



## Other Kinds of Violence: Wendell Berry, Industrialism, and Agrarian Pacifism

**William Major**

*University of Hartford, USA*

**ABSTRACT** This article examines the need to understand pacifism and environmentalism as essentially consonant philosophies and practices, just as a proper theorization of ecocide must also include the violence inherent to industrialism and militarism. Few contemporary writers understand the stakes involved in this conflation as well as Wendell Berry, and few have had more occasion to enact the entwined values of pacifism and environmentalism than he has. Berry therefore marries pacifist politics to a land ethic of care, a union from which emerges an environmentalism highly critical of the violence of American corporate capitalism and militarism, the apotheosis of which can be seen in the guise of war (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, the “War on Terror”). Moreover, such violence has its domestic ecocidal analogy, best evidenced by strip mining and mountaintop removal. Berry’s union of peaceableness and agrarian environmentalism does, however, deserve critical examination, for it often rests upon the construction of a sometimes frustrating disconnection between a precious and benign domesticity and a theoretically corrupt public sphere. To be sure, in his reworking of the fluid boundaries between the private and public through which his agrarian ethics is often articulated, Berry simultaneously invokes and disavows a separation he clearly understands to be artificial. In Berry’s peaceful agrarian vision, then, the agrarian pacifist who is also by definition an environmentalist must draw upon enormous internal resources if she is to revolutionize the economies of ruin that characterize modern life.

---

### One Violent America

The nettlesome idea that there is something inherently violent about America and Americans formed part of the fevered angst behind President Lyndon Johnson’s charge in 1968 to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence to “‘go as far as man’s knowledge takes it’ in searching out the causes of violence and the means of preventing it.”<sup>1</sup> It is not clear, however, whether Johnson understood that the domestic violence in the spring of 1968 in the form of political assassination, war protest, and racial unrest had a clear analogue in the Vietnam War, and that to bemoan one while prosecuting another was evidence, at best, of a ridiculous inconsistency. The authors and editors of the Commission’s final report, *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*,<sup>2</sup> concluded, in part, that the

<sup>1</sup> Milton S. Eisenhower, “Preface.” *Violence in America: Historical & Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979), 9.

<sup>2</sup> See Graham and Gurr, *Violence in America*.

Copyright: © Major 2013

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). This license permits use and distribution of the article for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work is cited and is not altered or transformed.

United States was a “nation whose past was often marred by violence,” but that “by comparison with other nations ... the American experience, though more extensive and voluminous, was neither unique nor beyond explanation and remedy.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the congruence of violence with America is neither mysterious nor natural, though one would be blameless to think otherwise. The comparative studies that form part of *Violence in America* and its revised sequel a decade later question the truism that the American character is *intrinsically* violent even as they affirm the interweaving of violence with history and ideology in the quotidian assemblage of American life, aptly described by novelist Philip Roth as the “indigenous American berserk.”<sup>4</sup>

Even if we grant that other countries may be more *statistically* violent than the United States, cultural historian Richard Slotkin makes clear that innumerable forms of cruelty contribute to America’s story of itself. His catalogue of American myth-makers, for example, reads like both a criminal rap sheet and a paean to frontier masculinity:

The rogues, adventurers, and land-boomers; the Indian fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness; the settlers who came after, suffering hardship and Indian warfare for the sake of a sacred mission or a simple desire for land; and the Indians themselves, both as they were and as they appeared to the settlers, for whom they were the special demonic personification of the American wilderness. Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history.<sup>5</sup>

For Slotkin, preeminent mythogenetic personalities such as Davy Crocket “became national heroes by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust.” Slotkin’s reading of early American history hinges on a perversion of the putatively benign concept of national redemption, one in which the “myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience.”<sup>6</sup> The “justification” for violence—when there was one—formed the warp and woof of American progressive thinking: a greater good was to come.

No one would argue, however, that metaphorical or literal regeneration has anything to do with the sordid proliferation of mass shootings in the United States—more than 60 between 1982 and 2012. One need only mention Stockton, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Fort Hood, Aurora, Oak Creek, and most recently, the massacre of schoolchildren and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut, to leave one with the impression that we in the U.S. live under threat of random and gratuitous carnage. It would be tempting to see in these incidents a peculiar strain of “indigenous” psychology at work, yet if our focus remains squarely on every atrocity we risk missing other kinds of violence almost too numerous to catalogue. As I will show, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Eisenhower, “Preface,” 10.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973, 2000), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 5.

