

SUMMA KENTUCKIANA

THEOLOGICAL NOTES ON WENDELL BERRY

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The *Summa Theologiae* tells a story. A history, to be more precise. In his *magnum opus*, St. Thomas Aquinas offers in propositional, scholastic form the drama of the Scriptures, the narrative of God's creation and salvation of mankind. Though few would make it bedside reading, the essential structure of the *Summa* follows a clear dramatic movement, the *exitus/reditus*, or going out/return. Michael Pasquarello puts it well when he writes, "As they unfold the pattern of divine revelation—God creating, saving, and perfecting—the first two parts of the *Summa* may be seen as an elaborate statement of the *dramatis personae*, God and humanity, with a supporting cast of other creatures. This drama consists of bringing together God and us in beatitude, which is a happiness created by grace in loving communion, or friendship, with God" (*We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken*, 75).

What makes St. Thomas such a compelling theologian—and, as it were, dramatist—is his account of reality. What St. Thomas writes is profoundly *true*. He answers the most important questions—Who is God? Who is man? What is his condition, and his final end? How does God bring man to that end?—in a way that resonates deeply with lived experience, human reason, and divine revelation. St. Thomas does not seek to put pious, rose-colored lenses on with which to see the world. Rather, he recognizes that our sins, and the disorder in our nature, puts blinders on us, and prevents us from seeing the truth of who God truly is, and the power of his providential love for creation. It even prevents us from knowing who we are, and what will make us truly happy. Instead, we become alienated from God, from our neighbors, and from ourselves. Only through Jesus Christ, the Word made Flesh, can this brokenness be healed. By becoming part of him, we are made

into adopted sons and daughters of God, and the life of divine friendship is restored.

Enter Wendell Berry. On the face of it, Berry would seem to have little in common with Aquinas, if anything. A poet, novelist, and essayist from Henry County, Kentucky, Berry has become a well-recognized voice in the American literary firmament for his reflections on agrarian life and society. He is, if nothing else, a man “of his place,” deeply rooted in the Kentucky soil where he was raised and which he farms to this day. Berry’s politics do not map easily onto the contemporary American discourse—a fierce defender of the environment and foe of large corporations, he is at the same time a stalwart promoter of an un-cosmopolitan way of life that follows traditional social patterns. While he confesses to be deeply influenced by the Gospels, and considers himself a “forest” Christian, he follows the Protestant tradition of deep suspicion of any ecclesiastical institution or organization (Interview, *The American Conservative*, February 17, 2015).

Let’s establish at the outset, to allay any suspense: Wendell Berry is not a Thomist, by a long shot. Yet, insofar as his works show a deep understanding of reality, of the truth of human nature and society, we should expect some deep resonance with the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. Sure enough, in his novels set in the fictional Kentucky town of Port William, the same drama of man’s character and community that animates the thought of St. Thomas finds compelling expression in literary form. The town of Port William is itself a central character in Berry’s novels, for it has its own existence in which the relationships and virtues of its members are realized. This sense of the *common good* is a central idea for Aquinas, and informs the way he understands the life of the Church and human communities alike. The movement towards concord and flourishing is opposed by forces of disorder and selfishness, both within and without.

II

The town of Port William is more than the sum of its parts. This is what makes it a character in its own right in Berry's novels, and also why it serves as a fitting example of a *common good*. One of the first things that Berry tells us about Port William is that it's not really a port at all. With characteristic wryness, he writes, "The town was not built nearer the river perhaps because there was no room for it at the foot of the hill, or perhaps because, as the town loved to reply to the inevitable question from travelers resting on the hotel porch, nobody knew where the river was going to run when they built Port William" ("The Hurt Man," *That Distant Land*, 5). This answer hints at a recurring discussion of Port William: the town has an existence all its own, that transcends the lives of its members, with origins in a past before the rivers knew their very courses.

This existence seems to be eternal—or at least it does to a young Mat Feltner, one of the stalwarts of the town who appears in several of the novels. "Port William did look as though it had been itself forever. To Mat at the age of five, as he later would suppose, remembering himself, it must have seemed eternal, like the sky" (5). Though it has an independent existence, with its own good, this does not mean that there is not lively individuality within Port William. "However eternal it might have been, the town was also as temporal, lively, and mortal as it possibly could be. It stirred and hummed from early to late with its own life and with the life it drew into itself from the countryside. It was a center, and especially on Saturdays and election days its stores and saloons and the road itself would be crowded with people standing, sitting, talking, whittling, trading, and milling about," Mat recalls. Yet even "this crowd was entirely familiar to itself; it remembered all its history of allegiances, offenses, and resentments, going back from the previous Saturday to the Civil War and long before that" (5).

