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Wendell Berry: The Mad Farmer and Wilderness

David E. Gamble

Wendell Berry envisions a moral agriculture that transforms the farmer from the enemy of wilderness to its most devoted guardian. This is one of Berry's most paradoxical themes, for traditionally the farmer's role has always been to destroy the wilderness; he clears away the forest with its vegetable and animal life to plant the crops and produce the agricultural abundance that makes civilization possible. Further, anyone with a rural background knows that farmers traditionally seem stubbornly blind to the virtues of the wild.¹ On a farm, wildlife is most often seen as a pest, and nature in general as an obstacle to be removed. Yet in both his poetry and his prose, Berry argues that all enlightened farmers must find room on their farms for wild areas, and that these pockets of wilderness must be tended as carefully in their own way as any cultivated field.

On this point, Berry calls for more than simply a change in agricultural practice; his work demands a revolution in thought about agriculture that would extend the responsibility of the farmer beyond his fields and into the wilderness. His rationale for this extension of agricultural responsibility is based on a religious experience of the wild that he believes must inform the daily practice of farming. Wilderness reminds the farmer that not only the fertility of his fields and the health of his animals, but his own life as well, ultimately rest on natural cycles of life that are beyond his control, that are wild. Berry associates these wild cycles of life with Creation, with God, and thus argues farming above all other human activities must be practiced as a religious rite; the farmer in his daily chores enacts his awe, humility, respect, and love for the Creation he is given to use, but never to destroy.

Berry's "Mad Farmer" poems contain his boldest expression of the ideal relationship between wilderness and agriculture. Some parts of these poems are typical examples of the influence of

Chinese poetry and the Taoist philosophy of nature on Berry's work;² like the ancient Taoist mystics, Berry emphasizes the need to make human actions contribute to the natural order:

Wanting the seed to grow,
my hand is one with the light.
.....
Eating the fruit,
my body is one with the earth.³

But more characteristic of this series of poems is an iconoclastic voice reminiscent of Nietzsche's philosophical "madman" from *The Gay Science*. Where Nietzsche's prophet announces that nihilism has created a new age in thought and culture, Berry's mad farmer boldly states the essentials of a new agriculture which defies the conventions and platitudes of agribusiness. Like Nietzsche's mad philosopher who "lit a lantern in the bright morning hours,"⁴ the mad farmer accepts that few will see the need for the ideas he espouses, and even celebrates the confusion he causes in the agricultural establishment. In "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer," Berry writes:

If contrariness is my
inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission
to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it.
(121)

Even Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead"⁵ is repeated by Berry, though qualified by the mad farmer's deliberately contrary behavior:

When they said "I know that my Redeemer liveth,"
I told them, "He's dead." And when they told me,
"God is dead," I answered, "He goes fishing
everyday in the Kentucky River. I see Him often."
(121)

Where his neighbors farm by the advice of "experts" from the university and the state, the mad farmer plants by the stars; instead of fertilizer, he chants incantations. He has no sense of propriety or property:

He plowed the churchyard, the
minister's wife, three graveyards
and a golf course. In a parking lot
he planted a forest of little pines.

(120)

He laughs at funerals, prays at revels, and, in general, refuses to cooperate.

The purpose behind the mad farmer's deliberate provocation of his neighbors is that "Going against men," he tells us, "I have heard at times a deep harmony" (121). He is contrary only to the ways of man, whom he sees as a spoiler and desecrater of life; following the ways of nature, he claims to be a preserver and sanctifier of life. The harmony he hears results from his making his farm operate within, rather than against, the natural processes of Creation.

Berry's mad farmer is a revolutionary driven by a poetic vision of the true calling of farmers: to care not just for their crops but for all natural life; to love not just their property but the earth which endures beyond all property. He rebels against the city, where Creation is paved over and forgotten:

As my first blow against it [the city] I would not stay.
As my second, I learned to live without it.
As my third, I went back one day and saw
that my departure had left a little hole
where some of its strength was flowing out,
and I heard the earth singing beneath the street.

