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An American Prophet: Wendell Berry's Community Ethic, 1965-1977

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AN AMERICAN PROPHET: WENDELL BERRY'S COMMUNITY ETHIC,
1965-1977

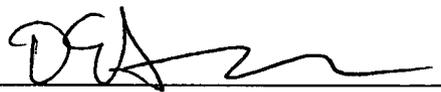
Joel O. Garrott

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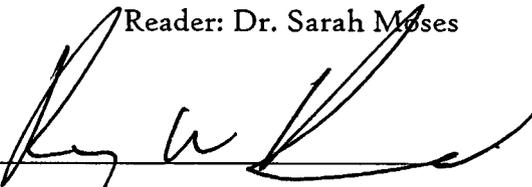
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ABSTRACT

JOEL O. GARROTT: *An American Prophet: Wendell Berry's Community Ethic, 1965-1977*

Under the direction of Dr. Darren Grem

This thesis provides a detailed commentary on Wendell Berry's agrarian ethic as articulated in his early literature of the 1960s and 1970s. It is part biography of Berry's early life, part history of his early thought, and part literary interpretation of his early work. It expounds on the significance of Berry's personal connection to place, and situates Berry's agrarian argument for community life in the context of the social issues addressed in his early literature. The central argument of this project is that Berry's agrarian ethic was grown out of his relationship with his native place in Kentucky, and that this relationship made Berry's ethic at points narrow in its scope of vision, and at other points prophetic in its analysis of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s. The main works engaged are *The Long-Legged House* (1969), *The Hidden Wound* (1970/1989), and *The Unsettling of America* (1977), along with selections of Berry's poetry from the same time period.

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Introduction

Aldo Leopold once wrote, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”¹ This sweeping statement of environmental ethics was made by Leopold in his classic work of nature literature *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously in 1949. Twenty years later, a young writer and farmer from Kentucky began his literary career by publishing a collection of essays devoted to this ethical ideal. Indeed, the work Wendell Berry produced during the early part of his writing career can best be understood as an extensive meditation on and defense of the virtues of a healthy human-land community.

This thesis provides a detailed commentary on Wendell Berry’s agrarian ethic as articulated in his early literature of the 1960s and 1970s. It is part biography of Berry’s early life, part history of Berry’s early thought, and part literary interpretation of his early work. It expounds on the significance of Berry’s personal connection to place, and situates Berry’s agrarian argument for community life in the context of the social issues addressed in his early literature. The central argument of this project is that Berry’s agrarian ethic was grown out of his relationship with his native place in Kentucky, and that this relationship made Berry’s ethic at points narrow in its scope

¹Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group, 1966), 262.

of vision, and at other points prophetic in its analysis of American culture in the 1960s and 1970s. The main works engaged are *The Long-Legged House* (1969), *The Hidden Wound* (1970/1989), and *The Unsettling of America* (1977), along with selections of Berry's poetry from the same time period.

Ethic is the most fitting term to use in framing Berry's commentary on the social issues of the 1960s and 1970s. It is necessary to use in articulating the significance of his personal connection to Kentucky to the larger arguments he made, as Berry's early literature was deeply moralistic. His community vision dealt explicitly with what he deemed "right" and "wrong;" or, more specifically, what was "good" regarding human relationships and human-land relationships. The Kentuckian's agrarian ethic had its foundation in what he believed was the inherent goodness of community and connection, while it condemned those things that brought ruin to the land and to the human-land community. Voicing his community ethic over against the country's treatment of the land, Berry took on the role of an American prophet.

Chapter one chronicles the general path of Berry's life from his boyhood years in the 1930s to his return to Kentucky in 1965. It provides a sketch of the relationship Berry established with his native place in Kentucky, and discusses the indispensability of place to Berry as an author. It highlights Berry's attachment to "the Camp," an enduring symbol of home in Berry's consciousness from his childhood to the early years of his marriage. The chapter also provides the personal and intellectual background to the work that Berry published from 1965-1977.

Chapter two is an in-depth discussion of *The Long-Legged House* (1969) along with excerpts from Berry's early poetry. It examines Berry's agrarian ethic, specifically as applied to religion, politics, and the Vietnam War. It attempts to show the prophetic nature, and to draw out the particulars of, Berry's ethic across his earliest prose and poetry publications. The chapter also discusses how Berry's own connection to place gave him an exceptional ability to get at the roots of the unsettled spirit of members of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Chapter three examines *The Hidden Wound* (1970/1989), Berry's personal meditation on the connections between race and agriculture. It argues that Berry's concern for the well-being of the land and those who work it remained consistent, that Berry had a tendency to romanticize the African American experience of the land, and that Berry's conservative attitudes toward race and social change arose from his agrarian sense of place. It asserts that *The Hidden Wound* was exceptional among Berry's early literature, in that Berry stepped out of his prophetic role in this work.

Chapter four analyzes *The Unsettling of America* (1977), the longest and most ambitious of Berry's books discussed in this project. It analyzes Berry's ethic in the context of one of its most prominent criticisms, namely that Berry merely offered a nostalgic push-back against the inevitable course of agricultural and cultural history. Here, it is argued that Berry's ethic of community and land use was prophetic rather than nostalgic, in that Berry did not center his arguments on the past, but rather on the moral problems that produced the cultural malaise of 1970s Americans. It argues that Berry acted as a voice of moral accountability for the nation in regards to its relationship with the land.

Berry's relationship with his community in Kentucky gave him remarkable insight into the moral problems and cultural conflicts facing America in the 1960s and 1970s. In Berry's case his prophetic insight was granted not through divine revelation, but through his experience of community in Kentucky. If a "prophet" is one whose work holds people accountable for their actions, then this is precisely the word needed to describe Berry's attempts at reconciling the American people with the land they have misunderstood, abused, and neglected. Berry's early literature was fundamentally a call to his readers to turn from a disembodied, destructive relationship with the land, and to enter into a relationship with the land rooted in the healthy possibilities of community life.

Chapter I: Homecoming

Berry's early life experiences and the journey that brought him back to Kentucky are indispensable to understanding him as an author, and to contextualizing the agrarian ethic expressed in his early literature. To understand Berry, one must understand him as an author whose work has grown out of a specific place in the world. Berry's argument for place, as expressed in his early works, was shaped primarily by his relationship with his Kentucky homeland. His experiences in other parts of the world served to confirm his ultimate destination in Henry County, Kentucky. Berry's texts were shaped first and foremost within this context of home—a home that pursued him wherever he traveled and guided him in whatever he wrote. As an American environmental author, Berry's devotion to place was both his liability and his inspiration. His vision of community life bore the limitations of an intense particularity. Yet it was this same particularity that allowed him to argue consistently for his agrarian vision.

Berry the author is inseparable from Berry the man, and the man is inseparable from his place. Berry's story is one of search and return to his native place. Berry lived across the country, from California to Indiana to New York. He lived for a year in Europe on a Guggenheim fellowship, and he visited some of Europe's most illustrious places. Then, he lucked into an opportunity to become a great writer in one of America's greatest cities. But in none of these places did Berry choose to ultimately

ground his life. He chose instead the place of his heritage, the place in which his identity first took shape. He chose Kentucky.

Berry's connection with Henry County, Kentucky endured through the many places where he sojourned, and in the Kentucky landscape Berry found both the beginning of his literary life and the end of his digressions. In 1969, Berry wrote,

Every man is followed by a shadow which is his death—dark, featureless, and mute. And for every man there is a place where his shadow is clarified and is made his reflection, where his face is mirrored in the ground. He sees his source and his destiny, and they are acceptable to him. He becomes the follower of what pursued him...That is the myth of my search and my return.¹

Berry's return was more than a quaint homecoming. It was, quite literally, a decision of life and death.

The telling of the myth of Berry's search and return is aided by comparison to the experiment of another American environmentalist, Henry David Thoreau. The eminent American transcendentalist Thoreau wrote that he went to the woods to live intentionally. His desire, he wrote, was to strip the bone of life down to the marrow to discover the essential nature of life. The "quiet desperation" Thoreau observed in his society could be countered, he thought, through a stripped-down lifestyle, through a life of voluntary simplicity.² His experiment at Walden was a significant act of counter-cultural living that bore an important resemblance to Berry's decision to seek the life of an agrarian. Berry's choice to live in closer proximity with the natural world in some ways mirrored Thoreau's decision. Both Berry and Thoreau pursued voluntary simplicity, intentional living, and communion with the natural world. Both

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 239.

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004), 6.

men sought a way of life that defied society's expectations. They both chose a path counter to the conventions of American culture, hoping to discover a more meaningful way of living in the modern world. Yet Berry and Thoreau articulated their relationships to the natural world in distinctive ways. These distinctions help to frame Berry's place as an agrarian environmental author of the 1960s and 1970s.

Two key differences between Thoreau and Berry were lasting fidelity to a particular natural place and religious concerns. Whatever connection Thoreau may have experienced with Walden Pond, his stay there was purposefully temporary. His intention was not to permanently settle the land, nor to raise a family or help make a community there. He went to conduct an experiment for himself, for his betterment as an individual. The argument made by Thoreau's lifestyle, then, was for the ability of the individual to live independently of the extraneous comforts of modern culture. "I went to the woods," Thoreau wrote, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."³ This argument championed the primacy of the individual and the ability to live with only the bare essentials. It was an argument for the individual rather than the community, and it was limited to the two years Thoreau spent in the cabin at Walden.

If Thoreau went to the woods for himself, Berry returned to Kentucky for the *community*. Berry's agrarian vision was communitarian rather than individualistic, and permanent rather than temporary. The arguments Berry crafted in his early prose and poetry were outgrowths of an unswerving loyalty to his agrarian ideal of a

³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 85.

community of people bounded together with the land. Berry's intention in returning to Henry County, Kentucky was to join his life with the life of the place. Berry expressed the unequivocal permanence of his statement of his "source and destiny." In a metaphorical and literal sense, then, Berry viewed himself as having grown from the land of Kentucky, ultimately destined to return to the ground on which he lived his life. As an agrarian environmental author, Berry saw the soil of the earth not merely as a means to an end, but as his beginning and end as a man. Berry understood both his life and his death in terms of the land-community of Henry County.

Berry also took greater issue than Thoreau with what he perceived to be shortcomings in American religious thought relating to the environment. This difference is readily explained in the observation that Berry and Thoreau, though both authors of spiritual substance, molded that substance in vastly different contexts. From 1965 to 1977, Berry wrote within a context of what historians have called "The Third Great Awakening" in America's religious life, and within the context of a growing environmental movement.⁴ Bruce J. Schulman has described the Third Great Awakening of the 1970s as "an outpouring of enthusiasm and spiritual experimentation that ran the gamut of American religious life, from New Right Christians to New Age seekers, students of the Book of Revelation and the Torah, the Bhagavad Gita and the I Ching."⁵ Understanding this context of massive experimentation, of this renewed search for meaning, is crucial to interpreting Berry's

⁴ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001), 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

writings. The agrarian arguments Berry articulated in the 1960s and 1970s were his resolutions to such a search.

The growth of this religious fervor ran parallel to the growth of environmental awareness during the 1970s. Thanks to authors such as Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, conversations about environmental ethics had been steadily growing in the country by the time Berry produced his early literature. The prominence of the environmental movement in the 1970s positioned Berry to outline his agrarian stance on environmental issues, for an audience conscious of the life of the natural world. With such an audience, Berry took the opportunity to insert his specifically *agrarian* environmental ethic into the conversation.

