it combines a number of important elements of Berry's vision.

In this context the *named* self flounders for some concrete signification of its identity in the absence of an authoritative *namer*, embodied by a recognized member of its community. Additionally, the "strangeness of all the strangers" compounding in the room with a fear of speaking one's name reinforces the passage's sense of alienation. The self feels no power of utterance and responds immediately by isolating and opposing itself through discrimination. As a result, all of the room's previous occupants are regarded uniformly and dismissively as *strange*. Finally, consider the fragmentation of Catlett's body itself to round out the list of factors actively contributing to an estranged state of being in Berry's vision. Thinking of all that he has lost (which includes his hand, as well as perceived place within a membership), Catlett's memories begin to dwell on absence.

That absence is with him now, but only as a weary fact, known but no longer felt, as if by some displacement of mind or heart he is growing absent from it.

It is the absence of everything he knows, and is known by, that surrounds him now.

He is absent from himself, perfectly absent. Only he knows where he is, and he is no place that he knows. His flesh feels its removal from other flesh that would recognize it or respond to its touch; it is numb with exile. He is present in his body, but his body is absent.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *Remembering* (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

In both these scenes of name loss, the character in question is simultaneously out of his familiar place and denied access to the resources of membership. Berry uses a character's inability to recognize or speak his proper name to emphasize the fracturing of identity during the self's estrangement. Andy Catlett has lost his place in the membership, or so he feels, because in the loss of his hand, he has lost his ability to work—an activity connecting him to his place within and among the Port William Membership. Jayber Crow, lacking such a mature outlook and alone with his memories, one night in his bed, begins to grieve.

The child I had been came and made his motions, out and about and around, down to the store down to the garden, down to the barn, up to the house, up to the henhouse. . . . All my steps had made the place a world and made me at home in it, and I had gone, just as Aunt Cordie and Uncle Othy had been at home and then had gone.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his writing, Berry declares a need for a holistic view of the self, and of the body, with nature. A self that has lost its place and its community will suffer diminishment and die out. Doubtlessly, it was in this spirit that he coined the phrase “health is membership.”<sup>11</sup> Just as the self is dismembered when estranged from the authentic community, a parallel effect is observed within the community itself. The discussion now turns to observe this effect in Berry's fictional community of Port William.

Setting a fictional town in the state of Kentucky gives Berry's fiction an uneasy correspondence with actual places and events of history. It has been stated that Port William's collective memory holds no precise accounting of its origin. Through this premise, Berry can paint Port William's consciousness as inhabiting a sort of eternal present that melds both its memory and its imagination into its “conversation, its consciousness of itself, its sleep and

---

<sup>10</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> Wendell Berry “Health is Membership” in *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002).

waking,” a kind of unending narrative of observation and speculation. Extending his meditation and the metaphor, Jayber Crow observes that “mostly the town’s history had become its ways, its habits, its feelings, its familiarity with itself.”<sup>12</sup> And while this time-less quality of the town is a unified motif in Berry’s novels, there is also in them a continual awareness that Port William exists in another, larger story that is external to its own.

Narrative voices in Berry’s fiction frequently hint at Port William’s impending demise or “disintegration,” both the town itself as well as its membership.<sup>13</sup> Jayber sees how the movements of larger forces in the world, however distant, have found their way irresistibly into Port William and have begun to act upon it. “When I say that Port William suffered a new run of hard times in the 1960s, I don’t mean that it had to ‘weather a storm’ and come out safe again in the sunshine. I mean that it began to suffer its own death, which it has not yet completed, from which it may or may not revive.”<sup>14</sup>

The death of Port William is an omnipresent concern in Berry’s fiction. This corresponds directly to Berry’s advocacy of the restoration of rural life and local economies in America today. The decline of Port William is symbolic not merely of Berry’s lament for a vanishing culture, but also his philosophic critique of modernity. Here, he adumbrates the problem:

What does the death of a community, a local economy, cost its members? And what does it cost the country? So far as I know, we have no economists who are interested in such costs. Nevertheless, when you must drive ten or twenty miles to reach a doctor or a school or a mechanic or to find parts for farm machinery, the costs exist, and they are increasing. As they increase, they make the economy of every farm and household less tenable.

---

<sup>12</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* Ibid, p. 300.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter 25: “A Period of Disintegration” in Wendell Berry *Jayber Crow*, p. 273-282.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 274.

As people leave the community or, remaining in the place, drop out of the local economy, as the urban-industrial economy more and more usurps the local economy, as the scale and speed of work increase, care declines. As care declines, the natural supports of the human economy and community also decline, for whatever is used is used destructively.<sup>15</sup>

The clear sense of outrage and loss Berry feels in the decline of rural communities is the result of an exploitative motivation at the heart of the American economy since its inception. He writes: “The economy is still substantially that of the fur trade, still based on the same general kinds of commercial items: technology, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and drugs.”<sup>16</sup>

Nowhere is Berry’s treatment of the decline of community life more poignantly presented than in his portrayal of Port William. The following passages, drawn variously from Berry’s corpus, illustrate its gradual, but perpetual disintegration. The first quotation depicts Port William in its early years: “Nothing in Port William seemed to him to be in passage from any beginning to any end. The living had always been alive, the dead always dead.”<sup>17</sup> The boy whose impressions are described here is Mat Feltner, a second-generation figure in Berry’s Port William Membership. This passage from his early life (five years old in 1888) is readily compared to one from, literally, the end of his life. Here, as Mat Feltner lays on his deathbed, another vision of Port William is described, narrated by his grandson Andy Catlett.

For a long time in Port William, what had gone had not been replaced. Its own attention had turned away from itself toward what it could not be. And I understood how, in his dream, my grandfather had suffered his absence from the town; through much of his life it had grown increasingly absent from itself.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Wendell Berry, “Conservation and Local Economy” from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 198.

<sup>16</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Unsettling of America” from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Hurt Man (1888)” from *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Wendell Berry, “That Distant Land (1965)” from *ibid*, p. 311.

The decline of Port William that is described here offers a parallel vision to the one of Andy Catlett in *Remembering* described earlier in this section. Familiar motifs emerge: a sick and dying man dreams of absence from a town which, simultaneously, is beginning to envision its own death, through the imaginations of its rememberers; and Andy Catlett most certainly is one of these.

Incidentally, it is the loss of Port William's rememberers, and along with them its memories, that Jayber Crow fears will be its undoing. He frames his remark in the context of the worrisome situation faced by Port William's farmers. It is worth quoting at length.

I don't think that such thoughts had ever been in the minds of farming people before. Before, no matter how hard they worked or how little they earned, farmers had always had at least the assurance that they were doing the necessary work of the world, and that before them others (most likely their own parents and grandparents) had done the same work, which still others (most likely their own children and grandchildren) would do when they were gone. In this enduring lineage had been a kind of dignity, the dignity at least of knowing that the work you are doing must be done and that it does not begin and end with yourself. Now the conversation in my shop was burdened with the knowledge that their work might come to an end. A good many of them already knew to a certainty that they did not know who would be next to farm their farms, or if their farms would be farmed at all. All of them knew that neither farming nor the place would continue long as they were. The dignity of continuity had been taken away. Both past and future were disappearing from them, the past because nobody would remember it, the future because nobody could imagine it. What they knew was passing from the world. Before long it would not be known. They were the last of their kind.<sup>19</sup>

The decline of the farmers in Port William is evidently tied not only to the loss of the "dignity of continuity," coming at the hands of lost posterity, but also it is tied to the loss of anyone to keep the membership alive through memory. This is certainly what Hannah Coulter means when she says that "The membership includes the dead. Andy Catlett imagines it going back and back beyond the time when all the names are forgotten. The members, I guess you could say, are born into it, they stay in it by choosing to stay, and they die in it. Or they leave it, as my children have

---

<sup>19</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, p. 277-278

done.”<sup>20</sup> As intimated, Berry’s vision of the self understands the individual’s sense of identity as tied to its community. Without the affirming gaze of a neighbor, the self forgets, or disremembers its proper place, a state of disorientation not altogether different from amnesia. Cumulatively, Port William’s decline is a slowly unfolding apocalypse that began in its very creation and extends into the unimaginable future—too uncertain to predict. This decline is accelerated by another apocalypse which arrives with advent of industrial modernization. Centrally located in the timeline of Berry’s historic Port William is the chaos of the Second World War.

While every generation lives in a world aware of other killing fields, it is in Berry’s effort to address the WWII period that he gives some of his most fully articulated depictions of the effect of war on community. Here, in the context of war, the parallel between the self and the community can be glimpsed most easily. The dismembering effects of war are, as Hannah Coulter describes them, “a human storm of explosions and quakes and fire, man-made natural disaster gathering itself up over a long time out of ignorance and hatred, greed and pride, selfishness and a silly love of power.” She continues, “I imagined it gathering up into armies of ‘ignorant boys, killing each other’ and passing like a wind-driven fire over the quiet land and kind people.” She concludes by reflecting on the war’s impact on her husband. “I knew then what Nathan knew all his life: It can happen anywhere.”<sup>21</sup> War’s indiscriminant violence is felt equally by the self and the community. As the next section will discuss in greater detail, war’s simultaneous destruction of self and community is crystalline in its ability to embody dismemberment.

---

<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*, (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004) p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172.

## Modernity: “The War” and “The Economy”

Berry’s view of modernity is approached most readily in examining two of his most pervasive metaphors: “The War” and “The Economy.” It is appropriate to discuss them in this order because they are in many ways linked by history. World War II and the subsequent period of rapid industrialization and mobility are treated in Berry’s work as harbingers of destruction and the embodied spirit of modernity. The destructive impulse in man is as much a part of his nature as any creative or compassionate sense and Berry’s view of war with relation to the modern period does not overlook this fact. The modern industrial economy is the offspring of that same destructive impulse.

Against the scenic backdrop of Port William—which attains serenity, but not without a fair share of violence and partiality—Berry paints wars and the rumors of wars as distant storm clouds: unimaginable darkness and fire, blood and steel. Throughout the Port William narrative, and appearing definitively in *Jayber Crow*, The War—now an entity—inevitably manifests itself at home, and then later abroad, taking lives and leaving ruination in its aftermath. Jayber says that war “is complete and spares nothing, balks at nothing, justifies itself by al that is sacred, and seeks victory by everything that is profane.”<sup>22</sup> Jayber goes on to intimate the universality of wary, and this is a key insight into Berry’s larger philosophy. Here Jayber expresses the larger metaphysical principles at work, of which The War is only a manifestation. “Hell itself, the war that is always among us, is the creature of time, unending time, unrelieved by any light or any hope.”<sup>23</sup> Here Jayber expresses a negative formulation for his metaphysical ideal of love. War, we see, is the consequence of falling short of the ideals of love whether they are expressed

---

<sup>22</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*, (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 249.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

through marriage or neighborliness. The War, Jayber says, “is always among us,” for it corresponds to time, whereas love “is of eternity”—a conceptual distinction considered in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to emphasize the omnipresence of war in Berry’s vision. And while the historical as well as the narrative-based circumstances of each manifestation are different, the language with which they are depicted is unmistakably unified.