(123)

He rebels against a system of production that not only systematically destroys Creation, but the dignity of human life as well:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made . . . [and]
Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you

to die for profit they will let you know.
(151)

He rebels against the abstractions and numbers modern economics uses to justify destruction and waste:

It is *ignorant* money I declare
myself free from, money fat
and dreaming in its sums, driving
us into the streets of absence,
stranding the pasture trees
in the deserted language of banks.
(154, author's emphasis)

To the mad farmer, it is those who lead lives dependent on an exploitive system whose only value is profit at any cost who are truly mad. It is they who do not value life, and it is they who might ultimately destroy it. Declaring himself free from a system which he sees as the enemy of the living world, his advice to all is at least not to cooperate: "everyday do something/that won't compute" (151). To the farmer, his advice is more specific and more radical:

Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will never live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit.
(151)

The farmer must reckon profit not in terms of what he can sell, but in terms of what is good for the life Creation has placed under his care. Profit must be not only what is good for the farmer, but also what is good for the forest, the stream, the insect, the bird, the mammal, the microbe, and even the humus. He must remember that "the real products of any year's work are the farmer's mind/and the cropland itself" (131). He must remember that his real goals are to "Make the human race a better head. Make the world/a better piece of ground" (131).

It follows that the satisfactions of such a farmer cannot be measured in terms of business, but only by the standards of husbandry, of care. Thus, it is not surprising to hear Berry celebrating a good, productive farm:

Growing weather; enough rain;
the cow's udder tight with milk;
the peach tree bent with its yield.

.....
the ground, new worked, moist
and yielding underfoot, the feet
comfortable in it as roots.

(132)

But is it surprising, at least from the point of view of tradition, to hear him celebrating the wildlife on his poetic farm; the satisfactions of the mad farmer also include:

deer tracks in the wet path,
the deer sprung from them, gone on;

live streams, live shiftings
of the sun in the summer woods;

.....
fox tracks in snow, the impact
lightness upon lightness,
unendingly silent.

(134)

What would be nuisances to most farmers—the deer that eat the corn before it is harvested, the fox that raids the hen house—are presented here as not only having a legitimate place on a farm, but also as having a right to a share of the fruits of the farmer's labor. Berry suggests the farmer should be as pleased by his healthy deer herd as he is by his own livestock, as glad to provide for the fox as he is for his hens. His satisfactions, and therefore also his responsibilities, extend beyond what he actually cultivates. He must also help the natural plant and animal life of his farm to flourish even in the midst of his fields.

To some readers, this must seem an astonishing portrayal of the relationship between farming and nature; to some farmers, it must

surely seem like "mad" farming indeed. But it is not merely a romantic fantasy; Berry has both practical and philosophical reasons for describing his poetic farmer in such unusual terms. In *The Unsettling of America*, his most detailed study of culture and agriculture in America, he contends in defense of wilderness that "Only by preserving areas where nature's processes are undisturbed can we preserve an accurate sense of the impact of civilization upon its natural sources," and endorses the idea that "farmers should pattern the maintenance of their fields after the forest floor, for the forces of growth and forces of decay are in balance there" (UA 30).

Berry here follows the lead of Aldo Leopold in arguing that wilderness provides a standard of normality against which we must measure our impact on nature; wilderness represents nature in self-renewing, self-sustaining health, and to keep the land that we develop healthy we must use wilderness as a reference point by which to judge our actions, and correct them when they go awry.⁶ For much the same reason, Berry argues that each farm must have its own wild areas as models for healthy use. The farmer must try to imitate in his cultivated fields the processes which kept the land healthy and productive when it was wild. He maintains that only in this way can farmland remain naturally fertile; the wilderness is a model for "kindly use" (UA 30), the sort of use that the long-term survival of life demands.

But the practical reasons for the farmer to preserve wilderness on his farm are limited. It is fairly easy to see the connection between the fertility of fields and the creation of humus on the forest floor; seeing the farmer's need for foxes and deer is more difficult. At this point, Berry shifts his argument to a more philosophical level. There is no immediate need for the farm to have foxes; nevertheless, they should be there, as should all the plants and animals native to the area. There is a deeper reason for preserving wilderness, and it is a religious one. Berry claims that "We need what other ages would have called sacred groves," to help keep us "properly humble in our use of the world" (UA 30).

