

**Membership and Masonry:
Wendell Berry, Cormac McCarthy, and the Search for Wisdom**

Matt Wanat
Ohio University - Lancaster

In Cormac McCarthy's play *The Stonemason* (1994), Ben, an aspiring layer of stone, studies the ancient art of masonry and the wisdom of the trade embodied in the life and work of his grandfather, an elderly African American stonemason born only a half decade after the end of the Civil War. Convinced that his *real* education lies in "the work" of stonemasonry and in working alongside Papaw, Ben leaves behind the intellectual pursuits of graduate school to devote long days to the art of true masonry, all while struggling with his father's money-hungry construction business, anticipating the birth of his second child, putting his wife through law school, and struggling with his nephew Soldier, a teenager who has lost his way in an early seventies urban landscape of drugs and crime.

In the play McCarthy utilizes a curious theatrical and narrative device in which an older version of the protagonist Ben sorts through the past and its lessons from a podium on the side of the stage, a device that the stage directions encourage performers and readers to see as a "speaker" with "an agenda which centers upon his own exoneration, his own salvation" (6). While McCarthy never clarifies for what Ben is to be exonerated, or from what he is to be saved, the tragic events of the play lend irony to the speaker Ben's advocacy for the value and wisdom of his grandfather's work, leading me to wonder what might be the flaws in the otherwise solid foundation of Ben's worldview, a worldview that offers the interconnected values of wisdom and work as an alternative to the business hustling of Ben's father and the street hustling of his nephew.

The following essay reads *The Stonemason* through Kentucky writer Wendell Berry's concepts of "membership" and "pattern" to illustrate that Ben's flaw lies not in his search for wisdom through his grandfather's life's work, which is admirable, but rather in his proprietary handling of information pertaining thereto, which separates Ben from full membership in his family and world and leaves Ben and his theories about wisdom and work always on the outside, looking in. *The Stonemason* imparts a wisdom that is old, practical, religious, foundational; nevertheless, the play is also a

tragedy warning that wisdom cannot be hoarded, but rather must be circulated within a membership of family, community, and world.

In saying that Berry's ideas about membership and pattern apply to *The Stonemason*, I am not claiming Berry has directly influenced McCarthy's work. *The Stonemason* is set in Louisville, Kentucky, which is not far from Berry's real home of Port Royal nor from Port William, the fictionalized version of Port Royal that has provided the setting for Berry's novels and short stories for more than fifty years. This similarity notwithstanding, I know of no evidence that McCarthy was thinking of Berry when he wrote the story of the Telfairs, an African American family in the early 1970s based on laborers McCarthy met while taking jobs to "accumulate life experiences" (Arnold 121). Nevertheless, Berry's ideas offer a useful theoretical lens through which to reread McCarthy's play and, in particular, the mistakes of his protagonist Ben.

Membership

Berry's essays, poetry, and fiction promote a unified idea or group of ideas, a Berry worldview which David Crowe has called "Berry's jeremiad" (192), others have called didactic (Smith, *Agrarian Tradition*, 115), and others still have called prophetic. Berry is often unapologetically straightforward. In fact, friend Gene Logsdon has called Berry, the essayist, "a polemicist of almost frightening skill" (113), and Berry's worldview pervades his fiction and poetry as well as his essays, pitting the goodness and sustainability of place-based connectedness of people and nature, often through mutually beneficial work, against destructive consequences of the compartmentalized industrial relations Berry associates with late-twentieth century environmental devastation, alienation, and dependency. On one side, we have what Berry calls the "connective power of culture" (qtd. in Crowe 197), on the other side, forces of disconnection, distance, dismemberment. Kimberly K. Smith describes Berry's view of connectedness as his "attempt to revive the notion of the Great Chain of Being—revised, however, almost beyond recognition" (*Agrarian Tradition*, 138). Smith's is a helpful comparison insofar as Berry believes that people and the earth are interconnected and interdependent, even if we sometimes fail to recognize these interconnections and interdependences, and Berry's vision is not only theological but also ecological and, as Berry often insists, practical.