In a scene from the novel *Hannah Coulter*, Berry’s characteristically poetic style renders an envisioning of The War’s devastating effects on the self.

You fought for days without knowing where you were, when the known world consisted of what you could see, the few friends fighting on either side of you, and the unknown enemy in front. You were lost in an enormous fact. The ones of you who were lost in it may never quite have found your way out of it, and nobody outside it would ever quite understand it. How far from home were you? How far beyond the political slogans? You were one of an army of young men fighting to stay alive and you were fighting an army of young men who finally were fighting only to die. They had to be killed, almost every one of them.

You knew the terrible loneliness of the thought that your life was worth nothing. You were expendable. You were being spent. Your folks could not have imagined what you were going through, you could not want them to know, you would never tell them.<sup>24</sup>

This imagery is typical of Berry’s renderings of war in all of his literary voices. It is interesting how war even comes to be emblematic of modernity itself—consumptive, heedless, and without restraint in its demand for men and material. Viewed from Port William’s perspective, war’s very existence is its justification; the will and the hunger indistinguishable.

The War is the antithesis of community, of membership. If unity of selfhood and identity bound to a particular place express the self’s native state then The War, ongoing and implacable, is the absolute negation of it. For an illustration, consider the following passage. Here it is important to note the subtle way the narrative style gives voice to both conscious and subconscious impressions upon the of self as Art Rowanberry relives his experience in the war.

---

<sup>24</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004) p. 170-171.

“I am not a stranger, but I am changed. Now I know a mighty power than can pass over the earth and make it strange. There are people, where I have been, that won’t know their places when they get back to them. Them that live to get back won’t be where they were when they left. . . .

“I know a mighty power,” he thought. “A mighty power of death and fire. An anger beyond the power of any man, made big in machines equal to many men. And a little man who has passed through mighty death and fire and still lived, what is he going to think of himself when he is back again, walking the river road below Port William. That we would have blowed all to flinders as soon as look at it if it had got in our way?”<sup>25</sup>

The “mighty power” Art mentions resonates with the same emotion as Hannah Coulter imagines as being “lost in an enormous fact,” overwhelmed, disoriented, and stripped of all humanity.<sup>26</sup>

Modernity, in Berry’s vision, sacrifices the direct connections of care and forbearance to small places in the name of a larger and greater impulse to bend the world into submission in the name of profit. The machinery of warfare, cold and powerful, and its violence, brutal and undiscerning, both are characteristic of an ideology that pollutes a river or depletes the land beyond its regenerative capacity, even as still depends on both for the basic staples of human sustenance. Enamored with big ideas, big machines that work quickly, stop-gap solutions applied to systemic problems, and needing some means of justification, Berry’s regard for this modern mentality of speed and greed is expressed as a history of delirious violence, waste, and moral confusion. He writes:

The mentality that exploits and destroys the natural environment is the same that abuses racial and economic minorities, that imposes on young men the tyranny of the military draft, that makes war against peasants and women and children with the indifference of technology. The mentality that destroys a watershed and then panics at the threat of flood is the same mentality that gives institutionalized insult to black people and then panics at the prospect of race riots. It is the same mentality that can mount deliberate warfare against a civilian population and then express moral shock at the logical

---

<sup>25</sup> Wendell Berry, “Making It Home” from *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), p. 232.

<sup>26</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004) p. 170.

consequences. . . . We would be fools to believe that we could solve any one of these problems without solving the others.<sup>27</sup>

Berry's literary project has long decried the recklessness of modernity by holding up its destructive values and asking it to account for its casualties. His vision of Port William, in its life and its death, is meant to speak to the lost humanity of estranged selves.

The thought of loving your enemies is opposite to war. You don't have to *do* it; you don't *have* to love one another. All you have to do is keep the thought in mind and Port William becomes visible, and you see its faces and know what it has to lose.<sup>28</sup>

There are at least four major United States military conflicts that impact Port William over the span of Jayber Crow's narrative. Through Jayber's meditations on war and its meaning to the community, certain historical details come to light as well. Describing the death of Mattie and Troy Chatham's son Jimmy in Vietnam, Jayber notices American society's great cultural shift away from the older, more traditional values of civic responsibility and self-sacrifice, toward an even more abstract, collectivized, consumer-based understanding of citizenship.

When Jimmy Chatham was killed in Vietnam it was not something anybody could easily believe. The War had come again and we were in it, there was no doubt about that. And yet it had changed. It was not what it had been before. It was not, for instance, World War II. It was smaller and seemed farther away. We at home were less involved. We sent fewer of the young. We made no sacrifices. There was nothing we used less of. People did not try to save gasoline, but drove their vehicles just as much and just as fast as ever. It was easy for people to guess that things were mainly all right.<sup>29</sup>

Here the converging purposes of The War and The Economy are plainly visible. Vietnam is a different kind of war for Port William because fewer among its members feel in any way connected to the war, or responsible for it. Thus, the exploitative mentality at the heart of Berry's critique of the means and ends of the modern economy comes clearly to the fore.

---

<sup>27</sup> Wendell Berry, "Think Little" from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 293.

Through this passage from *Jayber Crow*, Port William can be seen becoming at once more isolated and, conversely, more connected to the larger world. While more isolated in its abstraction from the actual causes and effects, the fighting and the dying of a particular war, Port William is at the same time more connected to the rest of the world through the increasing influence of the modern economy.

Just as Berry's critique of the modern economy and his vision for its correction have garnered equal shares of acclaim and controversy over the last forty years, *Jayber Crow*'s objection to the devaluation of small-scale agriculture is no less poignant in its cry for responsibility amidst the ongoing commoditization of people and agriculture.

The Economy no longer wanted the people of Port William to produce, for instance, eggs. It wanted them to eat eggs without producing them. Or, more properly speaking, it wanted them to *buy* eggs. It didn't care whether the eggs were eaten or not, so long as they were bought. It didn't care how fresh they were or how good they were, so long as they were bought. Perhaps, so long as they were paid for, The Economy was not much interested in even delivering the eggs.<sup>30</sup>

Economics, however, are not the primary source of concern. Once again, The Economy, like The War, while taken as a fact of reality, is summarily rejected as the inevitable outcome of "progress," which is a doctrine based on the destructive philosophical principles emblematic of the modern state and its economy.

It is not due to "The War" but to "The Economy" that Jayber is forced into his early-retirement (albeit unofficially). Discussing the era in which he mourns the death of his "unofficial" father-in-law, Athey Keith, in 1961, Jayber reflects that there was "a new run of hard times for Port William, and of course for other places like it."<sup>31</sup> Jayber next muses about how the life of Port William had become of secondary importance to "The News" among its

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 275.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 273.

members.<sup>32</sup> “The local news was just talks” he reflects, “the result of Port William’s never-ceasing observation of its own doings and its listening to itself.” This description should be altogether familiar to the discussion by now.

One of the characters in Port William who doesn’t seem to mind the new economy at all is Troy Chatham. Believing himself to be perpetually on the rise as a “somebody” in the world, Chatham cares little, if at all, for the respect of the Membership. Rather, Troy feels himself simply entitled to the respect of his community without offering anything to the others in return beyond his legacy as a high school basketball star. The picture Jayber paints of Troy Chatham from the 1960s is remarkably evocative of other values frequently attributed to modernity in Berry’s corpus.

Troy’s aim was to be at work with the greatest available power in the biggest possible field. During the sixties, with Athey gone and Della out of the way, and Mattie resigned or unable to resist, he began tearing out fences, plowing through waterways, bulldozing groves of trees. He didn’t want anything in his way. He wanted to be seated on power, driving on and on. His belief (his religion, you might as well as say) was that if he went on covering ever more ground with ever greater power, discounting the costs in worry, weariness, and soil erosion, he could finally be a success, a real businessman, with an office he actually sat and worked in. He would have status. People would look at him with envy.<sup>33</sup>

Troy Chatham’s fixation on the abstract, unattainable ideal of self-importance is quintessential of Berry’s critique of the placeless nature of modern society. Humans become self-conscious of the inadequacy and commonness of their place and fixate on the seductive thought of who they might yet become. In turn, this phenomenon fuels a market designed to cater goods and services ready-made to fulfill a sense of immediate gratification, which the modern world has come to equate with happiness. Jayber, realizing this about Troy, can only muster feelings of pity for such a disordered state of soul. Still, whatever pity he feels, the similarity with which Jayber

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

describes the destructive energy of war, the impulse to dominate anything standing between the self and the intangible, elusive goal of profit. Having once been in a state of such self-estrangement himself, Jayber realizes Troy's folly immediately.

He was a dreamer. He could not imagine himself as he was or where he was. And so he dreamed of himself as he would never be. For a dream he borrowed money, rented land, bought machines, drove them in big fields to the limit of endurance and beyond. It was a dream he could not have escaped even if he had waked up, for he belonged to it by his pledge and signature. His name was on too many dotted lines. The too little he earned by too much work already belonged to other people before he even earned it.<sup>34</sup>

The harried and over-worked mania with which Troy Chatham pursues his reckless, idealized vision of himself is by no means unique, and the solution to this problem of estrangement, so far as it may be gleaned from the text of Berry's novels and short stories, is no less applicable for society as it is for any individual. It is, of course, to use both discipline and hope to facilitate restraint. And while the specifics of this prescription for the economy at-large are too numerous for a detailed discussion in this thesis the solution for Jayber Crow is simple. Pondering his own fate which has been bound with the war-wounded and dissipating prospects of Port William, Jayber has a revelation.

For a while again I couldn't pray. I didn't dare to. In the most secret place of my soul I wanted to beg the Lord to reveal Himself in power. I wanted to tell Him that it was time for His coming. If there was anything at all to what He had promised, why didn't He come in glory with angels and lay His hands on the hurt children and awaken the dead soldiers and restore the burned villages and the blasted and poisoned land? Why didn't He cow our arrogance? Lying awake in the night (for again sleep was coming hard) I could imagine the almighty finger writing stars for all the world to see: GO HOME.<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The project of the modern self, as it is commonly conceived, is to self-actualize—to realize and then embrace its autonomy in the universe—and only then to seek out a communal existence

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 295.

of its own creation. The philosophical condition of modernity is characterized by a self, awakened to its own radical isolation, looking out on an alien world that it can only identify as an objective “not me.” The externality of the world, in relation to the modern self, has been ascribed a range of normative assessments ranging from a curious and delightful stage dressing for self-creation, to one of open hostility, strange and fearful. Wendell Berry’s entire corpus is colored primarily by his reaction, and the ongoing formulation of his response, to modernity. In *Jayber Crow* Berry is particularly interested in portraying how the self experiences this placeless and estranged mode of existence.

Reaching his journey’s point of profoundest estrangement, Jayber Crow finds himself struggling to live in a Berryian rendering of the ‘modern world,’ characterized by placelessness, isolation, society shaped around institutions (instead of the reverse), pre-conditioned terms of membership, cultural erosion predicated by boundless demands for novelty, and an ever-expanding and increasingly subjective understanding of community that depends for its existence on apathy, complicity, forgetfulness, and a willingness to be led by greedy self-interest. Jayber ultimately proves unable to find any sort of lasting fulfillment in the modern community. He is prevented, I contend, by a function of his memory.

