1984

Wendell Berry: Love Poet

John T. Hiers
Valdosta State College

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
WENDELL BERRY: LOVE POET

JOHN T. HIERs

VALDOSTA STATE COLLEGE

Wendell Berry — poet, novelist, essayist — has produced an impressive canon since his first novel, Nathan Coulter, appeared in 1960. In two decades he has published three novels, several volumes of verse, and five volumes of essays. Two interrelated themes unify all of his mature work: man's proper relationship with the land and, a corollary, his harmonious relationship with his neighbors. These concerns place Berry squarely in the agrarian tradition of Southern literature, a position he finds both intellectually satisfying and aesthetically essential. Unlike many of his agrarian predecessors, however, Berry actually farms as well as writes and teaches.

Although Berry is a former Guggenheim fellow, a former Rockefeller Foundation fellow, the recipient of two prizes from Poetry Magazine and an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, he has not attracted widespread critical and scholarly attention. The few scholars with critical interest in Berry have concentrated on his regional agrarianism, his traditional moral values, and his direct pastoral mode, but they have failed to appreciate him as love poet of considerable distinction. One critic, John Hicks, finds marriage in Berry’s novels “to be ideally a merging of the solitary selves, an act of healing, and a partial reconciliation with nature,” yet Hicks limits himself to Berry’s fiction and fails to find there much “passion, intensity, or personal encounter” in these novels’ “farm marriages.” Nevertheless, much of Berry’s love poetry does reveal a moving, if understated conjugal passion and controlled intensity.

Indeed, Wendell Berry’s agrarianism makes him a love poet. Other modern American poets associated with agrarian perspectives and values — Ransom, Tate, Warren, Frost, for instance — certainly have composed love poetry; yet, none can be classified so easily as a love poet in any traditional, limited sense. But Berry’s brand of agrarianism — far more convincing, far less stylized and academic than in his predecessors — naturally and organically evolves into constrained paeans of love. At times as exuberant as Theodore Roethke, at times as intensely intimate as Anne Sexton, Berry both inherits and creates an agrarian ethos which sustains poetic visions of love unique among contemporary poets. That is, Berry as love poet is a celebrant of procreative marriage. His seventh generation farm near
Port Royal, Kentucky, is both metaphorically and literally a country of marriage, the title of one of his most mature books of verse.

Berry's world picture is one of microcosmic analogies based on man's unity with the land, and, consequently, with his wife and his creator. Harmony with nature both creates and reflects a continuous harmony with others, and man is husband to the land as he is husband to his wife. In his essay, "The Likenesses of Atonement (At-one-ment)," Berry explains the philosophical tenets of his unifying system of metaphors and analogies:

Living in our speech, though no longer in our consciousness, is an ancient system of analogies that clarifies a series of mutually defining and sustaining unities: of farmer and field, of husband and wife, of the world and God. The language both of our literature and of our everyday speech is full of references and allusions to this expansive metaphor of farming and marriage and worship. A man planting a crop is like a man making love to his wife, and vice versa: he is a husband or a husbandman. A man praying is like a lover, or he is like a plant in a field waiting for rain. As husbandman, a man is both the steward and the likeness of God, the greater husbandman.  

This poet of agrarian harmonies and natural pieties can be no other than a love poet as well. What makes Berry's voice as love poet unique today is his complete, unabashed adherence to this ancient system of belief. Paradoxically, his voice sounds authentic and even original because it is so old-fashioned, didactic, and moralistic.

Agrarian imagery to describe sexual love, however, is hardly unique even in modern verse. Theodore Roethke, in such brilliant poems as "I Knew a Woman," gives perhaps the most striking examples:

She was the sickle; I, poor I, the rake,  
Coming behind her for her pretty sake  
(But what prodigious mowing we did make).  
(12-14)  

Yet, Roethke's occasional use of this kind of agrarian metaphor in his love poetry ultimately is a celebration of the self through the ephemeral harmony of one soul with another. In Whitmanesque ecstasy he announces in "Words for the Wind" that "Being myself, I sing/The soul's immediate joy" and concludes:
I kiss her moving mouth,
Her sweet hilarious skin;
She breaks my breath in half;
She frolicks like a beast;
And I dance round and round,
A fond and foolish man,
And see and suffer myself
In another being at last. (105-112)

For Roethke, sexual love harmonizes individuals in their separate, doomed quests to defeat time. Berry's celebrations of sexuality unify individual souls with the natural order, redefining the individual's defeat by time as essentially a source of meaning and life. Death becomes a source of life metaphorically and analogously, for Berry, because it is a literal source witnessed almost daily on his farm.

