



## WENDELL BERRY: MEDIATING BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*Wendell Berry who was born in 1945 is an American poet, novelist, environmental activist and a farmer. Berry worships nature and constantly resorts to it but not to retreat from society to a simple life of nature or to escape from social obligations. Rather, he emphasizes the need for a new view of nature that goes beyond the mystical treatment of nature. This paper aims to review Berry's efforts as a poet to mediate culture and nature through his words. Berry emphasizes labour and the cultivation of land for he is in between the civilized and the wild. Berry argues that culture and nature cannot be separated, and his conviction of the close connection between poetry and farming can be understood accordingly. Berry made great efforts through his works to reform the relationship between civilization and the earth. Unless human society renews the vision of its relationship with the natural world, there will be little hope of substantial and permanent environmental reform. This paper is hoped to inspire other poets, especially Asian poets to promote similar ideology in their works.*

**Keywords:** Culture, meditation, nature, place, wilderness

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Berry is greatly indignant at the damage caused to nature because of human selfishness, greed and their hostile attitude towards the natural world. There is a possibility of saving nature from destruction, Berry assures us, but it lies only in the giving up of the idea of human's superiority over other living beings in the universe that presumably gives us the right to destroy them. Berry emphasizes labor and the cultivation of land for he is in between the civilized and the wild. As Knott (1996) points out, "Berry resists the common tendency to oppose nature and culture, the wild and the domestic, and finds meaning and health in their interaction" (p. 124). Knott's words seem to suggest the peculiarity of Berry's ecological vision. He enjoys manual labor as part of his ecological commitment.

Berry argues that culture and nature cannot be separated, and his conviction of the close connection between poetry and farming can be understood accordingly. Are poetry and farming connected to each other? It seems hard for Berry to make a convincing argument, yet, he never stopped demonstrating that it is possible. In an interview, he explained that he is a farmer and a poet at the same time "a poet who writes about farming, and a farmer who reads and thinks

about poetry” (Berry, 1990, p. 22). To Berry, a good farmer is a highly skillful person and, therefore, he is an artist. Both the poet and the farmer are masters of the form. They must bring many models into harmony and should understand that diversity can only be understood within unity. They should also know how to deal with the unforeseen. These are, according to Berry, the features of the best poets and the best farmers. Berry believes that his knowledge of farming deeply influenced his work as a writer. He emphasizes the similarity and the mutual influence of farming and poetry as they explain and sustain each other (Berry, 1990, p. 22).

## 2.0 THE RELATION BETWEEN A PERSON AND A PLACE

Berry discusses his relation to the place and emphasizes that he is a placed person. He considers the place his fate and he is absolutely related to it. In this respect, Berry displays a rather linear movement from alienation to belonging and this is what makes him different from Dillard and other nature writers like Thoreau and Barry Lopez, who always fluctuate between correspondence and otherness and whose “writings are clearly more dialectical” (Slovic, 1992, p. 121). Berry (2004) presents a remarkable reversal of the relation between a person and a place; he thinks “we are the belongings of this world, not its owners” (p. 143). Berry comes to realize that his life is just one of many lives in this vast universe, it is just one kind among many kinds. He says only a small part of the beauty of the world comes from human origin, and it is highly superficial to say that human beings are the owners of the world or that they are the center of the universe. Human beings, Berry says, are but one element in a world inhabited by different creatures, “whose ancestors were here long before my ancestors came, and who had been more faithful to it than I had been, and who would live as well the day after my death as the day before” (Berry, 2004, p. 149). Berry turns down the sense of belonging to the place as he feels that even if he belongs to the place, nothing in the place belongs to him. He belongs to the place just as the thrushes and herons belong to it. He depicts an amazing picture of sharing life with other creatures; he describes how some birds made their nest in his house “Instead of one room; I had begun to have a house of apartments where several kinds of life went on together” (Berry, 2004, p. 159). He feels honoured to be a part of the life and home of other creatures. Berry shows a great interest in the nonhuman world and wants to learn more about it but recognizes that only a little could be learned about nature during one’s lifetime.

