

Invoking a 'Calamity of Peace': The Private Revolution of Wendell Berry's 'Mad Farmer'

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Abstract

Building on evolving theories and criticism of post-Vietnam War environmentalism, this essay places Wendell Berry's agrarian essays and "Mad Farmer Poems" at the cusp of significant ideological change in twenty-first century ecocritical thought. The semi-fictional mad farmer developed in Berry's poetry collection illustrates how the rural farmer serves as a catalyst for revolutionary environmental change that peacefully marries the private and public uses of wilderness. My analysis of Berry's poems demonstrates how the poet's use of symbolism, metaphor, and peaceful protest positions the farmer as the most qualified person to lead us away from mainstream and radical environmentalism and toward a movement indicative of deep-rooted social change.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Wendell Berry, agrarian poetry.

Resumen

Basándose en la evolución de las teorías y la crítica del ecologismo posterior a la guerra de Vietnam, este ensayo sitúa los ensayos agrarios de Wendell Berry y los "Poemas del granjero loco" en la cúspide de un cambio ideológico significativo en el pensamiento ecocrítico del siglo XXI. El granjero loco semi-ficticio desarrollado en la colección de poesía de Berry ilustra cómo el agricultor rural sirve como catalizador para un cambio medioambiental revolucionario que casa pacíficamente con los usos privados y públicos de la naturaleza. Mi análisis de los poemas de Berry demuestra cómo el uso del simbolismo, la metáfora y la protesta pacífica por parte del poeta posicionan al agricultor como la persona más cualificada para alejarnos del ecologismo dominante y radical y hacia un movimiento indicativo de un cambio social profundamente arraigado.

Palabras clave: Ecologismo, Wendell Berry, poesía agraria.

Wendell Berry's poetic alter-ego, the "mad farmer," seeks the truth. He considers his relationship with nature, his reliance on capitalist ideology, his duties to his community, and lastly, his loyalty to the American government. Many of Berry's post-Vietnam essays and poems depict the American farmer's frustration with urban growth, the destruction of the environment, and the empty governmental promises of agricultural support following the turmoil of the late 1960s. Berry's post-war agrarian essays and "mad farmer" poems narrate an environmental movement from the perspective of the rural farmer under a corporate-driven government.¹ The search for "truth" leads Berry, and his mad farmer persona, to denounce public forms of environmentalism in the context

¹ The "Mad Farmer Poems" were originally published in the 1970 poetry collection, *Farming: A Handbook*.

of large-scale industrial farms. Berry's farmer invokes a movement to peacefully reclaim the land and reassert a community-based farming existence.²

Berry's mad farmer poems encourage small-community farmers to return to their fields and families for spiritual renewal as a peaceful response to the political, economic, and environmental atrocities created by the Vietnam War. Reminiscent of Virgil's *Georgics*, a poetic celebration of the peacemaking characteristics of agricultural life, Berry's poems advocate caring for the land, crops, animals, and most importantly, each other.³ In the introduction to her translated text of *Virgil's Georgics*, Janet Lembke describes the poem as "a heartfelt cry for homecoming, for returning landholders and their families to the fields and pastures they had lost through no fault of their own" (xvi) during a time of political and civil war caused by Roman expansion throughout the Mediterranean. The conflict to which Virgil was responding was marked by the "power struggle between conservative aristocrats and the "nouveau-ric" made wealthy by trade, agribusiness, and war" (xiv). Similarly, in the wake of the Vietnam War, Berry interprets the shift from small to corporate farms as a spiritual and physical attack on rural communities. Many of these larger farms are designed to engage in faster, safer, environmentally friendly agricultural practices, but economically and spiritually, they destroy small farms. The selfish, prideful, greedy behaviors that Berry attributes to fueling the war are also the attitudes that destroy small rural communities once dependent on family farms; he labels these behaviors "a deadly illness of mankind" (*The Long-Legged House* 66)⁴. The issues perpetuating the Vietnam War and post-war environmental thought, suggests Berry, are based on an inability to address how we treat each other and the world. Despite promises to practice non-violence against each other and the environment, communities continue to foster violence by endorsing a *want* rather than a *need* culture.

Berry's argument is not new, and readers may ask why we should dredge up the complaints of Berry's farmer decades after their publication. The answer is glaring. "The machine economy has set afire / the household of the human soul, / and all the creatures are burning within it," he asserts in his poem "Some Further Words" (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 33). Berry's essays and mad-farmer poems build on the Vietnam war-time mentality by addressing the machine and technology-driven environmental movements of the post-Carson era⁵. The same movement that championed the protection of America's communities and wilderness by creating an environment that is safe from chemical hazards and long-term global threats is equally responsible for the erasure of the small-town farmer from the American landscape. Berry's environmentalism, as evidenced by

² Bron Taylor's forward to *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth*, asserts that, "it is only through "experiments with truth" (to borrow a phrase from Gandhi's autobiography) during concrete political struggles that we have a chance to discover or recover viable solutions" (5).