For Berry, religious and environmental issues were not distinct, but inherently connected. His early literature argued for this connection in a context of growing environmental and religious movements that were largely independent of one another. The distinction between searching for meaning in one's life and striving for a better relationship with the natural world was, to Berry, a false dichotomy of concerns. Moreover, Berry argued that this division between spiritual concerns and earthly concerns was indeed a *source* of both the country's spiritual and earthly problems.

For Berry, one serious problem in American religious thought was the schism between body and soul, between heavenly things and earthly things. Berry's works contained the underpinnings of an incarnational theology, a theology intimately concerned with the body. In the religious portions of his writings on culture and agriculture Berry was preoccupied with Christian attitudes toward the body. More

specifically, Berry was concerned with the environmental implications of an incarnational theology, one that was conscious of the body's relationship to the earth.

The influence of Christian imagery bore heavily on his writings, but Berry's writing was not specifically "Christian." The Kentuckian utilized much Christian imagery to illustrate his argument for community life. Illustrations of death, resurrection, love, and neighborliness were essential to Berry's writings. These illustrations, however, were left without a concrete, supporting theological framework. Berry's argument was thus a *religious* argument inasmuch as it incorporated Christian imagery and dealt with Christian themes, but it was not an argument founded in any particular sect of the Christian tradition. Thus, Berry is best understood as a member of the agrarian tradition first and foremost, and any other religious categorization ought only to be considered secondarily.

Berry's return to a life of agriculture produced a more social argument than did Thoreau's experiment. Berry did not return to Kentucky for himself; he returned to substantiate his beliefs in the healthy possibilities of community life. He returned to take responsibility for the part of the world to which his family had belonged for generations past. He returned to his native community, and began living an agrarian lifestyle—a way of life that formed the basis for his early writings. Moreover, he returned to substantiate his belief in the responsibility of human beings to care for a particular place on earth. In doing all this, Berry paved a path through which he would produce a body of agrarian literature that defined his identity as an American environmental author. The agrarian community Berry envisioned, articulated, and strove to create in his own life was inescapably tied to his place in Kentucky. At the

core, then, Berry's argument was made in place, and his place gave both possibilities and boundaries to his argument.

In 1934, when Wendell Berry was born, he took his place in a long line of Kentucky farmers. The land of Henry County inhabited by Berry's family consisted of the rolling hills and abundant farmland of northern Kentucky. On this land Berry's family lived and worked for five generations before his birth. With the exception of the boyhood of one Irish ancestor, all of Berry's family resided in the Kentucky upland.⁶ Berry's history—his search and return—was defined by his decision to make his life an enduring part of the Henry County land community. While his commitment to Kentucky created boundaries for his scope of argument, it also produced a powerfully embodied approach to understanding human and environmental life. For Berry, this embodied lifestyle began with his experiences of farming as a child.

Berry learned how to farm from his father, his grandfather, and family friends. Growing up in the Kentucky fields, he and his older brother, John Berry Jr., plowed fields together as teamsters, driving mule teams across their father's farmland.⁷ In the 1969 essay "A Native Hill," Berry recalled the instruction he received from his grandfather about working as a teamster. Berry's grandfather would ask of him "which mule had the best head, which the best shoulder or rump, which was the lead mule, were they hitched right."⁸ Coupled to this factual knowledge was the *experience*

⁶ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 192.

⁷ "The Berry Family: Straight Talk and Strong Traditions," Louisville, KY Courier Journal, March 6, 1978.

⁸ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 192-193.

of farm life. In a 1993 interview, Berry remarked: “I had what I think was a very free childhood, a lot of swimming and riding on horses and wandering about.”⁹ The combined knowledge and experience of life on his family’s farmland gave Berry a sense of kinship to the place of his childhood, a kinship that remained embedded in his consciousness well into adulthood.

During Berry’s boyhood he grew attached to a small two-room cabin, built in the 1920s by the brother of his grandmother, a man named Curran Mathews. Mathews constructed the cabin near the town of Port Royal along the Kentucky River. The cabin served as the subject of the 1969 essay “The Long-Legged House”—the title essay of Berry’s first essay collection—in which Berry described in detail his long relationship with the cabin. “Very early,” Berry wrote, “I began to be bound to the place in a relation so rich and profound as to seem almost mystical.”¹⁰ The “Camp,” as he called it, was a place of freedom for Berry, where he and his brother sought adventure by braving the flooded Kentucky River.¹¹ Following Mathews’ death in 1948, the cabin fell into disrepair, prompting Berry and a friend to clean and renovate it. It was at this point, Berry wrote, that the Camp entered their imagination, as he and his friend became “settlers,” and not merely “campers.”¹² The richness of the relationship between he and the Camp would prove to be essential to Berry later in his life. Berry’s history of departure and homecoming, of turning from one path and toward another, was a history embodied in places like the Camp. The Camp was a

⁹ *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, Ed. Morris Allen Grubbs (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2007), 61.

¹⁰ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 137.

key part of the path that led Berry back to his native place, to the community that directed his life and embodied his arguments.

As an adolescent, the Camp provided a place of retreat during the troubled times of Berry's youth. Beginning in 1948, when he was fourteen years old, Berry's parents enrolled him in the Millersburg Military Institute in Millersburg, Kentucky. In "The Long-Legged House," Berry recalled the Institute as a place where "military correctness and regularity were always the aim...The highest aim of the school was to produce a perfectly obedient, militarist, puritanical moron who could play football."¹³ Berry was miserable there. "I waged four years there in sustained rebellion against everything the place stood for, paying the cost both necessarily and willingly."¹⁴ As a free-thinking, creative person, Berry was restricted by the school in his ability to think fruitfully and form his own identity.

During his turbulent years at military school, the Camp was an indispensable place for Berry's creativity and imagination. It acted as a reminder that his life did not belong to the military institution, that his life might have greater possibilities elsewhere. Berry wrote: "I was coherent and steadfast in my rebellion against [the military school] because I knew, I *must* have known, that I was the creature of another place, and that my life was already given to another way."¹⁵ This attachment to place was an indispensable piece of Berry's personality as he made his way through additional years of schooling and writing.

¹³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

Berry's identity as an agrarian writer began to take shape in high school and during his time in college. Life at military school did not agree with Berry, but it did serve as an important stepping stone. Although he opposed the draconian nature of the Millersburg Military Institute, it was there that Berry discovered that he discovered his favorite subject, namely literature.¹⁶ This discovery guided Berry as he entered the University of Kentucky in the fall of 1952. Regarding his entrance into the university, Berry admitted: "I had the rather naïve assumption that the business of the University of Kentucky was to make me into a writer."¹⁷ This was, of course, not the university's business, but it nevertheless helped to mold Berry into a more articulate and mature writer. During his time at Kentucky, Berry honed his writing skills in the university's undergraduate English program.

After completing his B.A. in English at Kentucky, Berry continued to cultivate his vocation as a writer by attending literature seminars at the Indiana University School of Letters. In the fall of 1956, he entered the master's program in English at Kentucky, a degree he completed in less than a year. The University of Kentucky played a formative role in Berry's life. It was at the university that he honed his passion for literature and writing. It was there that he earned two undergraduate and graduate degrees in English, a subject he would later return to teach at the university. And it was there that Berry met the woman who would become his wife.

In the same year Berry completed his M.A. at Kentucky, he married his wife, Tanya Amyx. Amyx's father was a professor in the art department at Kentucky, and Amyx was an English major at the university. She and Berry met in the fall of 1955,

¹⁶ *Conversations*, 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

and were married in May 1957.¹⁸ Their marriage did not begin with an extravagant honeymoon to some exotic locale; rather, it began in a place much more humble, and much closer to home for Berry. It began at the Camp.

In the title essay of his first prose publication, “The Long-Legged House,” Berry recalled his work preparing the cabin for Amyx and he to inhabit after their wedding: “For weeks before the wedding I spent every spare minute at the Camp, getting it ready to live in. I mowed around it and cleaned it out, and patched the roof. I replaced the broken windowpanes, and put on new screens, and whitewashed the walls, and scrounged furniture out of various family attics and back rooms.”¹⁹ For Berry, these preparations held profound meaning. The nature of the place itself underwent a radical change. The Camp was no longer a place in which Berry would seek out hours of contented loneliness. Instead, the Camp became to him a place full of possibilities for a life lived in relationship with his wife: “This was the place that was more my own than any other in the world. In it, I had made of loneliness a good thing...And now I changed it, to make it the place of my marriage.”²⁰ The ownership of the place became *communal* rather than individual, and thus, for Berry, the place became richer in meaning.

The couple took great pleasure and pride in the way they chose to begin their common life together. These feelings even became part of the place itself.²¹ As they entered into the Camp, it became part of their collective consciousness. In Berry’s words, “[The Camp] began...to have as profound a significance in our marriage as it

¹⁸ Ibid., xvii, 66.

¹⁹ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 145.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 147.

had already had in my life.”²² That significance is vital to understanding Berry as an author, and as a man rooted deeply in the life of a particular place. At the same time that Berry wedded himself to his bride, the couple wedded themselves to the Camp, and the place itself became the center of their marriage “both as actuality and as symbol.”²³

Berry’s marriage to Tanya Amyx and the couple’s wedding to the place represented Berry’s understanding of a proper relationship to the natural world. This establishment of place embodied Berry’s agrarian argument for a settled, purposeful life. The idea of settling in *someplace*, and of making a life there, was the foundation of Berry’s environmental ethic. In his early literature, Berry established an ethic of environmental care inductively. That is, he started small—his own life, a marriage made in one place, the care of one place—and only then addressed larger issues. To Berry, a society’s political, cultural, and environmental harmony was an extension of harmony within the human household. This idea was not new, as Berry himself made evident by quoting Confucius in his epigraph to *The Hidden Wound*: “wanting good government in their own states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in the home, they first disciplined themselves.”²⁴

As Berry articulated the significance of his relationship to place in his early literature, the concept of husbandry guided him. As Jack Hicks wrote in his criticism of Berry’s second novel, *A Place on Earth* (1967), Berry’s writing demonstrated that he

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 148.

²⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), epigraph.

modeled his life in part around the concept of the ideal husband.²⁵ Berry was not only a husband to his wife. He also strove to properly “husband” his land and his place at the Camp. By marrying himself both to his wife and to the earth, Berry took on the diverse vocation of marital and agricultural caretaker. His union with his wife mirrored his connection to the land, and vice versa. The theme of husbandry—or the agrarian ideal of responsibly caring for the land—pervaded Berry’s writings in the 1960s and 1970s. And the first embodiment of this ideal was the couple’s marriage to the Camp.

Berry’s work as a writer and teacher temporarily removed he and his wife from their native Kentucky. After their initial stay at the Camp, the newly-formed Berry family traveled across the country and overseas. In 1958, Berry received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, and with his wife and new daughter moved to Mill Valley, California to study creative writing at Stanford University. While at Stanford, Berry worked on his first novel, *Nathan Coulter* (1960), the beginning of his Port William narrative, and that followed a young man through the loss of his grandfather. Berry studied under the Pulitzer-Prize winning author Wallace Stegner alongside other notable authors at Stanford, such as Ernest Gaines and Ken Kesey. Stegner pushed Berry to give his utmost to his work. Stegner’s tutoring of Berry made Berry feel “that there was no excuse for doing less than I could, and no excuse not to give honor to the things I’d been given.”²⁶ Later, Berry would devote an essay to

²⁵ Jack Hicks, "Wendell Berry's Husband to the World: A *Place on Earth*," *American Literature* (1979): 239.