Berry thus appropriates the Renaissance metaphor of death as sexuality. "What I am learning to give you is my death," he says to his wife in "The Country of Marriage," "to set you free of me, and me from myself/into the dark and the new light." Dark brings new light as death brings new life; hence, Berry presents sex primarily as procreative. But, again, his use of death as a sexual metaphor is more than merely quaint because it is, in Berry's world, more of a physical than a metaphysical figure. As a love poet Berry has indeed schooled himself on John Donne and similar company, but he has basically schooled himself on the ways of nature on his Port Royal farm.

As Berry generalizes in "Enriching the Earth," death is never an end in itself in the natural world: "After death, willing or not, the body serves, entering the earth. And so what was heaviest and most mute is at last raised up into song" (17-19). Sexual death, according to Berry's system of analogies, yields a similar song for similar reasons. It both mirrors a natural process of procreation and is one itself. More than two people are harmonized in Berry's hymns to marriage; a world is unified.

The unforgivable sin, for Berry, then, is to make a waste of death. He invariably associates violence and loneliness and despair with this kind of waste. In "The Morning News," for example, he states that

It is man, the inventor of cold violence,
dead as waste, who has made himself lonely
among creatures, and set himself aside from
creation, so that he cannot labor
in the light of the sun with hope,
John T. Hiers

or sit at peace in the shade of any tree.

(FAH, 11-16)

Analogously, sexual death as an end in itself brings disharmony, loneliness, alienation.

The farmer-lover-narrator of “Air and Fire,” borne away from the country of marriage by jetliner, composite symbol of modern technological and mechanistic society, is at once tempted by selfish, lustful passion:

Having risen from my native land,
I find myself smiled at by beautiful women,
making me long for a whole life
to devote to each one, making love to
her in some house, in some way of sleeping
and waking I would make only for her.

(FAH, 5-10)

Here Berry presents a traditional temptation scene, replete with an angel-temptor who satanically offers complete release from individual responsibility to wife, home, and farm. But the bonds of marriage paradoxically offer truer freedom (“I give you what is unbounded,” Berry declares in “The Country of Marriage”). Meaningful love doesn’t grow in some way, in some house; it is cultivated and nourished in the mind as well as in the flesh. “Like rest after a sleepless night,” concludes the narrator, “my old love comes on me in midair” (FAH, 22-23).

But it would be erroneous to consider such a conclusion to be only the puritanical prudishness of an eastern Kentucky farm boy. His kind of love anchors his lustful mind in midair because it is also of the flesh. In “Earth and Fire,” a companion piece to “Air and Fire,” Berry sings love’s ecstasy in lyrical harmonies worthy of Roethke or Anne Sexton. Here pain and joy are unified by passion and gusto:

In this woman the earth speaks. 
Her words open in me, cells of light
flashing in my body, and make a song
that I follow toward her out of my need.
The pain I have given her I wear
like another skin, tender, the air
around me flashing with thorns.
And yet such joy as I have given her
sings in me and is part of her song.
The winds of her knees shake me
like a flame. I have risen up from her, 
time and again, a new man. 

(RAH, 1-12)

Renewal of life comes because this sexuality is of the earth, not of the 
air. The lovers are in harmony with time because they creatively 
participate in the cyclical order of nature. This poet measures time not 
by the swaying of a woman's body, but by the rushing of wind and the 
flashing of light.

