

## BOOKS &amp; THE ARTS

## A Whole Earth Catalogue

ERIC ZENCEY

**THE ART OF THE COMMONPLACE: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry.**

Edited and introduced by Norman Wirzba. Counterpoint. 330 pp. \$26.

In the United States a deeply rooted bias toward the practical renders all knowledge, even the most sublime forms of wisdom, merely an instrumental good. This pragmatic streak tends to push our literature of epiphany toward pop psychology and self-helping boosterism unless the work connects with something larger than the self. In some cultures that larger-than-the-self thing would be God, and the result becomes Spiritual Wisdom literature—a form that does not, in any serious way, flourish among us. The chief Other we celebrate is our Great Outdoors, and when moral epiphany connects with it the result is a distinctively American product: Environmental Wisdom literature.

At 67, with nearly forty volumes of work to his credit, Wendell Berry is undeniably a master of the genre. As poet, essayist and novelist, he has been concerned throughout his long writing life with how humans live and work in place, and with the moral and spiritual elements of their relationship to land. His nonfiction should properly be seen as a contribution to political theology, but in America we shelve it as Nature Writing.

Berry is one of the few contemporary authors worthy of mention in the same breath with that triumvirate of immortals, Thoreau, Muir and Leopold. If Thoreau stands for romantic naturalism; Muir for the preservationism of his creation, the Sierra Club; and if Leopold traced in his life and work the intellectual distance between conservationism (which treats nature as economically instrumental) and something like modern ecology (which doesn't), Berry too is the chief ar-

ticulator of an environmentally relevant "ism": He is our foremost apostle of the agrarian ideal.

Ah—the agrarian ideal. But farmland isn't "nature," and Jefferson died centuries ago, right? Hasn't the Jeffersonian vision of a republic of free and equal yeoman farmers been completely occluded by the success of Hamilton's plan for a national manufactory? With only a minuscule portion of our population engaged in farming, talk of an agrarian ideal seems outdated at best.

Mainstream environmentalism seems to agree: It generally accepts that not in agriculture but "in wildness is the salvation of the world," as Thoreau famously put it.

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Thoreau meant also, of course, that in wildness was the salvation of the self. But Thoreau was a bit of a romantic poseur; during his idyll in the woods at Walden he was never out of earshot of the Fitchburg railroad, and when he did enter actual wilderness (in Maine, on the flanks of Mount Katahdin) he found it "savage and dreary," "even more grim and wild" than he had anticipated. If Thoreau's virtue was that he studied nature in detail while all around him men turned their backs on it (when they weren't actively cutting it down, draining it and otherwise "improving" it), still, he rarely saw the big picture except through the distorting lens of his romanticism. Like many another romantic, he did not see the ways in which his dissent from the anti-romantic realities of his day failed to transcend the evils he railed against.

In 1850 it was not quite so clear that industrial culture, with its dark, satanic mills and the increasingly complicated, spiritually barren life that Thoreau bemoaned, could, without being deflected far from its course, easily accommodate and even assign value to "nature" as the romantics understood it. Even Robert Moses, the auto enthusiast

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whose highway planning led us into the promised land of modern urban life, understood the value of parks and green space; they were a necessary anodyne, a complement to the city he helped to create. "Nature" has exchange value. Within a market system, anything with exchange value—anything that people will pay cash money for—will be preserved. The market undervalues some things, yes, but market effects can be controlled and augmented by legislation. (Sadly, neither the market nor Congress has managed to preserve enough untrammelled nature for natural processes to operate there. Oxymoronically, we have to manage wilderness in order to keep it wild.)

The logic of industrial culture can preserve a bit of wilderness, but it won't preserve the life of the planet on which all of us ultimately depend. It won't even preserve the soil fertility that lets us fend off our own immediate death by starvation. Berry takes articulate exception to this failure, and he speaks with the authority of long practice as a farmer. His love of his hillside farm in Kentucky, which he works with horses, is evident on every page he writes.

Berry doesn't say that we all must become farmers in order to save the world. As Norman Wirzba, the editor of this volume, points out in his introduction, Berry isn't asking us to hitch up horses and become tillers of soil. He merely wants us to adopt the values, responsibilities and concerns of an agrarian life. Wirzba writes: "Just as we have adopted...the assumptions of an industrial mind-set without ourselves becoming industrialists—we are still teachers, health-care providers, builders, students, and so forth—so too can we integrate agrarian principles without ourselves becoming farmers."