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. Violence and America are therefore strangely if not inevitably allied, but this is not simply because we are a “gunfighter nation.”<sup>7</sup>

If the 1960s was a particularly volatile decade in the streets, the tempestuous political climate also birthed a burgeoning environmental movement, itself an important reaction to the environmental degradation fittingly described by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as a kind of war.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Carson dramatized, an encroaching domestic militarism was perhaps the most suitable metaphor for what we were doing to our backyards. It is telling that the writer who helped ignite the modern environmental consciousness understood that the profligate manufacture and indiscriminate spraying of pesticides was a direct result of wartime research and development, and that their use in post-war America suggested a militaristic response to a poorly understood “enemy.” Carson’s insights notwithstanding, however, the exemplars of today’s *mainstream* environmental movement (as represented by its several noteworthy organizations—the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, the National Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Working Group, to name only a few) have arguably understood their mission as at best tangential to the militaristic vector of national life, presumably because peace-making has little relevance to the work of cleaning a waterway, preserving an old-growth forest, or keeping toxic chemicals out of breast milk.<sup>9</sup> If the mission statements and bylaws of these organizations are any indication, American bellicosity—and the omnipresent preparation for war that constitutes contemporary militarism—poses little threat to environmental health.

To note but one example, the Sierra Club—whose lobbying efforts over the decades have done much to further the causes of environmental conservation and preservation—has failed to attend to the effects of warfare on the environment or, more importantly, how the *values* which underlie the maintenance of a massive standing military (approximately 1.5

---

<sup>7</sup> See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). Slotkin understands violence in America not as that which sets the U.S. apart from other nations—we are no more violent, in other words—but as that which taps into our particular capacity for mythologizing: “What is distinctively ‘American’ is not necessarily the amount or kind of violence that characterizes our history but the mythic significance we have assigned to the kinds of violence we have actually experienced, the forms of symbolic violence we imagine or invent, and the political uses to which we put that symbolism” (13).

<sup>8</sup> See Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, Intro. Linda Lear (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> *The New York Times* has run a number of articles and book reviews on the militarization of America after World War II, perhaps the most notable of which is an op-ed by marine reserve officer and assistant professor of history at the U.S. Naval Academy, Aaron B. O’Connell. O’Connell writes that, oddly, it is the civilians in the U.S. who are the most vocal proponents of the military: “Today, there are just a select few in public life who are willing to question the military or its spending, and those who do—from the libertarian Ron Paul to the leftist Dennis J. Kucinich—are dismissed as unrealistic.” See Aaron B. O’Connell, “The Permanent Militarization of America,” *New York Times*, 4 November, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/05/opinion/the-permanent-militarization-of-america.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 4 November 2012). See also Gary J. Bass, “Endless War,” *New York Times*, 3 September, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Bass-t.html> (accessed 15 November 2012).

million active and 1.1 million reservists in the U.S.) potentially condemns the very earth the organization holds dear.<sup>10</sup> The beautiful rapture between humans and nature—“You either feel it our [sic] your [sic] don’t”—arrives not from the conscious work of peace-making as from that moment of transcendence out of which an environmental consciousness supposedly derives.<sup>11</sup> And while I hardly wish to pick a fight with the Sierra Club, its 2006-2010 “smart, safe clean energy” initiative somehow failed to mention how two ongoing hot wars in the Middle East could potentially confound this otherwise laudable goal of an alternative energy future.<sup>12</sup> The philosophy and practice of peaceableness, which one assumes would underlie any such energy proposal, is conspicuously absent. As I noted, it has not always been so. One remembers (too wistfully, perhaps) just how radical Carson’s work seemed when it appeared 50 years ago and she testified twice before congressional committees even as she and her work experienced the worst kind of calumny. Had she lived, it is little stretch to imagine that Carson, who recognized that we were living in an age in which “man’s war against nature” is fought with a “barrage of poisons” amounting to nothing less than “biocide,” would have realized before most of us (certainly before President Johnson) the parallels between the war in Vietnam—whose environmental effects may never be fully known—and industrial assaults at home.<sup>13</sup> To that end, economist and peace studies scholar Jurgen Brauer deftly notes the importance of understanding the intersection of pacifism and environmentalism: “Although many people espouse pro-environmental and pro-peace views, they tend to do so without noting the direct link between the two.”<sup>14</sup> For Brauer, our dividing the work of peace from the care of the environment rests upon the specious assumption that one can be achieved without the other.

