

Wendell Berry: Culture and Fidelity · *Steven Weiland*

IN A POEM HE WROTE ten years ago on the satisfactions of a “mad” but wise farmer, Wendell Berry praised any man “whose words lean precisely to what exists, who never stoops to persuasion.” Similarly, he acknowledged in another poem the futility of being “furious without aim” and the necessity of avoiding certain kinds of public discourse: “Better than any argument is to rise at dawn and pick dew-wet red berries in a cup.” Even, however, while he was uncertain about the uses of argument, Berry was writing important essays on a wide variety of public issues. In *The Long Legged House* (1968), *The Hidden Wound* (1970) and *A Continuous Harmony* (1972) Berry’s views on farming, race relations, regionalism, social welfare, war, and other subjects are mingled with biographical essays and criticism of some favorite writers including Homer, Thoreau and William Carlos Williams. He thinks of himself primarily as a farmer and poet whose work reflects knowledge of the history of agriculture and whose writing is in the tradition identified by Thoreau. “Poetry is nothing but healthy speech” that essayist said, and Berry explains the point this way: “speech that is not only healthy in itself but conducive to the health of the speaker giving him a true and vigorous relation to the world.” Berry’s argumentative and persuasive prose is just that.

The Unsettling of America (1978) continues the exploration of Berry’s central themes: agriculture considered historically and in its present state, and marriage and domesticity. Much of what he says is in response to the question he posed in a poem in *Farming: A Handbook* (1970): “What must a man do to be at home in the world?” He must, this latest book suggests, discover personal solutions for what are identified as the three crises we face: of character, agriculture and culture. All three are the result, Berry claims, of “the abstract values of an industrial economy preying upon the native productivity of the land and its people.” For we are in the midst of an “exploitative revolution” whose first victims are character and community. Culture, that is, in its most meaningful sense. And its neglect, in turn, is a reflection of our disregard for the land, its abuse, especially by agri-business. “Our culture must be our response to our place, our culture and our place are images of each other and inseparable from each other, so neither can be better than the other.”

One strength of *The Unsettling of America* is the compelling case it makes against recent agricultural policy and its treatment of related issues like the negative effects of the land-grant colleges and schools of agriculture on American farming. Berry identifies “specialization” and “expertise” as the expressions of a misguided policy and educational philosophy, ignorant of the interrelation of culture and agriculture. “If we conceive of a culture as one body, which it is, we see that all of its disciplines are everybody’s busi-

ness, and that the proper university product is therefore not the whittled-down, isolated mentality of expertise, but a mind competent in all its concerns. To such a mind it would be clear that there are agricultural disciplines that have nothing to do with crop production, just as there are agricultural obligations that belong to people who are not farmers." There are, therefore, critical relations between the state of the land and the nature of its use, and the character and products of the whole culture. As the values of farming and agriculture become defined by the specialist mentality as only economic, the results of all labor turn bitter and fruitless. "What happens under the rule of specialization is that, though society becomes more and more intricate, it has less and less structure. It becomes more and more organized, but less and less orderly. The community disintegrates because it loses the necessary understandings, forms, and enactments of the relations among materials and processes, principles and actions, ideals and realities, past and present, present and future, men and women, body and spirit, city and country, civilization and wilderness, growth and decay, life and death—just as the individual character loses the sense of a responsible involvement in these relations." This definition of the requirements of an active culture is the cornerstone of Berry's thought. A culture is not a collection of relics and ornaments but a practical necessity. "Its corruption," he warns, "invokes calamity."

In the long chapter at the center of *The Unsettling of America*, "The Body and The Earth," Berry finds that our several cultural crises are all based on the "isolation of the body from the many specialized activities which dominate everyday life and from all other living things." In his view modern work is too abstract and our relation to the land plainly exploitative. Our bodies, he says, are too weak and joyless. "Contempt for the body is unavoidably manifested in contempt for other bodies—the bodies of slaves, laborers, women, plants and the earth itself. Relationships with all other creatures become competitive and exploitative rather than collaborative and convivial." We are now divided within ourselves and from each other and the land. These divisions are identified as first "sexual" and then "ecological"—the most important divisions because the most fundamental.