³ Virgil's *Georgics* was his second major work, after *The Eclogues* and before *The Aeneid*, published between 37 and 30 B. C.

⁴ Berry makes this assertion in "A Statement Against the War in Vietnam," a speech presented to the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft at the University of Kentucky in 1968. The speech is included in Berry's *The Long-Legged House*.

⁵ Rachel Carson's groundbreaking 1962 work, *Silent Spring*, is credited as the catalyst for the modern environmental movement discussed at length in this essay.

his 'mad farmer,' begins privately, on his own farm, in his own community, for his and his neighbor's own good. The "mad farmer" persona is created to embody the personal responsibility of nurturing an intimate relationship with the earth and those we call our neighbors. The term "mad" may be used in two ways: It may refer to the anger that the farmer feels toward the disappearance of small farms, but it could also be used as his perceived mental state for wanting to distance himself from the rewards that capitalism promises. The poems underscore Berry's theories discussed in his many essays and allow readers to experience firsthand the American farmer's anguish. The loss of small family farms is more than just an economic problem: it is a loss of identity, culture, and family. "The first casualties of the exploitive revolution are character and community," he argues (*The Unsettling of America* 11). The farmer is still capable of adopting a private environmentalism, but only if he divorces himself from the commercialization of agriculture.

The farmer's suitability to model future environmental movements and reestablish the small, rural farm requires attention to two discussions I present in this essay. First, I examine how recent scholarship on the post-Vietnam era environmental movement, in the context of small farming communities presented in Berry's essays, is counterintuitive to fostering healthy farming communities.⁶ Second, I demonstrate how Berry's "mad farmer" and post-Vietnam industrial growth and misguided environmentalism provide significant political struggles in response to the wilderness degradation that early movements failed to prevent. By focusing on Berry's "mad farmer" poems and his portrait of the farmer as a peacemaker and nurturer, intimately tied to the land, I argue that the farmer reveals to the reader the urgency needed to escalate a deep, social ideological change that formal movements neglect.⁷

Post-Vietnam Mainstream and Radical Environmentalism

In the context of Berry's agrarian essays and poetry, post-Vietnam War environmentalism, characterized by economic, technological, and industrial growth for the sake of human comfort, drives / has driven / is driving? small farming communities to extinction.⁸ This growth strips the farmer of his character and identity, provokes violent ideology against the farmer, and leads to an increase in abandoned farms. Growing farming commercialization leads families to live less on their own products than in prewar times. Vegetable crops and meat are primarily produced for resale outside the community, which is forcing the farmers to purchase food for their families from larger, more industrious suppliers. Farming since the 1960s relies on agricultural technology to

⁶ Morris Allen Grubbs's edited collection of interviews, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, provides excellent context for many of Berry's essays and poems.

⁷ This line of thought is synonymous with what Mark Somma calls "Revolutionary Environmentalism," which I will discuss at length later in the essay.

⁸ The essays in Best and Nocella's *Igniting an Environmental Revolution* refer to this movement as "mainstream environmentalism."

make the farmer's work more efficient for large-scale production.⁹ However, the connection between modernization of agricultural techniques and, as Berry asserts, "the disintegration of the culture and the communities of farming" has not been adequately recognized. Berry explains in "The Agricultural Crisis as a Crisis of Culture" that reliance on quantity over quality is a central issue facing small farm communities (*The Unsettling of America* 45).¹⁰ To increase quantity, he argues, many technological advancements in machinery replace the work of American farmers, thus all their discipline and know-how is sacrificed. This statement underlines a concern expressed in several essays and poems addressed later in this essay. "What is the effect on quantity of persuading a producer to produce an inferior product? What, in other words, is the relation of pride and craftsmanship to abundance?" (46). Berry asks these fundamental questions to underscore the loss of the unique skills that build the character of the American farmer.

For a comprehensive historical analysis of post-Vietnam environmentalism, I turn to Hal Rothman's book *The Greening of a Nation? Environmentalism in the United States Since 1945*. Rothman points to the late 1960s as a crucial time in the development of United States environmentalism. American culture embraced a utopian vision by the late 1960s (83). Concerns for the physical environment and the effects of human activities on the landscape became part of everyday environmental discourse. Instead of efficiency that dominated the scientific conservation at the turn of the century, Rothman asserts that Americans developed a new ethic that emphasized the concerns of an affluent, optimistic society that envisioned no limits to its possibilities (84). Moreover, Rothman asserts that Americans became obsessed with individualism, individual rights and personal entitlement, rather than focusing on the collective rights and personal obligations that the nation's founders envisioned (85). Due to this ideology, the notion of "community" and healthy environments got lost.