President Johnson’s inability to understand the connection between the violence in American streets in the late 1960s and the blunder that was Vietnam speaks, in part, to the larger subject of this essay: the philosophical and practical need to understand pacifism and environmentalism as essentially consonant philosophies and practices, just as a proper theorization of ecocide must also include the violence inherent to industrialism and militarism.<sup>15</sup> Few contemporary writers understand the stakes involved in this conflation as well as Wendell Berry, and few have had more occasion to enact the entwined values of pacifism and environmentalism than he has. Berry’s marriage of peace-making and agrarian environmentalism does, however, deserve some critical examination, for it rests upon the construction of a sometimes fallacious disconnection between a precious domesticity and a theoretically corrupt public sphere. To be sure, in articulating an agrarian peace ethic, Berry

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0511.pdf> and <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0513.pdf> (accessed 1 December 2012).

<sup>11</sup> The Sierra Club, “Sierra Club Purposes and Goals,” <http://www.sierraclub.org/policy/downloads/goals.pdf> (accessed 27 Nov. 2012), 7.

<sup>12</sup> See Bruce Hamilton, “Smart, Safe, Clean Energy Future Top Goal,” <http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/200601/fiveyearplan.asp> (accessed 29 Nov. 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Carson, *Silent*, 7, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Jurgen Brauer, *War and Nature: The Environmental Consequences of War in a Globalized World* (Lanham: AltaMira, 2009), xvii.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief discussion of the intersection between emergent industrial capitalism and global militarism, see James A. Tyner, *Military Legacies: A World Made by War* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1-28.

proposes fairly strict moral and practical boundaries between the public and private which, on examination, are surely more fluid than he would have us believe.

### Wendell Berry's Private War

If Berry's enduring subject in nearly five decades of poetry, novels, and nonfiction is the diminished and diminishing health of the land and its dependent rural communities, his agrarian vision also manifests as an oft-neglected political commitment to sustainable local food sources and their relationship to the febrile debates over national security. Indeed, we really cannot understand Berry's agrarian ethic without digging through the basement of his political philosophy. When we do, we find not only a farmer whose obligations to land and community arrive out of daily contact with both, but also a theorist whose deepest fealty is to a pacifist ideology well outside of current mainstream political thinking. Like the hedgerows on a well-executed farm, Berry's pacifism encompasses and nourishes his deeply felt agrarian commitments, and vice versa. As was the case with Carson, the political ecology that undergirds Berry's agrarianism arrives as a reaction to post-World War II military-industrial practices—which are also and tragically agricultural practices as well.

Berry's writings target both mainstream environmentalism *and* industrial militarism, a critique that is often lacking in most "shallow" environmental discourse. Berry writes:

Industrialism, which is the name of our economy, and which is now virtually the only economy of the world, has been from its beginnings in the state of riot. It is based squarely upon the principle of violence toward everything on which it depends, and it is no matter whether the form of industrialism was communist or capitalist; the violence toward nature, human communities, traditional agricultures, and local economies has been constant.<sup>16</sup>

Naturalized as benign (one thinks of the term "economic growth"), the relentless thrust of economic life becomes simply the price to be paid for something called progress and its martial analogue, domestic security. Yet Berry has historically argued that progress and security are meaningless both practically and theoretically when they are divorced from the deeper obligations of land stewardship. "Security" becomes a superstition, a belief whose promise is always just out of reach, tantalizing us with its unfulfilled potential and ever dependent upon an ongoing industrial ethic whose most logical end is militarism—endless war for endless peace.<sup>17</sup> For Berry, the modern economy manifests itself in both the guise of war (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, the "War on Terror") and in a hidden imperialism at home, best evidenced by industrial agriculture, strip mining, and the more recent nefarious phenomenon of mountaintop removal coal mining.

