

**Grace McGrory**

**The poetry of Wendell Berry is more concerned with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature than religious and mystical ones.**

Wendell Berry's poetry has, in the main, traditionally been associated with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature. Berry himself is from Kentucky in America, where he has maintained a farm for over 40 years; taking a rather traditional approach, he is mistrustful of modern technology and holds a deep reverence for the land and traditional methods of farming. C. Glotfelty encourages eco-critics to question "how is nature represented?" (Glotfelty, 2014) in the poems we encounter and to some extent it is arguable that Berry's poetry presents nature as intimately connected to humans, particularly through the means of farming. However, in a number of his poems Berry alludes to the holiness of life and nature, celebrating the miracle of creation; this certainly reinforces his beliefs about the sacredness of nature. Although he is not widely acknowledged as a religious poet, the moral underpinnings of his poetry are rooted in the Christian tradition, articulating that faith and stewardship of the land are compatible. It is, therefore, debatable whether Berry's poetry is primarily concerned with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature or, alternatively, whether it is concerned with religious and mystical ones.

"The Man Born to Farming", as the title suggests, illustrates the work of a farmer, described as "the grower of trees, the gardener," as he cultivates the land. The metaphor likening the work of a farmer to a gardener suggests that there is more than mere pragmatism to his work, instead he is at one with nature, awakening its beauty. In his works Berry often criticises the development of agriculture towards mass production and industrialization stressing the necessity for humans, particularly farmers to "live in harmony with the natural rhythms if the earth or perish." The farmer is connected to nature in the way that his life is divided into the same seasons as the crops he grows fulfilling the fundamental premise which Glotfelty describes in "*What is Eco criticism?*" (Glotfelty, 2014) that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it." Berry describes the cycle of the farmer's life as he "enters into death yearly and comes back rejoicing" mirroring the cycle of his crops and reinforces that even the farmer's emotions are at one with nature. Moreover, it is clear that any tending of the land becomes an extension of the farmer's own hands which "reach into the ground and sprout" further illustrating the connection between the farmer and nature. The poem is written in free verse and is rich with enjambment illustrating the land and nature as free and reinforcing that the modern world should not impose upon its naturalness. In "*The Eightfold Agrarian way*" David Walbert illustrates that an agrarian sees "human life as a part of nature and believes that human and natural processes should be integrated" (Walbert, 2008) thus supporting the contention that Berry's poetry is primarily concerned with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature. However, one might interpret this poem to be concerned with religiosity and its association with nature. The apposition of the first line, likening the farmer to a gardener implies that perhaps the Edenic fulfilment of farming is present; the farmer responds to the demand to "keep" the land as part of human's "divinely ordered vocation" as given in Genesis. Moreover, Berry seems to illustrate the working of the soil as a religion in itself, he himself describes farming as "a practical religion, a practice of religion, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness" in one of his essays. The poem is populated with metaphors of religious imagery such as likening the soil to a "divine drug" and the "miraculous seeds" which further

reinforces this contention. Glotfelty asks the question “How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it?”; it is certainly arguable that Berry attributes such a crucial and important role to farming because of the sacred and religious values he associates with nature thus arguing that it should be treated with great care and precision, consequently suggesting that his agrarian conceptions of nature are underpinned by religious ones.

