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Wendell Berry's Beloved Community



Dave Schelhaas

Recalling a conversation he had with his friend the late Christopher Lasch about community, historian Eugene Genovese remembers saying to him, "You know, Kit, your critique of the break-down of communities is wonderful, and much of what you say about what should go into the making of communities is wonderful, but show me a community that you have ever been willing to identify with." Genovese remarks that the inability to be sympathetic to real communities as they really are is a problem for most intellectuals.

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Communitarian intellectuals are trying to create communities from the top down, ideal communities, but, says Genovese, communities are "things that grow up historically and in time and place."

In contrast to the communitarian intellectuals, Wendell Berry is an intellectual who is part of a real community, an historic community rooted in a particular place. The concept and practice of community is at the absolute center of everything Berry writes and does. Whether he writes of religion or farming or sex or technology, whether he writes fiction or poetry or expository prose, whether he travels a thousand miles to a conference on sustainable agriculture or a few miles to Port Royal, Kentucky, for a town meeting, his work and life bear witness to his beliefs about community.

The influence of Christianity on Berry's vision of community is profound. Although he is frequently critical of the role the church has played in the destruction of nature and community, he recognizes that Scripture requires people to live in harmony with God, the earth, and other people. "Charity," he writes in "The Gift of Good Land," "cannot stop until it includes all Creation, for all creatures are parts of a whole upon which each is dependent, and it is a contradiction to love your neighbor and despise the great inheritance upon which his life depends" (273).

In "Word and Flesh" Berry says that our wish to preserve the planet "must somehow be reduced to the scale of our competence, that is, to the wish to preserve all of its humble households and neighborhoods. What can accomplish this reduction? . . . Only love can do it" (*People* 200). In critiquing the industrial economy, Berry sets it against the only

economy “comprehensive enough” to include all that an economy should include, and that, he suggests, is the Kingdom of God (*Home* 54). Like an Old Testament prophet, Berry calls our destructive culture to return to communities that obey the laws of God and practice what those Old Testament prophets called “shalom.”

One can not quickly or comprehensively say all that the word “community” means for Berry, but here are some of the essentials: A community is rooted in a place. The land of that place is well cared for and is a primary component in the local economy. The people of the community depend upon each other, working and playing together and helping each other in time of need. The community’s history and stories are passed on from generation to generation. Children succeed their parents in the community and are educated to return home and to serve the community.

This last idea—that children return to serve the community and be served by it—is directly connected to Berry’s theory about the relationship between tragedy and community. In his essay “Writer and Region,” a perceptive analysis of the conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn* and the nature of genuine regional fiction, Berry discusses notions of tragedy and community that provide a fresh way of looking at a large number of American literary works as well as his own recent fiction (*People* 71-87).

When Mark Twain ends *Huck Finn* with Huck deciding to “light out for the Territory” so that he is not “sivilized” by Aunt Sally, we are, according to Wendell Berry, “left face-to-face with a flaw in Mark Twain’s character, a flaw in our history, and a flaw in much of our literature” (*People* ’75). Berry notes that Twain’s apparent assumption that there are no choices other than civilization represented by Miss Watson and Colonel Sherburn on one hand and freedom in the Territory on the other is not only immature but false. Aunt Sally, who is good and kind and not in the least bit confining, in no way represents the civilization of Watson or Sherburn. But Twain, like so many American writers since, assumes that one must either choose civilization with its hypocrisy and violence, or freedom in the anonymous territory apart from any community, and he opts for freedom. But this freedom is more than a freedom from some fussy

aunt; it is flight from adulthood and community obligation. Berry sees this childish desire for freedom as a characteristic of our culture.