All of this is to propose that Berry's agrarian ethic of land stewardship is fundamentally linked to his resistance to war and industrialism, as Michael R. Stevens observes: "the shadow of war hovers over Berry's career and his work in ways heavy and surprising to those who want to read Berry as a nostalgist and idealist." For Stevens, one cannot fully realize Berry's "laments of the violence done upon land and people by corporate greed and industrialized versions of

<sup>16</sup> Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers: Essays* (Berkeley: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 46.

<sup>17</sup> For a different view of perpetual militarism, see Christopher Hitchens, "In Defense of Endless War," [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2011/09/in\\_defense\\_of\\_endless\\_war.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2011/09/in_defense_of_endless_war.html) (accessed 16 May 2013).

agriculture" *without* understanding them in the larger context of global conflict. Notably, however, Stevens focuses his attention on Berry's critique of industrialism and militarism through the prism of "man's fallen desires," in which the "good of Creation" and the "redemptive work to which man is called" in "our fallen condition" call to mind the work required to renew a postlapsarian world.<sup>18</sup> It is perfectly reasonable for Stevens to emphasize Berry's faith, which is so often neglected in an academy that finds outward displays of religious observance outré. But if we concede Stevens' observation that the politics of outrage that animates Berry's prose is grounded in scripture, this fact surely does not obviate the larger effect of his politics, the fluid marriage of personal faith and its public avowal.<sup>19</sup> It is tempting here to emphasize Berry's faith as primarily a personal commitment that coheres around the concept of *sophrosyne*, or self-control; a cursory reading of Berry would support this idea. In fact, however, Berry makes no such distinction between private morality and behavior and their effects on, for instance, the health of the land. His emphasis on agricultural stewardship may seem to be an individual commitment, but his work as an agrarian cultural critic, while certainly starting from a place deep within, exceeds mere personal solutions to the problem of contemporary military-industrial ideology. Indeed, 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.

This is not to argue that Berry's faith is tangential to his work as a cultural critic—certainly, one might plausibly say that it is necessary to such work—rather, that Berry's emphasis on self-renewal can often read like *Candide's* lesson to cultivate one's own garden as the world collapses, the rhetorical effect of which is to circumscribe an otherwise sweeping political message. Berry's insistence that to make change one must eschew movement politics—which come, he believes, with the inevitable corruption of character—assumes an inviolate liberal self that can avoid the distasteful exigencies of politics. As he writes, "To be only an agitator for peace is to be a specialist, one in a swarm of random particles, destructive in implication, however pacific by intention. How can a man hope to promote peace in the world if he has not made it possible in his own life and his own household?"<sup>20</sup> Individual conscience always precedes and supersedes public action in Berry's metaphysics, so much so that we might be forgiven for assuming that the conscientious self is somehow invested with the potential to be free of the corruption that Berry well knows is impossible in a fallen world. This escape/redemption motif certainly forms a potent narrative line in the United States, beginning at least with the transcendental movement, if not well before. One is reminded of

---

<sup>18</sup> Michael R. Stevens, "Living Peace in the Shadow of War: Wendell Berry's Dogged Pacifism," in *The Human Vision of Wendell Berry*, ed. Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011), 107.

<sup>19</sup> See Wendell Berry, *Blessed Are The Peacemakers: Christ's Teachings About Love, Compassion, & Forgiveness* (Berkeley: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005) for Berry's discussion of Christ's call for peace in the Gospels. Here Berry excerpts Christ's teachings about peace much in the way that Thomas Jefferson cut Christ's divinity from the New Testament. Berry's Gospels evince an overtly political objective: to dramatize the distance between Christ's teachings and His followers' behavior. Berry's Christ is an active and unapologetic pacifist.

<sup>20</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2003), 85.

Henry David Thoreau leading a Huckleberry party in the hills around Concord, Massachusetts, after his arrest for failing to pay his taxes: “and then the State was nowhere to be seen.”<sup>21</sup> For Berry, there would seem to be moral danger in takin’ it to the streets. The loss of the inviolate self hovers perilously over his environmental politics.