One of the clearest contrasts between industrial and agrarian values concerns the matter of garbage. Urbanites dispose of it at the curb, where it is taken care of by jumpsuited specialists. Where these men take it the urbanites know not, nor are they able to see their responsibility for the damage it does when it gets there. The agrarian, with the wisdom and clarity of the farmer, knows that there is no such thing as a "sanitary" landfill. (No farmer would be so foolish as to welcome a dump anywhere near land being cultivated.) Agrarians are led to ask subversive questions about the origins of the waste they find so problematic. Is this purchase necessary? Can the old article be made to last longer? If the thing shouldn't be released into the environment

when I'm done with it, then it shouldn't be created in the first place. Do I need it? What do I really need?

The contrast is between ideal types seen romantically, through the shimmering heat of passionate belief. Even so, the difference seen is real. There are those who understand culture's root in nature, and those who don't. For all but hunters and gatherers, farming is the definitive, determinative point of contact between culture and its environment. As farming goes, so goes the nation and the

*Berry isn't asking that we hitch up horses and till the soil—but adopting the values and concerns of agrarianism would be a start.*

planet. Both have been going badly precisely because we have let the market assign valuations that should have been made morally, practically, agriculturally, ecologically. "A man who would value a piece of land strictly according to its economic worth is as crazy, or as evil, as the man who would make a whore of his wife," Berry declares in *The Unforeseen Wilderness*. For him that comparison is not an illustrative simile but an equation: How we treat the land is not separate from how we treat each other. Our agricultural practice should be ruled not by the market, whose cues and commandments are culturally and temporally parochial, but by a clear apprehension of what is needed to insure the long-range health of the soil, the communities it supports and the individual organisms (both human and non-human) within those communities. Berry's vision is trinitarian: These three kinds of life are one. He is enough of a romantic to believe that health is indivisible—that human health and the health of the planet are complementary, not antagonistic ideals.

Berry's romanticism is a source of hope. It doesn't distort his vision. He knows we're not going to save the planet or the self by playacting at being wild. Our world is neither completely a factory nor ideally a wilderness but in practice is very much under cultivation: We are inescapably agrarian. With even our wildernesses needing tender care, the question we face is not, "Shall we be gardeners?" or even "What proportion of garden to wilderness will we have?" but "What sort of gardeners should we be?" The essays collected here are Berry's thoughtful, comprehensive answer.

Berry throws off epigrammatic wisdom like a scythe sprays sparks when held against the sharpening wheel. Thus: "There can be no such thing as a 'global village.' No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living

responsibly in some small part of it"; "We live in agriculture as we live in flesh"; "We do not understand the earth in terms of what it offers us or of what it requires of us, and I think it is the rule that people inevitably destroy what they do not understand"; "Marriage...has now taken the form of divorce: a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided"; "There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence." And, with an especially startling clarity: "The basic cause of the energy crisis is not scarcity; it is moral ignorance and weakness of character." If the essential rightness of these epigrams isn't immediately obvious to you, you need more Wendell Berry in your life.

Part of Berry's brief against agribusiness and the rule of the market in general is that both radically decontextualize human experience, including the necessary experience of nurturing life to grow food. Fewer and fewer of us have that primary experience any longer, and those who do still make a living directly from the soil are continually pressed to pursue their calling not in accord with its own standards of excellence but in response to market imperatives, which push farmer and consumer alike toward thoughtless, selfish, live-for-today exploitation. This isolation from context—this replacement of a dense web of communal, historical and natural relations with naked cash nexus—keeps most of us from supporting, or even seeing, the sort of care, knowledge, honor and integrity that good farming practice (and good neighboring) requires. In a society ruled by industrial values, commerce is the only context, and relations are dramatically simplified.

It's ironic, then, that the selections in this volume have been taken out of context. The cumulative effect of reading through them is not the effect created by reading Berry at his best. Berry is a farmer and a moralist, one who speaks with the humble authority of a man who regularly treads ground behind a team of horses. His contributions to the rarefied discourse of political theology are earned by the sweat of that kind of direct experience, and he knows it. In their original context the selections here achieve a better balance between theoretical rumination and chewy first-person detail, between wisdom gained and the texture of the life that produced it. When Berry speaks his mind, usually it's to the jangle of harness and hitch. In emphasizing Berry as an agrar-



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ian theorist, this collection tends to under-represent Berry the farmer and neighbor and nephew and husband, the man whose experience makes his agrarian theorizing compelling. Reading the essays assembled here is rather like sitting down to a plate full of gravy and potatoes: It might be just what you want, but be aware that what the waiter brought you is only part of the meal the chef originally had in mind.