The mainstream environmental movement born out of the 1960s and 1970s political conflict focuses on rectifying the destruction of nature for purely anthropocentric uses which fuels a movement of violence and a revenge mentality that leads us even further away from Berry's ideals. Mainstream environmentalism, according to Mark Somma, is described as "a reform oriented, technocratic outlook that seeks accommodation with the existing corporate economic and interest-group political system" (37).¹¹ Activists disgruntled with mainstream environmentalism turn to radical forms of action to educate the public about the atrocities of environmental degradation. Perhaps the most well-known of these groups is Earth First!, established in 1980 by Dave Forman. In "A Spark that Ignited a Flame: The Evolution of the Earth Liberation Front" Noel Molland discusses the popularity of Earth First! in the United States and its influence throughout Europe. While the movement is characterized and popularized by protests,

⁹ Paul Conkin's *A Revolution Down on the Farm* traces the history of American agriculture from the times of the early English settlers through the Twenty-first century. His book examines the changes to small farm communities, federal policies impacting the farmer, and technological advances in agricultural techniques.

¹⁰ In the same essay, Berry compares communist countries forcing populations out of their villages to politicians in Washington forcing small farmers out of business (45).

¹¹ Somma compares "mainstream environmentalism" to philosopher Arne Naess's "shallow ecology." Some scholarship refers to this movement as "traditional environmentalism."

civil disobedience, and ecotage (Molland 47), its radical offshoot, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) is perhaps even more well known for violence. Meant to target exploiters of nature, the ELF asserts that its actions are to destroy the properties of those who profit from exploiting the environment. The ELF members argue that the law will support those individuals and industries that are directly harming nature. Paul Joosse in "Antiglobalization and Radical Environmentalism: An Exchange on Ethical Grounds" presents revealing data about this behavior. He argues that since 1997, "[the ELF] has committed over 600 acts of sabotage and arson in North America, causing over \$100 million in damages to biomedical research centres, logging companies, ski resorts, and SUV dealerships" (34). The problem here is that the radical protests are targeting those in power to get revenge for a perceived wrong. Matthew Hall, in "Beyond the Human: Extending Ecological Anarchism" provides an accurate assessment when he asserts that "anarchist thinkers recognise that 'power is everywhere', but they focus their criticisms on political and social power which uses force and compulsion to execute actions against the will of others" (376). The problem with mainstream and radical environmental movements is that they are contradictions, as Berry predicts and as we have seen.

Our actions toward achieving post-war community and environmental harmony are steeped in irony. Berry points out that we preserve peace by waging war, advance freedom by supporting dictatorships, or "win the hearts and minds of the people by poisoning their crops and burning their villages and confining them in concentration camps" (*Long-Legged House* 68). These contradictions are at the heart of some of the more recent criticisms of radical actions.¹² Property destruction detracts from the seriousness of protests, encourages police brutality, promotes militarization of protest management, and leads environmental activists to question the effectiveness of protests (Joosse 43). The ELF's (and similar group's) attempt to disable profit motive through violent attacks does more harm than good to the environment. Joosse argues that property destruction and protests undermine the aims of the movement and do little "to encourage practical, local, and sustained action in the service of global justice" (34-5), and his argument is precisely the reason that Berry calls to make our actions more private than public.

In his 1970 essay, "Think Little," Berry addresses the natural rise and fall of political movements in America.¹³ He is particularly concerned with the possibility of the environmental movement becoming a "[...] public cause, served by organizations that will self-righteously criticize and condemn other organizations, inflated for a while by a lot of public talk in the media, only to be replaced in its turn by another fashionable crisis" (*The Art of the Commonplace* 81-82).¹⁴ The main issue here is that people do not engage in

¹² Hall, for example, argues that anarchism is "a promising political philosophy for undermining the human hierarchy and domination of the natural world and exploring the exclusion and subjugation of the non-human" (375). He further argues that we need to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with non-humans. Milstein et al, in "Make Love, Not War?" argue that radical movements become stronger and more nuanced as time progresses, but that the violence associated by direct action appeals to media outlets can be framed in more effective and inclusive ways.

¹³ Berry specifically points to the Civil Rights and Peace Movements.

¹⁴ Joosse argues that continually addressing environmental problems with technological solutions clouds our vision of what the true environmental issues are, namely "global capitalism's inherent pursuit of unfettered economic growth" (33-4).

environmentalism as a private cause; the messages at the heart of protests, peaceful or otherwise, are lost in the public sphere. The media attention is centered on actions rather than message. Berry asks that we regard the environmental movement as an extension of the Civil Rights and Peace movements and argues that the same mentality in exploiting the environment exists in the fostering of racism and militarism. The problems remain public and institutionalized with the blame being placed on others (government). Rather, we should assume these issues on a much more private, personal level and without violence. There may be some immediate benefits to the ELF's challenge of corporate operations, but their actions are still very different from the inclusive, continual, local, political involvement that is lacking in the anti-globalization movement (Joosse 44).