Berry's ecstatic sensuality, though often as lyrical, stands outside 
of the modern tradition of love poetry as exemplified by the later Yeats 
or Roethke or Sexton. It especially contrasts to the sensuality of 
Sexton, who in many ways was Roethke's heir to the Bacchanalian 
muse. In "Barefoot," for instance, Sexton echoes Roethke's trumpeting 
of selfhood through orgiastic release:

The surf's a narcotic, calling out, 
_I am, I am, I am_ 
all night long, Barefoot, 
I drum up and down your back 
In the morning I run from door to door 
of the cabin playing _chase me_. 
Now you grab me by the ankles, 
Now you work your way up the legs 
and come to pierce me at my hunger mark. 
(25-33)6

Berry could never describe sexual union as a game, although he, too, 
revels in such climactic moments. For sexual union is but an extended 
metaphor of other Thoreauvian harmonies in his Kentucky Walden; it 
is, in short, a mode of participation in all of creation and, therefore, an 
act of joyful reverence.

But there are no more Waldens in the New England of Anne 
Sexton. Like her predecessor Roethke, she quickly plunges from 
zeniths of sensuality into labyrinths of remorse and loneliness. In 
"You All Know the Story of the Other Women," she sarcastically 
begins by shattering the Walden myth:

It's a little Walden. 
She is private in her breathbed 
as his body takes off and flies, 
flies straight as an arrow. 
But it's a bad translation. 
Daylight is nobody's friend. (1-6)
Creative, harmonious unions of lovers reflect only the heat of momentary passions. They are not analogies of natural order and design; they only intensify the desperate need for them in a world which can no longer accept them.

Sexton often perceives and dramatizes modern marriage as an artificial sham, an illusion of self-transcendence and self-definition. As a poetic metaphor or analogy it is useless because it is dead as a conventional sacrament. Even in her series of poems “Eighteen Days Without You,” one is suspicious of the selfhood attained through sexual passion. Here the narrator remembers how it once was, how

you come and take my blood cup
and link me together and take my brine.
We are bare. We are stripped to the bone
and we swim in tandem and go up and up
the river, the identical river called Mine
and we enter together. No one’s alone.
(“December 11th,” 7-12)

The irony is that she is alone even as she recalls this climactic moment of complete union. More often than not, Sexton’s theme is the unassuaged hunger of love which is only intensified by these memories.

The true Sexton, in short, may be found in such a poem as “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator.” There are few poems of greater intimacy and forlorn alienation in modern American verse. Here may be the inevitable, final lamentation of the kind of Romantic solipsism which Roethke and Sexton ultimately manifest as love poets. It is a tradition, a side of Romanticism completely rejected by Berry, whose agrarian world view is often and nebulously labeled “Romantic.” Paradoxically, the opening lines of Sexton’s poem easily might be confused with several of Berry’s: “The end of the affair is always death./She’s my workshop.” The similarity ends with the refrain, which closes each stanza with Euripidean pathos: “At night, alone, I marry the bed.” In this instance, Sexton, like Berry, employs death as a sexual metaphor; but her irony is overwhelming and terrifying. The self-fulfillment of this affair (one recalls the Whitmanesque declarations of self in “Barefoot” and other poems) is finally masturbatory—with no affirmation of meaning, no possibility of rebirth, only introspective anguish. “All is an interminable chain of longing,” writes Robert Frost. Anne Sexton would agree.

Wendell Berry, although much taken with Frost’s agrarian posi-
tions in such poems as "Build Soil," would not. If Roethke and Sexton are so far the era's supreme strophic voices of solipsistic sensuality, Berry is emerging as an antistrophic singer of the timeless harmonies of marriage — marriage not as a social convention so much as a pantheistic sacrament. Although he is not Christian in any narrow denominational or theological sense, he nevertheless considers marriage as sacramental because it is a means to greater natural harmony and piety, a mode of creativity analogous to natural and, ultimately, to divine creativity.

Berry’s "An Anniversary" epitomizes his poetic vision of marriage and of sexual love. Along with "The Country of Marriage," it stands as one of the modern age's boldest poetic visions of marriage as sacramental. At a time when marriage as a social institution is becoming anachronistic, Berry dares to center a complete agrarian ethos upon it. And he succeeds, partly from refusing to be strident as he cuts across the modern American grain with affirmations from the past. "An Anniversary" is a complementary descriptive statement for all "The Country of Marriage" dramatizes. An anniversary of love and commitment, a marking of time, becomes a window on all time through the seasonal fruition, decay, and rebirth of all life in "The household/Of the woods":

The fields and woods prepare  
The burden of their seed  
Out of time's wound, the old  
Richness of the fall. Their deed  
Is renewal (CM, 6-10)

The love of man and woman has similar harvest, achieves definition through change that is forever orderly and predictable, at least from an agrarian vantage point.