This chapter has discussed the self’s experience of estrangement from its native origins. Berry’s vision of the alienated, placeless, and forgetting self is paired with the simultaneous disintegration or dismemberment of the forsaken and forgotten community. The historic circumstances of World War II and the revolutionizing impact of industrial modernity are, to Jayber Crow, visible indications of the arrival of a new world order in Port William. The War and The Economy form a united front of hostility toward the humane bonds of care and fidelity that have held the Port William Membership together all along. And yet, amid the destruction and

disorder of this great change, home—like a beacon in the night—becomes the symbolic hope of redemption and the literal destination for the displaced people and disoriented selves of Berry's world.

Accordingly, the next chapter is addressed to the concept to restoration, discussing the means through which the self reorients toward its origins. This movement provides further underpinning for Berry's politics of homecoming, achieved through the elevation of membership out of time and into the sphere of eternity.

## CHAPTER 4. RESTORATION

The world doesn't stop because you are in love or in mourning or in need of time to think. And so when I have thought I was in my story or in charge of it, I really have been only on the edge of it, carried along. Is this because we are in an eternal story that is happening partly in time?<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This chapter is titled "Restoration" and explores the final phase of the homecoming journey depicted in author Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*. Previous chapters have articulated the first two phases common to Wendell Berry's vision of the self's departure from, and return home to, authentic community. The major concepts of place and memory have been introduced and discussed in light of their philosophical bearing. Place connotes Berry's agrarian attachment to the soil and to the created earth itself, it also expresses notions of right-order or propriety in political community. Place appears in the political context of the early experiences of order that are particular to an agrarian childhood. Later in life, an estranged self encounters these impressions through mimetic rehearsal of the places, faces, names, and narratives of the native experience. The use of memory is significant to an understanding of Berry not only for its own philosophical significance to a vision of consciousness, but also because the word itself is linked to Berry's favored term membership, which is quintessentially his political philosophical vision of authentic community.

The loss of membership, which is as much an act of forgetting as one of displacement, is endemic to Berry's vision of modern industrial reality and its effect on traditional institutions. The War, as *Jayber Crow* sees it, is the eternal recurrence of human partiality and the failure of love to curb human desires. In the context of post-World War II industrialization, however, *Jayber* observes the emergence of a related and equally rapacious force in *The Economy*. In the

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 322.

face of these, the people and places that make up the local vitality in communities like Port William become undesirable and obsolete. And yet, for the self, modernity offers no satisfying alternative to the authenticity of a life in Berry's Port William Membership. Realizing this, characters like Jayber Crow, Art Rowanberry and Andy Catlett—the walking wounded—destitute and exiled from Port William, become unable to find comfort in the doctrine of progress or the ideology of belligerent patriotism. In such a strange and inhospitable country, they cannot even recognize themselves by the sound of their own names. It is at this moment that they begin their movement toward home.

In order to complete the return passage, exiled selves must purify and must heal, as the Port William Membership partakes in both in the created world and the eternal one above it. Imbued with this sanctity, Port William begins to converge with Heaven itself. To re-enter Port William and rejoin its membership, prodigal sons and daughters must reconcile themselves to wholeness, thus removing the stains of their alienation. In Berry's vision of homecoming, restoration is a process involving simultaneous re-memberings of the self along with the replacement of the material body.

“Memory and Conversion,” this chapter's first section, discusses the importance of the concept of *mnemosyne* in the final moments of the self's period of estrangement.. Estrangement ends when the self, remembering the original wholeness of its native state, turns back and begins its return; a homeward movement for the body as well as the soul. Scenes of memory and conversion appear frequently in Berry's fiction, and the life of Jayber Crow is especially rich with imagery expressing a transcendental realization at the self's moment of extreme fragmentation and forgetting. This discussion of memory and conversion explores the experiences of Jayber Crow in depth while also considering other relevant scenes gathered from

Berry's corpus. Again and again, Berry emphasizes the role of memory in the bringing together of a self, a place, and an authentic community, both temporally and eternally.

This process is exemplified by a scene from the novel *Remembering*. Here, Andy Catlett, having travelled west as far as he can go—the end of a pier in San Francisco—has turned from his walking away and begins, literally, to run back east toward Port William, pushing through the crowd as he goes.

He makes his way among them, in the hold of a direction now, stepping, alone and among strangers, in the first steps of a journey that, by nightfall, will bring him back where he cannot step but where he has stepped before, where people of his lineage and history have stepped for a hundred and seventy-five years or more in an indecipherable pattern of entrances, minds into minds, minds into place, places into minds: the worn and wasted, sorrow-salted ground, familiar to him as if both known and dreamed, that owns him in a membership that he did not make, but has chosen, and that is death and life and hope to him. He is hurrying.<sup>2</sup>

As the passage illustrates, the anticipated beauty and joy of returning are clearly tempered by a profound sense of pre-envisioned loss and grief. In this example, homecoming is, in fact, two journeys undertaken simultaneously. Berry's writing suggests that for both the physical self, as well as the soul, any possibility of return from estrangement must fundamentally involve an act of healing.

The resolution of the memory and conversion processes sets up this chapter's second section titled "An Alternate Conception of Time." The conversion experience—one that turns the self back toward home and the life of membership, that impels the self's humble response to the beckoning of the land, that heals the self of the wounds of division—signals the self's preparation for political reinstatement within the commonwealth. To rejoin a membership that freely communes across the boundaries of life and death however, the self has to embrace a form

---

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *Remembering* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), p. 65.

of community that exists both in the past as well as in the present. Jayber comes to realize this strange fact of the membership's existence during a dream that occurs late in his narrative.

In a dream Jayber receives a phone call, "which was strange," he says, "because I have never owned a telephone in my life."<sup>3</sup> Answering the phone, Jayber is surprised to hear Athey Keith's voice inviting him to come over to Art Rowanberry's house and join some of the others already gathered there. The surprise of this, of course, is that both Keith and Rowanberry have been dead for years by this point in time. Walking up to the house, Jayber finds other long-dead friends sitting on the porch and enjoying a relaxing Sunday afternoon. Joining them, Jayber recounts how his dream comes to its conclusion.

I sat with them a long time, listening to them talk of the things they had always talked about before. But I didn't know the time. The sun seemed to be standing still. I knew that Uncle Othy's old silver watch was in my pocket, but I knew also that it was not running.

Finally I realized where I was.<sup>4</sup>

Time no longer seems to matter, though even in his dreaming Jayber is aware of the impossibility of such a gathering. He confesses that "to be there seemed strange, but it was all right."<sup>5</sup> The watch in his pocket, symbolic both for the fact that it belonged to his uncle as well as for its ability to measure the passage of time, has stopped in this timeless moment of conversation among friends. Though it is Jayber's dream, the joyful reunion of the old friends and workmates seems not to be lost on the others either. "'Well, ain't it a fine day overhead,' Art said, as he always used to do. And Elton picked up Art's hand and kissed it. There were tears of joy in his eyes."<sup>6</sup> An old man by this point in his story, Jayber has come to realize that

---

<sup>3</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 332.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

life's passage and eventual conclusion has little, if anything, to do with the bonds of membership. Thus, in pursuit of Berry's ideal of authentic community, it becomes necessary to consider a conception of time that allows for the communion of souls across the boundaries of life and death. Thankfully, Jayber Crow's narrative offers a useful and pervasive metaphor to assist in this effort.

Recounting the early years of his life, Jayber muses that, as a child, his consciousness "was all time and almost no memory." He confesses that he gave almost no thought to his life's eventual conclusion. "I stood in an unending river of time that would go on making the same changes and the same returns forever."<sup>7</sup> The phrase "unending river of time" touches on one of the predominant symbols found throughout the novel, particularly in Part I. The river is used not only to enrich the topographic detail of the novel's setting or to advance certain sequences of the plot, but also to mobilize the philosophical concept of time, which is essential to understanding Berry's politics of homecoming. This integration of idea and symbol expressing an alternate conception of time is introduced here by turning briefly to consider another of Berry's works.

An explication of Berry's verse-play "The Bringer of Water" will facilitate the reader's acquaintance with Berry's frequently used technique of merging the philosophical idea of time with the symbolic use of water. In the dramatic action of the play, a procession of three characters, symbolizing time—expressed as imagination, possibility, and memory—walks through the fields carrying water to the workers. Through this imagery Berry presents a threefold vision of the present; the here-and-now merging with things passed and things still to come. The political significance of this concept lies in its implications for membership. Berry's portrayal of time as threefold present intimates that God's creation continues in perpetuity,

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

beckoning the human response of awed reverence. Placed within creation, membership is both bound and beholden to the temporal, worldly order. However, membership retains at its core the essential aspect of memory. In addition, membership's mimetic aspect is coupled with an expression of unity or wholeness. Dismemberment, as we have seen, is the opposite of membership, characterized by division and forgetting.

For the politics of homecoming, the alternate conceptualization of time, symbolized by the river and more generally by water itself, charges a sublimated vision of Port William. This development marks the completion of a political restoration for the self and the community. From here, Berry's political philosophical vision widens in scope. Accordingly, the discussion in this section concludes by considering how Berry's use of time invokes a theoretical conception of a threefold and eternal present, available to humans in the cognition of memory, attention, and expectation. This formulation enables some deeper insights into Berry's comprehensive view of mankind's responsibility to God, mediated through participation in creation. Only with this final insight is Berry's philosophical progression of homecoming completed. Restoration, then, is the self's joining hands with other selves in an eternal, even heavenly commonwealth. As will be shown, the restoration to political community allows for the self's transcendence, as it rejoins a membership that partakes fully both of the world in time as well the eternal.

### **Memory and Conversion**

At the point of its apogee the self undergoes a conversion experience that, in Berry's vision, is typically an act of re-membering (a ritual of healing that emulates the natural rhythms and rituals of place). The self then turns toward Port William and begins its journey home to the recollected patterns of life in authentic community. The terms "memory" and "conversion"

indicate a two-part experience in which the self first reorients, and then reintegrates into community, completing its restoration. For Berry's fiction, estranged members of Port William cannot return to the membership without deep inner-conviction. Membership in authentic community, ultimately, is a profound commitment of the self to the care and duty of its place.

The role of memory in the experience of the self's turning around is a signature of Berry's writing. The self, having drifted into the deepest recesses of obscurity and forgetfulness, is broken off in its flight. The movement away from home is suddenly overwhelmed by the living presence of the past. What emerges are both memories as well as "rememories," recalled scenes of personal, as well as communal recollection as well as memories of remembering. These tend to focus on the commonplace in Berry's fiction, simple moments of home life and its rituals becoming highly significant.

The memories of my days at Squires Landing—which I had once been able to walk about in, in my mind—had shrunk and drawn away. That old life had come to be like a little painted picture at the bottom of a well, and the well was getting deeper. The picture that I had inside me was more real than anything outside, and yet it was getting ever smaller and farther away and harder to call back. That, I guess, is why I got so sad. I was living, but I was not living my life.<sup>8</sup>

Here Jayber describes the appearance of his memories in haunting terms, as though they burden his attempt to "make a theoretical something of himself."<sup>9</sup> And yet, confessing how "Aunt Cordie's voice troubled my mind," Jayber finds unexpected comfort, realizing that "[her voice] told me I didn't look down on my humble origins and didn't yearn to rise above them."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Jayber's being caught up in the world of progress has caused him to disassociate with his own origins.<sup>11</sup> The memory of his loved one turns him away from this path.