²⁶ *Conversations*, 68.

Stegner titled “Wallace Stegner and the Great Community” in his 1990 collection of essays *What Are People For?*²⁷

In 1959, Berry taught creative writing at Stanford, but in the summer of 1960 Berry and his family returned to Kentucky, specifically to New Castle in Henry County, where Berry farmed and wrote for a year before receiving a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.²⁸ In August of 1961, the fellowship gave Berry and his family the opportunity to travel to Europe, where they resided in storied places such as Florence, Paris, and London. While on the fellowship, Berry worked on *A Place on Earth* (1967).²⁹ In this novel Berry continued the story of his fictional Port William community that he began in *Nathan Coulter*. In *A Place on Earth* Berry also introduced the character Mat Feltner. Feltner, Hicks wrote, “is the ideal husband to the world, a striving upward in the flesh, back toward unity with the natural world.”³⁰ As a metaphor for the ideal husband, Feltner represented the ideal toward which Berry strove as a father, spouse, and farmer.

Following his time in Europe, Berry moved his family to their final place of residence before the permanent return to Kentucky. In 1962, Berry accepted a position at University College of New York, where he taught freshman English and served as the director of the freshman English department. In the fall, Berry and his family found an apartment in New Rochelle, New York, and Berry began his time at the university.³¹ To Berry, New York represented the possibility for his life to take a shape distinct from his formative Kentucky life. The possibility was appealing to

²⁷ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 48.

²⁸ Andrew Angyal, *Wendell Berry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 16.

²⁹ *Conversations*, 69.

³⁰ Hicks, “Wendell Berry’s Husband to the World,” 244.

³¹ Angyal, *Berry*, 21.

Berry, as he stood in a position to become an influential author in an eminent city. Yet, during his time in New York, the University of Kentucky also offered him a position in Lexington. Thus, Berry had to choose between the city of New York and the hills of Kentucky—between the place of a new career and the home of his ancestry.

In “A Native Hill,” Berry reflected on the decision to return to Kentucky:

[It] had cost me considerable difficulty and doubt and hard thought—for hadn’t I achieved what had become one of the almost traditional goals of American writers? I had reached the greatest city in the nation; I had a good job; I was meeting other writers and talking to them and learning from them; I had reason to hope that I might take a still larger part in the literary life of that place.³²

Yet Berry turned home, away from these possibilities, and toward Henry County.

After making his decision known, a faculty member at the university called Berry into a conversation in an attempt to persuade Berry to stay in New York. The professor made his argument to Berry through an allusion to Thomas Wolfe’s novel *You Can’t Go Home Again*, intimating to Berry the advantages available to him as a young writer living in the big city. Berry recalled,

“[I]t was clear to me that he wished to speak to me as a representative of the literary world—the world he assumed that I aspired to above all others. His argument was based on the belief that once one had attained the metropolis, the literary capital, the worth of one’s origins was cancelled out; there simply could be nothing *worth* going back to.”³³

³² Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 196.

³³ *Ibid.*, 196.

The argument of the professor was, in Berry's words, a representation of "the belief, long honored among American intellectuals and artists and writers, that a place such as I came from could only be returned to at the price of intellectual death."³⁴

Berry did not buy this argument. He very well understood that there was a "metaphorical" sense in which he could not return home.³⁵ He could not recreate his carefree childhood days of floating and fishing along the Kentucky River, or of learning to hitch a mule team with his grandfather. But Kentucky was still there, Henry County was still there, and the community which cultivated Berry's identity beckoned him to return. Kentucky was his fate, one Berry felt "obligated to meet directly and understand."³⁶ Thus in early 1965, he purchased Lanes Landing property, a small acreage adjoining the Camp. Then, in mid-1965, the Berry family moved back to Henry County.

And so Berry returned to the Kentucky hills and rooted himself in his place of inspiration. The Kentucky native's literary life flourished after his return, publishing several volumes of poetry and two essay collections within five years of his homecoming. His writing grew out of this place and sense of rootedness, and grew into a collection of fiction, prose, and poetry that would form his distinguished agrarian voice in American environmental literature in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s particularly, Berry tackled a broad spectrum of social issues in the context of an agrarian argument for community. Whether

³⁴ Ibid., 197.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 195.

concerning religion, war, race, agriculture, or culture, Berry's argument revolved around his vision of community life shared in a distinct place. This vision originated and was sustained by Berry's experiences as a child, young adult, farmer, and new husband in Henry County.

Berry's relationship with his Kentucky community inherently limited his arguments on religion, race, culture, and agriculture. Berry found his native place in Kentucky, and all his arguments and poetics passed through the rolling hills of Henry County before they made their way into his writings. Writing through this lens of a distinct place, Berry put forth arguments that bore the shortcomings of such specificity. At the same time that Kentucky limited Berry, however, Berry's investment in place gave his argument exceptional depth and clarity that could not have been achieved apart from this investment. This argument began to take shape with the publication of *The Long-Legged House*, alongside a substantial collection of poems. Berry's first collection of essays, *The Long-Legged House* combined with his early poetry to form the initial literary manifestation of the author's enduring commitment to his place in Kentucky.

Chapter II: A Spirit of Place

The prominence of place in Berry's early literature was an outgrowth of his experience of community. The possibilities of settled life became evident to Berry upon his return to Kentucky. Having experienced the possibilities of a communal life, Berry set out to articulate a vision for the renewal of this life in American thought and living. His vision took as its starting place his life in Henry County, Kentucky. Kentucky was the indispensable experience by which Berry made sense of the problems the country faced in the 1960s and 1970s. And his agrarian ethic was dependent upon inspiration from his spirit of place.

Berry's decision to turn away from his literary life in New York and return to flocks, fields, and neighbors in Kentucky served as the platform for his early writings. During the 1960s Berry began to articulate the significance of this decision through his poetry and through *The Long-Legged House*, an essay collection. Like his poetry, Berry's essays dealt with the issues of war, land use, and American culture. *The Long-Legged House* and Berry's early poetry were the genesis of his agrarian ethic. In the 1960s and 1970s Berry's poetry and prose formed an argument for the renewal of an agrarian vision of community life. The strength *and* weakness of this community ethic was Berry's dependence upon his own experiences in formulating his arguments. In contextualizing issues within the Kentucky framework, Berry made an argument that was powerful in its depth, but weaker in its breadth.

Published in 1969, *The Long-Legged House* was Berry's first articulation of an agrarian ethic. It was a book deeply concerned with the moral issues resulting from the intersection of people, land, and culture. The opening essay, "The Tyranny of Charity," focused on the impoverished condition of eastern Kentucky. The problem Berry outlined was the discrepancy between the abstract applications of governmental charity and the concrete situation faced by a particular East Kentucky furniture maker. The federal government, Berry wrote, could best serve the impoverished craftsman not through abstract charity, but by creating and protecting "a condition in which personal effort is meaningful."¹ That is, Berry thought the best way for the government to promote the economic health of the furniture maker was to provide aid that would allow the craftsman to make his own living, rather than the government making it for him. "An agency or bureau or institution," he asserted, "cannot exercise taste and judgment, cannot be motivated by love and compassion, cannot value a man for his industry or his art or his pride; they are abstractions themselves and they must deal with people as abstractions."² For Berry, the federal government's posture towards the East Kentucky craftsman was conflicted with what he saw as the inherent goodness of dealing in particulars.

In "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip Mine Morality in East Kentucky" Berry continued his commentary on land-human relations. In "The Landscaping of Hell," Berry mounted a defense of east Kentucky's land against the destructive practices of strip-mining corporations. He wrote, "The land destroyed by strip mining is destroyed forever...Such destruction—which can now be accomplished on a vast scale

¹ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 15.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

by a few men in a short time—makes man a parasite on the source of his life; it implicates him in the death of the earth, the destruction of his meanings.”³ The best answer to such a problem, Berry thought, was for the managers of the mining operations to take responsibility for the weight of their actions. Berry contrasted this personal responsibility with the responsibility imposed on the mining operators by the state or federal government, writing, “The closer to home the correction is made, the better it is—the more moral it is.”⁴ In Berry’s view, moral actions were best taken on a small scale—the larger the scale, the greater propensity for immoral abuse of the land.

Land abuse also served as Berry’s subject in “The Nature Consumers.” In this essay, Berry argued against abstract human interactions with the natural world. Berry described boatmen that sped carelessly down the Kentucky River near his home as a symbol of this abstraction. Discussing the quintessential boatman, Berry wrote: “He has become a symbol, to me, of an alienation from the world that I believe to be common among us, and on the increase.”⁵ As the boatmen inattentively sped along the river, they represented what Berry perceived to be the American attitude toward nature based on consumption, independence, and disconnection. It was this disconnection that Berry held responsible for damage done to the natural world. “It is invariably damaging,” Berry wrote, “when men with neighbors act on the assumption that they are alone.”⁶ Berry countered this attitude by suggesting a relationship with nature based on knowledgeable care and interdependence. He argued:

³ Ibid., 26.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁶ Ibid., 50.

Man cannot be independent of nature. In one way or another he must live in relation to it, and there are only two alternatives: the way of the frontiersman, whose response to nature was to dominate it, to assert his presence in it by destroying it; or the way of Thoreau, who went to the natural places to become quiet in them, to learn from them, to be restored by them.⁷

The frontiersman mentality of domination and destruction, as Berry described it, was the mentality that undergirded the ills of contemporary American society.

The second section of essays in *The Long-Legged House* applied Berry's agrarian ethic to politics. In "The Loss of the Future," Berry addressed issues of past and future in the context of American society, and argued expressly for the importance of his vision of community life. The central problems Berry identified in the essay were the problem of America's abuse of power throughout history, and the loss of an appealing vision of America's future as a result of the abuse. The country's abuse of power, Berry contended, led to massive destruction of land, humans, and the human-land community. In response to this destruction, Berry suggested a kind of moral equation: "The growth of power increases the capability (and, apparently, the likelihood) of destruction, which must involve a proportional increase of responsibility, which defines a need for a *developing* morality." This development, Berry wrote, meant "the continuous renewal of principles in the light of new circumstances, the continuous renewal and enlivening of the language of morality."⁸

The possibility of massive environmental destruction gave rise to the new circumstances in which Berry wanted to articulate a renewed moral vision. As mankind's capacity for destruction grew, Berry argued, the world's well-being became

⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

further dependent on the actions of governments, corporations, and individuals. “The recognition of that amazing and terrifying dependence, and of the great difficulty of the obligation it implies, ought to make the beginning of a new moral vision, a renewal of the sense of community.”⁹ The moral vision Berry asserted was based unequivocally on community life. “Now it has become urgent,” he wrote, “that the sense of community should include the world, that it should come to be a realization that all men ultimately share the same place, the same nature, and the same destiny.”¹⁰

The “world,” however, was too broad of an ethical framework for Berry to comprehend: “If [the sense of community] is to be hoped for at all, it is to be hoped for among the people who have had the experience of being involved responsibly and knowingly, and at some expense of their feelings and means, in the lives of their neighbors.”¹¹ And here Berry brought forth the distinctly *agrarian* piece of his argument. He wrote: “Against a long-standing fashion of antipathy, I will venture to suggest that the best model we have of a community is still the small country town of our agricultural past.”¹² (Berry’s use of the small agrarian community as a foundation for his social and ethical vision became a contentious point of criticism when Berry published *The Unsettling of America* in 1977.)