It could be posited that Berry is primarily concerned with ecological conceptions of nature, exploring the relation of living things to their physical surroundings. In “The Peace of Wild Things” Berry explores the relationship between humanity and nature whilst suggesting the problems that will face the world and nature in the future. The poem “the Peace of Wilde Things” contrasts the turbulence of the human world and the workings of the human mind with the peace of the natural world. The poem was published in 1968 when the conflict in Vietnam was at its height and Martin Luther King was assassinated explaining why the poem alludes to the despair regarding the human condition, yet Berry seems to find peace and stillness within nature, “for a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free”. This seems to resemble the “emotional communication between man and the natural world” that J Bates illustrates in his book *“The Great Pastoral Con-Trick”* (Bates, 2000) illustrating nature as a safe haven in which all despairs can be cast aside. The form of the poem reiterates Berry’s perception of nature; the first sentence takes up the first five lines and after that the sentences become progressively shorter and simpler, in keeping with the thematic movement from a complex to a simpler state of mind on the part of the poet. However, it could be suggested that there are religious undertones within the poem; “I come into the presence of still water” echoes a well-known phrase in the Bible from Psalm 23 “He leads me beside still waters.” However, there is a marked contrast in that in Berry’s poem there is no benevolent God who leads the poetic voice to comfort and peace, the poet himself finds comfort in the presence of nature; it is nature itself, not God, that provides the feeling of peace. Berry further illustrates the connection between man and nature in his poem “The Current” in which he describes the intimate relationship between a farmer and the piece of land he chooses to nurture. The metaphor “A man has made a marriage with his place” depicts just how intimate, important and permanent the connection and relationship between man and farmer is. This paradoxical state of connection with the land, “quick and mortal, in timelessness,” establishes the farmer as the mediator of past and future, the bearer of “The current flowing to him through the earth.” It is a mystical state enabling him to witness his ancestors, “the bearers of his own blood,” as well as the “one descended from him.” Although this poem centers around the relationship between farmer and nature thus illustrating Berry’s concerns with agrarian conceptions of nature, it is undeniable that he alludes to a sense of mystery and divinity within agriculture and farming which seems to transcend human life on earth.

It could be further illustrated that Berry’s poetry is primarily concerned with illustrating religious conceptions of nature, particularly in the *Sabbath* collection. The title of the collection itself is redolent with specifically religious associations, the word “Sabbath” is used in the Bible to indicate the seventh day of creation and alludes to Berry’s belief in the sacredness of nature as well as the essentiality of stewardship. In one of his Sabbath poems Berry alludes to the cycle of seasons and the cycle of life itself which comes from the hand of the Creator. He further illustrates that “the year is showing forth of the heavenly love” depicting that each day we experience the love of God which is particularly expressed through nature. This poem reminds us that God is the source of all things, of all creation, so it is no surprise that nature becomes “the delight that is our prayer.” In his Book ‘Pastoral’

Gifford describes “A delight in the natural...a celebratory attitude towards what it describes” which is certainly palpable in Berry’s poetry. He celebrates nature as a work of art and masterpiece which God has skilfully crafted; for Berry the best kind of pastoral poetry is devotional in manner. The word devotion carries multiple connotations but in this context, it is clearly a devotion to God’s power and brilliance which is illustrated through his creation of nature. For Berry, the Earth’s goodness is a manifestation of God’s presence in creation. In another of Berry’s Sabbath poems, Berry illustrates the presence of “the Maker” in the marvel that is the creation and, as in Genesis, the maker is “pleased” with his work; the maker is present and delights in creation. For this reason, Berry’s poetry illustrates the sacredness of nature and of the environment thus stressing the importance of small-scale farming and agriculture as a form of stewardship towards the land.

In conclusion, it is certainly arguable that Berry is more concerned with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature; as a farmer himself, he depicts a very intimate connection between individuals and the land, particularly farmers whose work helps to cultivate the land, allowing it to flourish. However, it is undeniable that his reverence for the land and the sacredness which he describes in his poetry has arisen because of religious conceptions of nature. In his poetry, Berry illustrates the land as a product of God’s brilliance and genius, often referring to quotes from the Bible to illustrate this point, he sees nature as a reflection of God’s greatness and thus emphasises the importance of stewardship, of which farmers play a critical role. Therefore, although ostensibly it is clear that Berry is most concerned with agrarian and ecological conceptions of nature in his poetry, religious conceptions of nature ultimately underpin the way he perceives it and consequently the way he feels humans should act towards it.

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