

BOOK REVIEWS

Family and Community Values

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***Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, edited by Jason Peters, The University Press of Kentucky, 2007.**

Wendell Berry: Life and Work is a collection of essays touching upon all aspects Berry's life and ideas. They range in style from intimate portraits to ideological polemics to literary criticism. A teacher, farmer, writer, and community activist, Berry emerges from these descriptions as a uniquely complex figure. However, the book does not aim to present a systematic or coherent vision of Berry's character or politics. And the multitude of perspectives it presents on Berry often seems random and unsettling. For example, a move from the discussion of Berry's reputation in Britain [John Lane, pp. 88-95] to his connection to the twelve agrarian writers of the American South [Allan Carlson, pp. 96-112] to his gospel of active citizenry [Bill McKibben, pp. 113-118] appears rather jolting. The inclusion of a proper introduction could have helped orient the reader in this compendium of memoirs and helped contextualize different aspects of Berry's personality and ideology.

Nevertheless, the cornerstones of Berry's ideology—localism, anti-consumerism, and community values—emerge in most essays. The authors' reactions to Berry's philosophy range from deeply reverent to critical and argumentative (although the collection could use more of those). The importance of being anchored in a place and a community is a running theme in Berry's work. Bill Kauffmann describes Berry as “a man of place in a world run by the placeless” [p. 17]. He is also a man who hates war because it destroys homes, dispossesses, “depopulates,” and “mechanizes...” [p. 20]. Katherine Dalton describes him as “a lover of the small and local” [p. 297]. Berry's agrarian localism, Bill McKibben and Kimberly K. Smith caution, can easily be mistaken for an unpatriotic “retreat into private domesticity” [Smith, p. 49]. Yet, both Smith and McKibben find Berry to be one of the staunchest patriots on the American soil. Smith specifically describes him as a man whose “fidelity to land” [p. 52] and “ideal of localism” [p. 54] include “active membership in an international as well as national and local community” [p. 55]. Along with Berry's sense of place comes a distrust for new technology, which he sees put at the service of capitalist economy rather than community life. Berry challenges the notion that “buying is better than doing” and claims that in a society where workers or eaters are not divorced from the products and food-making they consume, waste and over-consumption are unknown. In such a society, the educational system does not produce “the economy's robotic hireling” or “the sophisticated, check-writing Half-Man” [Peters, p. 261] generated in the capitalist context.

In Berry's view, a society based on personal relatedness and tight social networks rather than one based on alienating consumption, is also a society that honors physical love over disembodied relationships. In fact, Berry says that physical love and connection ensure the survival of both the community and spirituality itself. In his book “Remembering,” Berry writes that embodied love binds us “most intimately to the Creation, to the fertility of the world, to farming and the care of animals” [P. Travis Kroecker, p. 119]. Love for Berry is this act “of giving ourselves unconditionally...” [p. 121] that ultimately leads to interdependence of households and the

preservation of public life, because love prevents communal disintegration. It is a foundation of a new economic order based on the “economy of gratitude” and sense of interdependence [Norman Wirzba p. 142]. Conversely, lack of “genuine thanksgiving” in economic exchanges leads to anonymity and manipulation. This—and here Berry comes close to Marxist views—is the root cause of economic troubles in our society. Berry’s vision of “Great Economy” includes the sustained practice of gratitude towards land and the people who work it.

Berry’s views of society and social progress could be traced to Marxism, conservation and populism, Eric T. Freyfogle observes, although it is hard to equate Berry with any of them completely. Freyfogle sees Berry’s emphasis on individual transformation alongside communal values as contradictory and not easy to implement. But, while Berry is an unorthodox and “ideologically unaligned thinker” [Jeremy Beer, p. 215], he deeply believes that the relationship between humans in society and that between humans and nature can be based on thoughtful mutuality rather than exploitation. He rejects “the “get big or get out” philosophy that has turned modern food production “into a monstrous international factory where poor people [do] the work for wages that [guarantee] to keep them poor” [Gene Logsdon, p. 241]. Instead, Berry calls for a social order based on shared communal values that are supported by local decentralized producers. In the cross-section of perspectives of Wendell Berry’s life and work, there is one common denominator—Berry emerges as a strong voice for place and personal responsibility for it. In an era of fast-paced homogenization of place in the name of globalization and corporate growth, the urgency of this call cannot be ignored.