Perhaps the best metaphor for this kind of existence is that of a body—a living unity, with many distinct members. Sure

enough, this is precisely the language that Berry uses to describe the community of Port William: the *membership*. There is a fitting, and almost certainly intentional, resonance with the familiar passage from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he describes Christians as being but different members of the one Body of Christ. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... For the body does not consist of one member but of many... But God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:12, 14, 24-27).

St. Paul uses this metaphor of body and members to describe the relationship of Christians with Christ and his Church, and this ecclesial dimension has strong overtones in Berry's writing, especially in the novel *Jayber Crow*. More broadly, though, the language of membership, of wholes and parts, points to another touchstone of Thomistic thought: man is a social and political animal. Put another way, human beings are only able to flourish fully as part of human society—they aren't meant to live as isolated individuals. One of the tragedies of sin is the disruption of the order and concord that is essential to man's fulfillment. As St. Augustine puts it, man is at once "social by nature, but quarrelsome by perversion" (*City of God*, 12.28). Now, he is faced with a profound difficulty. Only by loving a *common good*—a good that transcends his own individual, particular good—can man hope to be fulfilled, yet his selfishness and self-assertion disinclines him to do precisely that.

These common goods are at the heart of the matter. They are goods of wholes, not parts; goods that can only be enjoyed as a unity, and not divvied up between individuals. One analogy is an orchestra: the beautiful music of a symphony can only be produced by the concerted unity of the members of an orchestra,

all pursuing (indeed, loving) the common good at stake. No one of them could ever produce a symphony alone. Nor could they each pursue their “own” symphony alongside the other; rather, their individual fulfillment as musicians depends on submitting to a common good that transcends each one. At the same time, their individuality is not lost—each contribution to the common effort is distinct and necessary. We encounter common goods all the time: the common good of the family, of the community, of the state, of the Church. Ultimately, *God himself* is the highest common good: no one person could ever exhaustively adore or comprehend his glory. In the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the common good is a central part of human happiness. St. Thomas holds that man must develop certain virtues in order to realize the common goods of the family, the city, and heaven itself. This is a central pedagogy in the Christian life—coming to love higher and higher common goods:

To be a good politician one must love the good of the city. But if a man, insofar as he is admitted to participate in the good of some city and is made a citizen, has need of certain virtues to accomplish the things that fall to citizens and to love the good of the city, it is the same with a man who has been admitted, by grace, to participation in celestial beatitude, which consists in the vision and enjoyment of God; he becomes in a way a citizen and member of this blessed society which is called the heavenly Jerusalem, according to Saint Paul to the Ephesians 2:19, *You are citizens of the city of the saints, and members of the family of God...* Therefore, certain gratuitous virtues are necessary to man when admitted to the celestial society: these are the infused virtues whose proper exercise presupposes love of the good common to the whole society, namely, the divine good insofar as it is the object of beatitude. (*Quaestiones Disp. de Caritate*, a. 2, cor.)

III

Jayber Crow, one of Berry's most moving characters, is a man who comes to experience, and love, the common good of Port William in all its varied respects. More than most, he experiences the pedagogy of virtue and love that living in the membership can offer. Jayber's personal story is marked by tragedy and loss. As a result, he becomes conscious of *Port William*—the town itself—as a defining part of his life. After a time of youthful wandering, he finds himself drawn back. Providentially, it is the town that even gives him his name: "My rightful first name is Jonah, but I had not gone by that name since I was ten years old. I had been called simply J., and that was the way I signed myself. Once my customers took me to themselves, they called me Jaybird, and then Jayber. Thus I became, and have remained, a possession of Port William" (*Jayber Crow*, 11).

Jayber's role as barber (and later, as church janitor and gravedigger) is actually larger than it would first appear. For what gives life to Port William as a community is not a set of structures or a government, but a network of relationships—perhaps put more theologically, the ties of civic friendship, or even the bonds of charity. "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... Port William would remember bits of its [history] occasionally, but mostly it forgot. Mostly the town's history had become its ways, its habits, its feelings, its familiarity with itself" (300).