In fact, the personal “lived peace” that Stevens lauds as an appropriate response in a time of war—and that Berry argues must precede any other work—is consonant with Berry’s very public protests against American militarism abroad and radical strip mining throughout the Appalachian plateau. It is therefore possible to think of Berry’s “distrust of movements” in a number of ways. The least plausible explanation is that in his own domestic life he has achieved a purity of character that necessarily precedes public critique. More likely, however, the distinctions he draws are not as clear as he proposes, and those private acts of conscience that trump the public realm imply a distinction without a meaningful difference. To that end, is it not plausible to suggest that Berry’s rhetoric about the necessity of self-transformation actually destabilizes common notions of private and public in order to dramatize how binary thinking perpetuates the status quo? This is not to say we should doubt Berry when he asserts, “one must begin in one’s own life the private solutions that can only *in turn* become public solutions,” but rather that we also recognize that the divergence between the personal and the public upon which such ethics hinges dissolves under the unrelenting pressure of agricultural, industrial, and military ecocide.<sup>22</sup> “The use of the world” may indeed be a “personal matter,” as Berry attests—then again, maybe it isn’t—but we have to ask whether in hammering this distinction so firmly Berry’s rhetoric concretizes the distinctions he means to undermine.<sup>23</sup> Berry would seem to understand this, too: “Because of the enormous increase in the economic and technological power of individuals, what once were private acts become public: the consequences are inevitably public.”<sup>24</sup> It is not simply that the personal is political; for Berry, there is no other political.

Two such examples of the tension between the public activism and a private commitment to peaceableness can be found in his “Statement Against the War in Vietnam,” which he read at the Kentucky Conference on War and the Draft in February, 1968, at the University of Kentucky, and its companion essay, “Some Thoughts on Citizenship and Conscience in Honor of Don Pratt.” In his “Statement,” Berry grapples with the meaning of peace in a time of war, the latter’s utter intransigence and the former’s potential to turn violent. In this essay Berry outlines a commitment to peace that precedes activism, that in fact asks fundamental questions about the nature of existence apropos of community and the health of the earth: “How should we behave toward one another? And how should we behave toward the world?”<sup>25</sup> Such questions move us to consider Berry’s belief that the Vietnam War and its domestic cousin (the ongoing war on the land) both partake of a “failure of imagination,” by

---

<sup>21</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” in *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 241.

<sup>22</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Berry, *Unsettling*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

which he means not that the government has failed us but that we have failed ourselves.<sup>26</sup> Berry would make sure that a *true* peace is a lived peace that does not begin and end with Vietnam or with the protests in the streets, that we look to “the causes of war that lie in our own thoughts and our own behavior, never forgetting that we are ... members of a war-making species ... and [that] the hope for order in the world fails in a disorderly household.”<sup>27</sup> The conservative in Berry is thus far less interested in governmental or public solutions to problems he understands as having been created by the wrong kinds of personal decisions: those made, of course, at home. Vietnam becomes merely the efflorescence of a perverse household economy.

In “Some Thoughts” Berry unites his commitment to place—Port Royal, Kentucky—to the ethic of nonviolent public dissent, which he clearly understands as intrinsic to the American experiment. Even in this early essay, however, we witness the tension between a public call for peace and his private commitment to the same, with the latter assuming the ethical foundation for any larger critique or activism: “It seems to me inescapable that before a man can usefully promote an idea, the idea must be implemented in his own life. If he is for peace he must have a life in which peace is possible.”<sup>28</sup> Read through the prism of agriculture and the effects of our domestic economy, Berry notes that it is not war, in fact, that provides the best example of our violent behavior as it is our treatment of the earth: “To corrupt or destroy the natural environment is an act of violence not only against the earth but also against those who are dependent on it, including ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> Peace therefore cannot be attained, he insists, through public demonstration—which always holds the potential for violence—but through a personal, private rapport with the land, one that he finds on his small farm in Kentucky and which, by extension, we ought to find in our own households. Yet the paradox is clear: Berry well knows that the private self out of which both cultural and *agricultural* renewal springs is already fouled by a fallen world.

Here it would be tempting to see Berry’s invocation of harmonious rural life as a chimerical bulwark against the vicissitudes of politics, a cynosure of relative calm during some of the most turbulent historical moments in late-20th century American history. In fact, however, Berry’s commitment to peaceableness is no mere front-porch lament about the good life in an idyllic past (though it is sometimes this), as much as it is a practice in which peace is always *more than* the absence of war. In other words, peacemaking—like stewardship—is hard work (and work, he notes, that most of us are loathe to do). In this, Berry’s pacifism is consonant with his agrarian environmentalism, yet each is theorized as 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. The individual is here burdened with the onus of peace-making and environmental responsibility even as the world rages. The potential for peace, which is never so certain as the potential for war, must be closely nurtured—but it *can* only be nurtured, Berry argues, in the most private spaces of the

---

<sup>26</sup> Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.



individual soul. To be a part of a movement is to become merely a neutered “random particle,” afloat without the anchor of conscience. There is a kind of Puritanism at work here, but the tempter is less the ever-present potential of sin than it is the seduction of the mob.