For example, to Berry, it is not only ideally wrong but also impractical to solve one problem by causing "a ramifying series of new problems, the only limiting criterion being, apparently that the new

problems should arise beyond the purview of the expertise that produced” them (1). This quotation comes from “Solving for Pattern,” wherein Berry argues that industrial agriculture and overspecialized corporate industrial solutions in general fail to recognize the interlocking “pattern of patterns” that connect human, animal, and soil (3). One cannot poison the soil without eventually poisoning oneself any more than one can wisely continue to ignore the human and ecological devastation of globalism simply because it occurs at a distance or any more than one can sensibly and sustainably trade water for fuel.

Connected to Berry’s ideas about patterns being, in truth, patterns of interconnected patterns, wheels inside wheels, is his notion of “membership.” While “the membership” sometimes refers to the characters in Berry’s Port William stories, it more importantly refers to the idea that we all belong to one another and to places we live and the resources on which we depend: water, sun, weather, soil. Berry’s membership relies upon fidelity of human to human and human to place, and David Crowe claims that Berry’s membership offers an alternative to the ambivalence and tragedy of writers like Hemingway, who Crowe argues achieves ambivalence and tragedy by stripping characters “of the sources of meaning—including family, neighbors, ‘real country’ [...] and faith—through which they might avoid tragedy” (197). Similar to Crowe, I have argued in another essay, forthcoming in *Journal of Contemporary Literature*, that Berry presents alternatives to the alienation upon which much modernist and postmodernist writing thematically depends, hence Berry’s tendency towards the didactic over, say, the absurd or the ironic. Although Berry’s characters are flawed and their decisions sometimes tragic, his fiction and poetry, like his essays, push toward restoration of membership within the patterns that, in his essay “Solving for Pattern” and a number of other works, Berry has offered as a path to wholeness and wisdom.

Masonry

Enter McCarthy’s aspiring stonemason Ben Telfair, a character who in many ways might be right at home in Berry’s Port William membership. Like Berry’s agrarian protagonists, Ben recognizes both the value of work and the value of work done in accordance with the natural order of the world. Ben shares with his grandfather, Papaw, what Ben believes to be not only an ideal but also a “reverence for reality” (90). Like Berry’s inspiration, British mycologist-turned-organic-agriculturalist Sir Albert Howard, who wrote after a half century of studying natural systems that “the birthright of

every crop is health" (Howard 4), Ben Telfair has come to believe from working with Papaw that "The structure of the world is such as to favor the prosperity of men," that "God has laid the stones in the earth for men to use and he has laid them in their bedding planes to show the mason how his own work must go" (McCarthy 10). In other words, like Berry and Howard, Ben Telfair believes that good work is done in accordance with a pattern, and Ben's reference to the interconnections of heaven and earth in the work of human beings suggests that Ben believes material geologic patterns are part of a larger interconnected pattern of patterns. Papaw demonstrates that he too believes this in a practical sense when he breaks a crooked level to "safeguard the true" (66) and in a Judeo-Christian sense when he embarrasses the family by refusing to lay stone in a photo-op for President Nixon because scripture forbids hewn stone and, as Papaw says, "You go against scripture you on you own" (63). However, while the play implies basic agreement between Papaw and Ben, it is Ben who does most of the talking, positioning himself as Papaw's pupil and family historian, successor in the wise and ancient tradition of stonemasonry.

Much like a first-person narrator would in fiction, an older version of Ben shares Chautauqua-style, from a podium at the side of the stage, his interpretation of past events and of his and Papaw's stonemason philosophy. As this speaker describes events and shares ideas, the events themselves, most including a younger version of Ben, unfold in front of the audience. Edwin T. Arnold claims that the podium device may be "more literary than dramatic," explaining that this device has frustrated attempts to produce the play for stage (120). Nevertheless, the device is fascinating for a reader insofar as it raises questions of the podium Ben's reliability, questions McCarthy encourages in the stage directions when he draws attention to an agenda: Ben's aforementioned need for "exoneration" (6).