Berry quietly, reverentially telescopes from nature in general to the particular celebrants of this anniversary:

Love binds us to this term  
With its yes that is crying  
In our marrow to confirm  
Life that only lives by dying.  
Lovers live by the moon  
Whose dark and light are one,  
Changing without rest.  
The root struts from the seed  
In the earth's dark — harvest
And feast at the edge of sleep.
Darkened we are carried
Out of need, deep
In the country we have married. (CM, 18-30)

Because these lovers are married to a country as well as to one another, they are carried away from need. In contrast, the lovers of Anne Sexton’s poems, whose desires are confirmed only by their own voices, have their needs intensified even while they harvest the fruits of their love.

Lovers in the poetry of both Berry and Sexton live by the moon, but for different reasons. On the one hand, the narrator of Sexton’s “Moon Song, Woman Song” declares: “I am alive at night./I am dead in the morning.” On the other hand, the married couple in “An Anniversary” is unified with both the night and the day, for dark and light give definition to each other as fall and winter define spring. Speer Morgan cogently says: “The statement ‘Lovers live by the moon’ implies the conjunction of both the woman’s cycle and the farmer’s labor with that of the moon; more important, the moon symbolizes the dark and light continually at work in one perfect circle: its essence is the ‘changing without rest,’ which suggests the joy of love-making itself as well as the pang of sorrow that the lovers...may feel in the face of transience.” This momentary regret of Berry’s lovers is quickly assuaged by the dark itself, for it carries them out of need. Sexton’s characters find no such solace. Feasting in the dark, they but hunger in the day.

Even when Sexton employs the agrarian images of planting and harvesting, she is consciously the poet of the moment rather than of the seasons. In “Us,” another of her Roethke-like ecstasies, she concludes with a veritable fury of passion:

Oh then
I stood up in my gold skin
and I beat down the psalms
and I beat down the clothes
and you undid the bridle
and you undid the reins
and I undid the buttons
the bones, the confusions,
the New England postcards,
the January ten o’clock night,
and we rose up like wheat,
acre after acre of gold,
and we harvested, 
we harvested. (20-33)

There can be no country of marriage for Sexton because there are no meaningful traditions left on which to found such a country. The traditions of New England are only post-card mementoes; the lyrics of the Psalms are now discordant. One can no longer return to the remnants of the past, as does Robert Frost’s urban quester in “Directive,” to “Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.”9 One can only throw off confusion, like clothes, as an act of the will. Sexual fulfillment is better than no fulfillment at all. When the time comes to face the reality of such uninhibited abandonment (“Let’s face it, I have been momentary,” concludes the narrator of “For My Lover, Returning to His Wife”), then at least the moment has been luxurious. Confusion inevitably, often pathetically, returns; one must wear clothes again. But the harvest has been golden, if short-lived.

Berry, of course, would find this kind of harvest to be not only too ephemeral, but also illusory. He would classify it as the fruition of “ignorant love.” As he rather whimsically states in “The Mad Farmer Manifesto: The First Amendment”:

And I declare myself free 
from ignorant love. You easy lovers 
and forgivers of mankind, stand back! 
I will love you at a distance, 
and not because you deserve it. 
My love must be discriminate 
or fail to bear its weight. (CM, 21-27)

Discriminating love is harmonizing love; it is passion without lust, pleasure without hedonism. It is, in the final analysis, participation in the seminal processes of all plantings and all harvests and thus a consummation of all time.

NOTES

1 John Hicks, “Berry’s Husband to the World: A Place on Earth,” 
American Literature, 51 (1979), 251-252.


3 My text is The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke (Garden City, 1961).
John T. Hiers

4 My text is *The Country of Marriage* (New York, 1973), hereafter cited with abbreviation *CM*.


6 My text is *Love Poems* (Boston, 1969).