The farmer's use of land and life must be inspired by a religious sense of their value as parts of Creation; our relationship to the land under our care must be that of respect to a work of God. Though we must use the divine Creation to live well, we must use it in ways that do not diminish it: "To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this

knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration" (GGL 281). Wasting *any* part of Creation is, to Berry, a sacrilege. We must respect all of Creation, and so we must preserve all of the wild whether it is convenient to do so or not. We must survive, but not at the expense of forgetting that we are but parts of a larger Creation. We must remember that the land and its creatures, even the predators who lower our profit margins, are as much a divine gift as are our very lives.

Only one of Berry's books, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*, is devoted solely to wilderness and its spiritual values. Like many contemporary books devoted to the subject of wilderness, it is both a general plea for mercy towards wild areas and creatures, and an attempt to save a particular wilderness from destruction. Just as other contemporary American writers, such as Edward Abbey in *Desert Solitaire* and Colin Fletcher in *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, wrote in the late 1960s to try to save the Southwest from the apparently insatiable lust of government agencies for building dams, Berry writes in the early 1970s to save Kentucky's Red River Gorge from industrial recreation and "flood control." His argument here focuses exclusively on the "higher" values of peace, serenity, solitude, beauty, and harmony with nature which will be destroyed if the Gorge is dammed and its wilderness lost forever.

In *The Unforeseen Wilderness*, Berry's relationship to the land is not his usual one of the resident, "mad" farmer-poet, nor does he play the role of agricultural critic; in the wilderness, he, like Thoreau, is a sojourner in nature, a visitor who in his temporary stay uses the land only as the inspiration for philosophical meditation. He recounts for us several trips into the Gorge, the most interesting of which is the story of a solo hiking trip. The narrative begins with Berry, usually so fastidious about his responsibilities to home, farm, and society, making a mad dash for the back-country. Leaving some of his work as a professor at the University of Kentucky unfinished, and his home and farm far behind, he races down the Kentucky Parkway at sixty to seventy miles per hour towards the small area of the Red River Gorge that remains undeveloped. Here he will spend two days in solitude, wandering through the woods and along the streams which are very nearly the sole remnants of wild Kentucky.

At first, Berry has difficulty adjusting to the natural area he

worked so desperately to reach. When he finally gets to a campsite, he feels restless, disoriented, and melancholy. But much like Thoreau's initial loneliness at Walden Pond, which he recognized as "a slight insanity,"⁷ Berry is not deeply disturbed by this particular anxiety. He is familiar with it, and understands its sources. He knows, for example, that his "mind is still keyed to 70 mph" (UW 39). His senses and thought processes have difficulty making the transition from modern speeds to the natural pace of the wild: "We seem to grant to our high-speed roads . . . the rather thoughtless assumption that people can change places as rapidly as their bodies can be transported. That, as my own experience keeps proving to me, is not true" (UW 38). It is simply going to take some time to slow down enough for him to appreciate the world he has come to, to see it as something more than a blur from a highway, something alive and intricate and unique.

To see this wilderness, Berry knows he must experience the "uneasy awareness of severed connections, of being cut off from all familiar places and of being a stranger where I am" (UW 40). He must leave behind his daily routines, chores, habits, and responsibilities; for a while, he must voluntarily isolate himself from the human world in which he is comfortable. His wife, family, job, farm, and poetry are all out of reach for a few days, and he feels their loss. Everything that ordinarily occupies his time and attention is absent, and at first there is nothing to take their place. But, like Thoreau, he knows that it is but a matter of time before his senses, nerves, and thoughts will adjust themselves from the human pace of highway, career, and responsibility to the luxuriant, free, timeless natural world he has come to. It is to experience this very adjustment, and its attending insights, that he has come to the wild.

Berry has come to the Gorge to remind himself of the meaning of Creation, and of the small part the human world plays in the larger natural processes of the universe:

I have come here to enact . . . the loneliness and humbleness of my kind. I must see in my flimsy shelter, pitched here for two nights, the transience of capitals and cathedrals. In growing used to being in this place, I will have to accept a humbler and truer view of myself than I usually have. (UW 42)

It is an experience Berry thinks necessary to both his own sanity and that of his species. Buffered by civilization, by a world we have created for our own comfort and convenience, we can be consumed by self-importance; we forget that there is more to life on earth than the human species. This self-importance in turn breeds overconfidence, and we begin to believe we have the right, because we have the power, to do anything we like to the natural world that surrounds and sustains civilization. In other words, we become careless with life, both natural and human, and begin to treat it as though it were cheap, infinite, indestructible. It is a sequence of attitudes such as this that Berry sees behind such ideas as the damming and ruining of a natural wonder such as the Gorge.