There are many things for which Ben at the podium might feel he needs exonerating. His father, Big Ben, a contractor uninterested in Papaw's true masonry and always hustling for work in Louisville's racist construction industry, kills himself, and Soldier, Ben's nephew, dies of a heroin overdose after Ben pays him for years to keep himself and his life of crime away from the family. With regards to Soldier, Ben's sister Carlotta struggles to forgive Ben for his not letting her know her son's whereabouts, saying to Ben, "I thought you were different," to which Ben replies, "So did I" (130).

Larry Maslon of the Washington, D.C. Arena Stage offers that Ben's "blindness and self-righteousness have resulted in all this tragedy" (Maslon qtd. in Arnold 127). With this in mind, the potential second meaning of

Ben's reply to Carolotta—"So did I"—hints that Ben might agree, that by thinking himself "different" Ben has given in to hubris. But one need not look to the deaths in the play to see Ben's tragic failure, and Carolotta's disappointment with Ben may have less to do with Soldier's dying than with Ben's deliberately keeping Soldier at bay. In other words, much of Ben's failure is illuminated by the idea of membership, particularly in Ben's use of what he has gleaned from stonemasonry not as inspiration to invite the rest of his family into the trade but rather as a proprietary body of knowledge shared between him and Papaw.

Education

The proprietary nature of Ben's wisdom shows elsewhere in the play during discussions of education, which often circulate around an opposition between the wisdom of the trade embodied by Papaw and the frivolousness of formal education. Discussing from the podium his decision to leave graduate school for stonemasonry, Ben considers the limitations of academia:

[Papaw] never suggested that it would not be a good trade for me. He even encouraged me, although I knew that when I told him I was studying psychology he had little notion of what that meant. Fair enough. Psychology has little notion of what he means. Never did he smile at my pretensions. It was only when I came home after my first year of graduate school that I realized my grandfather knew things that other people did not and I began to clear my head of some of the debris that had accumulated there and I did not go back to school [...]. (11)

Papaw may not have smiled at Ben's pretensions, but Ben clearly smiles at his own or, more to the point, at the pretensions of academia. Yet, although Ben makes clear the difference in his mind between the wisdom of Papaw's trade and the pretensions of formal education, and although he argues with his wife Maven, a law student, that "wisdom from the common experience" of the worker may be superior to the "pragmatic business" of law school (38), Ben also encourages Soldier to stop skipping school and offers to send his sister, Carolotta, back to school.

It might be argued that Ben, like Papaw, is nonjudgmental of Soldier's and Carolotta's potential academic futures, but the aforementioned sarcasm about Ben's own schooling makes it seem more likely that Ben

offers Soldier and Carlotta schooling out of expediency, i.e., that he holds himself to a higher standard of wisdom than he expects from, or offers to, the others in his family. Meanwhile one of Ben's fears toward the end of the play is that he has not so much been *living* the wisdom of work as he has been *thinking* about it: "Ultimately there is no one to tell you if you are justified in your own house. / The people I know who are honorable never think about it. I think of little else" (105). On one hand, it seems that Ben fears that he has been a tourist at the wisdom of Papaw's work, that instead of being honorable he has thought about being honorable and, one might add, now from the podium is thinking about thinking. On the other hand, Ben pushes Soldier and Carlotta toward the disconnected and pointlessly specialized system of education that he has run away from, and in Soldier's case the institution, by Ben's own admission, seems to specialize in the distribution of drugs, to be what Ben at one point calls "a drug exchange center" (27).