Measures taken by mainstream and radical environmentalists, we may conclude, are more symbolic than impactful, and they neglect the real issue facing our communities. William Major underscores one of the more significant points made by Berry when he asserts that, "marriage of violence and American identity is perhaps best exemplified less by the brutality of our streets—which, in essence, is a political problem—than it is by the machinations of our economic life and their effects on the land" (27). These issues continue to plague our communities in the post-Vietnam era because they are rooted in the consumerism that increasingly takes over the natural and social world (Best and Nocella 8). Best and Nocella point to two specific issues that are responsible for the war on the environment: overpopulation and mass production. A careful read through Roderick Nash's classic text *Wilderness and the American Mind* underscores the conclusion that western culture, from the pioneer era, through nineteenth-century romanticism, and into the preservationist and conservationist twenty-first century has pushed the limits of what it means to civilize the wilderness.¹⁵

The loss of nature and small-town farming communities to twentieth century consumerism may be recovered by receding from the public environmental battle and practicing a more personal approach. This movement begins in our own home communities on family farms. Berry's argument that a healthy culture is "a communal order of memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration" begins to address this issue (*The Unsettling of America* 47). He continues that a healthy farm culture is based on familiarity with the land thus promoting an intelligence that "no amount of technology can satisfactorily replace" (47). The key issue here is, as Berry states, that if we allow generations to pass without invoking the possibilities of farm communities, all will be lost. "And then we will not only invoke calamity—we will deserve it" (47).

Now, over two decades into the new millennium, neither mainstream nor radical environmentalism truly rectify damage to the environment. Rather, we must consider Mark Somma's call for "revolutionary environmentalism." In "Revolutionary Environmentalism: An Introduction," Somma argues that mainstream and radical

¹⁵ Ralph Pite's "How Green were the Romantics?" provides a necessary evaluation for how we interpret ecological problems. He asserts that ecological science is relatively new and that how we define and perceive environmental issues is a matter of personal interpretation. Turning to poets and essayists such as William Wordsworth, Percy B. Shelley, and Aldo Leopold, Pite argues, helps us understand how we should react to the scientific data with which we are presented.

environmentalism do very little to establish a “qualitatively new social system” (38). These acts of environmentalism embrace actions and behaviors over significant changes in ideology. Somma asserts that we need to move to an entirely new, positive social society which does not yet exist. Revolutionary environmentalism, according to Somma, promotes the need for deep ecological change integrated into the practical social and economic life of ordinary citizens. The three main components that define this movement are having a spiritual awakening, promoting ecological education and fundamental political and economic change. At first glance, Somma’s proposition for a revolutionary environmentalism seems unattainable. As Bron Taylor aptly states in his forward to *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth*, “the term “revolutionary” is concerned primarily with making lasting, systemic change” (4). He argues that many supporters of revolutionary environmentalism believe that their ideologies cannot be realized without abolishing the current forms of environmentalism that exist.

It is not that late-twentieth century environmentalism is not necessary and well-intentioned. Best and Nocella emphasize that environmentalism is a necessary movement “toward healing the pathologies of a destructive and domineering society” (9). However, post-Vietnam movements have done more to temporarily *rectify* the destruction of the environment for instrumental purposes rather than *prevent* damage to the environment to preserve its intrinsic qualities. While the movement protects nature, it does so in concert with corporate, economic, and political motivation. The decisions made for environmental protection depend on the individual leadership and special interest groups. Therefore, the movement embraces an anthropocentric view of nature promoted by white, privileged males.¹⁶

The Farmer is Not without Blame

The idea of sharing in land ownership and being bound to it by immediate economic interest (survival from the food we produce), investing love and work, family loyalty, and memory and tradition is promising. “It has the power to turn each person away from the big-time promising and planning of government, to confront in himself, in the immediacy of his own circumstances and whereabouts, the question of what methods and ways are best” (Berry, *The Unsettling of America* 16). It proposes an economy of necessity requiring the adoption of a private environmentalism on our own land.

Before praising Berry’s farmer as a natural “revolutionary” leader, it is important to note that Berry does not believe that the farmer is innocent of violent acts. We need to consider Firas A. Nsaif Al Jumaili’s argument in his essay, “Wendell Berry: Mediating Between Culture and Nature,” that there is a mixed message associated with the farmer. In one respect, the farmer must destroy nature, by removing forests and destroying wildlife to provide room to grow crops. However, Al Jumaili points out Berry’s argument

¹⁶ The “Wilderness Act of 1964” places specific definitions on how “wilderness” is defined and enforces protection based on human perceived value of wild areas. These criteria consist of land size, whether human-made structures or alterations are deemed necessary, or if resources in each area are essential to human use.

that wilderness and civilization can co-exist with “enlightened farmers” who find space for the wilderness on their farms (120).