Berry’s speech, “A Statement Against the War in Vietnam,” was reprinted in *The Long-Legged House* in 1969, and illustrated Berry’s agrarian perspective of citizenship. Delivered at the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft at the University of Kentucky in February 1968, Berry’s statement wove together the

⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

intricacies of war, violence, politics, and the agrarian ethic. In this speech, Berry brought the controversial war into the context of place. “We must recognize,” he argued, “that a dishonest or a wasteful or a violent life is as great a danger to the world as a weapon of war, and the violence of neighbors is the model for the violence of nations, and the hope for order in the world fails in a disorderly household.”¹³ The unequivocal foundation for Berry’s arguments for peace and for the restoration of the world was his hope in place, in the making of a settled home.

In “Some Thoughts on Citizenship and Conscience in Honor of Don Pratt,” Berry articulated his particularly agrarian understanding of citizenship. Citizenship, Berry wrote, “begins at home. Its meanings come clearest, it is felt most intensely in one’s own house...To assert that a man owes an allegiance that is antecedent to his allegiance to his household, or higher than his allegiance to the earth, is to invite a state of moral chaos that will destroy both the household and the earth.”¹⁴ In the framework of Berry’s agrarian ethic, there was no greater duty than that which one owed to one’s home place. The dividing line between moral order and moral chaos was the line that divided the general and the particular, *anyplace* from *someplace*, abstract devotion to an idea from concrete commitment to a place.

In the third and final section of *The Long-Legged House*, Berry turned his attention to his own life in Kentucky. “The Rise” took the Kentucky River as its subject. Berry praised the power and beauty of the river, but also warned that the river, despite its power, could not forever endure human abuse. The river was important to Berry as a representation of mankind’s inability to make the natural

¹³ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴ Ibid., 89,91.

world fully subject to its own will. Of the river, he wrote, “It is serenely and silently not subject—to us or to anything else except the other natural forces that are also beyond our control. And it is apt to stand for and represent to us all in nature and in the universe that is not subject.”¹⁵ The river was also significant to Berry in its proximity to the most important place of his early life, the Camp.

In the title essay “The Long-Legged House,” Berry told the story of his relationship with the Camp. Berry held this place in his imagination throughout his early life spent away from Kentucky, and his relationship to the Camp ultimately helped him determine the greater direction of his life as a whole. The days of peace he experienced at the Camp as a young man, Berry wrote,

suggested to me the possibility of a greater, more substantial peace—a decent, open, generous relation between a man’s life and the world—that I have never achieved; but it must have begun to be then, and it has come more and more consciously to be, the hope and ruling idea of my life.¹⁶

The Camp, then, was the physical foundation of the agrarian ethic Berry sought to embody.

In the final essay of the book, “The Native Hill,” Berry expounded on his search and return, his extended sojourning and eventual return to the hills of Kentucky. “A Native Hill” was an essay of homecoming. In it, Berry was preoccupied with the portion of Kentucky’s uplands long inhabited by his family, the place in which he was born and to which he chose to return again. The essay moved ever downward, as it pulled its reader further into the earth and the problems, perspectives, and possibilities of a renewed relationship with the earth. A quote from Ezra Pound’s

¹⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁶ Ibid., 139.

“Canto LXXXI” opened the piece, setting its poetic and bucolic tone. As a piece of writing, it was intimately concerned with the things of the world, and sought to break down boundaries between the world of the intellect and the world of the body. It presented a kind of turning around, a change of direction for the author, in which the course of his life struck a different—and yet old—path. It was in many ways Berry’s most clearly drawn “religious” essay, in that it attempted an articulation of the significance of one man’s relation to the divine, to the mysterious, and to the world.

“A Native Hill” related the new chapter that began in Berry’s life upon his return to Kentucky. For Berry, the “native hill” was a place from which he could stand and ask questions that defined his journey as a writer, as a man, and as a human being dependent on the earth. “After more than thirty years,” he wrote, “I have at last arrived at the candor necessary to stand on this part of the earth that is so full of my own history and so much damaged by it, and ask: What *is* this place? What is in it? What is its nature? How should men live in it? What must I do?”¹⁷ These questions brought Berry to the ground below his feet, and into the workings of his body and spirit. They wedded the workings of the intellect with the workings of the body—of his own body and the body of the earth. In the process of asking difficult and pressing questions, the distinction in Berry’s mind between body and soul disintegrated, and the boundaries between heaven and earth blurred. Hence, for Berry, his questions were “religious” in nature. His questions were religious because they were forms of deep exploration and experience. They were religious, he wrote, “because they are asked at the limit of what I know; they acknowledge mystery and honor its presence

¹⁷ Ibid., 223.

in the creation.”¹⁸ Berry’s discernment of his place in the world was a process of not only thinking through the issues of his life and time, but of *feeling* the earth that he called home *beneath* his feet and being led to live in harmony with it. It was a process of coming to terms with his history, not only through learning of it, but through sharing in it by taking his place “both on the earth and in the order of things.”¹⁹

This essay is crucial in understanding the significance of religion to Berry’s agrarian ethic. The Kentucky native’s religion was a religion of the soil. This is not to say that Berry worshipped the earth as a deity; rather, his ultimate framework for articulating the significance of life was founded in the taking of one’s proper place in the mysterious cycle of birth, life, death, and resurrection—the life cycle of the soil. This agrarian vision of community with the earth, of a whole relationship with the human-land community, was informed by Christian ideas of love and resurrection. A clear sense of Berry’s religious sensibility appeared in his later writings as well. For instance, Berry’s 1972 poem, “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” was a forceful testament to the religious nature of the Kentuckian’s work. Themes of love, death, and resurrection abounded. The “Mad Farmer”—Berry’s aggressive, eccentric agrarian alter-ego—exhorted his hearers: “Love the Lord./ Love the world.../ Love somebody who does not deserve it.../ Listen to carrion—put your ear/ close, and hear the faint chattering/of the songs that are to come.../ Practice resurrection.”²⁰

The influence of Christian imagery in Berry’s thought notwithstanding, Berry did not write as a “Christian” author. *The Long-Legged House* was not produced in a

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wendell Berry, *New Collected Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 174.

framework of an explicit genre of Christian thought, or with clear denominational interests or influences. It was, however, a work that bore marks of Christian metaphors and illustrations, which heavily influenced Berry's view of the human and natural worlds. To Berry, the earth was of primary concern, with heaven as something of an afterthought. Still, in "A Native Hill," Berry admitted that his questions about his life and his relationship to the world were, for him, "religious." But he was uncomfortable with the word "religion". He wrote:

I am uneasy with the term, for such religion as has been openly practiced in this part of the world has promoted and fed upon a destructive schism between body and soul, heaven and earth. It has encouraged people to believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation in it is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to heaven. And so the people who might have been expected to care most selflessly for the world have had their minds turned elsewhere.²¹

Berry's problem with churchly formulas was that the theology they neglected the things of the body. Berry's argument implied that American Christians had lost a proper understanding of incarnation, of an *embodied* and experiential theology. Berry argued that American religion had directed people "to a pursuit of 'salvation' that was really only another form of gluttony and self-love, the desire to perpetuate their own small lives beyond the life of the world." This direction, he asserted, produced a destructive split in values and "an equally artificial and ugly division in people's lives." Berry claimed that this was a religion that created a man who "while pursuing heaven with the sublime appetite he thought of as his soul, could turn his heart against his neighbors and his hands against the world."²² In his devotion to the earth

²¹ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 224.

²² *Ibid.*

and to his place on it, Berry envisioned himself as set against those who pursued heaven while neglecting the earth.

In some ways, Berry was not wrong to view himself as something of a cultural outsider to the Christian community of his day. Some popular Christian authors of the time were not concerned with caring for the earth, but rather with leaving it. The best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s was Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey's book was part of a greater apocalyptic ideology that saw the destruction of the earth as an imminent event. As Bruce Schulman observed of the 1970s: "American evangelicals found abundant and manifest omens of the end in the workings of nature, the tangles of the Cold War and Middle Eastern politics, the hedonism of the sexual revolution."²³ With the world apparently falling to shambles, some followed in the footsteps of many generations of Christians before them in turning their attention heavenward, leaving the earth to its imminent destruction. Berry criticized this ideology directly in "A Native Hill."

In other ways, however, Berry generalized too much regarding the state of American religion. He was not alone in articulating an environmental ethic compatible with religious sentiments. For instance, in the same year that Berry published *The Long-Legged House*, Walter Brueggemann authored an article in *Christian Century* challenging the interpretation of Genesis 1 that viewed mankind as the arbitrary dominator of nature. While Brueggemann maintained a man-over-nature framework, he advanced an exegesis of Genesis 1 that stressed the

²³ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 94.

responsibilities of mankind in its role of dominion over the earth.²⁴ Moreover, the following year Harold B. Kuhn wrote in *Christianity Today* that “Christians have tended to make much of the mandate ‘have dominion over’ the earth ‘and subdue it,’ and relatively little of the profound statement, “The earth is the Lord’s.”²⁵ Contemporaneous with Berry, these articles were not exceptional in their content or argumentation. While Berry was not incorrect in his critique of contemporary Christian thought, his focus on the Christian theology he developed and experienced in Kentucky led him to make generalized criticisms regarding Christian indifference to environmental care.

If his fellow Christians and his country were going to be saved, Berry argued, it would be through the process of humans learning to work and live together in harmony with the earth. Three years after the publication of *The Long-Legged House*, Berry articulated his ethic in his most succinct form yet. Titled “Back to the Land” and written by Gene Logsdon, the article appeared in the March 1972 edition of *Farm Journal*. The article was written in the context of a burgeoning “back-to-the-land” movement in the United States. As Schulman has noted, American rural communes of the late 1960s and early 1970s “advanced a new way of thinking about the relationship between nature and society, about humanity’s place in the environment.” This movement towards a new way of thinking and living, Schulman wrote, was a movement that sought to achieve spiritual ends: “[The movement] offered a weapon against alienation, a tool for self-realization. Young ecologists and communards

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “King in the Kingdom of Things,” *Christian Century* 86, no. 37 (1969): 1165-1166.

²⁵ Harold B. Kuhn, “Environmental Stewardship,” *Christianity Today* 14, no. 1 (1969): 758-759.

sought not so much to remake the nation as to create ‘islands of decency’ within it.”²⁶ Schulman argued that the communalists’ alienation from a consumer society brought them to attempt to reorder the structure of their lives as distinct from the dominant national culture.

