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# ‘Bearing the Taste of the Place’: Spatiality in Wendell Berry’s *Farming: A Hand Book*

Arunabha Ghosh

Recollecting that we once lived in places is part of our contemporary self-rediscovery. It grounds what it means to be “human” (etymologically something like “earthling”). . . . The “place” (from the toot plat, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind. We should be thankful for that, and take nature’s stricter lessons with some grace.<sup>1</sup> (28-29)

— Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*

My life is only the earth risen up  
a little way into the light, among the leaves.<sup>2</sup> (20)

— Wendell Berry, *Farming: A Hand Book*

In “A Wet Time,” a poem in Wendell Berry’s *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970), Berry writes, “The land is an ark, full of things waiting” (22). On one hand, his comparison of the land to an ark points towards the flow or current of the place; on the other hand, however, this metaphor raises questions regarding the identity of the land that is movable. The apparent impossibility of the first suggestion is explained in the poem and we find that Berry is pointing towards a huge rise of water that engulfs the earth—as proportionately with the rise of water level the earth is falling to ‘meet’ it. As a passive onlooker of the phenomenon, the ‘I’ in the poem stands still—albeit

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he is unwilling to accept it. The perceiver describes the process minutely—the fields are sodden; as soon as the feet are raised, water fills the track—croplands and gardens are inundated, airy places become dark and silent. In the midst of all these his mind “passes over changed surfaces/ like a boat, drawn to the thought of roofs” (22). It is the mind that moves, though the body stands still “like a stake/ planted to measure the rise” (22). Indicating himself as a stake, which is a pole set up to mark something the movement of the earth (and earth) is juxtaposed with the immovable position of the perceiver. The image of the ark in time of flood obviously alludes to the biblical flood brought by God upon the earth because of the wickedness of human beings. The anecdote in the Genesis, however, is symbolical here as Berry refers to a probable reality of flood in future due to global warming at an alarming rate. The passage from myth to reality occurs spontaneously as Berry says,

I turn like an ancient worshipper  
to the thought of solid ground. I was not ready for this  
parting, my native land putting out to sea. (22)

If we move to the second proposition suggested in the beginning, i.e. regarding the identity of the land, it reveals as the poet’s ‘native land’ which is the United States of America. But in the myth of the biblical flood the entire earth was flooded, not only a particular part of the world; and hence, can in Berry’s vision only his native land be affected? Or, put in a different phrase, can Berry as a visionary afford to be that selfish to lay his interest within the periphery of his native land? The poems in the collection, *Farming* tells a different story anyway, and we find a typical place-space consciousness in the poems which assure us that the poet, conforming to his role as a true visionary, has extended his vision from the narrow boundary of a place to the openness of the outer space. Close analysis of the poems would reveal this aspect of his writing; however, the theoretical

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paradigm of the place-space synergy is to be highlighted before that.<sup>3</sup>

In general, literary imagination's traditional specialities are to evoke and create a sense of place with expressions chosen carefully. During the last two decades of the twentieth century the concept of place as well as space has been re-interpreted in many ways that included active involvement of various disciplines under the humanities and physical sciences as well; that is to say, whereas architectural patterns evoke a sense of place and the identity of the place somehow depends on that pattern, it is the openness of the space in an environment which invokes a different and quiet opposite sense of place. For our discussion of Wendell Berry's poetics we have to depend on the conceptual paradigm of space and place as given by the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. In his landmark study, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Tuan remarks,

“Space” and “place” are familiar words denoting common experiences. We live in space. . . . Place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other. There is no place like home. What is home? It is the old homestead, the old neighborhood, hometown, or motherland. . . . Space and place are basic components of the lived world; we take them for granted. (3)

To define each term brings the interdependence of them as the concept of one depends on the other to define itself. Tuan continues,

The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (6)

When the Tuanian theorisation of place and space is applied to the

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poetry of Berry and other contemporary ecopoets we find two common tendencies in their poetics—first, to create a sense of place in the text of the poem; and, secondly, to show a humility, to value the environment of the open space and recognising the fact that it is impossible to know the place *totally*.<sup>4</sup> The recognition of the unknowability of the space and the extent to which it is knowable forms the base of the humility towards space, which is, on the whole, humility towards nature. We need to mention that in case of ecopoetry, nature is not an inactive entity providing merely a backdrop; rather, nature is perceived as “a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclic feedback systems” (Scigaj, 37). Hence, here comes a question of interrelation of humans with the nonhuman world that include the flora and fauna of a place.