The American farmer, however, is not born “enlightened.” Berry would likely not agree that abolishing current environmental thought is necessary for sustained, systematic change. Rather, he argues that we need to look at history to reshape our ideals. The first half of Berry’s essay, “The Unsettling of America” presents the similarities between the foreign and domestic colonialism responsible for the destruction of productive farms and forests. “Now, as then, we see the abstract values of an industrial economy preying upon a native productivity of land and people” (9). Berry’s essay provides a historical overview of white America and how it has been both a catalyst for and victim of exploitation. He first asserts that the historical discussion documents how exploitation is deeply rooted in our past. Europeans exploited the land by civilizing it and running natives off the land. However, white settlers, too, have always been victims of exploitation and invasion from generation to generation. Modern industrialization continues to buy out individuals for land. The exploitation is as much a modern problem as a historical one. “[. . .] These conquerors have fragmented and demolished traditional communities, the beginnings of domestic cultures,” Berry argues, and these conquerors have argued that what they destroyed was outdated, provincial, and contemptible. Victims, especially those who were also white, often believed them. He asserts, “[. . .] the class of independent small farmers who fought the war of independence has been exploited by, and recruited into, the industrial society until by now it is almost extinct” (6).

Semblances of the period of industrial growth are highlighted further when Berry mentions white Europeans trading items such as knives, tools, cloth, weapons, ornaments, novelties, and alcohol. These materials changed the Indian way of life because they made life easier. Handicrafts became obsolete. Modes of hunting changed. “The Indians acquired commercial values and developed business cults. They became more mobile [. . .]” (7-8). While the Indians experienced movements in population, their “place was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, veneration” (6). Berry refers to the exploitation of the Indians as a parable. He argues that it was not a loss in battle that made them “redskin,” but rather accepting dependence on traders “that made necessities of industrial goods” (8). A farmer’s existence under a post-war corporate environmentalism is one that will not thrive. Not only does environmentalism vis a vis corporate and industrial growth threaten the farmer’s economic well-being, but it also threatens his own physical existence.

Additionally, the historical overview illustrates how revolutionary the idea of exploitation is over time, and it shows how our relationship to the land is integral to our history. The founding of America (and its conquest) rarely occurred on purpose as it was the result of our ancestors’ rush to clear the way to get to some other fertile land or area where gold was promised. Some North American settlers, however, saw promise in the land and opted to establish a “home.” They created agricultural settlements rather than continue the quest for gold. Other settlers, however, failed to see the continent as a

"home," and thus failed to understand that the wild, howling wilderness of North America was "home" to native Americans.

The Mad Farmer as Political Pacifist

Berry's "mad farmer" poems advance the discourse on revolutionary environmentalism because they illustrate how the rural farmer serves as a catalyst for deep-rooted change by peacefully engaging in private measures that evoke peace, community, and the health of the land. In "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer" the persona says, "I am done with apologies," and he goes on to assert that if he prefers to do the opposite of what is expected then so be it. The rest of the poem provides examples of his "contrariness," defined as deliberate unruliness and disobedience. He plants by the stars [not the experts] and puts faith in God that he would have a crop. He laughs at funerals and cringes at weddings, gives money when enough has been collected, and only joins in activity when it was on his own accord. These actions demonstrate rebellion, but in a non-violent yet meaningful (to the farmer) way.

The first overtly political blow comes when the persona says, "Well, then, 'they said' / go and organize the International Brotherhood / of Contraries" (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 8). At the request, the persona asks, "Did you finish killing / everybody who was against peace?" While a discussion of the poem's commentary on the war is outside the scope of this analysis, it is important to note that "The violence of the domestic economy, seen here in scarred lands, acidic streams, polluted wells, and the loss of natural and human habitat is strategically juxtaposed with Vietnam to emphasize their commonality under governmental and corporate complicity" (Major 34). The persona concludes the poem by offering his overall lesson: going against "men," the representation of established environmentalism discussed earlier in this essay, has given him a sense of "deep harmony" and truth. Berry's farmer does not ignore the political ramifications that previous movements instill, nor does he advance his cause by advocating the violence that these political actions provoke. Berry, a pacifist, combats a violent capitalist society by turning to his own domestic reality: his own farm. In his own private space, the farmer does as he pleases, answering only to nature and the crops he has cultivated.¹⁷

For a more serious political commentary, I turn to "The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union." The poem denotes the farmer's attempt to remedy mainstream environmentalism. Written from a third-person perspective, the poem overviews the mad farmer's desire to distance himself from a commercialized society. The opening stanza identifies all the promises from which the farmer is walking away: power and money, power and secrecy, government and science, government and art, science and money, ambition and ignorance, genius and war, and outer space and

¹⁷ The essay "Conservation and the Local Economy" in *The Art of the Commonplace* provides an excellent overview of how environmental conditions shape Berry's call for increased awareness and support of small, community-based agriculture. Berry also provides personal accounts of hardships facing the rural farmer in his home of Port Royal, Kentucky.

inner vacuity (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 27). To change his thinking, he must remove himself from these economic-driven vices.