Berry’s ethic both complemented and critiqued “self-realization” as a motivating factor for the movement’s participants. In the *Farm Journal* interview, Berry argued that the desire for a sincere identity was the impetus for the back-to-the-land movement, asserting: “We are conditioned to judge all things by profit and loss. That’s the reality my ideals must struggle with every day. City people come here to visit me and they all want to be farmers...They don’t want to be farmers—they just want to be *themselves* and the life they lead won’t allow it.”²⁷ In Berry’s view, what drove people back to the land was a yearning for a life of authenticity. This was a life they had not found in the cities, Berry asserted, saying: “The disease of the city is nonentity. A man familiar, with his *place*, a place in which he can measure himself against existence...The people leaving the cities are looking for that kind of familiarity. They want a place they can invest their lives in, not just their money.”²⁸

But, for Berry, there could be no identity without investment in a place. As American agriculture embraced the philosophy of industrial efficiency, small farmers increasingly became an endangered species. With fewer farmers actually on the land and more of America’s population moving into the suburbs, fewer Americans had any connection to the land. This was a trend Berry intended to reverse. To Berry, the

²⁶ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 89.

²⁷ Gene Logsdon, “Back to the Land,” *Farm Journal* 96, no. 3 (1972): 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

problem confronted by the back-to-the-land movement was the “nonentity” produced by the dominant American metropolitan culture. As people’s lives gravitated away from rural areas, their lives lost their connection to the body of the land. This disconnection, Berry contended, was the source of urban and suburban dwellers’ frustration. Berry argued that the antidote to modern culture’s disease of nonentity was not mere self-realization but agrarian reclamation: “I am trying to demonstrate...that *more* people can live on the land, not fewer.”²⁹ Reconnecting with the land would allow millions of Americans—*anxious consumers or not*—to once again find meaning in their lives, and would better the country as a whole: “If enough people would take hold of a small piece of land and love it like I try to do, wouldn’t America be improved ecologically *and* socially?”³⁰ Instead of a disembodied life of abstract work in a city, Berry called his audience to a constructive lifestyle embodied in a particular place.

The article closed with an excerpt from a poem that concisely illustrated Berry’s agrarian thinking. The poem, published in 1970 in *Farming: A Handbook*, spoke of the power in an argument that is made through a life better lived: “Better than any argument is to rise at dawn/ and pick dew-wet red berries in a cup.” Although Berry was a public author, his argument was not made in an entirely public or written form. It was made in the daily work of husbanding a piece of earth. It was an argument made ultimately *in* his lifestyle, rather than merely *through* his writings. His life in Kentucky was the means by which he represented and embodied his arguments for community life. It was Berry’s experience of place in Kentucky that gave him insight

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 32.

into the search for meaning taking place in the 1970s. His relationship with the Camp, the life he built there with his wife at the onset of their marriage, his decision to settle their family's life in Henry County—these elements of Berry's life gave him a prophetic challenge to the pursuit of "self-realization." Berry's experiences of searching and returning to a particular place, to a personal community, enabled him to see and articulate clearly the frustration experienced by those dissatisfied—or even satisfied—with their lives spent in impersonal places.

Berry's argument for a life embodied in place made much of the value of life, both human and non-human. But though his agrarian ethic began at home, it did not ignore the problems of the world outside Kentucky. On the contrary, Berry's concern for the life of his own place was the ground from which he defended life in other places. During the Vietnam War era Berry asserted that the American people were complicit in the destruction of life both at home and abroad. Abroad, the United States was involved in a complicated and deadly war in Vietnam. Berry made clear his views on the war. His speech delivered at the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft demonstrated the prominence of Berry's value for life in his thought, speech and action.

In his speech, Berry argued that the Vietnam conflict was a manifestation of mankind's capacity for human and environmental destruction: "I am opposed to our war in Vietnam because I see it as a symptom of a deadly illness of mankind—the illness of selfishness and pride and greed which, empowered by modern weapons and technology, now threatens to destroy the world."³¹ This illness manifested itself,

³¹ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 77.

Berry argued, in America's actions abroad in Vietnam and at home. To the Kentucky native, there was a clear link between American violence at home against the land and abroad against Vietnamese.

Violence against the earth and violence against villagers in Vietnam, Berry asserted, were symptoms of the same disease. Through its empowered selfishness and greed, Berry argued, America had abandoned itself "to the inertia of power."³² It gave itself over to violence and destruction, and acted out of power instead of principle. "Our ideals no longer serve us, because, though we probably talk about them more than ever, we no longer act according to them or judge ourselves by them."³³ In its behavior during the Vietnam War, Berry argued, America failed to embody ideals in actions, and was therefore complicit in the destruction of life both at home and abroad.

As he had done before, Berry advanced this argument through poetry. His 1968 collection of poetry *Openings* included two poems which criticized America's role in the conflict. In his poem "Against the War in Vietnam", Berry wrote: "We see the American freedom defended/ with lies, and the lies defended/ with blood, the vision of Jefferson/ served by the agony of children, women cowering in holes."³⁴ In a similar vein, he wrote in "Window Poems": "Abroad/ we burn and maim/ in the name of principles/ we no longer recognize in acts./ At home our flayed land/ flows endlessly/ to burial in the sea."³⁵ The United States, Berry thought, failed to live up to its own ideals of freedom and prosperity through its disregard for life at home as well

³² Ibid., 79.

³³ Ibid., 84.

³⁴ Berry, *Poems*, 75.

³⁵ Ibid., 104.

as overseas. He argued that the nation involved itself in destructive contradictions between its principles and its actions. In his poem "February 2, 1968," a reference to the Tet Offensive, Berry illustrated an embodied alternative to violence through the juxtaposition of massive destruction and small creation: "In the dark of the moon,/ in flying snow,/ in the dead of winter,/ war spreading, families dying,/ the world in danger,/ I walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover."³⁶ For Berry, the proper response to violence was not further violence, but small efforts at peace-making through the creative work of community life. In both his prose and his poetry, Berry exhorted his readers to enter into such a life.

Berry wrote that the destruction of life and land that took place during the Vietnam era left a shadow growing over the United States. America's destructiveness, he asserted, had brought the country to a desperate place in its history, a place where there was no hope for a bright future. In "The Loss of the Future," Berry wrote:

The great increase of our powers is itself maybe the most immediate cause of our loss of vision. It must be a sort of natural law that any increase in man's strength must involve a lengthening of his shadow; as we grow in power we are pursued by an ever growing darkness.³⁷

It was power, Berry argued, that had darkened the nation. Regarding this problem of power, Berry asserted: "The greater it grows, the harder it is for us to see beyond it, or to see the alternatives to it."³⁸ Berry's poetry again reflected the arguments of his prose. His poem "Dark with Power" described the country's potency for inflicting death as responsible for its lack of vision: "Fed with dying, we gaze/ on our might's

³⁶ Ibid., 122.

³⁷ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 54.

³⁸ Ibid., 55.

monuments of fire./ The world dangles from us/ while we gaze.”³⁹ This poem was one manifestation of Berry’s attempt to shine light into the darkness of the consequences of abused power.

As an alternative to a destructive way of life, Berry called his readers back to the ideal of community. This alternative defined Berry as an environmental author and prophetic voice. His vision of community life reflected an ideal of peace that was based not simply on an absence of violence, but on a positive creation of “community” within American life. His agrarian ethic was at its foundation an argument for the renewal of small communities of work, neighborhood, and culture.

Regarding “community,” Berry provided the following definition:

A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other’s lives. It is the knowledge that people have of each other, their concern for each other, their trust in each other, the freedom with which they come and go among themselves.⁴⁰

Berry’s argument for community was thoroughly based on agrarian principles. It was an argument for a community of land, resources and lives, for connection, relationship, and responsible dependence. Berry did not argue for a return to a society consisting of solely agrarian communities within the United States; rather, he argued for the process of actively imagining, and actively practicing, the creation of communities whose members had a vested interest in one another’s lives. This vision, this possibility of community, was what Berry argued could give hope to America’s future.

³⁹ Berry, *Poems*, 76.

⁴⁰ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 71.

Berry's agrarian ethic strove to mend what the Kentucky author perceived to be agricultural and cultural damage in the American land and its people. It sought to heal what, in the author's eyes, were deep wounds in the body and spirit of the nation and other nations. According to Berry, these wounds were being inflicted by the dominant cultural mindset of greed and exploitation. The wounds were manifest in the American conflict in Vietnam, American attitudes towards the land, and trends in American religion towards personal salvation. In his second collection of essays, *The Hidden Wound*, Berry dealt with one of the most intense manifestations of this wound—the problem of racism in American life and society.

Chapter III: History, Race, and Agriculture

In all the places he sojourned, Berry could not escape the draw of Kentucky on his life. This connection to his home place left Berry with the same kind of draw towards his own family history in Kentucky. In his poem “My Great-Grandfather’s Slaves” (1968), Berry wrote:

I have seen that freedom cannot be taken/ from one man and given to another,/ and cannot be taken and kept./ I know that freedom can only be given,/ and is the gift to the giver/ from the one who receives./ I am owned by the blood of all of them/ who ever were owned by my blood./ We cannot be free of each other.¹

Just as Berry was pursued by the place of Henry County, Kentucky, so too was he pursued by the racial history of that place—and that history involved slavery. *The Hidden Wound* was Berry’s pursuit toward coming to terms with his personal racial history, even as this history pursued him. This pursuit led Berry to apply his agrarian ethic to the historical problem of slavery and the contemporary issues of racism and civil rights. Berry articulated an agrarian ethic on racial issues that was consistent, honest, and insightful, but romantic in its view of African American agricultural experience and narrow in its scope of social vision.

As he made evident in “A Native Hill”, Berry’s family history of farming in Kentucky was a key piece, if not *the* key piece of his identity. Berry formed his identity by taking his place in the greater story of his family history upon his return

¹ Berry, *Poems*, 62.

to Henry County. That identity of place, however, was marked by the role of the Berry family in the history of slavery. Berry wrote at the beginning of the second chapter of *The Hidden Wound* that he had received an oral tradition of stories which informed him that on both sides of his family there had been slaveholders.² These stories shook Berry to the core.

The casual manner in which his family told the stories produced within Berry a kind of slowly unfolding stress:

There is a peculiar tension in the casualness of this hereditary knowledge of hereditary evil; once it begins to be released, once you begin to awaken to the realities of what you know, you are subject to staggering recognitions of your complicity in history and in the events of your own life. The truth keeps leaping on you from behind.³

His historical complicity in the institution of slavery and the concomitant “hidden wound” of racism led Berry to articulate an extended personal meditation on race relations during the late 1960s.

The Hidden Wound was at once both a personal and communal piece of literature. In this essay collection on American race relations, Berry wove his personal experience of his family’s relationship with African Americans together with broader concerns about human relations with the environment. In Berry’s agrarian framework, matters of land care were inseparable from matters of human relationships. As Berry wrote in the 1988 afterword to his book,

When I wrote *The Hidden Wound* in 1968, I did not see how the freedom and prosperity of the people could be separated as issues from the issue of the health of the land...I wrote the book because it seemed to me that the psychic

²Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

wound of racism had resulted inevitably in wounds in the land, the country itself.⁴

The “hidden wound” of racism, Berry wrote, was a psychological, social, historical, and environmental wound. According to Berry, the wound was hidden in the psyche of the white man, but it had nevertheless caused conspicuous damage to the American land and people. Berry argued: “If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself...and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as in his society.”⁵ Berry experienced the wound personally. His early personal experience with race relations between whites and blacks in his native Kentucky shaped his later expression of land and race problems in 1968. Berry understood his role in the history of American race relations through the same lens he used to conceptualize other issues of the 1960s and 1970s, namely his life in Kentucky.