The conversion scene that comes next in Jayber's narrative could only be completely and effectively realized in a fictional account, although Berry's entire corpus points to such an attunement of the self. In the following passage, Jayber articulates the definitive moment of his conversion which occurs in the novel's first part.

But I know now that even then, in my hopelessness and sorrow, I began a motion of the heart toward my origins. Far from rising above them, I was longing to sink into them until I would know the fundamental things. I needed to know the original first chapter of the world. I had no past that I could go back to and no future that I could imagine, no family, no friends, and no plans. I was as free as a falling stone or a floating chip—freer, for I had no direction at all.<sup>12</sup>

This is Berry's classic formulation of a lost or placeless self: wandering a foreign landscape populated by strangers, the self becomes conscious of its incapacity to create an autonomous second-home, or anything resembling an authentic community. Floundering to determine its orientation through the "rational" and "progressive" means offered by modern society, the Jayber Crow narrative poignantly evokes how the inarticulate yearning of the soul becomes clear and, in a moment of revelation, points the way back, not onward. For Jayber, this moment comes after a night spent among other refugees of the flood in the state capitol building in Frankfort. In the face of so much homelessness and displacement, Jayber decides on a new course, known but unrecognized to him all along.

I was on my way. My mind had changed as completely as if I had never thought of going to Louisville. I was on my way home, as surely as if I had a home to be on my way to.

---

<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon for the fictional character echoes a frequent criticism found throughout Berry's corpus, especially in his nonfiction, of the values guiding modern education. In a world so concerned with fueling "progress" to serve shortsighted views of prosperity, the modern university is becoming a highly specialized vocational factory, producing "progressive" graduates who pursue their highly specified vocational aims with a shortsighted and reckless philosophy of life that equates wealth (defined as consumptive capacity) with prosperity.

<sup>12</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 73.

And to my surprise, I might add, for not a one of my teachers had ever suggested such a possibility. I suppose that in my freedom, when it came, I pointed to Port William as a compass needle points north.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps it is the very real need of the displaced families in the capitol, or perhaps it is the realization that the homeless freedom of a wonderer is no freedom at all, whatever the immediate trigger, the passage cited above is unmistakable in its expression of the self's turning around and its first motions of return.

For the placeless self in Berry's fiction, memory functions as the definitive catalyst for the self's homeward journey. Berry revisits the topic in differing contexts throughout his body of work. In *Jayber Crow*, a good illustration is found in the final scenes of a chapter titled "An Invisible Web." Within the context of memory serving as the catalyst for homecoming, phrases such as: "The place itself and its conversation surrounded me with reminders,"<sup>14</sup> or "My few memories of that place came to me, and I felt the presence of memories I could not remember,"<sup>15</sup> intimate the concept of rememory, which informs the discussion of Berry's use of *mnemosyne*.

Throughout *Jayber Crow*, and in other novels, Berry hints at a world in which an individual human consciousness can actively converge with others. Scenes of remembrance—the self's memory of its past experiences—are endowed with further complexity in the presence of communal memories converging with those of the individual. The planes of communal subjectivity merge across the limits of singular individuality. In these moments of rememory, consciousness transcends selfhood as well as time through the self's communing with a corporate consciousness that is both eternal *and* particular. These memories that Jayber cannot

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 81-82.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 130.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

recognize as his own do not belong to just anyone, but only to such a membership that, by its nature, “includes the dead.”<sup>16</sup> On the plain of memory, understood in this sense, conventional understandings of time are eclipsed. It is not simply the act of mimesis or remembrance, but the repeated and communal recitation of Port William’s history to which the self, detached from any authentic community, adheres in its moment of conversion. Once again, it becomes apparent that Berry’s understanding of the self is inherently political. Without the acknowledged ancestry of membership, no conversion experience could be possible.

In a similar scene, taken from the novel *Remembering*, the moment of memory and conversion is even more explicitly rendered. Here, Andy Catlett has just realized that only by returning to his home can his wounded self be healed. In this lengthy paragraph, Berry’s depiction of the moment of conversion becomes clear. In the first sentence, Berry explicitly states the inward, turning-around character of the conversion experience.

Though he has not moved, he has turned. *I must go now. If I am going to go, it is time.* On the verge of his journey, he is thinking about choice and chance, about the disappearance of chance into choice, though the choice be as blind as chance. That he is who he is and no one else is the result of a long choosing, chosen and chosen again. He thinks of the long dance of men and women behind him, most of whom he never knew, some he knew, two he yet knows, who, choosing one another, chose him. He thinks of the choices, too, by which he chose himself as he now is. How many choices, how much chance, how much error, how much hope have made that place and people that, in turn, made him? He does not know. He knows that some who might have left chose to stay, and that some who did leave chose to return, and he is one of them. Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it, which he did once, and now has done again.<sup>17</sup>

The interplay of “chance” and “choice,” express a further and more nuanced connotation of Berry’s overarching political vision. In this formulation, the naturalistic element of nativity, the harmonized life lived toward a place, is combined with volition—the self-determined

---

<sup>16</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Wendell Berry, *Remembering* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), p. 60.

component of membership. The “disappearance of chance into choice,” expresses how pre-authentic community becomes the authentic community of membership proper. The phrase, “though the choice be as blind as chance,” which expresses, once again, the haphazard dance of nature and providence within the human psyche, so essential to Berry’s agrarian philosophic outlook.<sup>18</sup>

Also worthy of note in the excerpt is Catlett’s realization that his identity as well as his very existence are inextricably linked to the history of the membership. Here Berry intricately interweaves the language of memory with the language of membership, and the result is highly suggestive. The faculties of recall and agency, for Catlett’s self, combine definitively in this scene. Berry’s vision of membership reaches its fullest expression in the final line: “Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it, which he did once, and now has done again.”<sup>19</sup>

The experience of conversion and the journey toward the recollected surety of home is not altogether painless. Both Jayber Crow and Andy Catlett suspect this fact, and yet, in this moment, they cannot immediately realize the full magnitude of potential pains that are implied by their decision. What Andy has recognized as a choice—“as blind as chance”—introduces a spectrum of future contingencies that very well may not contain convenient, or even favorable outcomes for him. By comparison, this misgiving is exactly what Jayber Crow intends through his statement of commitment to Port William and its uncertain future: “I will have to share the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

fate of this place. Whatever happens to Port William must happen to me.”<sup>20</sup> Jayber then continues:

That decision changed me, and it cleared my head. It didn’t make me feel good to be sharing the fate of Port William, for I knew there would be pain and trouble in that, but it made me feel good to have my head clear. Afterward, I slept all night for the first time in weeks.”<sup>21</sup>

The “pain and trouble” that lie ahead for Port William are inevitable for any community. They are a product of the natural order of increase in decline, the ebb of flow of things caught in time. The proposition of humans sharing fates without any formal compact or legally binding assurance is a fearsome thought in the modern state. Pledging his bond of fidelity, Jayber has full understanding that things may not go well. Indeed, if its history is any indication, Port William’s future has always been shaded by a dark cloud of uncertainty.

A society’s future is perpetually suspended in the balance of human history. Whatever permanence can be obtained, generation to generation, Port William is destined to be shaken by forces that literally move mountains. Those belonging to Port William’s membership are only too aware of their community’s being caught in the middle of larger events going on in the world. Inevitably, Port William will find itself standing in the way of progress. Men and material will be taken away by larger powers and put to use for larger purposes, beyond Port William’s reckoning. Once again, as for always, everything will be change. With the universal imposition of modernity’s valuations of bigger, faster and more centralized means of subsistence, it is only too clear that time is not on the side of Port William and places like it.

Though Andy Catlett and Jayber Crow realize this hard fact of the times, and of all time, the power of the conversion experience implies their acceptance of the fight ahead. The

---

<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143-144.

significance of conversion for both men is that they both have become determined to make Port William's fate their own. Their inner-restoration translates outwardly in their respective declarations of intent. As though to a field of battle, both men, after remembering their place and thus being converted in their souls, willingly begin the journey home. The powerful sense of tranquility that follows for them can only be due to the characters' having come into an understanding of the relationship between membership and time. They now seem to know that whatever Port William's past and however bleak its future, restoration to The Membership is a self's rejoining a community of people and of souls. It exists in an eternal *now*.

In addition to the physical movement, homecoming also implies an inward change to occur during the restoration phase. Berry's characters cannot simply *go back* to Port William. Restoration begins a new life of home-making and involves a continual effort within the self. Just as the biblical Canaan is continually lost and regained by the Israelites, a home in Berry's Port William is not permanently found, it is perpetually *made*. This insight, by way of a parallel, introduces the significance of a ritual of healing to the inward process of homecoming. Restoration does not necessarily require any physical journey at all. The self's return to its rightful place is as much a return to one's proper position within the membership as it is a return to the membership's geographical location. To rejoin the membership is to humble oneself before the larger body and mind of the community. It is to acknowledge one's need and need of being needed. For some, this action will require a symbolic act of purification. To rejoin the Port William membership a lost self must heal and leave the stain of its transgression, its guilt-wound behind. What the self has forgotten, divided must be remembered and made whole once again.

One of Berry's most descriptive and poignant accounts of purification and healing is found in the short story "Making It Home." Wounded by shrapnel in the weeks following the Battle of the Bulge, Art Rowanberry's meditation on his experiences as a soldier in the war press on his conscience the frightening possibility that he will be unable to be restored in his place. His wound, which has pulled him inward and rendered him "a man in the dark on the inside of himself," has brought Art out of a life of wholeness and thrust him into one of division, colored by the horror of war.<sup>22</sup> To return to his former life as it was is impossible. He must accept a new life and be reborn into it, for his time of woundedness has taken him into a symbolic death of the self; a brokenness of pain and despair.

On the second day of his journey home, travelling the last fifteen miles on foot, Art bathes in a familiar stream. This is his first morning back in his native country. Emerging from the water, Art is filled with an unexpected sensation of warmth. "It came from inside himself and from the sun outside; he felt suddenly radiant in every vein and fiber of his body. He was clean and warm and rested and hungry. He was well."<sup>23</sup> The Christian symbolism of the baptismal rite is unmistakable here, but with a notable difference: Art enacts the ritual himself, in solitude. Emerging from the water, he reflects: "I am not a stranger, but I am changed."<sup>24</sup> The memory of his wound, like that of his home, will remain a permanent part of Art Rowanberry's being. Like the scar on his body, his soul will forever bear the marks of its dismemberment. Emerging from the water, however, Art has left behind the destructive and deadened false-self

---

<sup>22</sup> Wendell Berry, "Making It Home" from *Fidelity: Five Stories*, (New York & San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1992), p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*.

constructed during the war. Accordingly, he never again mentions what he has left behind as he walks on toward home.