It is important to first examine the act of "secession" as it is being used in this poem. Berry chooses a politically charged act, often one that is accompanied by violence or military aggression, to place his persona in a war. His secession, however, is not wrought in violence; it is peaceful, and the metaphor is being used to demonstrate the drastic measure the farmer is willing to employ to preserve his farming community. After the "secession" from the ills of war and violence, the farmer "returns to the small country he calls home" (27). This country is his farm, and the second stanza illustrates the close loyalty and connections that the farmer has with his land and his neighbors [sharing potluck dinners with them]. These homes that the farmer describes present a close bond, a "togetherness" that the "Union" ironically fails to provide. In a key passage the persona states:

Come all ye conservatives and liberals
who want to conserve the good things and be free,
come away from the merchants of big answers,
whose hands are metalled with power;
from the union of anywhere and everywhere
by the purchase of everything from everybody at the lowest price
and the sale of anything to anybody at the highest price;
from the union of work and debt, work and despair;
from the wage-slavery of the helplessly well-employed.
From the union of self-gratification and self-annihilation,
Secede into care for one another
and for the good gifts of Heaven and Earth. (28)

This stanza is not politically divisive despite the threat of secession; the farmer calls for both conservatives and liberals to come together. The peaceful secession is the act of turning away from the corporations, or "merchants of big answers." Further, Berry places the blame of war on consumerism when he says that the merchants' hands are "metalled with power," as if they are armed and easily overpower consumers. The power to purchase goods cheap and resell them at a higher price demonstrates Berry's concern with exploitation, "wage-slavery of the helplessly well-employed." Finally, the persona re-asserts his peaceful protest by asking his fellow community members to join him in separating from a country of greed and profit and return to a country (his community) that cares for one another.

Berry's persona furthers this movement in the second stanza when he asks people to embrace the economy of the body, daily work, and replenishment at mealtime and at night (freedom through severing political ties). The persona then invites the reader to join in the farmer's world:

Come into the dance of the community, joined
in a circle, hand in hand, the dance of the eternal
love of women and men for one another
and of neighbors and friends for one another. (28)

Berry's poem illustrates both the need for and the capability of communities to unite. However, a figurative interpretation yields another outlook. For the community to unite, Berry's farmer has had to secede from the "union," suggesting a brazen political move that

was made considering previous efforts not being successful. The political metaphor is strong; the union is the larger, corporate world that governs all economies and communities. For the farmer and his neighbors to get out from under the hold of corporate America, they must remove themselves and create their own community [or union] of farmers. While co-existence is certainly a theme derived from this poem, the blatant separation the farmer experiences from the corporate world is clear.

Politicians and bureaucrats base success on the economic prosperity of industrial interests and not on the success or failure of small local economies. David Robinson, in "Wilderness and the Agrarian Principle: Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and the Ethical Definition of the 'Wild'" contends that wild and human interactions in the late twentieth century are often associated with antisocial acts that show "disregard for and domination of others that characterizes the structure of our social relationships, and in extremes, the violence, perpetrated by both individuals and nation-states, which haunts our ordered and regulated lives (16). The farmer's commentary that we receive in "Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer" and "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer" are typical. A wish for a good crop, a healthy environment, and a moral existence are all that he wants. In these poems we find Berry and his persona as farmer and theorist, both of whom exhibit a significant degree of pacifism that fosters their agrarian commitments (Major 29).

Berry's essay "Think Little" points to the American farmer's hard work with fewer economic returns. "As a class," Berry argues, "farmers are one of the despised minorities. So far as I can see, farming is considered marginal or incidental to the economy of the country, and farmers, when they are thought of at all, are thought of as hicks and yokels whose lives do not fit into the modern scene" (*The Art of the Commonplace* 85).¹⁸ As generations pass, the farmer's knowledge and intimate connection with the land is lost. Corporations and machines are not bound to the land like the farmer—big farms think in terms of volume and efficiency as opposed to care for the crops and the land. Berry argues that to repair the damage, we need to go further than public protests and political action. "We are going to have to rebuild the substance and the integrity of private life in this country" (Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace* 86). William Major's "Other Kinds of Violence: Wendell Berry, Industrialism, and Agrarian Pacifism" asserts that once the individual is carrying out the foundations of true change, conscience, morality, and local knowledge, he "is no longer tethered to anything fundamental" (33). Being part of the economic barrier that is the "union," only serves to distract the farmer from finding true change.