In recounting his early experiences of race, Berry relied heavily on the memory of two black family acquaintances, Nick Watkins and Georgie Ashby. These two African Americans played essential roles in forming his understanding of race relations. Ashby, Berry recalled, provided him with an important contrast to the dominant culture of his childhood. Her mystical worldview and her dark, intense storytelling served as a balance for Berry against what he called “the smug assumptions of my race and class and time that all questions have answers, all problems solutions, all sad stories happy endings.”⁶ She forced Berry to confront the

⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶ Ibid., 73.

view that “life is perilous, surrounded by mystery, acted upon by powerful forces unknown to us.”⁷ Ashby also helped Berry come to terms with some of the inadequacies of his race’s cultural assumptions.

Watkins came to work for Berry’s grandfather while Berry was a young boy. Berry grew very fond of Watkins, as young Berry and his brother worked alongside the older black man and spent time in conversation with him. His relationship with Watkins gave Berry insight into the cultural and agricultural manifestations of the wound of racism. When the young Berry invited Watkins to his birthday party, Berry experienced the social implications of the division between the races. Berry realized that, because Watkins was black, the older gentleman could not come into the house to join the party.⁸

More significantly, Watkins represented to Berry a man who was intimate with agricultural work, and who consequently knew how to enjoy the elemental pleasures attained through such work. Describing Watkins, Berry wrote that

there were two heavy facts that Nick accepted and lived with: life is hard, full of work and pain and weariness, and at the end of it a man has got to go farther than he can imagine from any place he knows. And yet within the confines of these acknowledged facts, he was a man rich in pleasures.⁹

To Berry, the removal of this agricultural intimacy—both its pleasures and its hardships—from the *white* man’s experience of America left a deep wound in the land and in the white man’s consciousness. One of the legacies of slavery, Berry argued, was an estrangement of the white race from the work of agriculture. By forcing blacks

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁹ Ibid., 74.

to do the hard work of soil cultivation in their stead, whites barred themselves from the life of the soil. "The Negro," Berry wrote, "both as slave and as servant, has been a barrier between the white people of *all* classes and the soil."¹⁰

As Berry portrayed them in *The Hidden Wound*, Watkins and Ashby were didactic characters in his life. The part they played in Berry's personal meditation on race was one of instruction, revealing to Berry things he would not have realized otherwise. For Berry, such instruction was necessary to white men. The impetus for his focus on the lives of these two black persons, Berry wrote, was his "growing sense that, in the effort to live meaningfully and decently in America, a white man simply cannot learn all that he needs to know from other American white men."¹¹ "The white man's experience," Berry continued,

of this continent has so far been incomplete, partly, perhaps mostly, because he has assigned certain critical aspects of the American experience to people he has considered his racial or social inferiors. In my part of America at least racism has made a crucial division between the two races which has produced, as it was bound to do, a crucial difference between them. As the white man has withheld from the black man the positions of responsibility toward the land...so he has assigned to him as his proper role, the labor, the thousands of menial small acts by which the land is maintained, and by which men develop a closeness to the land and the wisdom of that closeness. For the lack of that closeness and wisdom the white man has suffered and is suffering more than he has admitted, more probably than he knows.¹²

This lack of closeness and wisdom, Berry argued, made the white man the black man's dependent. In the final chapter of *The Hidden Wound*, referring to African and Native Americans, Berry wrote: "When we realize that they possess a knowledge for the lack of which we are incomplete and in pain, then the wound in our history will

¹⁰ Ibid., 80.

¹¹ Ibid., 78.

¹² Ibid., 78.

be healed. Then they will simply *be* free, among us—and so will we, among ourselves for the first time, and among them.”¹³

In-depth criticism of Berry’s racial views did not come until nearly thirty years following publication of *The Hidden Wound*. In a 1999 essay on *The Hidden Wound*, Debian Marty provided the longest critique to date of Berry’s personal meditation on race relations. Marty argued that *The Hidden Wound* was a form of “white anti-racist rhetoric” that functioned as an *apologia* of white privilege¹⁴. Despite the fact that *The Hidden Wound* was an “exceptional anti-racist effort,” Marty wrote, the Kentuckian’s “apparent desire to defend himself and his slave-owning ancestors from racist culpability obscures the need to change white racial privilege and its racist effects.”¹⁵ Berry’s defense, Marty argued, was an attempt to exonerate himself and his family from moral wrongdoing in the history of slavery and racism. She wrote that Berry failed to live up to his own standards of rhetorical accountability, which Berry outlined in *Standing by Words* in 1983. In rhetorically failing to stand by his family’s racist actions, and by deflecting blame for the wound of racism from his ancestors to the “system” of slavery and to institutional racism, Marty argued, Berry denied his family’s responsibility for moral wrongdoing.¹⁶

The weak point in Berry’s argument in *The Hidden Wound*, however, was not that he defended his family’s moral soundness—his commentary on his family’s racial history was not a denial of moral culpability. *The Hidden Wound* was Berry’s attempt

¹³ Ibid., 108.

¹⁴ Debian Marty, “White Antiracist Rhetoric as *Apologia*: Wendell Berry’s *The Hidden Wound*,” in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, Eds. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 51.

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., 58-62.

to come to terms with his complicity in an historical narrative of racist thought and action, not to deny this complicity. Berry's shortcoming was in his neglect to articulate the significance of the abuses of racism and slavery to the *black* person's experience of the landscape. As has already been stated, Berry made much of the African American farm worker's intimacy with the land. What he failed to discuss, though, was the inherent injustice and brutality that *forced* this intimacy upon African Americans, and the possibility that African Americans could have been scarred, rather than enriched, by such work of the land. The narrowness of his commentary on the African American experience of the landscape left Berry's argument with a romantic perspective of this experience. In her study of African American agrarian thought, Kimberly K. Smith has found conflicted African American views toward working the land. On the one hand, she wrote, the testimony of fugitive slave narratives revealed that forced labor could "create in slaves a strong tie to the land and become a source of pride and self-respect."¹⁷ Such testimony clearly concurs with Berry's discussion of Watkins as a man who took pleasure in his work, as well as with his insistence that agricultural labor gave African Americans a connection to the land that many whites lacked. This, however, does not tell the full and difficult story of the reality of slave labor in the American South.

The argument of black agrarians, Smith asserted, was quite different than these slave narratives. Black agrarians, she wrote, argued "that instead of cultivating agrarian virtues, slavery tends to create in the workers a contempt for agricultural

¹⁷ Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 2007), 67.

labor, hatred for the land, and a disposition to cruelty.”¹⁸ Smith’s discussion of the historical complexity inherent in the relationship between African Americans and the land serves as an important critique to Berry’s romanticized vision of the connection between black laborers and the soil. Though Berry might have been partially correct in his interpretation of an African American experience of the land, he neglected a large body of historical evidence that suggested otherwise.

Berry’s intention in *The Hidden Wound* was not to preserve his family’s moral reputation. Berry did, however, want to conserve via his agrarian ethic the ideal of the agricultural community, and the reconciliation possible through such a community. Berry’s heavy focus on his ideal of community and connection, however, left his commentary on race relations lacking in the scope of its social vision, and weak as an argument for social change.

The connection between abuse of land and abuse of slaves was an integral piece of Berry’s discussion of his family’s history with slavery. It was also essential to his broader social argument for reconciliation between whites and blacks. In the application of his agrarian ethic to the context of race relations, Berry sought to establish the centrality of connection and community to solving both racial and environmental problems in one fell swoop. In regards to race relations, Berry’s agrarian ethic took a conservative, careful approach in establishing an argument for social change in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1972, Berry articulated in the essay collection *A Continuous Harmony* an argument that sought to link environmental issues with civil rights issues and with

¹⁸ Ibid.

the problem of war. To Berry, the issues of peace, civil rights, and the environment were not independent issues. The growing environmental movement of the early 1970s, Berry thought, was not a “digression” from the peace movement or civil rights movement, but rather the “logical culmination” of the two prior movements.¹⁹ “For I believe,” Berry wrote,

that the separation of these three problems is artificial. They have the same cause, and that is the mentality of greed and exploitation. The mentality that exploits and destroys the natural environment is the same that abuses racial and ethnic minorities, that imposes on young men the tyranny of the military draft, that makes war against peasants and women and children with the indifference of technology... We would be fools to believe that we could solve any one of these problems without solving others.²⁰

Berry’s solution, then, was to uproot the underlying mentality behind such abuses.

Berry was primarily concerned not with a reform of policy, but with an uprooting of racist attitudes and practices in the context of small communities of individuals. These attitudes and practices encompassed abuse of the earth and war against an enemy even as they encompassed prejudice against a race of persons. Berry’s argument in *The Hidden Wound* mirrored his other cultural and agricultural arguments in that it was both acutely particular and intentionally inclusive of several different facets of human life. The Kentucky native argued his agrarian ethic consistently in the contexts of war as well as race relations.

The argument Berry made for social change was a personal, as well as conservative, argument. It dealt with the need for change in the thoughts and actions of individuals. The race issue was, to Berry, an issue to be handled in the context of

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

communities of persons, rather than in the context of an abstract national issue. To Berry, to enter into abstraction—to lose grasp of the other as *somebody*—was to compound the problem of racial division. The cultural fault lines brought about by historically divisive land relations divided whites and blacks in the late 1960s, Berry thought, and made it exceedingly difficult for the two races to connect with one another. Berry argued that these relational rifts were largely due to whites and blacks occupying different physical places. He wrote:

[I]n many places the two races are now divided more than ever, and are less known to each other. Where they have withdrawn into the ghettos of white and black they know each other only as abstractions; they are more divided than they were at the time of slavery. This does not merely intensify the crisis; it may well be that this *is* the crisis.²¹

Berry's way to racial reconciliation, then, was fundamentally personal. It would involve personal encounters between individuals seeking to know the member of the other race. Giving four literary examples—*The Odyssey*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Anna Karenina*, and *War and Peace*—of meetings across class or racial lines, Berry argued that “the real healings and renewals in human life occur in individual *lives*, not in the process of adjusting or changing their abstractions or their institutions.”²² Berry believed that the process of altering institutions was too abstract to meet the deep needs of reconciliation between the races. These needs could be met, Berry thought, only through the physical meeting of whites and blacks, through the races recognizing each other as fellow persons, not simply members of a particular

²¹ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 92.

²² *Ibid.*, 104.

race. Anything less than a personal encounter would not square with Berry's argument for specific and embodied, rather than general and theoretical, relationships.

Berry advocated change in the action and lifestyle of individual persons. He thought that institutional transformation would not be nearly as effective as personal transformation. As Berry wrote in *The Long-Legged House*, "The revolution that interests me and that I believe in is not the revolution by which men change governments, but that by which they change themselves."²³ And as he further argued in *The Hidden Wound*, "I believe that the experience of all honest men stands...against the political fantasy that deep human problems can be satisfactorily solved by legislation."²⁴ Berry's argument was thus a kind of personal conservatism. The Kentucky author consistently operated on an intimate, small scale in his social critiques. His argument stressed the significance of the small and the fundamental over against the large and the abstract. As Berry analyzed the racial crisis of the 1960s, he concluded that the ultimate answer was not new legislation or organizations, but a personal transformations in the lives of individuals.