Based in a farm on the Kentucky River, most of Wendell Berry’s writings explore the issues related to environment in novels, essays, and of course in poetry. In *Farming: A Hand Book*, these issues are dealt with a sense of place which can be called his quintessential style, or, as a matter of fact, practice. Berry’s preoccupation with land is important as it is behind his sense of culture; the idea of culture, however, is derived also from the way of life that he leads and which, many people now consider as an alternative way of life, as a possible replacement for the overtechnologised world. In the poem, “In This World,” the poetic language that Berry creates is actually made upon a conflict between two opposite facts—on one hand, we have the portrayal of a place serene to the core, and, on the other hand, there are human beings “making plans. Wearing themselves out,/ spending their lives, in order to kill each other” (24). The concrete as well as mystical poetic language is created as we see that in one poem after another Berry juxtaposes a complex relationship between self and the community, and between space and temporality. The first relation is something more than the interrelation between the human and the nonhuman world, as the spatio-temporal concept comes into it—at

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any given point of time a space is defined in terms of the first interrelation which alters with time, and, as a result, the concept of spatiality alters with it too. In “The Lilies,” these complexities find excellent expression. The poet first describes the “gay woodland lilies” or the gray trunks of ancient trees, held or moved by the standing or moving air. The poet muses on the vitality of the earth underneath the lilies that made them full of life. The “music of the light” is created by this vitality and from time immemorial, the earth has woken them up and the lilies remained “no less symmetrical and fair/ for all the time” (33). The end of the poem is interesting as after the reflection on the lilies the poet asks a question regarding the land—“Does my land have the health/ of this, where nothing falls but into life?” (33). The land is inhabited by humans and the nonhuman creatures, and it is interesting to see how the poet moves from a very normal, somewhat mundane, picture of the lilies to a philosophical inquiry of vitality bestowed by the land. The past of the land is connected to its present through the interaction of the human and nonhuman world. The Tuanian theoretical standard of place-space synergy is a ready tool to understand Berry’s response to the issue of interrelation or interdependence between the human and nonhuman worlds. As the poems bear evidence, Berry stresses the necessary but lacking correlation with the landscape around men—an organic, physical and sensuous, active relationship that is long lost. His poems that focus on the domestic/wild dichotomy are important because in them the idea of ‘opposition’ is dichotomy is distilled away and a synergy is aimed at—so that the human world can discover, and to some extent re-create, the bond. Nature is taken as a ‘series of cyclic feedback systems,’ and the aim of the poet is to know to what extent the dependence between man and nature is possible; also, there is an emphasis on the fact that nature is ultimately unknowable, and human comprehension of its mystery goes only to a certain extent. “The Springs” describes this notion of relationship. Springs in the poem becomes a site of pilgrimage as the country is “without saints or

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shrines,” and Berry talks of ‘one’ who went on a pilgrimage to the springs. The identity of this man becomes clear at the end as Berry establishes the relationship between the man and the landscape in which the springs are integral part. The idea of permanence is related to the land as the springs are called “everlasting,” and Berry weaves the intricate filigree of vitality that passes through water to the ground where men find “bondage”—

The water broke into sounds and shinings  
at the vein mouth, bearing the taste  
of the place, the deep rock, sweetness  
out of the dark. He bent and drank  
in bondage to the ground. (10)

The use of the word ‘bondage’ is intriguing as it does not refer to slavery here; rather, it is the state of being under the control of a force, influence or abstract power—and this abstract power is the knowable-to-an-extent nature. The ‘one’ then becomes the modern embodiment of an Everyman who needs to reconstruct the ‘bondage.’ This type of ‘nature writing’ or place-based literature is important as it traces the history and specificity of a place or landscape that cannot be found in the annals or court documents and reports of the place. The personal mind of a person, representing a collective psyche of the people of the place, is in harmony with nature; and, the poet rebuilds a lost bond through his text.

In *Farming*, we have a number of poems where a character called the Mad Farmer appears, such as—“The Mad Farmer Revolution,” “The Contrariness of a Mad Farmer,” “The Mad Farmer in the City,” “Prayers and sayings of the Mad Farmer,” “The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer” etc..<sup>5</sup> It would be worthwhile to interpret each of them, but due to the limited scope of this paper we would take “Prayers and sayings of the Mad Farmer.” The poem is relatively long with thirteen sections, and apart from everything else, the poem is remarkable for

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its lyric grace. The first section starts with a humorous account of the Mad Farmer justifying his “only for himself” prayers. The first prayer—“At night make me one with the darkness./ In the morning make me one with the light” (56), is a reminder of the motif that recurs in many a Berry poem—the evocation of the bond between nature and human beings. The other important thing is the humility that Berry emphasises. In this context we should mention the chief characteristics of ecopoetry as defined by J. Scott Bryson in the Introduction of his edited volume, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*. Bryson points out three major attributes of ecopoetry—first, the recognition of the interdependent nature of the world and “a devotion to specific places and to the land itself” (6). Secondly, the essential duty, “an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature” (6). Lastly, a doubt, a scepticism towards the notion of progress which is based only on technology and heavy industry. The Mad Farmer hence urges to be humble and his prayers are full of this humility as to be humble is equal to a step towards an understanding of the inscrutable nature around us. The eighth prayer goes like this:

When I rise up  
let me rise up joyful  
like a bird.  
When I fall  
let me fall without regret  
like a leaf. (57)

The humility leads to a realisation of the external world inside oneself as in the last section the Mad Farmer takes somewhat an objective position and says—for himself again—“Let him receive the season’s increment into his mind. Let/ him work it into the soil” (59). While commenting on Berry’s place-consciousness, Scott Bryson remarks,

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Through this Tuanian lens we see that Berry's response to the human-nature split is a call to connect with literal, local, physical places. He also demonstrates a highly developed sense of space in his point that a true and vital connection to the land reveals the extent to which we are incapable of fully knowing those places.