We want to be free; we want to have rights; we want to have power; we do not yet want much to do with responsibility. We have imagined the great and estimable freedom of boyhood, of which Huck Finn remains the finest spokesman. . . . We have hardly begun to imagine the coming to responsibility that is the meaning of growing up. We have hardly begun to imagine community life and the tragedy that is at the heart of community life. (*People* ’76)

American literature following Twain is a repository of stories about young men and women who, disturbed by the bigotry or the repressive morality or Philistine sensibilities of their communities, want to light out for the territories: Paul in Cather’s “Paul’s Case,” Nick Adams or another of Hemingway’s disenchanting young veterans, Carol Kenicott of *Main Street*, Thomas Wolfe’s Eugene Gant who discovers *You Can’t Go Home Again*. Sherwood Anderson’s “grotesques” don’t light out for the territories, but his “community” of Winesburg, Ohio, is a miserable place full of unhappy despairing souls. So also, for the most part, is the graveyard above Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River.

What is lacking in most American literature, according to Berry, is the concept of a beloved community. Most writers who are called regionalists are, according to Berry, “provincial,” engaging in the “conscious sentimentalization of or condescension to or apology for a province” (*People* ’79). But condescending to a community or sentimentalizing it cannot produce truly tragic literature. Tragic literature demands a beloved community, one that can experience the worst that is imaginable and yet survive. When the individual who experiences the worst does not return to the beloved community, he denies himself the possibility of consolation or forgiveness or redemption. And without these there is no true tragedy.

In *Oedipus Rex*, Thebes recovers from the plague that torments it only after Oedipus uncovers the truth, acknowledges his evil and puts out his eyes. He does not simply light out for the territories. As Francis Fergusson writes in an intro-

ductory essay to his edition of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Oedipus "undergoes . . . suffering to restore the life of the community" (41). Huck can, like Oedipus, experience grief and horror, but "he cannot experience that fulfillment and catharsis of grief, fear, and pity that we call tragedy" . . . [apart from] a beloved community" (*People* 77).

Like Aristotle, Berry believes that the "community" is restored though the suffering of the tragic hero, but he also emphasizes the restoration and catharsis that the "hero" can experience within the beloved community. Oedipus, of course, was put out of Thebes after his sin, but Huck could have returned to his community for consolation. By "lighting out for the territory" instead of returning to it he deprives himself of the possibility of consolation by the community. Here Berry seems to move beyond a Greek concept of tragedy and argue for what is essentially a Christian concept of tragedy. The classic Christian story to illustrate that an individual who experiences the worst must return to the community for healing is Christ's parable of "The Prodigal Son." Having left his home and community, the prodigal eventually discovers that to have a life he must return to his father and his community and confess his sin.

Berry calls this forgiving community the "beloved community," and he defines it as "common experience and common effort on a common ground to which one willingly belongs" (*People* 85). But two collections of short stories, *The Wild Birds* and *Fidelity*, reveal the beloved community far more effectively than any abstract definition can. Published during the past ten years, these stories depict a group of families ("the Port William membership" as Berry sometimes characterizes them) over several generations—from 1930 to 1990—functioning as a beloved community. Of course the idea of the beloved community has to do with more than tragedy and its accompanying guilt, reconciliation and restoration. Before looking at the tragic dimension of the beloved community, I will illustrate some of the other qualities of community in Berry's stories.

One essential trait of the beloved community is that it has a geographical location; it is rooted in a place, a place with a history and a heritage. In "It Wasn't Me," a story that happens in 1953, Wheeler

Catlett describes a certain farm place as "asking for" particular owners; he speaks of what the old farm and the prospective owners could "mean to each other." This personifying of the farm not only illustrates the importance of place to Berry but also helps us to understand his concept of a local economy. It is an economy concerned as much with the care of the land as it is with profit, one limited in scale and independent of outside institutions, yet constantly under attack by outside institutions connected to the industrial economy.