Moments of memory and conversion permeate Berry's novels and short stories. They are deeply personal experiences for individual characters, but they are also political. The restoration of Berry's prodigals into the Port William Membership requires a reconciliation of the self to its former state of wholeness. Memories of the authentic community must overcome those of its loss; of division, violence, despair and pain. For this conversion to be real, the self must accept its transgression and repent. In Berry's fiction this phenomenon typically takes place in nature and not at the church altar.

Restoration, implies the individual's choice to be bound to the community without reservation. Conditional acceptance would be fundamentally opposite to the very nature of membership. The authentic community is characterized by its unconditional or benevolent naturalization and integration of members.<sup>25</sup> For Berry's vision, the bonds of community are held together by love. Self-interest, in the end, is circumstantial.

### **An Alternate Conceptualization of Time**

Following the self's inward conversion and return to its origins, it next seeks to regain a place within the commonwealth. To understand this phenomenon, the centrality of time to restoration within the politics of homecoming must now be examined. The concept is most easily approached through an analysis of Berry's verse-play "The Bringer of Water." In the play, a procession comprised of a boy, a young woman, and an old man, walks to a field. On a hot summer's afternoon, they carry water to the men working in tobacco on a hot summer's

---

<sup>25</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Short Answer: An Exchange with Wendell Berry" *Preservation* 57.2 (March/April 2005), p. 49. Published in *Conversations With Wendell Berry*, Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 178.

afternoon. Through the symbolic value of each of the characters, Berry presents a vision of time that challenges the traditional linear conception. Past, present, and future, or, to rephrase them, memory, possibility and imagination, exist in a unified moment that is symbolized by the three walkers carrying water across the land. The procession's order is significant, as is the central image of water in the play. Water, it will be shown, is a prominent symbol through which Berry presents a vision of time that anticipates his later treatment of the topic in *Jayber Crow*.

In "The Bringer of Water," time receives its first symbolic treatment in the image of the three characters walking through the fields. First in the procession comes Henry Catlett, the young boy in the play, who is directed by the author's annotation to keep running out ahead of the others and calling back. Finding an arrowhead in the path, he returns to Hannah Coulter and Old Jack Beechum, who are walking more slowly, presenting his discovery for their approval. Henry's questions to the others indicate an imaginative mind, invoking a past so distant that it is beyond the reach of any personal memory of the living members. This paradox is resolved through the artifact's being found in that place which is so familiar to them all. Henry uses his faculty of imagination, or expectation. Because he is already an acknowledged member, though not yet by choice, he can look at his native landscape and envision what was, and also what might have been.

Next comes Hannah, a young mother and recently widowed bride of the war who has spent the past three years mourning the death of Virgil Feltner. Frequently speaking through her subconscious, she indicates her growing sense of how the events of time have come to "fullness," changes occurring perceptibly within her.<sup>26</sup>

Hannah:        Like a baking or a pregnancy  
                         the time has come to fullness

---

<sup>26</sup> Wendell Berry, "The Bringer of Water" found in *Farming: A Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), p. 74.

and can be no fuller.  
It can't go on being  
what it is. I haven't tried  
to change it, but I feel  
it changing. I feel it  
in the air, hovering over me  
and all I'm part of,  
like the closeness before rain.<sup>27</sup>

The catalyst for this change, the main cause of Hannah's feeling of expectancy, is her growing awareness of Nathan Coulter, an eligible young man of about her age. In these two characters Berry expresses a fertility-vision that symbolizes the present—pregnant with possibility—but also darkened, because it naturally also contains unknown but inevitable pain.

Knowing all of these things intimately and intuitively, Margaret Feltner, the mother of Hannah's dead husband, utters an early expression that illuminates Berry's ongoing effort to come to terms with time in his writing.

It's not in her children  
that a woman can live. Not  
in the future. She lives  
in living with her man  
who *is the present*, asking,  
changing, filling hand  
and heart, not with the hoped  
or the mourned, but with his life  
as it is, what is possible in time.<sup>28</sup>

The expression of a woman's living "with her man / who is the present," combined with the phrase "what is possible in time," indicate Berry's vision of an eternal present corresponding to fertile possibility. In the procession, Hannah must occasionally stop to rest, but the annotation indicates that she does so out of kindness for the old man following her, who occasionally lags behind the other two.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 74.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 68. Italics are mine.

Jack Beechum, the old man bringing up the rear in the procession, is full of memories. His speeches typically lapse in and out of the time in which the play is set. Through the continual converging of the boundaries of time in Old Jack's consciousness, he comes to symbolize the past, or even memory itself. A living emblem of the old ways and former times, Old Jack walks in a dreamy, ruminative present that fully partakes of a world that now exists only in memory. Passing a natural spring, he invokes the ancestral wisdom that, for *The Membership*, is tied to the place itself.

Old Jack (*drinks and puts the dipper back in the bucket*):

That's good. That spring never  
has gone dry in my time,  
though I've seen it dwindle  
mighty small once or twice.  
I stopped and drank here  
when I was a boy, younger  
than this boy, and my daddy  
before me stopped and drank  
here, and his daddy before him.

Berry's notation divides Old Jack's monologue:

*Moved by his thoughts, he turns away from them and goes on ahead by himself.*

. . . While we've worked  
and taken pleasure and suffered  
and died here, it has flowed  
like the sound and the feel  
and the taste of what this ground  
has been to us—kinder to us,  
mostly, than we've been to it.  
It has been the turning toward us  
of the womankindness of the earth.<sup>29</sup>

The incorporation of water's unique ability to express the human perception of time is significant here, just as it is in *Jayber Crow*. In this example, water acts as a medium between humanity and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 79-80.

the sempiternal fertility that Berry phrases here as “womankindness of the earth.” The gendered language compliments the growing expectancy of Hannah Coulter who, thinking of the possibility of pairing with Nathan Coulter, has already become aware of her response to the external forces at work.

I begin to feel again  
the claims on me my life has.  
As though I felt my body  
touched in the night, I want  
to be talked to, touched,  
for only my own sake.<sup>30</sup>

In “The Bringer of Water,” Berry’s vision of time is embodied by the symbol of three members walking in a procession across the land. The boy’s imagination, the young woman’s expectancy of change, and the old man’s rehearsal of memory and lived experiences, together, connote a conceptualization of time in which past and future commune in the fertile possibility of a perpetual midday. Here, familiar characters from Port William partake in a brief sacrament that observes, at a workday’s meridian, a universal and eternal vision of divine incarnation for humanity. The motif of water, as it is used here, unites this vision with other works in Berry’s corpus, further developing his concept of time.

The conception of time Berry presents in “The Bringer of Water,” is further expanded in the novel *Jayber Crow* and is critical to the politics of homecoming because it provides the linkage between the attendant concepts of place and memory. Jayber Crow’s meditations on the river establish the most pervasive and philosophically provocative of motifs found in the novel. Through poetic scenes of imaginative description, Jayber’s conceptualization of time is a threefold present; the ephemeral and fragmentary revelation of the eternal as it converges with temporal reality.

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

Expressed through the image of a river, Jayber Crow's formulation of time removes the restrictions of linear sequence. Instead, the image of the continuous band of water—lost to sight both upstream and down—serves only as a demarcation of the perceptible poles of existence.

It is hard to look at the river in its calm, just after daylight or just before dark, and believe that history has happened to it. The river, the river itself, leaves marks but bears none. It is only water flowing in a path that other water has worn.

Or is that other water really "other," or is it the same water always running, flowing always toward the gathering of all waters, and always rising and returning again, and again flowing? . . . What is it? Is it the worn trough of itself that is a feature of the land that is marked on maps, or is it the water flowing? Or is it the land itself that over time is shaped and reshaped by the flowing water, and is caught by no map?<sup>31</sup>

The utility of the river as a symbolic analog for time is the way in which both resist the mind's understanding. Throughout the novel are found descriptions of the river's nature and spirit, its property of flowing from and on to places unknown. While the water moves past the observer, the river itself remains stationary. And so, just as the river cannot be wholly understood in any empirical sense, Jayber begins to sense how time must necessarily be grounded in subjectivity as well.

This enigmatic or paradoxical property of flowingness Jayber perceives in the river, resembles very closely St. Augustine's frustration in his efforts to measure the passage of time in his *Confessions*. "How do we measure time, since it does not have space?" he repines. "It is measured while it passes; but when it shall have passed, it is not measured; for there will not be anything that can be measured."<sup>32</sup> Flowing past the boundaries of existence and non-existence, time's passage can be observed only by the movement things caught in it. The difficulty for human understanding emerges in any attempt to establish the precise location of the poles of

---

<sup>31</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 19, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *Confession*, Bk. XI, Ch.21, 27; from *An Augustine Reader* Edited, with an introduction by John J. O'meara (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1973), p. 193.

existence and non-existence. For Augustine, as one commentator notes, the paradox of time's immeasurable passage is resolved in the formulation of a new concept that joins past, present, and future into a unified, and threefold present, which is grounded in subjectivity.

There are thus properly not three times—a past and a future which are not, with an immediate present which is a mere point of transition between two non-entities; but there are three presents, a present of things present, a present of things past, and a present of things future. The present of the present is attention, the present of the past is memory, and the present of the future is expectation. This triple mode of the present exists in our mind, or not at all.<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, Augustine's theory of the present-past and the present-future reconciles how man exists in his time, and how God exists in his own. The reader should note here the further correspondence between Augustine and Berry's play "The Bringer of Water." In this view, a human consciousness perceives the present as situated in time. God, however, experiences an eternal present that is similar to man's in that both are real, but "while there are infinitely many things timelessly together in God's eternal present, there are only minute segments of eternity in man's limited consciousness of the present."<sup>34</sup>

This phenomenon of eternity revealing itself within man's consciousness is doubtlessly the equivalent to Jayber Crow's experience when he watches the river.

The ripples are like the slats of a blind or a shutter through which we see imperfectly what is perfect. Though that other world can be seen only momentarily, it looks everlasting. As the ripples become more agitated, the window darkens and the other world is hidden. As I did not know then but know now, the surface of the river is like a living soul, which is easy to disturb, is often disturbed, but, growing calm, shows what it was, is, and will be.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Herman Hausheer, "St. Augustine's Conception of Time" *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (Sep., 1937), p. 505-506.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 510-511

<sup>35</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 20.

Because Jayber allows the reader access to the deepest levels of his consciousness, his meditations beside the river reveal a profound sense of wonder and yearning, as the self strives to gain insight into the nature of existence. This communion, or merging of the spheres of time and eternity is endowed with further significance as Jayber's thinking develops. He comes to sublimate the river's time transcending properties and to project them onto the life of the Port William community. In this sense, the novel *Jayber Crow* serves as a vehicle for Berry's larger philosophic project.

During the phase of restoration, the self's perception of time is entirely removed from view. Restoration becomes the finite self's joining hands with other souls in an eternal, even heavenly commonwealth. Thus, the true importance of restoration to the politics of homecoming is that it expresses, above all, transcendence. Now the full power of Berry's vision of membership becomes visible. Ultimately, the authentic political community is metaphysical in nature. With this timeless communion of souls across time, there comes a profound feeling of love within the soul—an experience that is at once triumph and tragedy. Though triumphant in its world-saving, life-affirming power of redemptive grace, Jayber's love—both for Mattie Chatham (to whom he is married in his heart), and for the community Port William itself—is altogether tragic. As he well knows, a love such as his must forever remain out of reach for an “ineligible bachelor barber.”