It is in the context of this membership that the most meaningful relationships in Jayber's life—his great loves and friendships—are formed. He writes with understated grief of his best friend, Burley: "Forty years Burley Coulter was my friend. When he died—or, rather, disappeared clean out of the present world—my life was changed. You will know how much, practically and otherwise, my life in Port William and here at the river had

been his gift. In a way, I had been living out a vision that he had seen. I had, after all, lived as a man who'd had his dwelling place and his place of business right together, as he had said at the beginning" (318). This kind of friendship was only possible because both Jayber and Burley were part of the same membership—because they sacrificed for the same common good. It is the shared love of the same common good that allowed their friendship to take deep root, and for a lifetime of generosity and patience to unfold between them. Of course, the most transformative relationship for Jayber within the membership was with Mattie Keith, and this self-sacrificing love is at the heart of his growth in virtue and love for the highest good. So as not to spoil the story, further detail will be spared here.

Jayber gradually finds himself transformed by his incorporation into the life of Port William. The onetime restless wanderer has set down deep roots; the man who formerly was invisible is now deeply enmeshed in others' lives (even if he does still like to escape now and again). He has been decidedly *caught* by Port William, and it has changed him decisively:

I had been the barber in Port William for fourteen years by then, and the grave digger and church janitor for six years. My mind had begun to sink into the place. This was a feeling. It had grown into me from what I had learned at my work and all I had heard from Mat Feltner and the others who were the community's rememberers, and from what I remembered myself. The feeling was that I could not be extracted from Port William like a pit from a plum, and that it could not be extracted from me; even death could not set it and me apart. (204)

Berry then channels eighteenth-century political philosopher Edmund Burke, in both eloquence and thought, with a profound reflection by Jayber on what it means to be part of *the*

membership, part of a communion held together by the bonds of love and perhaps even transformed by grace:

What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on... 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 will toward goodwill. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and 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 maybe 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. (204-5)

In these passages, in which Jayber reflects at the greatest length on what it means to be part of Port William, it is unsurprising that his language begins to sound decidedly *ecclesial*. His description of a body with members imperfectly and indifferently united to it is soundly Thomistic language to describe the relation of many Christians to the Catholic Church; this language has a solid pedigree in Scripture and the tradition, and Berry uses it to great effect to underline the way in which Jayber experiences Port William as a kind of local church, having its own unity and its own common good. He does this still further in borrowing the language of Christ from Matthew 23:37: "And I could imagine a



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Father who is yet like a mother hen spreading her wings before the storm or in the dusk before the dark night for the little ones of Port William to come in under, some of whom do, and some do not. I could imagine Port William riding its humble wave through time under the sky, its little flames of wakefulness lighting and going out, its lives passing through birth, pleasure, suffering, and death. I could imagine God looking down upon it, its lives living by His spirit, breathing by His breath, knowing by His light, but each life living also (inescapably) by its own will—His own body given to be broken” (252).

In the end, Jayber himself admits that his language isn't accidental: “This is a book about heaven,” he observes. “I know it now. It floats among us like a cloud and is the realest thing we know and the least to be captured, the least to be possessed by anybody for himself. It is like the grain of mustard seed, which you cannot see, which you cannot see among the crumbs of earth where it lies. It is like the reflection of the trees on the water” (351).

Given the quotation from St. Thomas' *De Caritate* at the end of the previous section, it is eminently reasonable that this should be the case: man's life in common here on earth is an anticipation of, and preparation for, our common life in heaven. Anthony Esolen describes Jayber Crow as Dante "in the key of Kentucky," noting that Berry seems to self-consciously model the novel on Dante's *Divine Comedy* in several important respects ("If Dante Were a Kentucky Barber," *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, 272). If that is the case, it makes sense why there would be strong Thomistic overtones discernable as well: the *Comedy*, after all, has justly been called "the *Summa* in verse." All of these works are about journeys through and towards eternal cities—albeit in very different modes!