All of this is to say that Ben's failure to micromanage the lives in his family indicates something more and less than his butting in. Ben's membership in the trade becomes an exclusive membership. Ben and Papaw rebuild the family house using the old methods, but ironically only certain members of the family ever get to occupy the home. The failure in *The Stonemason* appears to be a failure of membership, and the Telfairs, like so many families whose work is unwise—e.g., whose work becomes something to do to make money or whose work excludes one member from the other—find that their family has been dismembered. In fact, like Hemingway, who Crowe says achieves ambivalence and tragedy by stripping characters "of the sources of meaning [...] through which they might avoid tragedy" (197), McCarthy in *The Stonemason*, though he seems to recognize the patterns of interrelationship between the stones and humanity, achieves ambivalence and tragedy by stripping these patterns of the familial human elements of membership that might unify the Telfairs within an ancient model of working within a pattern of patterns.

Wisdom

I should point out that it is not my intension to criticize McCarthy for not writing *The Stonemason* like Wendell Berry might. McCarthy has crafted a play full of wisdom tempered by difficult questions about the path by which we might reach it. And it may be noted that Berry's own fiction is full of failure, sometimes embodied in tragically flawed characters like Jack

Beechum, who fails to hold his family together amid economic forces and poor decisions that tear it apart.

In Berry's novel *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974), the title character grows alienated from his daughter, Clara, and her wheeling-dealing husband, Gladston Pettit, due to Clara and Glad's values—as Jennings Mace says, "Glad and Clara will never buy anything, improve it and keep it. Glad would rather lend money to people to buy worthless things" (71)—but Jack's alienation also arises from his own decisions in the past, which have harmed his marriage and led to his separation from Clara. More interesting for our purposes, Jack Beechum, like Ben Telfair in the McCarthy play, abandons members of his family:

At about the same time [Jack] also withdrew, bluntly and finally, from all other relationships that had no meaning to him. He granted no more worth to mere formality or blood tie; he would no longer stir a foot for old time's sake. [...] They belonged to another world, and he could expect nothing from them. He would be faithful to what he belonged to: to his own place in the world and his neighborhood, to the handful of men who shared his faith. (139-40)

As the quotation reveals, rather than offering a happy alternative to the tragic mistakes we see with McCarthy's protagonist, Berry presents a similar crisis of dismemberment. Keenly aware of the collapse of the biological family amid the collapse of locally interdependent ways of life, this Berry novel, like a number of others by the author, dramatizes the rise of the suburb, transient consumerism, industrial dependency, and the global market of buying and selling by showing a family reduced to little more than monthly visits back to the old home for "a load of eatables 'fresh from the farm,' as [Clara] and Glad [like] to say to their guests at dinner" (138).

However, if the long quotation above is analogous to McCarthy's play, Jack Beechum is more like Papaw than he is like Ben. Jack's abandonment of family is not abandonment really, certainly not a hoarding of traditional wisdom. Rather, Jack's refusal to indulge Clara and Glad recognizes that some of his family has already abandoned him and that they have dismissed the work that his life represents to a degree that Jack has become to his daughter and her husband little more than a symbol of quaint rural obsolescence. More importantly, the narrator ends the paragraph on

Jack's division from Clara and Glad by saying that Jack "would be faithful to what he belonged to: to his own place in the world and his neighborhood, to the handful of men who shared his faith" (140). Membership is not withheld; it is shared, but only where it is recognized. Discussing with friend and nephew Mat Feltner the matter of his dissatisfaction with his patronizing son-in-law, Jack admits, "I've hated to tell you that [...] I dislike to talk against my own. I tell you to show you the kind of man you're not, and to give you some idea what it's worth to me that you're the man you are" (139). Opposite disappointment and division, Berry characterizes a membership based on mutual values, interdependence, and respect. In this example, Berry focuses on Jack's respect for Mat, but elsewhere Berry's Port William stories contain numerous other examples of respect and cooperation and mutual need among the men and women of Berry's "membership."