And so, even as his self achieves political and spiritual restoration, needing and needed as a willing member of Port William, Jayber Crow's autobiography anticipates future restlessness. The self must endure the ongoing struggle of loving a community while suffering its losses, failures, and deaths. And yet, realizing that this struggle offers only a difficult hope at best,

Jayber cannot deny the power of his conviction. A scene from the novel *A Place on Earth* describes Jayber's vision of the community transcending the fate of human error and ignorance.

In Port William, or beyond it or above it, Jayber imagines a kind of Heavenly City, in which each house would be built in a marriage and around it, and all the houses would be bound together in friendships, and friendliness would move and join among them like an open street.<sup>36</sup>

These imagined marriages partially comprise a doctrine of ideas that encompasses marriage, friendship, and Jayber's love for an ideal of community. They form the "Heavenly City" hovering over the earthly Port William. Here the narrative speaks of Jayber manages his ideals, leveraging them against his love and his longing.

He holds to them against the possibility that life will mean nothing and be worth nothing. He is a despairing believer in these things, knowing that everything fails. The ideal rides ahead of the real, renewing beyond it, perishing in it—unreachable, surely, but made new over and over again just by hope and by the passage of time; what has not yet failed remains possible. And the ideal, remaining undiminished and perfect, out of reach, makes possible a judgment of failure, and a just grief and sympathy.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly this is behind Jayber Crow's impulse when, in his autobiography's epigraph, he invokes the poet Andrew Marvell.

Magnanimous Despair alone  
Could show me so divine a thing . . .<sup>38</sup>

As has been shown, Jayber Crow catches glimpses of what he knows can only be the transcendent beyond of Heaven during his meditations on the properties of water and on the aesthetics of the river. Later in his life, Jayber's narrative also comes to dwell on the power of love in the world, and in his life. What water provides in symbol—a means for man's understanding of the presence of eternity in the world of time—love provides the actual means of

---

<sup>36</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Place on Earth* [revision] (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1983), p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

<sup>38</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000).

linkage for the continuity of souls across time. Love, says Jayber, “sooner or later, forces us out of time. It does not accept that limit. Of all that we feel and do, all the virtues and all the sins, love alone crowds us at last over the edge of the world. . . . It is in the world but is not altogether of it. It is of eternity. It takes us there when it most holds us here.”<sup>39</sup>

The symbol of water is evidence that Berry, throughout his corpus, is working—struggling, even—to develop an adequate means of expressing the correspondence between time and eternity. To this end, water works well as a symbol. As the *Jayber Crow* passages on the river attest, Berry’s symbolic play with symbols articulates more formal ideas on time developed by Augustine, and these ideas are still explored by scholars today. The notion of rethinking time’s bearing on human experience is compelling. And yet, philosophically rich as it may be, the symbol alone does not completely establish the concept’s relevance for politics.

Restoration is the self’s readmission to social community, enacted through the self’s joining of hands, or minds, with other selves, in a spiritual communion that transcends human mortality. The actual mechanism of this mediation, between the reality of time and the reality of eternity, is love. Adding love completes the development of Berry’s concept of membership, and expresses the full weight of its bearing. Jayber Crow’s initial homecoming in the novel is complete insofar as he realizes that the physical structures of his original home—houses, trees, barns, fields, and even people—will have changed. Jayber accepts that most of the world he embraces as a member will ultimately be lost in the temporal sequence of events, never to return. Only through Jayber Crow’s impossible and idealized love for a woman, and his transcendent vision of the community around him, can Berry’s full vision of membership be realized. Membership is a human association that transcends the world, and yet remains bound and

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

beholden to creation. Therefore, Berry's view of time sets forward a dynamic model of creation extending the political vision of homecoming to its farthest reach. At the end of the journey, the "home" in question comes to signify the created world itself. The human community within it, through love, embodies the metaphysical union of all souls with God.

## **Conclusion**

Homecoming is largely a continuous cycle of absences and returns for a community's members, and this mirrors a corresponding motion within the self. Restoration is the final and most essential phase of the homecoming journey. Without the return, the first two stages—nativity and estrangement—would not have any symbolic meaning. Restoration is more than simply an individual's returning to its original place. Rather, the concept is meant to articulate the individual's reintegration into the community of that place; its membership. The authentic community is signified a mutual acknowledgement of the choice to observe fidelity to place and to commonwealth by all members. Membership requires an essential act of free choice to make the place one's home. The membership remembers its dead, and it hands down their knowledge through its workaday sayings and doings. In such a society, each individual is known and trusted, accepted without condition. Finally, the membership is bound together through a bond of deep, abiding love, and sharing this love, transcends time; an earthly approximation of Heaven itself.

This chapter has detailed the manner in which the self's estrangement ends, and the homeward journey begins. In spite of having experienced a state of native-being, and having belonged to a community by virtue of birth, rather than by any act of choice, individuals frequently leave the membership to pursue other forms of community in other places. For the character Art Rowanberry in the story "Making it Home," this departure is necessary, due to

military draft. For characters like Andy Catlett and the children of Hannah Coulter, the breaking of fidelity with the membership comes as the result of inner-turmoil and a wounded self, or through a desire for the opportunities available “someplace else.” Finally, in the case of Jayber Crow, his self’s state of exile begins with his being orphaned and continues through a long period of wandering, as he searches for a home in a world he does not understand. In every case, Berry’s vision of community treats this separation in the same way. The loss of authentic community throws the self into a state of estrangement. Separated from its known place, the self undergoes inward division. It goes in search of some possible fulfillment, wandering through an alien world with no recognizable home available to it, save for various forms of provisional, contingent and inauthentic community. In *Jayber Crow*, the orphanage, the seminary, and finally, the free life of living only for the fulfillment of desire, typify the inauthentic community.

The loss of a small town’s population is a historic trend in American life, and this fact is equally devastating to Berry’s vision of authentic community, which embraces kinsmen and neighbors equally and unconditionally, in spite of their obvious flaws. For some of Berry’s principle characters the experience of absence becomes overwhelming, and the devastating effects of disunity on a once-whole person are commonplace in his writing. Exiled and made strange to their former lives, Berry’s characters often begin to involuntarily relive remembered scenes of a lived-in wholeness, both for the self, and, by correspondence, the community. At this moment, for characters like Jayber Crow, the self begins to turn away from its pursuit of an indefinable and elusive *something else*, and looks back toward the loving familiarity of its origins. Thus, memory engenders conversion. Purified and healed through the experience, the self is prepared for restoration.

The act of restoration between the self and the membership is conscious, deliberate, and rational, though the rationality is often cloaked in the emotional outpouring that so often accompanies a self's moments of deepest sadness. Frequently, these scenes are followed by moments of profound joy. Interestingly, the actual event of coming home for the self, which is to say, the practical experience of resuming one's life and livelihood in one's native place, is typically so gradual that no grand climax can be observed. For Jayber Crow, the homecoming event is a gradual experience, recognizable to the self only fleetingly. The expression "home-making" is closer rendering of Berry's vision. The phrase signifies a journey not completed, but ongoing. An important aspect of Berry's treatment of the homecoming experience is the sense with which he phrases it in terms of re-integration rather than triumph. The language of re-integration is characterized by a sense of humility, submission, purification and healing. Berry's quintessentially humane vision of human nature insists on the anti-climax of homecoming. The experience, whether depicted in the first person or the third, connotes beginnings as much as or more than it does fulfillment or completion.

Even when the physical journey of homecoming has been completed, the self can, and eventually will, return to states of restlessness. Throughout his life, Jayber periodically wanders away from Port William again, searching for some consolation for a frequent restlessness within his troubled spirit. And while the completion of each cycle makes the narrative of his life story more complex, the final sections of *Jayber Crow* are its simplest in terms of philosophical concepts. It is in these that Berry makes some of his most definitive statements on time and on love.

Just as water provides the symbolic mediation between that which is present and that which is passing, Jayber's life in Port William is marked perceptibly by the perpetual tension

between communion and disintegration there. On the eve of his departure from his life in the barbershop, packed and ready to move to the shack on the river, Jayber looks out over the sleeping town and reflects on this fact.

In the quiet, in the fall of moonlight upon it that last night of my life there, Port William slept and dreamed the dreams its history had brought to it. In the time of my stay it had suffered its own history, of course, but also the history of the larger world that contained it. In those thirty-two years that now seemed almost no time at all, the town had shrunk and declined. Some of its quiet that night was the quiet of sleep. Some was the quiet of emptiness and absence. . . .

. . . If you knew the place, if you had known it for long, you could not look at it without feeling that its life was being irresistibly pulled at by larger places. It was stretching itself farther and farther in order to hold together, traveling farther in order to stay in place. It was like a spider's web that will stretch so far and then break.

I thought, "Here once, forever gone."

But then, in the flimsiness of time, in the moonlight, the presence of the town so strong upon me, I thought, "now and forever here."<sup>40</sup>

Like a reflection on moving water, Jayber sees the Port William Membership held in a timeless moment, though one he doesn't quite understand. The love and care that exists between two people in marriage or, for that matter, between all the members of a community, however imperfect, is not swept away by the passage of time. Whether living or dead, the members of Port William are never absent from the place. And so, by virtue of its restoration, the self's coming home is, ultimately, its acknowledgment of faith in redemption and the immortality of that which is held between souls.

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 300-301.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

### Political Implications

This study's stated purpose has been to sound Berry's novel for principles of political philosophy, interpreting them in a way that would delineate any political vision. This final chapter summarizes the basic progression of stages and philosophical themes as they interact within the homecoming journey, detailing the philosophical implications for politics discerned within this interpretive model.

Berry's work addresses the moral, social, economic and ecological plights and problems plaguing the modern world. He laments the irrevocable loss of the land's native fertility, while simultaneously condemning the wanton destructiveness and human greed that is its cause. Berry's vision connects the exploitation of the natural world with the loss of traditional moral values and the authentic community in modern society. He spares no one culpability or complicity in the modern mentality, not even himself. His polemic against modernity is expansive in scope. Unflinchingly, he presents the charges of forgetfulness and greed, catalogs the evidence of neglect, and then declares us guilty. Berry's words ring prophetic, announcing to whom we are responsible, and predicting the penalty that we must surely pay.

There appears to be a law when creatures have reached the level of consciousness, as men have, they must become conscious of creation; they must learn how they fit into it and what its needs are and what it requires of them, or else pay a terrible penalty: the spirit of the creation will go out of them, and they will become destructive; the very earth will depart from them and go where they cannot follow. . .

We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. And this has been based on the even flimsier assumption that we could know with any certainty what was good even for us. We have fulfilled the danger of this by making our personal pride and greed the standard for our behavior toward the world—to the incalculable disadvantage of the world and every living thing in it. And now, perhaps very close to too late, our great error has become clear. It is not our own creativity—our

own capacity for life—that is stifled by our arrogant assumption; the creation itself is stifled. . .