"It Wasn't Me" is about a farm auction. Old Jack Beechum had willed half the purchase price of his land to Elton and Mary Penn, his tenants, because he realized they were "right" for the farm. Furthermore, he had set the purchase price below

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market value so that they would be able to buy it. Unfortunately he had not stipulated that purchase price in his will, and his daughter Clara, a city banker's wife, has no intention of selling below market price now that her father is dead. When she refuses to honor her father's scribbled note concerning the price, Wheeler Catlett, the local lawyer, is surprised. He had assumed that the world "was ruled by instinctive decency. That Clara and Glad Petit did not inhabit that particular world, they let him know fast" (*Birds* 48). When Wheeler sees that Elton is about to quit bidding on the farm because the price is too great, he tells Elton to keep on bidding. After Elton gets the land, Wheeler assures him that he will help make the payments if the need arises. At first Elton Penn objects. He "wants to make it on his own" without a "soul to thank." Wheeler, however, leads him to the insight that in a community all depend on each other:

"Back of you is Jack Beechum. Back of him was Ben Feltner. Back of him was, I think, his own daddy. And back of him somebody else, and on back that way, who knows how far? And I'm back of you because Jack Beechum is,

and because he's back of me, along with some others." (*Birds* 67)

Finally, says Wheeler, "it wasn't me" that did anything. It is an entire heritage and way of life that obligates us all to one another and it is an obligation that is not accountable, a debt that cannot be repaid.

In a 1983 essay called "Higher Education and Home Defense," Berry coined the phrase "itinerant professional vandals" (*Home* 50) to describe powerful, well-educated people who disrupt, endanger or destroy local economies but who live away from the bad effects of their work. They may propose a nuclear power plant or a gambling casino or a shopping mall for an area, all the time claiming and believing that what they are doing is good. They have been educated not to serve their local communities (though that is what many state colleges and universities were originally mandated to train them to do) but to serve the industrial economy. The lawyer, Wheeler Catlett, is, of course, an exception to this pattern. But in "Fidelity" we see several characters who are, indeed, itinerant professional vandals. Industrial medicine (the health industry), industrial education (the college and university system), and industrial law enforcement (the impersonal state authorities) are at odds with the beloved community, and in "Fidelity" we see the Port William Membership, the beloved community, stick together to subvert these large institutions and allow an old man to die with dignity.

Uncle Burley is old and worn out, "as no-account as a cut cat" (109). He falls asleep whenever he is until finally Danny, his illegitimate son, decides to bring him to the doctor. The doctor immediately sends Uncle Burley on to the large hospital in Louisville where he is placed in a "mechanical room, in the merciless light, with a tube in his nose and a tube needled into his arm and a tube draining his bladder into a plastic bag that hung beneath the bed" (107). As Danny and his wife visit the now comatose Uncle Burley night after night, Danny comes to regret that he ever brought him to the hospital. Finally, in the middle of the night, he steals Uncle Burley from the hospital and takes him to an old barn in his beloved woods. He sits with him, talks to him briefly when he regains consciousness, laughs at

Burley's allusion to an old joke, holds his hand as he fades into death, and then buries him after he dies.

But in stealing Uncle Burley, Danny has committed a crime. The Louisville detective Kyle Bode comes to Port William to find Danny. Kyle does not like hills and hollows or farmers. He had "higher aims that made him dangerous to those he considered to be below him" (146), which includes all of the Port William community. He is an itinerant professional vandal who represents, as Henry Wheeler says,

the right of the state and other large organizations to decide for us and come between us. The people you [Bode] represent will come out here, without asking our opinion, and shut down a barbershop or a little slaughterhouse because it's not sanitary enough for us, and then let other businesses—"richer ones—poison the air and water. (165)

When Kyle insists that he is "just doing my duty" (166), Wheeler replies, "And you're here now to tell us that a person who is sick and unconscious, or even a person who is conscious and well, is ultimately a property of the organizations and the state" (166). Kyle is non-plussed by Wheeler and the other members of the Port William community who have gathered to answer his questions, and eventually he leaves, defeated by the solidarity of the community though none has lied and all have looked him straight in the eyes when answering his questions. In this case, at least, the large institutions and the itinerant professional vandals have been thwarted by the Port William community.