However, in his essay “Wendell Berry’s Watchfulness”, Slavic (1992) is of the opinion that Berry does not mean that nature should be civilized or “flooded with the light of human intellect-- in a word domesticated” (p. 119). Rather, *The Long-Legged House* shows the gradual growth of Berry’s understanding of how to be aware of and accept the natural place for what it is. Berry shows less intrusion and more attentive reception of what the place offers. Berry contends, however, in an essay titled “Getting Along with Nature” that this process involves both making changes and also accepting what nature is:

*The survival of wilderness--of places we do not change, where we allow the existence of creatures we perceive as dangerous - is necessary. Our sanity probably requires it. Whether we go to those places or not, we need to know that they exist. And I would argue that we do not need just the great public wildernesses, but millions of private or semiprivate ones. Every farm should have one; wildernesses can occupy corners of factory grounds and city lots - places where nature is given a free hand, where no human work is done, where people go only as guests. These places function, I think, whether we intend them to or not, as sacred groves - places we respect and*

*leave alone, not because we understand well what goes on there, but because we do not*

(Slovic, 1992, p. 119).

Berry, as Slovic (1992) points out, unmistakably echoes nature writers like John Muir and Wallace Stegner in reconciling wilderness with the city but adds a new element. These patches of wilderness may help give people perspective of their lives by showing them that there are processes which surpass their own.

However, Berry does not try to enhance the disjuncture between human and nature. Instead, Berry thinks that there is a separation between the wild and the domestic; they are isolated but “these are not exclusive polarities like good and evil. There can be continuity between them and there must be”. Therefore, neither the complete humanization of nature nor complete detachment is possible or desired. Berry says:

*People cannot live apart of nature. . . . And yet people cannot live in nature without changing it. But it is true of all creatures; they depend on nature and they change it. What we call nature, is in a sense, the sum of changes made by all various creatures [including humans] and natural forces on their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places*

(Slovic, 1992, p. 120).

Berry tries to mediate between nature extremists who assume natural good is human good and civilization extremists who exploit nature to serve human needs. Berry asserts the presence of wilderness in his work as a source of illumination, peace, order and joy which helps humans to understand and maintain life but never to escape civilization. But how does Berry reconcile two apparently conflicted concepts of wilderness and domesticity as he adopts the values of agrarian life without giving up his attraction to wild nature?

### **3.0 THE FARMER AND THE WILDERNESS**

Berry presents a unique vision of agriculture and the connection that supposedly exists between farmers and the wilderness. It is, to use Gamble’s (1988) words, “a moral agriculture that transforms the farmer from the enemy of wilderness to its most devoted guardian” (p. 40). Berry goes beyond the contradiction between the farmer and the wilderness by trying to reconcile them. His vision seems to be in line with his attitude of rejecting the opposition of nature and culture, the wild and the domestic. This may seem quarrelsome as traditionally, the farmer’s role is to destroy wildlife with its plants and animals in order to be able to grow crops. The farmer, then, must remove the forest to produce crops. Berry, however, argues that it is possible to achieve reconciliation between wilderness and civilization with enlightened farmers who find space for the wilderness on their farms. Berry calls for a revolution in agricultural ways and styles which inevitably requires a revolution in thought about agriculture about the interrelation between farming and wilderness, demanding a new awareness on the part of the farmer. Berry’s “mad farmer” poems which deal with the ideal relationship between agriculture and the wilderness seem to be the most daring embodiment of this relationship. Berry’s mad farmer is a revolutionary who calls for equal care for both crops and natural life. The farmer should not only be interested in his own property but should be interested in the whole earth which is much more significant than all human property.

In “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”, Berry indicates that the human system of production not only destroys the natural world which is the creation of God, but also harms the dignity of human life:

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made . . .  
. . . . . Your mind will be punched in a card  
And shut away in a little drawer*  
(Berry, 1987a, p.1).