We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its processes, and to yield to its limits. But even more important, we must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon our arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the source of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, against this harsh tone of Jeremiad, Berry's vision remains deeply hopeful. He longs for the restoration of health to the human soul, the reunification of authentic communities, and ultimately, the reconciliation of all mankind to the divine order of creation. The politics of homecoming concludes with a glimpse of how this might yet be possible.

*The Life Story of Jayber Crow, Barber, of the Port William Membership, as Written by Himself*, follows a series of distinct stages that advance both the plot of the novel, as well as a progression of philosophical concepts. Like the rambling and wayward nature of the narrative itself, place, memory, and time emerge and develop within the reader's awareness at an organic pace. The chronology of Jayber's life-story can be roughly outlined as birth, exile, return, and then a final departure, when Jayber retires from barbering and takes up residence in Burley Coulter's fishing shack on the river. The life-story of his interior self, of his soul, however, includes a much more nuanced series of departures and returns. In this latter story, Jayber comes to know more about the nature of his self, of his community and its environment, and ultimately, Jayber comes into the time of his life's deepest insight. Meditating on the river, Jayber glimpses the transcendent order of eternity as it fleetingly converges with the temporal world. Thus,

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, "A Native Hill" from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), p. 18-20.

despite Berry's injunction as to how the book should and should not be read, the novel *Jayber Crow* requires careful and measured analysis to be understood in its full philosophic complexity.

Jayber Crow's homecoming is similar in its broad outlines to the journeys of other characters throughout Berry's corpus. The progression details various states of the human soul, as it moves from nativity, through estrangement, and then comes to its final restoration—at home within The Port William Membership. The native state begins at birth. In this phase, the individual becomes self-aware, as she simultaneously begins to perceive the loving order of family as well as the larger society of families embracing her. Gaining a sense of familiarity with this ordered existence of family and society, the self constructs its fundamental and lasting conception of its home.

For an agrarian culture, one of the principle hallmarks of home life is the activity of the place itself. For farmers, home is a place of work and of rest, in equal parts, frequently indistinguishable. Chapter Two addresses this idea, focusing on the agrarian sense of place within the context of nativity. Children of farming families, especially in Jayber's time, are a much needed source of help, within the home and out in the field. Berry values this fact of farming life—the full integration of family life and work, conducted at home—and muses on how the rhythmic cycle of home-making and crop seasons establish a very concrete sense of place for the individual. Further, Berry posits that the natural harmony and physical demands of agriculture build powerful and structured bonds of community, advancing the individual's sense of place to include his social identity. Thus, the chapter's first and second sections are intimately linked: the simple rituals of domesticity feed into a broader concept of place and *placedness*, an expansive idea that affirms the virtue of attachment to the particular in Berry's vision.

For Jayber Crow, the rituals of domesticity become powerful signifiers of who he is, especially when the external circumstances of his life force his removal from all that is familiar to him. The evidence of this in the text is largely established by the novel's very structure—an autobiography. First and foremost among the early memories Jayber describes are happy scenes of workaday life. His recollection of the activities of homemaking conveys how both duty and kinship have imparted to him a sense of home and of place during his childhood.

In the agrarian perspective, the word “place” itself is a deep and multifaceted concept. It connotes the particular, the land that farmers love, and on which they depend. But to emphasize the profound attachment to a specific “homeplace” in the agrarian mentality risks deemphasizing the manner in which the idea of “place” also embraces the particular community and its culture. To work and to subsist in agriculture requires a very specific knowledge of regional topography, weather, and economics. The life also requires a community of families committed to the commonwealth of shared labor. From this develops a regional and even local culture, and includes a living memory of crops seasons, useful practices, and, above all, deep bonds of neighborliness and friendship.

The agrarian idea of place flows freely into the concept of membership. Among the various senses of its meaning, place expresses the idea of propriety, which is its political aspect. Even with its informal and happenstance composition, agrarian communities are visibly structured at all levels, from the family to the public commons. An individual's sense of place derives within the structure of her various roles in family life, work, and the community. Place informs a sense of obligation, motivating as well as constraining an individual's behavior. Even among work crews at tobacco cutting time, or wives in a quilting circle, Berry consistently emphasizes the silently acknowledged social hierarchy. Among members, greater experience

engenders respect and bestows a level of authority in the direction of work, and the maintenance of social cooperation that is informally acknowledged by all. To uphold this order, persons must be willing to accept the dictates of their place within it. In a phrase, the idea of place shows the limit of acceptable behavior, the idea of membership shows the point.

Within the universe of concepts that appear in Berry's work, membership is the most politically relevant of all. "The Port William Membership," as Berry conceives it, is more than a simple community of people, historically associated with a certain place in Kentucky. Rather, the term conveys a practical fact of the community's bond, as well as a metaphysical and trans-historical vision of ideal community that is never to be realized in temporal existence.

Regarding Jayber Crow's story, the nature of membership is never disclosed during the time of his nativity. Only after Jayber has bounced between various institutionally mandated structures approximating a true community, does he come to realize the nature of what he has lost. The exposition of "authentic community" is developed over the course of this essay, and expressed by the term "membership." It expresses, in part, an association of persons who freely choose to bind themselves, through a sacred pledge of fidelity, to the needs and obligations of their place. Through this sense of fidelity, they choose to remain in place, though they face certain hardship and loss. As members, a person comprises one part of a greater commonwealth. He acknowledges both his need for acceptance within the union, as well as his deeper need to be needed by the others for labor and companionship. The individual strives to keep fidelity to, and for the sake of, his place. Conceptually, membership is the social expression of this individual commitment. And though there is no formal instruction in the ways of fidelity observable in Berry's Port William fiction, The Membership endures over the generations, undiminished by the external forces of singleness and division, omnipresent in its history. The ways of

membership are handed down through local custom and tradition in Port William, continually rehearsed through a running conversation—the narrative of the community’s memory, its history and lineage.

Nativity progresses to estrangement, and in Chapter Three the dominant philosophical motif is that of memory. The reason for this pairing is derived from the plot of the story itself. Jayber’s period of estrangement is, emblematically, his time of being absent—both from his native place, as well as from his original sense of being; his self in its native wholeness. Just as the religious doctrine espoused at The Good Shepherd and at Pigeonville Theological Seminary decries the flesh and exalts the soul, Jayber’s loss of his home removes the external signifiers of his identity, throwing his self into a state of alienation and despondency. The section on “Dismemberment” focuses on this phenomenon. So isolated, Jayber loses contact with the original intactness of his being. Without an authentic social community, the self is divided, dismembered.

The dismembering of the self is sketched in tandem with the historic disintegration of America’s rural communities. Setting *Jayber Crow* against the backdrop of the twentieth century’s rapid industrialization enables Berry to critique the world-altering advent of modernity in practical as well as philosophical terms. In the novel, Berry introduces the symbols of “The War” and “The Economy” to speak to the loss of discipline, of sanction, of reasonable forbearance endemic to this new reality. In the context of Port William, dismemberment is inherently linked to forgetting within the community and the self. The community suffers losses, not just due to its war dead, but due also to the bigger and faster-paced world “out there,” seductively calling out to country people, and causing them to suspect that they would be better off “someplace else.” The casualties of The War are, of course, the soldiers killed or wounded

by guns and bombs. Soldiers who survive the fighting are deeply traumatized by the destruction and waste beheld in combat. No less casualties of war are the places where land is spoiled and homes destroyed and also, the families and communities who have given up their sons and lost their husbands to this grim, ambiguous “cause.”

The casualties of the modern economy are similarly violated. Farming, a vocation traditionally offering a life of freedom and measured dignity, cannot withstand the fierce competition of agribusiness and the economy of scale. The figure of Troy Chatham, harried and incautious in his pursuit of the vague ideal of “success,” personifies what Berry sees replacing the humble yeoman on the land.

For Jayber Crow, the loss of community and the strangeness of his new life trigger a patchwork collage of memories. These torment him in his effort to establish an autonomous home for his self in a world of strangers. Remembering the love and neighborliness of his home and former place, Jayber endures the increasing burden of his freedom until he can bear it no longer. At this point, the function of his memory changes, becoming an internal litany—soft, indistinct at first, then growing louder and unmistakable in its message—and Jayber is left with no other option. He must return to Port William. He must go home.

The stage of restoration for the self is inaugurated by the “Memory and Conversion” experience, just described in the example of Jayber Crow. In Chapter Four, the term “restoration” is a fitting descriptor for the final stage of homecoming inasmuch as the self, exhausted by the burden of autonomy, comes to the end of its striving. It rests and is healed of its wounds; the homeless wanderer finds reconciliation for his soul. Thus, the lost and forgotten home becomes the home regained. Jayber Crow, the wandering son, chooses and is chosen by a community of membership. In a moment of solemn, but profound joy, the journey ends and the

soul comes to rest. The final phase of homecoming is pared with the third major conceptual motif developed in this essay. The “Alternate Conception of Time” Berry formulates in the novel moves his concept of membership out of the political sphere altogether, endowing it with a transcendental vision of the human soul, the social commonwealth, and the divine order of creation.

Berry’s treatment of time is explored in Chapter Four by first considering the concept’s appearance in the verse-play, “The Bringer of Water.” The dramatic action of the play offers two important glimpses of the early Berry’s concern with human society and its correspondence to time, and to eternity. The first is the procession walking over the fields. Three members, representing time through their embodying aspects of imagination, possibility, and memory, are all present and passing together over the land. Embodying imagination, the boy symbolizes the future. He runs out ahead, drawn by youthful curiosity; seeing much and yet knowing little. He beckons the woman, Hannah, to come on ahead with him by enticing her, with wide-eyed exuberance, to envision the world as he sees it. His need is for her to affirm the plausibility of his boundless wonder at the landscape, of what things *might* be.

Following him, Hannah is moved with affection. She entertains his fantasies but is fearful of their implication. The arrowhead he brings to show her is a talisman of her very real and very present knowledge of life’s frailty. Though she is still young, she does not share the boy’s naiveté. The death of her husband in WWII has opened Hannah’s to profound feelings of loss and grief. But the day is warm and the fields are fertile. Hannah senses that even as she clings to her grief, the forces at work in the natural world around her are also at work within and upon her. Though she is afraid of arrowheads and all instruments of killing, mysterious and violent to her, she cannot turn back. And so, she stops to rest.

Old Jack lags behind the others. He moves slowly because his body is tired and his mind is wandering. Like the boy, he sees around him more than what simply *is*. He is held in a reverie of all that has been. Nothing in that place is new for him, and his attention is focused only on the things that are enduring. He has no expectation. His hope for the future is that things will stay as they are. Hannah is drawn to Old Jack, in part, out of a desire to know something of what he knows. For her, his memory provides surety in the face of flux. The past is her grief, so she turns to Old Jack—for whom the past is simply the assurance of the present. He is a walking verification for her that whatever changes lay ahead can and will be endured. She is worried about what *can* be in such a world; what is possible.

The second vital element in the play is the symbolic value of the water the procession carries in a jug. Though water will later come to take on greater importance to understanding time in Berry's work, even here, water is used as the symbolic mediation between the temporal and the eternal. The drinking water in the jug, like the cold, dark spring beside their path, is the emblem of something shared, and yet not understood. Just as it provides sustenance for the members who live and work together in life, water expresses perfectly what these three humans who represent past, present, and future, can only convey through symbol. All is passing, and only that which is shared will remain.