Berry is a master craftsman. His essays move from the personal to the abstract, the reportorial to the indignant, the anecdotal to the reflective as smoothly as an ecosystem moves through stages of succession, evolving toward its climax. Throughout Berry's work comes a strong sense of the narrative persona behind it: A kind and generous man, one at peace with his lot but deeply at odds with the temper of his times, a man of insight and empathy who never retreats into the solace of irony or smug detachment. Berry has a poet's ear, which keeps his prose from dissolving into the galumphing polysyllables and hissing sibilants (the "-isms" and "-nesses") that infect abstract subjects in the hands of lesser writers. He's constantly aware that, just as we are food incarnate (sunshine and soil, condemned to mortal life), so too are our ideas incarnated in our acts and organizations, each of which has a history it cannot fully escape.

It's odd, then, that Wirzba's Berry is a rather disembodied, timeless intellect. Sometimes the individual chapters in this collection aren't effectively introduced, and often something as basic as the date of original publication is missing. Occasionally Berry's text will refer to "the point of this book," though we are of course no longer in "this" book—we're in Wirzba's book, and he hasn't given us easy access to what the original textual reference meant. (For most selections, you've got to comb through the acknowledgments to discover the origin, and even then the provenance of many of them remains unclear.) Berry's 1993 plaint against the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade still has relevance—the issue of globalization hasn't gone away, and its portent for agrarian values is enormous—but "A Bad Big Idea" would benefit from annotation or an introduction explaining the current status of world trade in agricultural goods and limning the continuing relevance of Berry's analysis. Without that context, the reader may well dismiss the piece as an outdated tilt against a *fait accompli*.

As with any collection, one can second-guess the selections. I longed to read Berry's elegiac *mea culpa*, "Damage," in which he recounts his misguided attempt to carve a stock pond into one of his farm's hillsides.

The piece, a kind of prose poem, could have served admirably as part of Wirzba's first section, "A Geobiography," which aims to "introduce Berry's person and place to the reader." Also missing is Berry's notorious essay from *Harper's* in which he gave his reasons for refusing to buy a computer (he writes with a pencil). Wirzba has included Berry's response to critics of that piece, though without the original essay the rebuttal's elaborate analysis of feminism seems puzzlingly non sequiturish. (In his original essay Berry mentioned that his wife types and edits his manuscripts, a circumstance that drew harsh criticism from some readers. A wife, one letter writer said, meets all of Berry's criteria for an appropriate technology: She's locally producible, easily repairable, doesn't burn fossil fuel, doesn't radically transform the community when exploited, etc.) Without a clearer sense of the whole exchange, one can't fully appreciate why Berry titled his reply "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," or why he offers the telling insight that "one cannot construct an adequate public defense of a private life." (It's clear he's not apologizing, but admonishing those whose passion for political rectitude would destroy the boundary between public and private life. But the full exchange makes clearer why this is an agrarian's concern: It's that boundary, and not some chimerical escape from meaningful work or moral duty, that is crucial to the exercise of our liberty.)

Even with these limitations, this volume is worth a read. There is so much good sense collected here that one is tempted not to review it but simply to repeat it. Examples: "We must recover that sense of holiness in the world, and learn to respect and forbear accordingly." "Economic justice does not consist of giving the most power to the most money." "Eating is an agricultural act."

As to solutions: Berry's advice for those of us wishing to do what we can to make things better is simple, direct and difficult: "Eat responsibly." His essay "The Pleasures of Eating" (taken from *What Are People For?*) describes in detail what that means. Deal directly with a local farmer whenever possible. Prepare your own food. Participate in food production to the extent that you can—raise herbs in a window pot if that's what you can do. Learn the origins of the food you buy, and buy food produced close to your home. Learn what is involved in the best farming and gardening. Learn as much as you can, by direct observation and experience if possible, of the life histories of food species. Learn, in self-defense, as much as you can

of the economy and technology of industrial food production.

The imperative, you see, is to learn. Of course: This is wisdom literature.

We are accustomed to our wisdom about nature coming from people who write

about wilderness. We don't think of farmland as nature, or of the farming life as offering us much in the way of opportunity to accrue and exercise wisdom. As this volume shows, on both counts we are sadly mistaken. ■

# A Bombmaker of Conscience

DUSKO DODER

**SAKHAROV: A Biography.** By Richard Lourie. Brandeis/University Press of New England. 465 pp. \$30.

**W**e are all fascinated by the lives of the powerful and famous, and in the last part of the twentieth century Andrei Sakharov became one of Russia's most famous. He burst onto the world stage in the summer of 1968, and seemingly overnight he went from the high-clearance obscurity of thermonuclear

weapons to world fame. His essay advocating "convergence" of capitalism and socialism, which was smuggled to the West, was extraordinary. It did not matter that its contents were naïve and sophomoric (he envisioned a world government by the year 2000). Its author was the "father" of the Soviet H-bomb, someone who understood that life and civilization could be incinerated in an hour's time and as such commanded instant respect. Moreover, he was a member of the elite, whose views were "profoundly socialist" and who abhorred the "egotistical ideas of private ownership and the glorification of capital." But there were deeply heretical undertones in his thinking. He insisted that the Soviet Union needed economic and political reforms, and if necessary a multiparty system, even though he did not regard the latter as an essential step "or even less, a panacea for all ills."