The divisions can be bridged and critical connections reestablished through "fidelity" considered as a cultural discipline. Berry's interest in this most traditional of virtues is based on his belief in its social practicality and its relation to the conservation of energy. "At the root of culture must be the realization that uncontrolled energy is disorderly—that in nature all energies move in forms; that, therefore, in a human order energies must be *given* forms. It must have been plain at the beginning, as cultural degeneracy has made it plain again and again, that one can be indiscriminately sexual but not indiscriminately responsible, and that irresponsible sexuality would undermine any possibility of culture since it implies a hierarchy based purely upon brute strength, cunning, regardless of value and consequence.

Fidelity can thus be seen as the necessary discipline of sexuality, the practical definition of the moral limits within which such responsibility can be conceived and enacted.” One expression of fidelity, therefore, is in marriage, which Berry sees as the central cultural bond on which many others depend. He blends a realistic view of its rhythms with an insistence on its symbolic force. “What marriage offers—and what fidelity is meant to protect—is the possibility of moments when what we have chosen and what we desire are the same. Such a convergence obviously cannot be continuous. No relationship can continue very long at its highest emotional pitch. But fidelity prepares us for the *return* of these moments, which give us the highest joy we know.”

Many supporters of Berry’s timely views on ecology will no doubt find his conviction on certain necessities of domesticity less congenial. From his point of view, however, they are inseparable. Private and public life, love and work are bound historically and practically by the household. The failure of marriage and abuse of the land constitute for him the “two estrangements” most responsible for our sense of cultural loss. “Fidelity” to the land is maintained as part of what is termed the “necessity of wildness,” part of the natural order. This second sense of fidelity is needed because wildness is the permanent context for good farming as instinctive sexuality is the context for marriage. And therefore “fidelity to natural order preserves the possibility of choice, the possibility of the renewal of devotion. . . . One who returns home—to one’s marriage and household and place in the world—desiring anew what was previously chosen, is neither the world’s stranger nor its prisoner, but is at once in place and free.” Certainly one of the most compelling features of these views is their unity in a form of culture as traditional as it is, now, near revolutionary. “If we are to have a culture as resilient and competent in the face of necessity as it needs to be, then it must somehow involve within itself a ceremonious generosity toward the wilderness of natural force and instinct.”

The potential for the resettlement of America depends, according to Berry, on the recognition of a useful conflict between certain modern social and agricultural practices and traditional but now “marginal” alternatives. “As an orthodoxy loses its standards, becomes unable to measure itself by what it ought to be, it comes to be measured by what it is not. The margins begin to close in on it, to break down the confidence that supports it, to set up standards clarified by a broadened sense of purpose and necessity, and to demonstrate better possibilities.” The Amish farmers are cited as outstanding examples of the critical margin since they suggest a standard against which today’s culture and agriculture can be judged. “I do not see,” Berry says, “how a stable, abundant, long-term agriculture can be built up and maintained by any standard less comprehensive than that of the perfect health of individual human bodies, of the community, and of the community’s sources and supports in the natural world.” This is a high standard

indeed which demands that culture be the perfect expression of a balanced social and economic order built on a diversified system of farming. Culture is at the same time the source and product of agriculture. It depends on our appreciation and practice of the domestic and social ideas now revealed as the potential basis of a resettled America.

Culture is a term Berry has often used in his essays to identify the particular set of traditions and qualities he admires. He is, of course, only one of many who now make "culture" the subject of critical comment and study. The number of books and articles in the humanities and social sciences with "culture" in the title is, however, more a suggestion of the ambitions of the authors than proof of agreement about what the term actually means. The explanation of culture is a field dominated by anthropologists who, predictably, disagree among themselves about what exactly their field is. Clifford Geertz, for instance, reminds us that even Clyde Kluckhohn, in his widely read *Mirror for Man* (1949), manages to define culture in almost a dozen different ways. Geertz himself states flatly in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has created and culture is these webs." Another highly original anthropologist, Edmund Hall, identifies culture as essentially "a series of situational models for behavior and thought," and in his suggestively titled *Beyond Culture* (1976) insists that in so far as culture as a process is largely unconscious it must be transcended. Berry very wisely shows no interest in this essentially academic debate over the definition of "culture" and the most appropriate methods for its study. His understanding of culture is based essentially on his experience as an observer and participant. Much the same might be said of British historian and critic Raymond Williams whose studies of culture are close in spirit to Berry's while at the same time very deliberately theoretical. In fact Williams' historical review of the definitions of culture suggests the timeliness and power of Berry's essays of the past decade.

Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961) are efforts to describe the important processes of change over the past two centuries: the democratic, industrial and cultural revolutions. Each, of course, is a complex social process the meaning of which can be largely understood through close attention to the historical development of the terms of critical explanation. Hence the meaning of culture is actually a record of the changes in the uses of the word.

Before the nineteenth century it had meant, primarily, "the tending of natural growth," and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, a "general state or habit of the mind," having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second it came to mean

“the general state of intellectual development in society as a whole.”
Third, it came to mean “a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual.”

Williams himself comes from a Welsh farming background surprisingly similar to Berry's as he demonstrates in his novel *Border Country*. He values the traditions of agriculture and rural life as he does those of learning and the city.

Within his historical analysis Williams finds the violation of important political principles as critical as the abandonment of certain agricultural habits. It is finally “solidarity” that is identified as the key to cultural vitality, as the real basis of society. Individuals, Williams argues, verify themselves primarily in their communities and require a participatory culture which must be guaranteed by the fundamental principle of “equality of being.” When Williams argues for a common culture he is interested less in the individual or domestic expression of its virtues and products than in its collective results. All modern cultures are complex ones and for that reason each needs a principle of order: “At root, the feeling of solidarity is the only conceivable element of stabilization in so difficult an organization.” Any hope, therefore, for a common culture depends on a form of selfconscious community guaranteed and reinforced by suitable political structures. Culture is a source and product of any such arrangement; its analysis is the work of anyone interested in the shape and direction not only of the arts and learning but of politics and society.

In *The Long Revolution* Williams supplements his elaborate etymologies with an authoritative review of the purposes and content of the categories of cultural analysis. He names three in this very useful synthesis of the interests of many of those whose use of “culture” is not always clear. The term will probably never have a precise and widely agreed upon definition and that is as it should be; but Williams, in this lengthy quotation, helps us to understand the relation of intentions to materials.

There is, first, the “ideal,” [style of cultural analysis] in which culture is a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute or universal values. The analysis of culture, if such a definition is accepted, is essentially the discovery and description, in lives and works, of those values which can be seen to compose a timeless order, or to have permanent reference to the universal human condition. Then, second, there is the “documentary,” in which culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the activity of criticism, by which the nature of the thought and experience, the details of the language, form and convention in which these are active, are described and valued. . . Finally, third, there is the “social” definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings

and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture.

Williams' summary of the styles of cultural criticism provides an excellent setting for understanding Berry's distinctive contribution. For in *The Unsettling of America* and his other books he makes forceful judgments in all three categories. His, therefore, is an unusually comprehensive display of cultural criticism but without the apparatus of professional theorists. Berry has no general theory of cultural analysis, only the particular instruments of its practice: a commitment to high ideals of human behavior, analytical interest in the arts and learning including attention to literature and history, and daily attention to the traditions and routines of everyday life, especially of agriculture.

Though he admires the personal or domestic values of "fidelity" rather than the political values of "solidarity" Berry also believes in the need for a common culture. He stresses the development in individuals of the disciplines necessary to healthy family and community life: fidelity in ones relations with other people and with the land. These constitute, in a productive culture, recognition of the essentially cyclical nature of human life. "It is only in the processes of the natural world," he wrote in 1972, "and in analogous and related processes of human culture, that the new may grow usefully old and the old be made new." For these reasons culture is never progressive but neither is it simply the cumulative display of art and learning. It is the network of disciplines, as Berry defines them, applied to the facts of everyday life and the possibilities for the future. "The great moral labor of any age," he says, "is probably not in the conflict of opposing principles, but in the tension between a living community and those principles that are the distillation of its experience." It is the purpose of *The Unsettling of America* as it is of Berry's other essays, poems and novels, to mediate those tensions as they explain them. His methods of cultural analysis are decidedly less elaborate than either Raymond Williams' or contemporary anthropologists' but his findings are equally pointed and certainly, because of his prescriptive posture, more practical. Solidarity, finally, suggests the primacy of social answers to questions of value facing individuals. Fidelity is preeminently a trait of healthy individuals and citizens. Berry stresses settlement as the goal of private and family life and the source, therefore, of a society firmly rooted in its own home-made culture.