But Berry has not come to the Red River wilderness to rail at modern, industrial civilization. He has come alone, and does not expect to speak to anyone during his stay. He has come to reenact an ancient rite of self-purification; he has come to the wilderness to seek wisdom. He compares himself to Indian braves who once ventured into the wild to find themselves, to learn their names, and to understand their place in the world (UW 67). By temporarily escaping from the human world, Berry, too, hopes to put his life and his society into a larger, more natural perspective. Aware that he is human and thus prey to the same confusions as the engineers, politicians, and economists who cannot see why the Gorge should not be destroyed in the name of recreation or cheap power, he has come to make sure his own soul is in order.

As a farmer, Berry, too, is a user of nature; although he believes that all farms should have room for the wild, he also knows that the farmer has no choice but to alter nature on most of his land. What must not be forgotten in this interference is that there are considerations other than economic ones; Berry is in the wilderness to remind himself of the natural limitations of human knowledge and action. For example, as a successful breeder of one or two species of domestic animals, he faces the temptation of being too satisfied with himself, of succumbing to the illusion that he has mastered nature. A wilderness that effortlessly breeds a thousand species of animals, birds, and plants in perfect health with no help or interference from man is the perfect spiritual antidote. Struggling to maintain the fertility of his fields, a wealth wasted by his ancestors, he sees the primeval forest building soil through cycles of life, death, decay, and new life, cycles far longer

than a man's life and thus far beyond his control. Finally, Berry contends that any man who has experienced the power of the river that carved the Gorge out of solid rock, or even that of a trickle of water that sculpts a channel for itself through a rock face, realizes that the idea of man holding back that water and using it as he pleases is a ludicrous, dangerous illusion.

For Berry, the Gorge is a holy place, as Walden Pond was for Thoreau, as the Sierras were for John Muir. Indeed, he shares with many American nature writers this sense of religious awe at wilderness as a place where the solitude and silence of creation is undisturbed, where God's handiwork is left in pure form. As Roderick Nash points out in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, "Romantics and Transcendentalists sensed the unity of the natural world and related it to the presence and reflection of divinity." In doing so, they gave nature a higher value; it was no longer simply raw material to be shaped by human desire. Rather, Nash argues that writers like Thoreau, Muir, George Perkins Marsh, and even the more scientific Leopold all "manifested a belief in the sanctity of all life."⁸ What Berry does is to take this religious sense that he shares with literary tradition, and apply it to the practical occupation of farming, making it the basis for his view of the environmental responsibilities of farmers. The wilderness taught Thoreau and Muir about God; the Red River wilderness teaches Berry not only about God, but about how to farm as well.

Rightly understood, the wilderness experience is a humbling one. It reminds Berry that a successful farm, like a successful society, exists within the margins of the natural world, and a successful life is one that endures within the natural conditions that sustain life, rather than altering them at the expense of all life, present and future.

The time he stays in the wilderness is a time spent in touch with a nonhuman world that is mysterious to him. From the flowers to the stars he sees little or nothing that men have made. He spends time not as a master of the world but as a dweller in it—which is, after all, his true condition. And he should emerge from his experience somewhat changed—less eager to cash in on his birthright, aware that men are *part* of what they destroy. (UW 66, author's emphasis)

When Berry leaves the Gorge, his perspective on human life and

activity is restored. The natural pace of the wilderness cured the anxiety he felt as a modern man too much in a hurry to really see the world around him, and the vast intricacy of the natural life of the wilderness reminded him of his place in the natural order of things.