Although Berry's approach to civil rights issues operated at the personal level, it was nevertheless a public concern for the Kentucky native. This is where Berry's conservatism appeared again. As in his other writings of the 1960s and 1970s, Berry was concerned in *The Hidden Wound* with questions of how the personal affected the broader community. Yet, he chose not to take an active part in the community of civil rights activists at Stanford University during his tenure there. Berry authored *The Hidden Wound* in the Stanford library during the winter of 1968-1969, in the midst of

²³ Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 86.

²⁴ Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 92.

much civil rights excitement surrounding him at Stanford. He attended the gatherings of civil rights activists, but as an observer rather than as a participant. In the 1988 afterword, Berry recalled:

I attended a number of outdoor meetings called by campus blacks...The blacks, one by one, accuse and berated the whites, sometimes addressing them by obscene epithets, and the whites cheered and applauded. Speakers and hearers seemed to be in perfect agreement that the whites were absolutely guilty of racism, and that the blacks were absolutely innocent of it. They were thus absolutely divided by their agreement.²⁵

Berry argued that the cultural division between whites and blacks was not aided by what he witnessed of the civil rights activities taking place at Stanford. He perceived whites and blacks at these gatherings to be set against one another, as necessary enemies. On his observations of the civil rights movement at Stanford, Berry wrote:

[T]he implicit agreement on the historical scheme of white guilt and black innocence, white victory and black defeat, seemed hopeless to me. In this public life of the issues of racism and civil rights, one felt the possibility of an agreement of sorts, but nowhere the possibility of the mutual recognition of a common humanity, or the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation, or the possibility of love."²⁶

The problem with perpetually hammering away at these historical distinctions between whites and blacks, Berry thought, was that it sent the two races further into conflict and opposition, instead of moving them towards reconciliation.

Berry was clearer in his views on the war than in his views on civil rights because his agrarian ethic was not morally compromised in discussions on war. The element that distinguished the civil rights movement from the environmental and

²⁵ Ibid., 109.

²⁶ Ibid., 110.

peace movements in Berry's thought was the problem of complicity in historical wrongdoing that the race problem posed to Berry, a difficulty that was not present in his other writings on war, religion, culture, or agriculture. The civil rights movement forced Berry to confront the "hereditary evil" that existed in tension with the ideal of the agrarian community of the past. Because of this tension, his writings on issues of race were more morally complicated than his other writings. This complication took Berry out of his typical prophetic context.

The Hidden Wound was exceptional in Berry's early literature in that it was not a manifestation of the agrarian's prophetic voice. The morally complex connections between rural life and race relations led Berry to step out of his role as a prophetic voice of moral accountability for the country. His argument for the personal reconciliation of whites and blacks notwithstanding, Berry did not provide a practical or moral framework for how this reconciliation could function in the daily lives of whites and blacks in the United States. He chose not to take part in the civil rights movement, a practical instrument of social change for the time. The conservative nature of his agrarian ethic produced an argument that was ambiguous in its attempts to bring whites and blacks a place of reconciliation. Berry left some important questions unanswered: How could his ideal of community function practically in the context of race issues of the 1960s and 1970s? How might it be possible for both blacks and whites to reconnect with the land together, to uproot the mentality of racial and environmental abuse in community, in the way that Berry envisioned?

As the civil rights movement came to share more of America's attention with the environmental movement during the 1970s, so too did Berry turn his discourse

from racial problems to problems dealing more intensely with land use and human relationship with the natural world. In 1977, Berry launched his most comprehensive defense of the ideals central to his agrarian community ethic—intentional care of the land, the health of small rural communities, the significance of the life of the body, the hope in a restored connection with Creation. Berry articulated these and other ideals in his agricultural polemic against agribusiness, *The Unsettling of America*.

Chapter IV: A Rural Prophet

Although *The Unsettling of America* (1977) garnered more attention and criticism than Berry's previous prose works, it asserted the same argument for a restored connection between people and the land. Berry's argument in *The Unsettling of America* was his most nuanced and comprehensive expression of his agrarian ethic, touching on not only agriculture but marriage, education, homemaking, spirituality, and the Bible. Encompassing all of these themes, the book's primary function was as a polemic against what Berry termed "modern or orthodox agriculture."¹ Modern industrial agriculture, Berry argued, had unsettled the country's land as well as its people. America had suffered greatly from having no sense of being settled in a place. Berry's work in *The Unsettling of America* was the work of resettlement, of rejoining the fractured bonds between, person, culture, and agriculture. Berry strove to bring the country back to a physical place of settled, permanent life. His voice functioned as a rural prophet's call for the American people to remember the land and the lives of those who worked it.

In the opening title chapter, "The Unsettling of America," Berry argued that whites had brought about a "revolution of exploitation" on the American continent that was intrinsically abusive of both land and people.² Historically speaking, Berry

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1996), v.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

wrote, white presence in America had long been characterized by a mentality of perpetual expansion and consumption which had destroyed much of the nation's land and native peoples. Berry argued that the exploitive revolution dismantled the understanding of caring for the earth as good and necessary work. He asserted that the country's conquerors had chosen to ignore the ancient wisdom "that good work is our salvation and our joy; that shoddy or dishonest or self-serving work is our doom," and had thus inflicted great damage on the country.³ Berry concluded the chapter with two key points: First, that as many of the country's inhabitants as possible should take part in caring for the earth and thus form a vested interest in the land; second, that this work was the "only legitimate hope" the country had left.⁴

In the following three chapters Berry approached the country's ecological problems from three different frameworks, namely character, agriculture, and culture. In the second chapter, "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character," Berry argued that "the disease of the modern character" was specialization.⁵ The modern system of specialization, Berry wrote, "requires the abdication to specialists of various competences and responsibilities that were once personal and universal."⁶ Berry argued this system had caused people to resign essential responsibilities—such as food production, child care, and education—to organizations, thus leaving the individual devoid of the liability of living responsibly in the world.

In "The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Agriculture," Berry criticized what he saw as an improper, harmful relationship between American society, wilderness, and

³ Ibid., 12.

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

agricultural land. Observing that humanity's biological and cultural roots were in nature, Berry argued that wilderness was needed "as a standard of civilization and as a cultural model. Only by preserving areas where nature's processes are undisturbed can we preserve an accurate sense of the impact of civilization upon its natural resources."⁷ The inherent value of wilderness notwithstanding, Berry made it clear that out of practical necessity the nation would have to *use* its land; it could not leave all of it untouched. A proper relationship to the land, Berry thought, would be carried on in the context of a community, of connection between "farm and household."⁸ The author critiqued what he believed to be occurring in lieu of this connection, namely a growing generality in the relationship between agricultural producers and agricultural consumers, or farmers and eaters. "We are eating thoughtlessly," Berry wrote, "as no other entire society ever has been able to do."⁹

In "The Agricultural Crisis as a Crisis of Culture," Berry argued in favor of an understanding of food as a cultural, and not merely a technological, product.¹⁰ "A healthy culture," he wrote, "is a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration...It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other."¹¹ To Berry, then, food production was inherently a matter of *relationship* with the earth and with other people, and was thus best carried out in a healthy agrarian culture. "A healthy *farm* culture can be based only upon familiarity and can grow only among a people soundly established upon the land."¹² To remove

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

the practice of food production from the context of such a farm culture, Berry claimed, was to corrupt people's relationship to their very source of life. To further exploit and damage that source, Berry wrote, invited destruction upon a culture.¹³

In "Living in the Future: The 'Modern' Agricultural Ideal," Berry confronted what he saw as the modern inclination toward working in the context of a manufactured, general future, rather than in a real, particular place. "This generalized sense of worldly whereabouts," he wrote, "is a reflection of another kind of bewilderment: [the] modern person does not know where he is morally either."¹⁴ This generalized existence, Berry argued, was destructive because in its moral ambiguity it attempted to work outside of human limits, and to make the living world into a totally controllable machine. But working in one's immediate context, Berry wrote, allowed one to work responsibly and morally within the natural cycles of an ultimately mysterious world.

In chapters six and seven, Berry tackled the modern malaises of American culture in an expressly moral and spiritual context. "The Use of Energy" explicitly brought religion into Berry's conversation on culture and agriculture. Issues of energy use were bound to issues of religion, Berry thought, because the use of energy involved human beings in processes inherently superhuman. Energy, Berry wrote,

is superhuman in the sense that humans cannot create it. They can only refine or convert it. And they are bound to it by one of the paradoxes of religion: they cannot have it except by losing it; they cannot use it except by destroying it. The lives that feed us have to be killed before they enter our mouths; we can only use the fossil fuels by burning them up.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

Berry brought his readers down into the life of the soil, arguing for it as “the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all...Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.”¹⁶ The use of energy—and thus of the soil—implied a moral choice, and Berry argued that a morally-sound use of energy stemmed from a proper understanding of human limits within the cycle of “birth, growth, maturity, death, and decay.”¹⁷

“The Body and the Earth” was Berry’s most aspirational chapter in *The Unsettling of America* and the farthest-reaching. It was the most comprehensive articulation of Berry’s religion of the soil. Berry argued for a cultural reconnection between body and soul, between the spiritual and the material. Berry insisted that body and soul divided could be no healthier than people divided from the life of the earth. No statement captured the crux of Berry’s agrarian ethic as well as his assertion in “The Body and the Earth” that “it is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth.”¹⁸ In Berry’s ethic, a morally, spiritually, and physically whole human community was dependent upon a harmonious connection with the land. The wide array of subjects Berry incorporated into his argument—comprising marriage, Shakespeare, fertility, the Bible, work, and homemaking—all turned around the axis of this connection. The chapter connected diverse aspects of human life and thought to affirm Berry’s point that “Connection is health.”¹⁹

Berry rounded out his work in *The Unsettling of America* with two critiques of orthodox agricultural practice in the United States. Chapter eight, “Jefferson, Morrill,

¹⁶ Ibid., 86.

¹⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

and the Upper Crust,” served as a detailed critique of what Berry termed “Colleges of ‘Agribusiness’” and their specialized mode of agricultural education.²⁰ Berry contended that the country’s land-grant colleges had lowered educational standards from Thomas Jefferson’s ideal of community responsibility to a specialized education aligned with the interests of industrial agriculture, writing:

The expert knowledge of agriculture developed in the universities, like other such knowledges, is typical of the alien order imposed on a conquered land. We can never produce a native economy, much less a native culture, with this knowledge. It can only make us the imperialist invaders of our own country.²¹

The non-native agricultural knowledge promoted by the universities stood in stark opposition to Berry’s emphasis on local knowledge applied in a specific place.

The final chapter, “Margins,” highlighted what Berry perceived to be the increasing marginalization of small farms and rural communities in the wake of the domination of orthodox American agriculture. As Berry perceived small agricultural communities being pushed to the brink of survival, Berry pushed back with a motif he believed was still very much alive in the margins, namely “the theme of settlement, of kindness to the ground, of nurture.”²² Berry concluded the chapter and the book by outlining a dozen “public remedies” to mitigate the agricultural and cultural crises that he sketched in *The Unsettling of America*. The twelfth remedy was a fitting capstone for the most extensive piece of Berry’s agrarian literature, a pithy expression of his ethic:

Twelfth, having exploited ‘relativism’ until, as a people, we have no deeply believed reasons for doing anything, we must now ask ourselves if there is not,

²⁰ Ibid., 149.