The Mad Farmer as Nurturer

The second part of Berry's essay "The Unsettling of America" distinguishes between the characteristics of the exploiter and the nurturer. In short, the exploiter is concerned with efficiency and profit, whereas the nurturer is concerned with health and

¹⁸ In "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," Berry argues that rural communities are often regarded as backward, unprogressive, unmodern and in need of new advancement and technology (*The Art of the Commonplace* 165).

long-term dependability. Berry identifies the farmer as the nurturer. In other words, the exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, "hard facts" while the nurturer thinks in terms of character, condition, quality, and kind.

The nurturing farmer presented in Berry's poems is divine and mythical. He introduces the farmer as a nurturer, who crosses the boundaries of sexual roles, to seed, plant, nurse, and repeat. He says, "[. . .] the farmer crosses back and forth from one zone of spousehood to another, first as planter and then as gatherer" (*The Unsettling of America* 10). The farmer has a divine hold over nature. "The Man Born to Farming," the first poem in Berry's collection, offers a third-person observation of a farmer's supernatural relationship with the land. The persona tells us that to the farmer the "soil is a divine drug," and he is the one who "enters into death / yearly, and comes back rejoicing" (3). The death referenced here is the harvest: once the vegetation dies off the farmer reaps the rewards. There is a life-cycle metaphor that permeates the poem, however. From death, as previously referenced, comes life when his hands reach "into the ground and sprout." Furthermore, he sees the sun set in the "dung heap," a reference to early planting when the fields have been fertilized and rise again "in the corn" when the crops are completed (3).

The farmer as a mythical character has the power to influence nature without the help of machines. The persona asks, "What miraculous seed has he swallowed / that the unending sentence of his love flows out of his mouth / like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water / descending in the dark?" (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 3). Symbolically, the farmer has the power and the understanding of the land that is highly unique. It is not a far-reaching idea to call upon the farmer to lead the march into the fundamental changes that revolutionary environmentalism demands. "Berry's discursive attack on modernity— faith-based or no—helps us to re-think the private/public dichotomy he so readily summons as essential to environmental and cultural renewal" (Major 30). The farmer, in this instance, is not influenced by modern advances in agriculture. He relies on the relationship with his own private farm to understand his relationship with nature.

Despite the effects of misguided environmental protection of the twentieth century, the "mythical" farmer has the power to save the environment with his own hands. Robinson makes an interesting argument when he says that the farm is "in many ways an entity based on order and control, dedicated to the use of the land for ends decided by the farmer, usually economic ends. The farm, that is, can be seen as the first step in the denial of the wild" (17). However, Berry's farmer represents an individual descending directly from the wild. Berry illustrates that the farmer, despite order and control and potential profits, is the man who is most in tune with the wild. In "The Mad Farmer Revolution," the first poem in the collection to provide a call to action, Berry again presents a third person observation that paints the farmer as a mythical creature, "dancing at night in the oak shades / with goddesses" (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 5). His power has made a bountiful crop of corn, pumpkins, plums, peaches, and flowers.

But what really makes the farmer a divine nurturer? In "People, Land, and Community" Berry suggests that to work at a farm and make it successful, it takes time and community. Berry states that "human continuity is virtually synonymous with good

farming, and good farming obviously must outlast the life of any good farmer" (*The Art of the Commonplace* 189). For good farming to last it must occur in a farming community, a neighborhood where people know each other and place proper value on good farming. He asserts that, "A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge in *place* for a *long* time. That is, the essential wisdom accumulates in the community much as fertility builds in the soil" (189).¹⁹ We become victim to industrial farming the minute we purchase machinery. Farm and farmer both become resources. "It is running out for the farm built on the industrial pattern; the industrial farm burns fertility as it burns fuel. For the farm built into the pattern of living things, as an analogue of forest or prairie, time is a bringer of gifts" (192).