Berry rejects the idea that material profit justifies the destruction caused to the environment. For the mad farmer, it is those who exploit the system and consider profit as the only important value that are truly mad. Berry’s advice to this mad farmer is specific:

*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*  
(Berry, 1987a, p.24).

The farmer must not consider profit in relation to what he can sell but in relation to what is good for the environment which he ought to care for. Profit should not be defined by an individual farmer’s own profit or even by a larger group of human beings; rather, it must be a profit to all elements of the natural world such as the forest, the stream, the insect, the bird, the mammal, the microbe, and even the humus.

In “The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer,” Berry depicts his own image of this mad farmer. This mad farmer should exalt the wildlife on his farm and his satisfaction should 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*  
(Berry, 1987b, p.58).

What is unpleasant for most farmers, like the deer that eats the corn before it is harvested, is presented here as not only having a legitimate place on the farm but also as having the right to share the crops of the farmer’s labor. Berry suggests that the farmer should be as pleased with the healthy deer as he is with his own farm animals. In addition to what he cultivates, his responsibilities should be broadened to keep plant and animal life flourishing in the midst of his fields (Gamble, 1988).

Berry, therefore, calls for the ethical treatment of the natural world. This ethical treatment can only be achieved through an intimate knowledge of it. His relationship with the earth, woods, lakes, mountains and streams is dominated by a developed deep understanding and experience rather than being dominated by the requirements of science, technology, and profit. This approach to the treatment of the earth is fully contrasted with dominant attitudes.

According to Berry, the relationship between creatures and the environment is sacred. We must respect the creation of God and do not do it any harm. The environment bestows human beings life so they must preserve it in return. This sense of sacredness can be seen in one of his early poems, “The Sycamore”:

*It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.  
In all the country there is no other like it.  
I recognize in it a principle, an indwelling  
the same as itself, and greater, that I would be ruled by.  
I see that it stands in its place, and feeds upon it, and is fed upon, and is  
native, and maker*

(Berry, 1987c, p.16).

Johnson (1991) says, “what dwells within all living things is at once concrete and mystical, the self and the self’s ruler. As it feeds in its place, and in turn is fed upon, the tree is native and maker” (p. 184). We should be aware of the other elements of the natural world, respect them, and look at them as being complementary to our life and never to feel isolated or independent of them.

Let me take Berry’s (1991) prose work *The Unforeseen Wilderness* and try to explore his vision of wilderness in it. The book was written on Kentucky’s Red River Gorge. The writer describes his discovery of the Red River through his boat trips over several years. He looks to those years as landmarks in his life. The book records Berry’s transition from his initial sense of “strangeness” towards the place to a familiarity that enables him to surrender to it. Berry documents his own observations and reactions and from the very beginning, Berry’s main concern, the land, is explicitly exposed. He praises those who were kind to the land in the past like the original Indians and condemns those who ill-treated the land like the farmers and mineworkers who cared only for their own profit. In the opening chapter, Berry traces his first visit to the gorge in spring, describing spring wildflowers and the sounds of waterfalls which convey a strong sense of the freshness of the landscape:

*Again and again, walking down from the wooded ridgetops above the Red  
River Gorge one comes into the sound of water falling--- steady pouring  
and spattering of a tiny stream . . . One looks up twenty or thirty or fifty or  
more feet to where the water leaps off the rock top, catching the sunlight as  
it falls*

(Berry, 1991, p. 25).

The natural order, according to Berry, is too complicated to be understood “within the limits of human life” (Berry, 1991, p. 25). Berry strongly opposes any violation of the natural order; those who would dam the river add to the history of the violation of nature done by miners, loggers and farmers before. He presents a romantic vision when he describes an isolated farmhouse in the bottomlands of the gorge on the edge of the woods at the foot of a great cliff: “the quiet of wilderness rises over it like the looming gray cliff face. . . [the house] seems somehow to have assumed the musing inwardness of the stone that towers over it” (Berry, 1991, p. 25). As Knott (1996) points out, “This remarkable vision embodies a yearning for a natural world in its pure state, not a world without humans but a world of primitive simplicity that admits no sense of a division between man and nature, a world before any human destruction” (p. 133). Berry draws no borders between humans and nature but suggests a perfect harmony between them.