It is not incidental that Berry’s belief in an enactment of peace through a commitment to place and agricultural work also essentially rejects the very type of protest in which he was, at least during his anti-war speech, obviously engaged. When Berry argues that being against the war is hardly the same thing as being for peace, he is concerned that “the peace movement will be perverted by self-righteousness and disillusionment and anger,” and as a consequence will no longer conform to the highest ideals of pacifism as defined by private ethics.<sup>30</sup> When one becomes a “protestor” or an “activist,” one suffers the distortions of group think, of “dealing finally in effects rather than causes.”<sup>31</sup> Like a tool that loses its sharpness when unused, peaceableness is a praxis whose existence lies on the verge of obsolescence, and to participate in a movement is to distance oneself from those difficult choices that make peace possible. Emerging from his critique of the public sphere, then, is a fear of loss, an anxiety that the self upon which a pacifist ethics hinges would be dispersed amid the anonymous ephemera of the crowd. The issue is not, therefore, whether the individual will become corrupted by an abstract politics; the issue is whether the self can survive interpellation into a larger whole. In Berry’s ethics, once the self is immersed into the nexus of movement politics the basis for true change—conscience, morality, local knowledge—is no longer tethered to anything fundamental.

Because the regenerative self is here juxtaposed against an almost overwhelming environmental ruin, one *could* argue ungenerously that Berry’s revolution-of-the-personal is simply an all-too convenient moral high ground upon which only a few purged souls may stand. To make this argument, however, one would have to ignore evidence to the contrary: Berry’s life-long public activism in the face of exceedingly long odds.<sup>32</sup> Yet it is not always clear what further steps need be taken if larger environmental reform does not materialize out of the work of personal enlightenment and domestic reform. The conservative in Berry is here in a bit of a quandary: by acknowledging the reality of human frailty in the face of tough moral choices—and thereby abjuring activism—he also intimates the fallibility of the personal solution since it, too, is always inflected with the same weakness. That is to say, the personal solution might be the wrong one. To skirt this issue, Berry puts his faith in the individual who ostensibly has the kind of contact with the soil that would properly guide her choices and whose commitment to the earth and to the local community exceeds that of the politics of anonymity. For Berry, our war against the earth, the machinations of our economy, and our unremitting militarism share the same basic excesses, the same basic causes, but in addressing those causes we are to look—paradoxically—to the postlapsarian self for redress. There is at best a rhetorical and philosophical dissonance at work here—some would simply call it

---

<sup>30</sup> Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Wendell Berry, *In the Presence of Fear: Three Essays for a Changed World* (Great Barrington: Orion Society, 2001), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Berry recently published a short essay in *The Progressive* lamenting the three times in his life he engaged in civil disobedience, which he characterized as exercise[s] in anticlimax [and] ... by any practical reckoning, pretty useless.” See Berry, “About Civil Disobedience,” *The Progressive*, [http://www.progressive.org/wendell\\_berry\\_civil\\_disobedience.html](http://www.progressive.org/wendell_berry_civil_disobedience.html) (Accessed 14 Nov. 2012).

wishful thinking—in which locating and fostering an economy of care outside the scope of industrialism and militarism rests solely on the shoulders of the individual who, after all, may not be able to make the right choices.

### **Vietnam and Appalachia**

As the war in Vietnam escalated in the mid-1960s, in the mountains of Appalachia the violence against nature and human communities in the form of strip mining also intensified. To understand war, Berry intimates, one does not have to go to Indochina; the militant logic of industrialism is writ large across the landscape of eastern Kentucky.