People who live in communities care for each other. Not only in dramatic ways as illustrated in "Fidelity", but in simple daily acts of kindness. In "A Jonquil for Mary Penn" Elton Penn asks a neighbor, Josie Tom, to come and sit with his sick wife while he goes out to plow for another neighbor (*Fidelity* 61). Josie walks over, sits with Mary Penn, and embroiders a beautiful jonquil for her. Two farmers in "Are You All Right?" take a long, middle-of-the-night hike to make sure that their neighbors, two elderly men who have been marooned by spring flood waters for over a week, are all right (*Fidelity* 191).

"Thicker than Liquor," the first story in *The Wild Birds*, is set in the 1930's and illustrates several of the recurring traits of a beloved community. Wheeler Catlett, the central character, is a young man who in the course of the story comes to assume the responsibility that being a grown-up demands of him. He has been charged with the responsibility of rescuing his mother's brother—an unproductive drunk whose entire life has been a failure—from periodic drinking bouts that leave him broke and helpless in a Louisville hotel. Through much of the tale Wheeler carries out his obligation to Uncle Peach dutifully but grudgingly. However, at one point in the long struggle to get Uncle Peach home, Wheeler shouts in anger: "I hope you puke your damned guts out" (23). Uncle Peach replies, "Oh, Lord, honey, you can't mean that" (23). Then Wheeler, his anger spent, for the first time "willingly" assumes his responsibility for Uncle Peach and sees him now as a "poor, hurt, weak mortal, twice hurt because he *knew* himself to be hurt and weak and mortal. And then Wheeler knew what he did need from Uncle Peach. He needed him to be comforted. That was all" (23-24)

From then on his attitude is changed. He gently nurses Uncle Peach through a long night of nightmares. Two things happen here that are illustrative of the beloved community. Uncle Peach returns to the community, as he has done before, for healing and revival. But he also brings knowledge and healing. He teaches young Wheeler something about the fragility of the human condition and in that lesson, educates his heart.

Uncle Peach is certainly not a tragic hero, but he does receive from the community and give back to it. To be truly tragic, however, a story needs someone more heroic and demands a beloved community that can experience the worst and yet survive. "Pray Without Ceasing," which shows us such a community and such a hero, is a beautifully written story, woven, in the telling, over four generations and illustrating the place of memory and the tragic imagination in the establishing of community. It is a story that says history is everything, asserting in all sorts of ways that "the past is present"(3), that "the unknown past is present in us"(4), that "the living, by dying, pass into the living" (5).

The story begins in the present, narrated by Andy Catlett who visits his grandparents to hear the details of a story involving his grandfather and great-grandfather. Ben Feltner, the great-grandfather of Catlett, had been shot to death in the prime of life by his good friend Thad Coulter. Coulter killed Ben Feltner because, drunk and in despair over the loss of his farm due to his profligate son, he could not accept the straight-forward advice given by his friend Ben. When Mat Feltner, Ben's son, hears of his father's death, he leaps toward revenge but is restrained by another of his father's friends. Later, after Mat has gone home to inform his mother and family of the death of Ben, a large group of his father's friends come to the house and urge young Mat to go with them to the Hargrave

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jail where Thad Coulter is locked up and to measure out justice swiftly with a noose.

This is the climactic moment of the story. One of the most beloved men in the community has been killed by his friend. To employ mob justice at this time could divide the community irreconcilably even to the point of creating a "Grangerfords and Shepherdsons" feud. But young Mat Feltner in the most crucial situation of his life makes the right decision. In six sentences, the longest speech of his entire life, he says all that needs to be said: "No gentlemen. I appreciate it. We all do. But I ask you not to do it. . . . If you want to, come and be with us. We have food, and you all are welcome" (*Fidelity* 57). The health of the community is restored by these six simple sentences. The young hero has courageously confronted the powerful forces of filial love, grief, anger, and injustice and made a decision that reveals the greatness of the human spirit.

Andy Catlett, the narrator of the story, is living proof of the healing created by his grandfather's decision. A child of a marriage between Feltners and Coulters, he concludes that

The two families, sundered in the ruin of a

friendship, were united again first in new friendship and then in marriage. My grandfather made a peace here that has joined many who would otherwise have been divided. I am a child of his forgiveness (*Fidelity* 59).