In “An Entrance to the Woods,” the central essay in the collection, Berry describes a single trip to the gorge. Berry undergoes a sense of displacement as he moves from the city, his familiar place with its human society, to the complete solitude of a campsite by a creek at the bottom of the gorge. This displacement causes sadness for Berry, yet, by experiencing such solitude, he is able to undergo the spiritual rebirth which he seeks. It is the same solitude Thoreau experienced one day in Walden, a solitude which is fruitful and productive. Entering the world of the wilderness provides the opportunity to feel a sense of “nonhuman time” which makes human existence secondary and shows the transient existence of those who lived in the place before: Indians, hunters, loggers and farmers, all of whom left nothing other than chimneys and flowers to indicate their extinct lives. Berry identifies with those who lived in the place before him and has to go beyond his awareness of civilization at that time, symbolized by the sounds coming from the highway that could be heard in most parts of the gorge. Civilization and wilderness, according to Berry, are inseparable and should be closely related. He describes the wilderness as:

*The element in which we live encased in civilization, and as a mollusk in his shell in the sea. It is a wilderness that is beautiful, dangerous, abundant, oblivious of us, mysterious never to be conquered or second-guessed, or known more than a little. It is a wilderness that for most of us most of the time is kept out of sight, camouflaged, by the effects and the busyness and the bothers of the human society*

(Berry, 1991, p. 37).

Berry’s remarkable metaphor of the “mollusk” demonstrates that both civilization and wilderness are indispensable to man. He expresses the need for people to experience nature but not in Thoreau’s way. People need not go to Walden to live in loneliness for the sake of spiritual rebirth. Rather, they can achieve spiritual recovery through imagining the wilderness as a wrapping element in which man lives “encased in civilization” in an inevitable primitive nature.

In “The Unforeseen Wilderness,” the essay which gives the book its title, Berry (1991) addresses the human illusion that the world is stable and fixed. The continuous change of the world is necessary for him, and this process of change occurs spontaneously without adhering to certain plans. Rivers, for example, may change their directions and make new bends in response to obstructions and gaps. Wild birds do not go to the kitchen or restaurants to eat but eat what they may find throughout their daily search for food. Berry emphasizes the idea of spontaneity; he urges people to go on foot into the wilderness with a readiness to learn lessons from it. The wilderness “will teach [people] the wisdom of taking no thoughts for tomorrow— not because taking thought is a bad idea, but because it is not possible; [they do not] know what thought tomorrow will require” (Berry, 1991, p. 48).

As an environmentalist, Berry rejects the trash of material civilization, “old tires, buckets and cans, the various plastic conveniences of our disposable civilization”. To be civilized, Berry says, we should protect our environment and preserve wild places such as the Red River from human abuse. He describes a day he spent in nature:

*All day we have been in motion ourselves, and now we see it very still and watch motions of the world: the flight of the birds, the stirring of the wind, the flowing of the river, the darkening of the day. In our weariness and stillness we watch it happen without impatience, with candid interest. It is as gratifying as watching somebody else works*

(Berry, 1991, p.54).

Berry presents a radical concept of the relationship between humans and the natural world. He thinks that it is not enough for us to be in the natural world; we should be a part of it and move within it. Nothing in nature is fixed or immortal, not the hills or mountains, but there is an immortal process of creation which is quite different from human action that is described by Berry as destructive to the natural world. This everlasting process of creation cannot be understood within humans' limited and selfish view. It cannot be perceived as an act of destruction, says Berry, even when hills are torn down, it is a creation.