IV

Throughout Berry's novels, there is a palpable sense that Port William is slowly dying. In this, one can discern the fraying bonds of communion, and Berry's concerns about a national uprooting of our sense of place. Towards the end of her life, Hannah Coulter reflects:

There was a time when Port William drew its members into itself every Saturday night to shop, trade, talk, court, play, argue, loaf, or whatever else they had to be together in order to do. Now Port William, or what is left of it, is most likely to assemble, not in Port William at all, but in the Tacker Funeral Home in Hargrave. The survivors of the old life come to pay their respects. The neighbors, old and young, come. People who have moved away, maybe a long time ago, come back. You see people you knew when you were young, and now don't recognize, people who may never come back again, people you may never see again. We feel the old fabric torn, pulling apart, and we know how much we have loved each other. (*Hannah Coulter*, 164)

How many small towns—and neighborhoods and communities more generally—could this paragraph describe? The rituals of death signal something about a society, and for many, death is one of the only occasions that brings together otherwise separated or far-flung family and friends. This is a new state of affairs: such widespread and constant migration makes the notion of a “hometown” weak indeed for most people under the age of fifty. We are increasingly upwardly-mobile nomads—but it comes with a terrible cost. Greater freedom at any cost isn’t genuine freedom: it’s merely a different sort of alienation. If the sense of the common good described by St. Thomas, and depicted in Berry’s works, correctly describes a necessary part of human flourishing, then we have gone a long way to uprooting those essential virtues.

Returning to Hannah Coulter, the unbowed matriarch is facing the defection of all her children, one after the other, from life in the membership—a familiar story that played itself out across countless households and towns in America. She expresses her concerns to Andy, who seems to understand intuitively her deeper concern:

[Andy] nodded. He knew what I meant. It used to be that we sort of knew, we sort of could guess, how the lives closest to us would end, what beds our dearest ones were likely to die in, and who would be with them at the last. Now, in this world of employees, of jobs and careers, there is no way even to imagine. Andy said, “You’re worried because they’ve left the membership,” and he smiled, knowing we both knew whose word that was. “They’ve gone over from the world of membership to the world of organization. Nathan would say the world of employment.” One of the attractions of moving away into the life of employment, I think, is being disconnected and free, unbothered by membership. It is a life of beginnings without memories, but it is a life too that ends without being remembered. The life of membership with all its cumbers is traded away for the life of employment that

makes itself free by forgetting you clean as a whistle when you are not of any more use. (133)

This neatly summarizes the sense of *rootlessness* that now pervades American culture, and that makes fostering a love for the common good increasingly difficult. Nearly all the ties that bind us to people and places in ways that require commitment and self-sacrifice have been weakened over the past half-century: families, neighbors, a shared culture, a sense of the past, a common faith. Even reality itself is increasingly seen as a subject to redefinition based on one's desires and preferences, no matter how disordered. As a result, we are more profoundly restless, and rootless, than ever before.

Wendell Berry doesn't offer a solution, but he does give us cause to reflect on the reality of what leads us to genuine happiness. Turning one last time to *Jayber Crow*, let us read how Jayber deals with the prospect of a love that wounds:

If God loves the world, might that not be proved in my own love for it? I prayed to know in my heart His love for the world, and this was my most prideful, foolish, and dangerous prayer. It was my step into the abyss. As soon as I prayed it, I knew that I would die. I knew the old wrong and the death that lay in the world. Just as a good man would not coerce the love of his wife, God does not coerce the love of His human creatures, not for Himself, or for the world or for one another. To allow that love to exist fully and freely, He must allow it not to exist at all. His love is suffering. It is our freedom and His sorrow. To love the world as much even as I could love it would be suffering also, for I would fail. And yet all the good I know is in this, that a man might so love this world that it would break his heart. (*Jayber Crow*, 254)

Jayber, the dropout preacher who doubted God, makes good here. He gets to the heart of God's love for us—God wants us

to love him as he loves himself, freely and abundantly. The cost of this great gift is the sorrow of rejection, but the promise of it is the possibility of entering into a communion of love and commitment, of abiding friendship with God and man. We are called to enter into the kind of closeness and commitment—this membership—that makes possible self-sacrificing love. God wants to draw us into closer friendship with himself *through* those he also loves, those whom we must love more and more *in God* and *for his sake*. Marriages, religious communities, close friendships—these will always be marked by our human imperfections. In the end, Berry's work is not principally about nostalgia for rural Kentucky, but about the bonds of charity that break us open to God's own love. "As much as you will let it, Port William will trouble your heart," Jayber observes (230). We should all be so fortunate as to have our hearts troubled by a Port William. We should all be so blessed to have a Jayber there as our friend.

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