In "Some Further Words," Berry's persona crafts a succinct philosophy statement for the farmer:

The farmer
is worthy of the harvest made
in time, but he must leave the light
by which he planted, grew, and reaped,
the seed immortal in mortality,
freely to the time to come. The land
too he keeps by giving it up,
as the thinker receives and gives a thought,
as the singer sings in the common air. (33)

This passage allows readers to see the balance and give-and-take relationship that the farmer fosters with the land. The land is his to nurture and cultivate, but it is not truly his in the sense of ownership. He may own the farm but is not entitled to the ownership of the land, much like a singer cannot own the air where her song is carried. William Major's essay sheds light on why we should look to Berry's writings to understand the division between these public and private environmental spheres. Major's essay asserts that pacifism and environmentalism work with one another. Berry's environmentalism captures the pacifism he practices individually, which, as an agrarian environmentalism, speaks directly against the violence associated with capitalistic ideology. As Major argues, Berry presents scenarios that suggest a disconnect between the peaceable agrarian domestic life and the violent public sphere. "Berry's writings target both mainstream environmentalism and industrial militarism, a critique that is often lacking in most "shallow" environmental discourse" (29). Berry's writing provides an understanding for how purpose and meaning are shaped by the ethical values developed out of relationships fostered between individuals, families, and the landscape (Robinson 17). However, these ideas are in stark contrast to the foundations of mainstream environmentalism.

As Somma asserts, the revolutionary environmental movement is most effective when every day citizens are called upon for action rather than law makers and entrepreneurs who are removed from nature. Berry's poems are from the perspective of

¹⁹ Berry discusses how the Old Order Amish's longevity in farming is based on their reliance on horses and manual labor as opposed to machine-operated equipment. These farmers have run out millions of mechanized farmers (190).

the very individual that Somma describes. This mad farmer is not the privileged individual who embraces the mainstream. Rather, he is the working individual most in tune with the earth. Al Jumaili points out that Berry's "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" (121). His experience of intimately cultivating the land as a farmer allows him a perspective rarely seen by non-farmers. As Major reminds us, Berry believes that practice and security are meaningless when not immersed in land stewardship (29). However, revisiting poems such as those that celebrate the American farmer could lend a new interpretation of how we can begin moving toward this way of viewing our relationship with the land and society.

Conclusion

Berry argues that our lack of imagination to envision our future world is a "failure to perceive a relation between our ideals and our lives" (*Long-Legged House* 67). To live fully and free it is important to embrace American ideals, but these ideals cannot be achieved through violence. Our involvement in violence and war demonstrates that we have lost our faith in our ideals and that we know we have not lived up to them. "We do these things because we have forsaken our principles and abandoned ourselves in the inertia of power" (68). We seek to uphold the "truth" with lies and answer dissent with force and intimidation. Berry asserts that "this involves us in a sort of official madness, in which, while following what seems to be a perfect logic of self-defense and deterrence, we commit one absurdity after another" (68). The ultimate madness, Berry contends, is that to destroy our enemies we are willing to build and keep weapons that will destroy ourselves and the world. He contends, "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" (74).

Berry's 1988 essay, "Economy and Pleasure" presents the most glaring dichotomy that exists in modern agriculture: On the one hand industrial farming relies on constant change and technology and on the other hand the small, community farm thrives off stability and balance. Berry makes clear how those who hold small farming communities dear to their heart should respond to cultural movements that threaten that way of life. However, no essay or poem on its own is going to change those actions. Rather, Berry's works create an action plan that embrace the pacifist ideals of a revolutionary environmentalism

To carry out this peaceful "revolution," Berry's farmer offers important guidelines. In "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" the persona issues a warning: If you embrace quick profit, all things ready-made, instant gratification and so forth, your mind will be owned by the government. The government will tell you what to buy and when and your future will be determined by these individuals. To resist this influence, the farmer asks readers to do something that does not automatically translate to profit. He asks readers to love the Lord, love someone who does not deserve it, denounce the

government and so forth. Basically, do anything that cannot be bought or sold. Embrace nature by calling a forest your crop (knowing you will never harvest it) and call the leaves that fall from the tree and rot your harvest. The persona asks his readers to "Put your faith in the two inches of humus / that will build under the trees / every thousand years" (*The Mad Farmer Poems* 20). As soon as the government figures out the moves you are making, you need to throw them off the trail—the way a fox does when he makes unnecessary tracks to lure prey in a different direction.

Does the American farmer successfully carry the flag for a twenty-first century revolution for the protection of small farms? That remains to be seen. What we can conclude, however, is that Berry makes compelling arguments for why we should follow the "mad farmer" into peaceful battle. In "Some Further Words" the persona states, "My purpose is a language that can make us whole, though mortal, ignorant, and small" (32). It is tempting to view this poem as a commentary or preface directly from Berry, but its position in the text (late among the poems) suggests that the poem serves as an aside from the mad farmer himself. Al Jumaili concludes that Berry's "intense interest in the natural world was not inward toward transcendental awareness but outward toward membership, family, and human cohesion" (125). Al Jumaili's point is further substantiated by Major who argues that Berry's theories are "connected foremost in the private domestic world where the work of peace and stewardship has its moral center. Even if peace doesn't come, at least the individual lives with the certitude of a clear conscience, free of the public stain that too easily soils the person of character" (32).

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