Conclusion

By reading McCarthy's play through the lens of Berry ideas, we deepen our understanding of the tragic nature of Ben Telfair's situation. Ben, like some in Berry's Port William membership, recognizes wisdom both practical and ideal in locally and traditionally interdependent work and culture, but he fails to share this knowledge with the ones he loves. In addition to giving us a way to reread McCarthy's play, Berry's work offers alternatives to alienation, reminding us that membership to one another within cultural and natural patterns remains viable even when we forget these connections, that although one can lead a horse to water without it drinking, the water still remains. The pattern and membership await our acknowledgment. In his poem "Healing," Wendell Berry writes the following:

There is the bad work of pride. There is also the bad work of despair—done poorly out of the failure of hope or vision. Despair is the too-little of responsibility, as pride is the too-much. The shoddy work of despair, the pointless work of pride, equally betray Creation. They are wastes of life. For despair there is no forgiveness, and for pride none. Who in loneliness can forgive? (11-14)

It might be argued that Clara and Glad Pettit, like much of our contemporary consumer culture with its dependency on corporations and

collective abdication of responsibility for excess and waste, exemplify the “too-little of responsibility,” the “shoddy work of despair” or the cynicism by which recognition of our common membership is abandoned for images or imitations of life packaged and sold. We are often like Clara and Glad, or like Ben’s father and Soldier, hustling ourselves to death.

However, it might be equally argued that in McCarthy’s *The Stonemason*, Ben’s is “the bad work of pride,” the “too-much” of responsibility, doomed to an unforgiving “loneliness” that, much like the loneliness of those who would abandon wise work for apparent comfort, leaves the student of wisdom no one with whom to share it. Nonetheless, an alternative remains: hard, rewarding labor—work interconnected, wisdom shared.

Good work finds the way between pride and despair.

By it, we lose loneliness:

we clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the
hands of those who come after us;

we enter the little circle of each other’s arms [...]

(Berry, “Healing,” 15-20)

In *The Stonemason*, Ben has joined hands with some of what Berry’s poem calls “those who go before.” Masonry is not only ancient but connective, joining novice worker with knowledgeable worker and the workers with an earth where each mason becomes, in Ben’s words, “a custodian of sorts” (McCarthy 10). When Ben says, “We were taught. Generation by generation. For ten thousand years,” he describes a community of workers and work the longevity of which suggests that the trade is also a model for sustainability, for generations of workers nurtured and work done in accordance with the earth (26). But what of the second half of the line from Berry’s poem: “the hands of those who come after us”? Where are these hands in *The Stonemason*? This is the connection we’re left wanting in McCarthy’s play, and disconnection is the price of Ben’s mistakes—in Berry’s words, the consequence of “the bad work of pride,” the “too-much” of responsibility.

Berry’s ideas about membership reinforce Ben’s vision of connective work, of workers and earth working together as one, but when we consider what full membership might look like, we also see in Berry’s ideas an alternative to Ben’s failure. No sustainable vision can be preserved

by one alone; “the bad work of pride” makes a shoddy foundation for full and sustainable membership of people and earth. Fortunately, by re-reading McCarthy’s play through the ideas of Wendell Berry, we can further illuminate the interrelationships among communities of people, the work that people do, the wisdom they might acquire from it, and the world in which we live so that, even in failure, we might grow wise.

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Biographical Information

Matt Wanat is an Assistant Professor of English at Ohio University Lancaster, where he teaches writing, literature, film genre, and literary and cultural theory and helps coordinate a campus vegetable garden that grows food for the hungry and provides students with a service learning opportunity related to place-based sustainability themes. Wanat's scholarship examines intersections of narrative, genre, and culture in the

areas of American literature and cinema studies. He has written articles on film and literature, including essays on the work of Sam Peckinpah, Jack Schaefer, Clint Eastwood, Katherine Anne Porter, and Wendell Berry.