The wild Gorge of the Red River restored Berry's mental and physical health, much as Mat Feltner's faith in nature is restored by his perception of the wildness on his farm in Berry's major novel, *A Place on Earth*. Throughout this novel, Mat Feltner is haunted by the death of his son, which seems to negate the care and love Feltner has invested in his land; what is the point of husbandry, of restoring a farm's fertility, if there is no heir to carry on the work? Feltner stubbornly continues to fulfill his responsibilities to the land and his community: he takes over the deteriorating farm of his drunken cousin, Roger Merchant; he alone maintains a vigil over the body of his friend, Ernest Finley, an unfortunate veteran who has committed suicide; he is there when his son's widow gives birth to his grandson. But he is merely going through the motions; his life seems hollow and unhappy until one day he has to retrieve a new-born calf from the woods on his farm. His sense of the kinship of all life is rekindled when he perceives the trace of wildness, of the free, natural instinct to flourish with or without men, even in his own domestic animals. He "finds the calf curled up in some long grass in a patch of sumac. . . . obeying like its mother an instinct still wild in it."⁹ Seeing this wildness brings Mat back to his senses; leaving the calf hidden for the moment, he continues on through the woods, observing the process whereby the wild vegetation reclaims spent cropland. The wildness seems to put both human sorrow and joy into perspective once more:

He feels the great restfulness of that place. . . . [and] feels the difference between that restful order and his own constant struggle to maintain and regulate his clearings. Although the meanings of those clearings and his devotion to them remain firm in his mind, he knows without sorrow that they will end, the order he has made and kept in them will be overthrown, the effortless order of the wilderness will return.¹⁰

Like his fictional farmer, Berry's faith in the natural order is

restored by the wilderness, and he returns to his civilized life and his farm with new energy and insight, calmed by "the recognition and acceptance of one's human limits, by acknowledging one's dependence on powers beyond human reach" (UW 68). He leaves the wilderness, like Mat Feltner, a better man than when he entered.

Thus the wilderness has both practical and moral lessons not only for the life of the farm, but for the life of the farmer as well. It reminds us that food, cultivated or not, ultimately comes from natural processes beyond human actions, that nature itself is a manifestation of God and must be respected as such, and that the meaning even of an individual human life must ultimately be found in its place in the natural order of life. Although this view of farming and nature is so different from modern agriculture that it must seem to man more like madness than sense, Berry insists that the truth of the matter is that agriculture, as well as human life in general, must exist within nature's economy, rather than at the expense of it. Because agriculture ultimately depends on the process of wilderness, Berry can tell farmers to plant sequoias, and to claim that the forest they will never see is their main crop. It is an investment in the future, a willingness to give back as well as to take from the natural world. It is why the satisfactions of the mad farmer include the bounty of his well-kept fields, the deer who live in his woods, and a stream kept clear and pure out of his respect for it.

To the farmer, the meaning of the wilderness, of the sacred grove, is that he must care for life in its entirety—the forest as much as the fields, the wildlife as much as his herds, the children of tomorrow as much as the children of today. The farmer who does otherwise is simply one more cog in the exploitive machinery of modern business, another person who profits from the land by taking as much from it as possible, and keeping as much of it as possible. Berry's farmer, in contrast, measures profit in the restored health and life of the land. He knows the wild creatures of his farm have as much right to be there as he does, and are as deserving of his care as the animals he owns. The forest he plants and tends not only provides the wilderness virtues of peace and solitude, but also shows him how to use his land and produces fertile soil for the next generation. Farming as a mere business cannot help but destroy the land it exploits; farming as an occupation informed by a religious sense of humility and wonder

enhances the land it uses, and preserves both the natural and the human. The future will decide which kind of farming is mad and which is not, but for Wendell Berry "mad farming" is a moral obligation of the present, and must be practiced both in his writing and in his farming.

NOTES

¹A recent study on the geographic distribution of ecological awareness finds that agricultural states tend to be low on the scale of concern for conservation. Berry's home state of Kentucky ranked "very low," as did many states in the South and Midwest. See "Conservation Cartography," *Sierra* 71 (March/April 1986): 11.

²Berry discusses his debt to Chinese poetry and thought in *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), 142. Further references to Berry's prose works will be by page numbers in parentheses using the following abbreviations: GGL: *The Gift of Good Land* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981); UA: *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra, 1977); and UW: *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971).

³*Collected Poems* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 130. All references to Berry's poetry will be to this edition, and will be indicated simply by page numbers in parentheses.

⁴Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 181.

⁵Nietzsche, 181.

⁶See "Wilderness" or "Wildlife in American Culture" in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

⁷Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: New American Library, 1960), 92.

⁸Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 194.

⁹*A Place on Earth* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), 314.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 317.