This was, of course, the time of the Prague Spring, when the peoples of the Communist part of Europe followed with sympathy and apprehension Prague's reformist Communist leaders taking Czechoslovakia down the path of democratization. A nascent democratic movement had emerged in Russia in the mid-1960s as well, spreading through large sections of the intelligentsia. "What so many of us...had dreamed of seemed to be finally coming to pass in Czechoslovakia," Sakharov said later. "Even from afar, we were caught up in all the excitement and hopes and enthusiasm of the catchwords: 'Prague spring' and 'socialism with a human face.'"

*Dusko Doder, a journalist who spent eight years reporting from Moscow, is the author of Gorbachev: Heretic in the Kremlin (Viking).*

All hopes were squelched on August 21, 1968, when Russian tanks entered Czechoslovakia and arrested the reformers. It was also a fateful moment for Sakharov: His essay had transformed him into the leading personality of a small dissident movement. The regime ended his career at the secret weapons lab in Turkmenistan but allowed him to work at the Institute of Physics in Moscow. After a decade of defending dissidents, he was arrested in 1980 and exiled to the closed city of Gorky (now Nizhni Novgorod), where he was force-fed when he attempted a hunger strike. The dramatic struggle between a lone individual and a mighty totalitarian state ended with an astounding concession by the state: On December 16, 1986, the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, personally invited Sakharov to return to Moscow and "go back to your patriotic work." It was an act of contrition that also enhanced Gorbachev's reputation in the West.

In this first English-language biography of Sakharov, Richard Lourie offers a beautifully written and engaging account of the physicist's life. Lourie is a distinguished author and a leading translator of Russian literature. He also translated Sakharov's own *Memoirs*, which they had discussed at length. Lourie has had extended help from Elena Bonner, Sakharov's second wife, and the portrait of their marriage is one of the most insightful aspects of the book. But writing a biography of so complex a figure as Sakharov is more difficult than it may seem, in part because his life was the stuff of which myths are made. It had two distinct phases.

In the first he eagerly served the state and performed his great bomb-making ac-

complishments. It was a period of Stalinist terror and appalling privations in which Sakharov accepted everything with "cheerful fatalism." Like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, he clung to his belief that everything Stalin did was for the best, that creating the most destructive weapons mankind had known was his patriotic duty, that "the Soviet state represented a breakthrough into the future." Even the repugnant KGB system of informing seemed to him a normal fact of life, an "ordinary link in the network of surveillance that enveloped the whole country." When the dictator died in 1953, Sakharov was deeply moved. "I am under the influence of a great man's death," he wrote to his wife. "I am thinking of his humanity."

The second period—one of political activism, open dissent and real sacrifices by Sakharov—has been meticulously documented in the press. Needless to say, he was lionized in the Western press and awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Yet his impact on the events that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union remains unclear. As a leading actor in the dissident movement, he seemed from the beginning a tragic figure who most fully reflected its strengths and weaknesses. Sakharov not only lacked charisma, as Andrei Amalrik said, but he also rejected the leadership role bestowed upon him by the dissidents. Sakharov, Amalrik says in *Notes of a Revolutionary*, wanted to be "a solitary monk under a leaky umbrella whose voice in the defense of the oppressed would be heard because of his moral prestige."

It is difficult to explain the almost complete break between these two periods. It coincides roughly with the publication of his controversial essay, "Reflections on Progress, Co-Existence, and Intellectual Freedom," and the death of his first wife. What made him do his U-turn, or, in Professor Philip Morrison's apt image, what made him go "from a Teller to an Oppenheimer"?

We can only speculate what went on in Sakharov's head. His explanation seems incomplete. He said he confronted a "moral dilemma" at the time of the 1955 H-bomb test because his calculations of death by fallout over the generations made it clear that the total numbers were staggering. He was also appalled by the ecological consequences and began advocating a ban on nuclear testing.

An incident at a banquet to honor a successful test may have had a greater impact on Sakharov. His toast at the banquet—"May all our devices explode as successfully as today's, but always over test sites and never over cities"—was immediately countered by Air Marshal Mitrofan Nedelin, who

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