²¹ Ibid., 168.

²² Ibid., 191.

after all, an absolute good by which we must measure ourselves and for which we must work. That absolute good, I think, is health—not in the merely hygienic sense of personal health, but the health, the wholeness, finally the holiness, of Creation, of which our personal health is only a share.²³

This absolute good—the health and wholeness of the community of Creation—was the crux of Berry’s agrarian ethic. To Berry, the health of any human society was wholly dependent upon the health of the greater Creation. This conviction resided at the core of Berry’s argument for the renewal of agricultural communities bound to the land. Although *The Unsettling of America* was his breakthrough into the nation’s conversation on the environment, Berry’s contention for the revitalization of rural communities faced strong opposition. The most pronounced critiques of *The Unsettling of America* painted Berry as backward-looking, as an agrarian idealist out of touch with the modern world. Berry was criticized for being a proponent of a bygone era, denying the progression of society. In a rapidly changing Southern and national culture, many viewed Berry’s arguments as antiquated and irrelevant to the modern industrial world.

In his review of *The Unsettling of America*, President Nixon’s Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz wrote: “The book is filled with facts interspersed with fantasy, tilting with straw men, and a nostalgic longing to turn the agricultural clock back by at least a couple of generations.” Butz described Berry as a “crisis prone” author who exaggerated America’s cultural and moral issues. Butz refuted Berry’s argument that the nation was in a state of moral, cultural, and agricultural crisis. Butz conceded that the country’s relationship with the land had shifted significantly in fifty years’ time,

²³ Ibid., 222.

and that “we may have lost something in community identity, understanding of nature, and even old-fashioned moral concepts.” “[Y]et,” Butz wrote, “this is a world of trade-offs.” To Butz, what America lost in community and morality it gained in “widely-distributed affluence” and a freedom from “virtual serfdom on the land.”²⁴

The conflict between Berry and Butz was a conflict of values. Their disagreement ultimately boiled down to their differing answers to the question of what makes a good society. Butz spoke a language of efficiency, progress, and adaptation. Berry spoke a language of community, neighborliness, and good work. These differences were encapsulated in a debate between Berry and Butz at Manchester College in Indiana in November 1977. Butz spent a considerable amount of time during his opening statement speaking the language of progress and adaptation. Speaking on the problem of declining rural community identity and a proper response to the problem, Butz said: “Our challenge is to adapt to the changing situation in which we find ourselves...I’ve often thought that if I live long enough, I’m going to adopt Butz’s Law of Economics—it’s a very simple one: Adapt or Die. It’s a harsh one. But those who cling to the moldering past are the ones who die.”²⁵ To Butz, Berry was indeed one of those clinging to the past.

Berry framed his argument in response to Butz in terms of recovery. Berry responded to Butz’s accusation of quaint nostalgia by clarifying his position on the past: “I’m not talking about going backwards in history. I’m talking about going backwards in character.”²⁶ The recovery Berry sought was a recovery of lost

²⁴ Earl L. Butz, “The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture (Book Review),” *Growth & Change* 9, no. 2 (1978): 52.

²⁵ “Earl Butz versus Wendell Berry,” *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, no. 17 (1978): 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

principles, of a human-earth relationship based on care and embodiment rather than efficiency and abstraction. In reference to industrial agriculture's dependence on oil, Berry said: "The idea that human beings could starve for want of oil is something new under the sun alright. I won't mind a bit when we go backwards from that, just as an alcoholic oughtn't to mind if he goes backward from his addiction."²⁷ To Berry, then, there was a sense in which going backward would mean progress. To restore the connection between people and land, to recover a more careful practice of agriculture, to regain community identity, Berry thought, *was* "progress."

In a letter to *The Nation* magazine, reader John R. Woods echoed Butz's critique of Berry as anti-progress. In language strikingly reminiscent of Berry's faculty elder at New York University, Woods criticized Berry for idealizing the life of a small farm, writing: "Let's face it—you can't go back again...[F]arming is the factory of agriculture."²⁸ That is, to Woods, the practice of farming had become another business arena of the industrial world. To Berry, however, farming was not primarily a business endeavor. Berry thought that farming was first and foremost a cultural practice to be carried out in the context of community life.

In his response to Woods' letter, Berry wrote:

Modern' farming is governed by an ideal that is not agricultural but industrial...it sees only a mechanical or economic connection between people and land...The ideal that I support, on the other hand, sees the health of the land and the farming community, not production, as the primary concern.

²⁷ Ibid., 58.

²⁸ "The Unsettling of America—an Exchange: John R. Woods and Wendell Berry," *Nation* 222, no. 10 (1976): 312.

Consistent with his argument in *The Unsettling of America*, Berry rebutted to Woods that “the land and the people must be deeply bound together by a preserving and settled culture, not economics or technology only.”²⁹ Without an intimate connection with the life of the earth, Berry thought, there could be no settled culture. This disharmony, according to Berry’s argument, was precisely what “the factory of agriculture” had produced.

The argument proposed by Butz and Woods raised essential questions of Berry’s agrarian ethic: Was Berry’s vision of community life an idyllic fantasy of an agricultural utopia, a false hope in an outdated way of life? Or was it a viable alternative to contemporary American culture? Answers to these questions are found by carefully dissecting Berry’s *actual* agrarian argument for community. The argument was not based on either a return to or progression toward a totally agrarian society. Berry’s argument did, however, deny the plausibility of a healthy society dominated by exploitive industrial agriculture and by specialized pursuits of individuals whose lives shared no common place. Berry’s path to the physical health of the land, as well as to the physical and spiritual wholeness of individuals, was not through specialization and isolation, but through connection and community. The community ethic Berry voiced was concerned not with a *return* to a past state of society, but with a *renewal* of his society’s moral character.

Berry’s argument for the health of Creation as the necessary standard by which society ought to judge its actions was not founded in nostalgia for the past, but a hope for a healthier America in the future. His attempt to reshape public thought on

²⁹ Ibid., 313.

the environment was indeed informed by a centuries-old lifestyle, but it nevertheless served as a fundamental challenge to the status quo of a growing industrialism in the 1970s South. “By the 1970s,” Schulman wrote, “[t]he South had shed its rural, agricultural heritage...Much of the rural culture disappeared... Meanwhile, modern industries—electronics, defense, transport, equipment, government—grew rapidly.”³⁰ If the trajectory of the South in the 1970s was toward a more industrialized economy at the expense of rural communities, Berry attempted to stand in front of that trajectory with a prophetic voice that warned of the damage that such an economy would incur, and had already incurred. The agrarian ethic Berry outlined in *The Unsettling of America* pushed back against the disintegrating rural culture of the South. In the wake of the loss of many rural places, Berry’s own devotion to place led him to launch his polemic against the agribusiness-like trends that damaged America’s rural culture.

One of Berry’s central counters to agribusiness in *The Unsettling of America* was the indispensability of food cultivation to the life of human culture. Berry argued that “food is a cultural product; it cannot be produced by technology alone.”³¹ To build a system of food production around a strictly technological or business model, Berry thought, invited the destruction of farm cultures. This argument against the disintegration of farm cultures was not lost on one reviewer of *The Unsettling of America*, who wrote: “While analyzing our culture as a whole, Berry’s central concern

³⁰ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 110.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

is the deterioration of American farming, and probably no subject has been more neglected and is yet more crucial to the future of us all.”³²

Three years after Berry published *The Unsettling of America*, Frederick H. Buttel, a sociologist at Cornell University, published a paper on rural environmental problems and underdevelopment that corroborated Berry’s perception of rural disintegration. Although Buttel disagreed with Berry’s use of the term “crisis” in describing American agriculture and rural society, the sociology professor advanced other arguments similar to Berry’s.³³ Buttel argued that there were deep connections between rural environmental problems and changes in the structure of American agriculture. Buttel wrote that the environmental and developmental problems faced by rural areas were “inherent in the very trajectory along which agriculture and rural society have developed within the larger societal context.”³⁴ This trajectory, Buttel asserted, included structural changes in American agriculture such as movement towards large-scale farming, intensified mechanization, and increased levels of food processing.³⁵ Berry called this trajectory agribusiness, and he believed it was destroying the country.

Berry’s pushback against disintegrating rural cultures, his defense of an old lifestyle, was accompanied by an ethic concerned not with what had been, but an ethic intensely aware of what the author viewed as his society’s moral shortcomings. Berry’s arguments on the social issues of his time were inherently more moralistic

³² Jim Mulac, "On the Loss of Contact: A Response To Wendell Berry's *The Unsettling Of America*," *Spirit That Moves Us* 4, no. 2/3 (1979): 10.

³³ Frederick H. Buttel, "Agricultural Structure and Rural Ecology: Toward a Political Economy of Rural Development," *Sociologia Ruralis* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

than the arguments of John R. Woods or Earl Butz. At the same time that he tackled cultural, agricultural, and economic problems from the perspective of an agrarian argument lived for centuries before him, Berry's voice sought to warn its hearers of the consequences of their actions in the here and now.

Berry wrote in "The Body and the Earth" that the whole question of "the proper definition and place of human beings within the order of Creation," rested ultimately upon human attitudes towards the body.³⁶ To Berry, the modern disembodiment of American life—the disconnection between people from the body of the land as well as from their own bodies—was the source of the country's cultural malaise. It was Berry's intention to bring his readers back to the body of the earth, to reconcile them with the land they had forgotten. As an environmental author of the 1970s, in the context of a disintegrating rural culture, Berry condemned the destruction of this culture by agribusiness and denounced the industrial, mechanistic, disembodied ethic agribusiness promoted. His devotion to the ethical ideal of the inherent beauty and goodness of Creation, and to the community possible within Creation, defined his position as an agrarian environmentalist of the late twentieth century.

Through the articulation of his agrarian community ethic, Berry served as the prophetic voice for a disintegrating rural America. His condemnation of the destruction wrought by agribusiness, as well as his attempts to reconcile the American people with the American landscape, had their roots in the community ethic Berry formed through his connection to Kentucky. Berry's defense of agrarian life and

³⁶ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 97.

culture was founded in his personal experiences of the virtue and wholeness of such a life. It was this spiritual, physical, and relational wholeness to which Berry called his readers. It was this community ideal that imbued Berry's prophetic exhortations toward a settled, healthy way of existing in relation to the land.

Conclusion

Berry's early literature was the work of a prophet of place. Berry's voice was infused with the moral language of a prophet determined to bring people back into a healthy relationship with the land. Although his devotion to place at points narrowed the scope of his social vision, Berry's agrarian ethic also derived its force and profundity from his embodiment of the argument in the life of his community in Kentucky. The Camp, the Kentucky River, the "native hill"—these pieces of Kentucky became pieces of Berry himself. They gave Berry's life meaning and direction. They breathed life into Berry's writings, giving his work its exceptional insight, clarity, and fecundity. The ground from which Berry wrote ethically was the same ground on which he stood bodily. Berry's role as an American prophet of the 1960s and 1970s would not have been possible without his rootedness in place. Any interpretation of Berry's work as it has developed in the course of more recent American history must continue to draw out the significance of Berry's proclamation in his poem "Below," "What I stand for/ is what I stand on."¹

¹Berry, *Poems*, 240.

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