But the peace made by Mat Feltner was not made by him alone. Both directly and indirectly, the community was involved. Mat was restrained from immediate revenge by Jack Beechum. An old school teacher, who comes to the house to bring a cake, reminds Jack that anyone may be taken without a moment's notice and therefore we must "Pray without ceasing." Her obvious point is that each of us must be ready to meet our maker, but surely that phrase, taken in the context of the murder and possible lynching, also alludes to the communal prayers that must have surrounded young Mat and his family in their time of grief and crisis.

The message is clear. We do not act alone. People who live in community support one another in times of tragedy: Some bring food, others wisdom and some simply give their presence. Gradually healing and restoration occur.

Thad Coulter, the man who killed Ben Feltner, does not return to the beloved community but hangs himself in his jail cell in the nearby town of Hargrave. We can be sure that the community would have demanded justice, but it is quite possible that some among them would also have embraced him.

In *The Wild Birds* we have the story of a man in mild disgrace with the community his entire life who nevertheless seeks its embrace and acceptance—and eventually receives it. Uncle Burley (the dying man in *Fidelity*) has come to Wheeler Catlett, his lawyer and friend, because he wants to will his property to Danny Branch, his illegitimate son. But he has something else on his mind as well. All his life Uncle Burley has been something of a ne'er-do-well.

Burley Coulter's faults have been public entertainment in the town and neighborhood of Port William ever since he was a boy, most of his transgressions having been committed flagrantly in the public eye, and those that were not, if they had any conceivable public interest, having been duly recounted to the public by Burley himself. His escapades have now, by

telling, worn themselves as deeply into that countryside as its backroads. (*Birds* 131)

At first Wheeler thinks that Burley is sorry for the way he has lived his life, but Burley says emphatically that what's done is done and "I have to be what I've been" (*Birds* 137). Then he tells Wheeler that the only reason they have been friends is that they're not related. "If we'd been brothers, you wouldn't have put up with me. Or anyhow you partly wouldn't have, because a lot of my doings haven't been your kind of doings" (*Birds* 144). Wheeler "knows with a seizure of conviction that Burley is right" (*Birds* 144), and senses a great gap between them. Finally Burley tells Wheeler that "you've got to forgive me as if I was a brother to you" (*Birds* 145).

Here is the sinner, the community scapegrace, come back to his friend at the heart of the community to seek forgiveness and complete acceptance. This is the kind of return to the community that Berry must have in mind when he writes in *Writer and Region*: "Given human nature and human circumstance, our only relief is in this forgiveness, which then restores us to community and its ancient cycle of loss and grief, hope and joy" (*People* 79). Wheeler's first response to Burley's request for forgiveness is a gradual realization that "some deep dividing valley has been stepped across," that "their lives have begun again—lives dead, living, yet to be" (*Birds* 145). Then he reaches out, grips Burley's shoulder and says, "Burley, it's all right" (*Birds* 145). Earlier, Burley had quoted the Psalmist: "Cleanse thou me from secret faults." Now both men, Wheeler and Burley, feel cleansed.

In "Writer And Region" Berry holds up Sarah Orne Jewett as the one American regionalist who depicts, without malice or condescension or sentimentality, a beloved community, a community that has survived its "remembered tragedies," is rooted in the past, and has accepted its oddballs and welcomed back its exiles. But Berry's stories of the Port William Membership are certainly another beautiful model of the beloved community. Having asserted that, I am immediately confronted with questions: Can a fiction writer who consciously seeks to present a beloved community write honestly about such a community or will her need to portray a beloved community cause her to

look away from the meanness and pettiness of the community and see primarily its virtues?