The profound bond with the land rendered by Berry can be found in a remarkable poem, "The Current"—here we find a relationship sustainable and this also enables the poet to connect himself to the land. The 'man' who "has made a marriage with his place" (41), finds himself as a "descendent" of "the old tribespeople" who preceded him in the land. The flow of the tradition of something which Yi-Fu Tuan would call 'topophilia,' becomes the unifying idea in the poem.<sup>6</sup> The title of the poem has two fold meaning—it refers to a stream, metaphorical; nonetheless, that flows from past to future; on the contrary, the man's position in the poem is the current's position, the momentary existence that can be called the 'present.' So what takes place *now*, that what is *current*, is linked with the past and future. Also, it is not something which has appeared in past or would appear in future, but it is a continuation. The spatio-temporal issue is well-handled as Berry writes,

The current flowing to him through the earth  
flows past him, and he sees one descended from him,  
a young man who has reached into the ground,  
his hand held in the dark as by a hand. (41)

Berry's attempt to make place is to remind the readers that literally and biologically the human and nonhuman nature are connected as all things die and the bodies nourish the rest of nature. This is exemplified in "Awake at Night," where he writes,

... the end, too, is part  
of the pattern, the last



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labor of the heart:  
to learn to lie still,  
one with the earth  
again, and let the world go. (55)

The same idea is echoed in an episode of “The Bringer of Water,” a verse-drama in the third section of *Farming*. Nathan Coulter, who meets his fiancé, Hannah Feltner, explains why he has purchased an overused farm, and in doing this he echoes the idea of the ‘current,’ the flow in which man is a part:

... —the idea of making  
my lifetime one of the several  
it will take to bring back  
the possibilities to this place  
that used to be here. (92-93)

Place and space become almost synonymous to culture and nature, and the textuality of this practice is important as it is in perfect accord with the postmodern idea of space and textuality. In *Geocriticism*, Bernard Westphal argues that the text precedes a place as the place is made, or rather created, by the writer (or artist) is his text—a poem, a novel, or in a painting. What is important is the tradition of texts that creates a place “with the beautiful regularity of geological and archaeological strata” (155). And thus, the place corresponds to a texture, as it is reticular in nature to its smallest folds. Here place becomes almost synonymous to space though space is more than a texture; it is an intangible conglomerate that regulates the flow of society as Berry has described in the poems of *Farming*. We can conclude by quoting a four-line poem, “To Know the Dark”:

To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.  
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,  
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,  
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings. (14)

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This is probably the highest realisation of a man who loves his land and hence wants others to delve deep into the depth of the darkness of the open space which “blooms and sings.”

### Notes

1. In this connexion, Snyder says more of the relation of man and place,  
Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience. For example: “real people” have an easy familiarity with the local plants. This is so unexceptional a kind of knowledge that everyone in Europe, Asia, and Africa used to take it for granted. Many contemporary Americans don't even know that they don't "know the plants," which is indeed a measure of alienation. (39)  
Clearly, Snyder views place as something sacred from where modern man is alienated and this aspect is the subject matter of his own as well as his contemporary Wendell Berry's writings.
2. In case of the quotations taken from *Farming: A Hand Book* the page number is mentioned. The details of the edition of the book are mentioned in the Works Cited list.
3. It is to be noted that because of the limited scope of this paper in our discussion we have only mentioned the theory but did not explain that in detail. However, the use of that in interpreting the poems would clarify it.
4. By the term ‘poetics’ we refer to the idea or definition provided by Jonathan Bate in his famous book *The Song of the Earth*. In the book, Bate argues for the power of poetry in a world which is ruled by technology and how poetry could bridge the gap between the human and the nonhuman nature. Bate defined ‘ecopoesis,’ from where came the word ‘ecopoetics,’ and writes that it is a “poetic language as a special kind of expression which may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature” (245). Seeing through this lens, Wendell Berry's poetic endeavour is nothing but ecopoetic endeavour.
5. In many of his poems Berry adopts this jeremiadic persona of the Mad Farmer; such as, “Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front” that appears in *The Country of Marriage* (1973). In the poem, Berry stresses the pristine state of things which are unadulterated. Equating human approach with corruption of the primitive, Berry insists on a form of unknowability as what man does not know he does not destroy. Berry writes—  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed. (Collected Poems, 151)
6. For details, see Tuan's book *Topophilia*.

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