The evocative power of water-as-symbol, representing the mediation between time and eternity, is discussed with greater detail in the context of *Jayber Crow*. The section, "An Alternate Conception of Time" continues, exploring how, through the symbol of the river, Berry establishes a motif for time's convergence with eternity within human perception. In turn, this phenomenon enables Jayber's story to project his vision of the eternal onto the social community. Restoration, for the community as well as for the self, expresses the transcendence

of mortal finitude. The town of Port William will eventually pass into a future yet unimaginable to humans, who are bound by the limits of an imperfect knowledge of creation. The communion of souls that abides within the membership, however, will be preserved. Berry's view of creation embraces this mystery, bestowing it with reverence and awe. His vision of the authentic community, The Port William Membership, acknowledges the power of this mystery and affirms the virtues of humility and restraint in recognition of humanity's limited understanding. Berry is hopeful that human society might yet learn that it is within the divine order of creation that we can learn to become better than we are.

Regarding the homecoming experience, the political philosophical implications found in Berry's Port William fiction, and particularly in the novel *Jayber Crow*, intimate a hierarchy of correspondences, in which order within the human soul has a direct analog in the social community, echoed again in the order of divine creation. The political vision expressed in *Jayber Crow* combines the human soul, the Port William Membership, and the whole of God's ongoing Creation into a simple and timeless moment. What the political scholar commonly interprets as "order" is formulated differently in Berry's vision. Membership, Berry's concept of the ideal of community, is the essential political principle to the politics of homecoming. The question, then, is whether Jayber Crow's experience can be effectively universalized for all of humanity. Following this is whether the Port William Membership is attainable in actual life, or whether it simply represents the unreachable ideal of authentic community.

Perhaps these are the wrong questions. Berry never attempts to illustrate the proper way to order civil society. Rather, his fiction simply offers a view of the soul, and of what the soul needs from political life; including the consequences that result when these needs go unmet. Ultimately the self will either come to rest in authentic community or it will not. That some of

Berry's characters succeed in this effort is his message of hope. A home in the world truly exists for those who seek it, but its demands are not met without real sacrifices. This is how Berry's political vision comes to be expressed through the politics of homecoming.

A second offering to be gleaned from Berry's work is his devastating critique of modernity. Though it assumes many forms throughout the corpus, the argument running in numerous directions, Berry's critique of modernity and his lament for the rejection of proven modes of sustainable community singly express a doctrine of social pietism. It is along this line that Berry has been exposed to charges of nostalgia—quaint and romantic preoccupations with a past that never really was. Ultimately these criticisms miss the point.

Berry boldly asserts that contemporary society must look at itself more critically and act in a manner consistent with both reason and reverence toward the mystery of creation. A clear expression of this view emerges during the final scenes of Part I of *Jayber Crow*, among Jayber's reflections on the flood. The reader will recall that it is during the great flood of 1937 that Jayber Crow's time of wandering suddenly ends. Making his way upriver through inundated towns and submerged croplands, Jayber begins to realize that he is apprehending the perpetuity of God's creative act. Recalling that moment, he says:

I knew that the Spirit that had gone forth to shape the world and make it live was still alive in it. I just had no doubt. I could see that I lived in the created world, and it was still being created. I would be part of it forever. There was no escape. The Spirit that made it was *in* it, shaping it and reshaping it, sometimes lying at rest, sometimes standing up and shaking itself, like a muddy horse, and letting the pieces fly.<sup>2</sup>

In the Port William fiction, Berry uses Jayber Crow and other characters (notably Hannah Coulter, who is another naturalized outsider among the membership) to give utterance to his vision of the correspondence between the temporal and the eternal. In this view, Port William's

---

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), p. 83.

perpetual decline is forestalled, and the timeless character of the membership gains theoretical plausibility.

Berry's call to social pietism, his persistent reproach and lament for society's turning away from the natural harmony, realized in both society and self, stems from values literally rooted in the soil and permeates his prescriptive teaching for personal and political restoration. The dawn of the twenty-first century has brought with it troubling political, economic, and ecological uncertainties that have become wholly undeniable. Little disagreement remains about the urgent necessity for rethinking the global use of energy, economic policies that allow for the debasement of the ecological health of the planet, agricultural policies that commoditize food, replacing the integral role of the individual farmer or farm community with large-scale corporate agriculture and finally, a civic culture fed by media that panders to unthinking and wasteful consumerism, rather than affirming personal responsibility, or citizenship that embraces self-sacrifice. Berry's entire literary career has focused on understanding these problems, and the formulation of an adequate response. It is in the spirit of the politics of homecoming that Berry's vision points the way toward restoration. This insight is illuminated in Berry's ongoing critique of modernity.

The damage wrought by post-WWII modernity is most clearly expressed in the terms of Berry's anthropological principle. The violence endemic to the twin rapacities of The War and The Economy can only lead to the destruction of land for monetary gain. Modernity breeds dissatisfaction with rural life and the inevitable dissolution of communal bonds as more and more people become convinced that they might be better off "somewhere else." The economic doctrine of "get big or get out" ensures that those who remain in farming communities will be harder pressed to subsist using the traditional and more careful practices. Berry's vision

confronts the seeming multiplicity of crises facing contemporary society as a single issue: homelessness.

Until contemporary society can bring itself to reject the wayward nature of modern living and individuals can commit to accepting their places—engaging in the rituals of homemaking and community-building on the particular level—then the destructiveness will persist. There is but one problem, and its solution is political insofar as society can realize the real and growing need for a more engaged form of citizenship. Without the recovery of authentic communities, the requisite civic virtue to revitalize local economies and sustain them cannot be realized, and this is perhaps our best, if not only hope. Any political philosophy to be extracted from Berry’s vision builds on the model of membership.

In the novel, Jayber Crow’s restoration to the membership of his native community completes his journey of homecoming. The course of this journey spans roughly the first third of his narrative but is repeated throughout his life. Jayber Crow is restored when he chooses to bind his individual fortune and fate to that of Port William. Later in life, he finds another restoration through pledging his faith to Mattie Chatham; marrying her in his heart. For all of the redemption he finds for his self within the membership, *Jayber Crow* is the autobiography of a man filled with, and despairing of love. Herein is Berry’s moral teaching.

Ultimately the novel provides a glimpse into the tragic experience of our lives together. Jayber’s story of his homecoming within the Port William Membership offers, at best, a heartfelt gesture of faith and hope for all mankind. Calling himself “a man of faith,” Jayber makes this persona the subject of his final meditation.

He believes that the child in the womb is not lost, nor is the man whose work has come to nothing, nor is the old woman forsaken in a nursing home in California. He believes that those who make their bed in Hell are not lost, or those who dwell in the uttermost parts of

the sea, or the lame man at Bethesda pool, or Lazarus in the grave, or those who pray,  
“*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.*”  
Have mercy.<sup>3</sup>

A failed seminary student and a wandering soul throughout his life, Jayber’s simple benediction is adequate and fitting. His life is the story of his struggle to find a way to be at home, find love, and simply to understand a world that often seems bent against him. And yet, somehow, Jayber’s home finds him.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 356-357.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Basney, Lionel. "Five Notes on the Didactic Tradition, in Praise of Wendell Berry." In *Wendell Berry*, edited by Paul Merchant. American Authors Series. Lewiston, ID: Confluence, 1991.
- Beer, Jeremy. "Wendell Berry and the Traditionalist Critique of Meritocracy." In *Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007.
- Bellah, Robert N. *Individualism and Commitment in American Society*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1987.
- Berry, Wendell. *A Place On Earth*. 1983 Revision. New York: Counterpoint, 2001.
- . *Farming: A Handbook*. New York: Harcourt, 1970.
- . *Fidelity: Five Stories*. New York & San Francisco: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- . *Given, New Poems*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005.
- . *Hannah Coulter*. Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.
- . *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.
- . *The Art of the Commonplace*. Edited and Introduced by Norman Wirzba. Washington D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002.
- . "The Farm." *The Hudson Review*, 46, No. 1, (45th Anniversary Issue, Spring, 1993): 123-134.
- . *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays, Cultural and Agricultural*. San Francisco: North Point, 1981.
- . "The Short Answer: An Exchange with Wendell Berry," *Preservation* 57.2 (March/April 2005), p. 49. In *Conversations With Wendell Berry*, edited by Morris Allen Grubbs, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007.
- . *The Way of Ignorance*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005.
- . *What Are People For?* San Francisco: North Point, 1990
- Carson, Allan. "Wendell Berry and the Twentieth-Century Agrarian 'Series.'" In *Wendell Berry, Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007.
- Deneen, Patrick J. "Wendell Berry and the Alternative Tradition in American Political Thought." In *Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2007.

Goodrich, Janet. *The Unforeseen Self in the Works of Wendell Berry*. Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

Homer, *The Odyssey*. In *Literature of the Western World: The Ancient World Through the Renaissance*, edited by Brian Wilkie and James Hurt. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Vol. 1., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997.

Luban, David. "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory of Theory." In *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, Edited by Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

Pennington, Vince. "Interview with Wendell Berry" In *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, edited by Morris Allen Grubbs, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.

Rody, Caroline. "Tony Morrison's *Beloved*: History, 'Rememory,' and a 'Clamor for a Kiss.'" *American Literary History*, 7, No. 1, (Spring, 1995): 92-119.

Smith, Kimberly K. *Uncommon Grace: Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003.

Triggs, Jeffery Alan. "Farm as Form: Wendell Berry's Sabbaths." In *Wendell Berry*, edited by Paul Merchant. American Authors Series. Lewiston, ID: Confluence, 1991.

## VITA

Drew Kennedy Thompson was born in Murray, Kentucky, in December 1980. He graduated from Murray High School in 1999. From Murray State University, Thompson received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 2004, majoring in political science, with minors in English and French. His Senior Honors Thesis was titled *Operation Iraqi Freedom and the Just War Tradition*. The thesis discusses major developments in Just War Theory as developed by Augustine, Aquinas, and Grotius, and then analyzes the U.S. invasion of Iraq, focusing on the official report of the 9-11 Commission, and the implications of the Bush Doctrine. The thesis applies the criteria developed within the Just War tradition to the official public justifications for war in Iraq, finding that the Bush Administration did not satisfy the criteria of the tradition, though invoking it in its rhetoric.

In 2003, Mr. Thompson served as an intern with the Tennessee Valley Authority. Working in the Valley Relations section of Communications and Government Relations for the Kentucky District, he coordinated communication between TVA and public officials at the local, county, and state levels. His duties included researching legislation and constructing strategic briefs for distribution to relevant internal and external parties; strengthening TVA stakeholder relations through event planning, and coordinating field visits for the district manager to facilitate community, environmental, and economic development initiatives.

Thompson is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in political science at Louisiana State University, expecting graduation in August, 2009. His research interests include politics and literature, Classical and modern political philosophy, American political thought, and the study of regional and rural politics.

A version of this thesis has been accepted by the Association for Political Theory's Conference 2009, to be held October 22-24 at Texas A&M University. The panel is to focus on time, decline, and memory.