To put it directly, will art that seeks to portray a beloved community, by its very agenda, become sentimental? More specifically, is Berry's portrayal of the Port William community sentimental? To answer that we must first define what we mean by sentimental literature. Usually, the word "sentimental" is used in two senses when it is applied to literature. The first is the use of excessive emotion and the conscious attempt to generate emotions in the reader." As John Gardner says, it "is the attempt to get some effect without providing due cause" (115). That meaning simply does not apply to any of Berry's fiction. Berry is a first-rate writer with a keen eye and ear for the right word, the right tone, the genuine emotion; he seems incapable of appealing to stock response, or employing cheap melodrama and rhetorical clichés. The immensely popular farm romance by Robert Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County*, is certainly guilty of the sin of sentimentality, but Berry is a far better craftsman than Waller.

A second way to be "sentimental" is to look at the world through rose-colored glasses, that is, over-emphasizing humanity's goodness. In response to this definition we can assert that Berry's stories are peopled with proud men, stiff-heads, drunks, and eccentrics. A selfish woman in "It Wasn't Me" goes against the spirit of her father's will. A friend murders his best friend in "Pray Without Ceasing," and a whole gang of men are ready to join a lynch mob. But at the same time, the controlling spirit in Port William usually seems to be, in the end, wise, generous, compassionate, and self-sacrificing. It is a place made up of flawed human beings but held together by the virtues of forgiveness and tolerance. Surely this is not sentimental. People and communities actually do behave this way sometimes.

Of course, a community might also be dominated by greed, spite, and individual self-interest. Communities behave *this* way sometimes, also. Willa Cather's Sand City in "The Sculptor's Funeral" is such a town, and when Jim Laird returned to Sand City after college, he became the "damned shyster" the townsfolk wanted him to be. Is Berry obligated to show us Sand City as well as Port William? I don't think so. As I noted earlier,

we have an entire canon of literature devoted to depicting the intolerable selfishness and hypocrisy of life in certain small towns. Berry's Port William, which shows tolerance and forgiveness operating in a community, are a necessary and welcome balance to the negative or sentimental pictures of small town life.

I began this essay by asserting that what Berry writes about community is more than intellectual game-playing. He is serious about living his views—not just those views on tragedy that I have been discussing, but his views about creation care. That being the case, I can not avoid asking whether or not he seriously expects young people today to return to their home communities after having "lit out" for the college campus. Wendell

[Berry] is serious about living his views—not just those views on tragedy that I have been discussing, but his views about creation care.

Berry himself "lit out" for that territory and he stayed there for some time as a teacher.

But eventually he came back to his "beloved community." I don't suppose he would insist that every young person who has left the community for the larger world has to return, or that membership in community negates mobility, but he vehemently opposes educating people away from the community and suggests that it is best to belong to a community where one has a heritage, a history.

Recently, as I sat in a lecture hall with about forty people, most of them environmental scientists, the speaker asked if anyone still lived in the community where he or she had been raised. No one did. Only one of us had lived in the same community for twenty years. The lecturer went on to make a point that Berry makes in his essay "The Obligation of Care": "Saving the planet means sticking with a place. . . ." (63). Clearly, Berry's concern for the environment is connected to his view of community, and both are absolutely linked to concern for place. Of course it is possible to become a part of a place that is not the place where one was born and raised. But one must live for a considerable length of time in a place to

become a part of it and have a history in it, and only then can he or she know the place well enough to care for it.

To live in community is not always easy. It requires sacrifice and the assumption of responsibilities: you must live with people who are sometimes cantankerous and stupid; you must care for the children and the elderly; you must preserve and sustain the land; you must enrich the culture. You cannot be self-indulgent. Berry seems to suggest that if more young people had returned to their native communities rather than remaining in the territory (the city, the academy) to pursue their personal dreams, we might have a nation of small communities that are environmentally and spiritually healthy.'

As the great centralized governmental, educational, and economic entities of our time move like giant bulldozers across our landscapes, obliterating neighborhoods and community in both city and village, Berry's vision of the beloved community may seem unattainable. But it also seems worth striving for. He makes no claim that the beloved community is a perfect place; as long as sin exists, it will continue to be a tragic place. But he argues convincingly in his fiction and his nonfiction that when we return to it and when we seek to nourish it, we have taken the first step toward responsible citizenship, toward creational stewardship, toward a harmony of all creation living joyfully before the Lord.

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