In the last chapter of "The Journey's End," Berry (1991) meditates on the sense of place and the relation between a place and its inhabitants. Berry enquires whether the place is strange to him or to other living beings. The place, for Berry, is neither strange to its creatures, to the birds, animals, and insects, nor is it strange to human beings for Indians had once lived in its caves and near its streams. It is the explorers who made the place strange through the planting of their own values of conquest, exploitation, and destruction. To be familiar with the place, human beings should not merely be observers but to be creatures overwhelmed by creation. Going to wild places is not related to recreation; it is related more to creation, "For the wilderness is the creation in its pure state, its processes unqualified by the doings of people. In the woods, we come face to face with the creation, of which we must begin to see ourselves as part" (Berry, 1991, p. 66).

Berry thinks that people become more familiar with the wilderness only when they become less fearful of it. The wilderness does not change; it is the same. It is our fear of nature that changes. When we stop looking at it as an enemy, it will become comfortable and familiar. We fear it as we fear the unknown. Our fear should change from that which is associated with contempt and ignorance to "the fear that accompanies awe that comes with understanding of our smallness in the presence of wonder that teaches us to be respectful and careful" (Berry, 1991, p. 67). It is fear that is mingled with love. Berry came to know about the mystery of the nonhuman world during his stay in the wilderness at the gorge. He came to recognize that only little was created by humans as the natural world can always challenge human power and reveal our weakness. Berry does not consider himself a master of the world but an inhabitant of it which, for Berry, is the right position of human beings. The vastness and complexity of the natural world reminded Berry of his place among other animals and inhabitants of the natural world.

Unlike Snyder, Berry endorses farm life simplicity rather than the primitive, and if we associate Snyder with the wilderness of the Rocky mountain landscape, Berry is associated with the mountain farmland of Kentucky. Berry does not believe in the tribalism of Snyder "but in the neighbourliness of the rural community to which he belongs" (Lothar, 1995, p. 285). Berry does not have the anti-humanist attitude that radical ecologists have. He shares the ecologists' regionalism which focuses on an ecological knowledge of their region but, as I see it, Berry has his own version of regionalism. Berry expresses his regionalist sympathies in an essay titled "The Regional Motive" in "A Continuous Harmony". Berry strongly refuses "the moral distortion of exploitive or sentimental regionalism and he criticizes the "tendency to love the land, not for its life, but for its historical associations" (Berry, 1972, p. 63). He says, "The regionalism that I adhere to could be defined simply as "local life aware of itself. It would tend to be a substitute for the myths and stereotypes of a region a particular knowledge of the life of the place one lives in and intends to continue to live in" (Berry, 1972, pp. 64-65). It is a conservative regionalism, indeed compared to that of Snyder, which can be described as revolutionary.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Wendell Berry loved nature that is not wild, nature that is adapted to the support of human society without being exploited or abused. The territory of Berry is not the wilderness but the farm and human society. Berry's meditations deal with matters that Thoreau and Emerson did not pay much attention to such as marriage, love, neighbourliness, shared work and responsibility. What I mean to say is that his intense interest in the natural world was not inward toward transcendental awareness but outward toward membership, family, and human cohesion. Berry did look at the earth in a mystical way but in a practical way as a responsible husbandman. Berry is not a mere observant of life and an eloquent meditative writer but a highly responsible writer who rejects setting aesthetics and ethics apart to avoid their clash but insists on keeping them together in harmony.

Wasting any part of creation, for Berry, is blasphemy. The land and its creatures, including the predators, are all divine gifts; they are all creations of God and, therefore, must be preserved. Wendell Berry made great efforts through his works to reform the relationship between civilization and the earth. Unless human society renews the vision of its relationship with the natural world, there will be little hope of substantial and permanent environmental reform. Berry might not have provided solutions for all environmental dilemmas, but he certainly has inspired people with the spirit of real reform. He urges people to reconsider their daily interaction with the environment with a new vision.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is part of a larger study for the author's PhD research at University Malaya, Malaysia.

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