Berry's essay "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mine Morality in East Kentucky" draws explicit, Carson-like parallels between war and strip mining. When Berry looks at communities in eastern Kentucky he understands how industrial economic imperatives spell doom for "houses and farms and communities" that:

have no firmer hold on the future than so many bird nests. And when I look around in the hope of some power that might save them, I see only the state government carrying the coal industry on its back like a winking uncle, and the federal government with its forms and rhetoric and half-answers, preoccupied by violence as though the destruction of Kentucky is to be compensated by the destruction of Vietnam.<sup>33</sup>

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. Just as the stupefying goal of a democratic Vietnam would not be encumbered by the cost to human and nonhuman life, the securing of natural resources buried in the coal seams of eastern Kentucky would not be gainsaid by property rights or ecological imperatives. Berry's conflation of Vietnam and strip mining proposes that militarism and industrialism are coeval in this drama of destruction. It hardly makes sense to see them as distinct entities in the larger tableaux of ruin that is the modern economy.

Just as war is prosecuted from a distance (though, as always, with very real effects on the ground), so is strip mining planned and funded by corporate officers who do not see or live with its effects. This abdication of responsibility is the result of both geographic and moral dislocation, and thus Berry's call to conscience, his need to have the private sphere presuppose all other politics, can have little hold on an absentee industrial imagination: "One wishes," Berry writes, "that the *persons* who own the mineral rights and run the mines had taken for themselves the prerogative of responsible and just behavior. If they had been willing to govern themselves strictly enough, it seems unlikely that they would now face the prospect of *being* strictly governed."<sup>34</sup> That they do not engage in "responsible and just behavior" on their own is evidence, according to Berry, of an estrangement from the earth and the home that sadly characterizes contemporary life and that makes such deleterious work imaginable. It also, I would add, makes Berry's call-to-conscience the more inconceivable, for the people

---

<sup>33</sup> Berry, *Long-Legged House*, 28-29.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

responsible are a “powerful class of itinerant professional vandals” who are “now pillaging the country and laying it waste,” the point being that the naturalization of industrial thinking, based in part upon separation of work from its effects (and work from *affect*), has violence encoded within it.<sup>35</sup> Vietnam and strip mining constitute only the most radical examples of this disconnection, but in their extremes lie the general lesson of everyday social and economic life according to Berry: to be alienated from the land and from each other is to embody the potential for violence. As noted earlier, Berry answers that estrangement can only be rectified through a personal response that bypasses a too easy anger at the “system” of exploitation that passes for our economy: “If it is unrealistic to expect a bad economy to try to become a good one, then we must go to work to build a good economy.”<sup>36</sup> Since we are all implicated in the economy of destruction, only by revolutionizing our domestic lives can we expect a different system to emerge.

Whether Berry’s vision of benevolent domesticity can renew an economy of destruction is the real question, and one, at any rate, that demarcates the spurious fault lines between a life devoted to public social change and one devoted to an ethic of individual responsibility. In his effort to find a way to account for the two spheres, though, Berry sees in the politics of movements an inadequate substitute for the moral necessity of personal transformation: “In seeking to change our economic use of the world,” he writes, “we are seeking inescapably to change our lives.”<sup>37</sup> The home paradoxically becomes the most politicized of spaces where distinctions between public and private recede, where militarism and industrialism thrive out of a failed ethic of self-revolution, and where environmental ruin stands as bleak compensation for a botched domesticity—just as Vietnam was compensation for the ruin of Appalachia, and Iraq for mountaintop removal. Seen in this way, the division between public activism and private ethics ultimately ceases to be meaningful. One could just as easily propose, for instance, that participation in movements might have a salutary effect on an injurious domestic life. If Berry therefore seeks to re-imagine false distinctions between public politics and domesticity, he does so as a firm believer in the personage of the modern liberal subject who can change the world by changing her self, free of the pervasive ethic of industrialism and militarism that one could argue helps constitute that very self. In this way, both escape and redemption appear impossible.

### **The War on Terror and Agrarian Pacifism**

Just as Vietnam stood as a test case for an environmental politics that understood militarism as something more than war (and peace more than war’s absence), for Berry, recent American Realpolitik has concretized the need for a renewed connection between agrarian environmentalism and pacifism. The events of 11 September, 2001, and the more than decade of war and enhanced domestic surveillance measures that followed raise the issue of how far the country is willing to go to equate “security” with enhanced militarization. In Berry’s eyes, the unexamined desire for homeland security is tempered by the disjunction between the ideals we mean to defend and the methods we employ. What is it that we think we are protecting, his writings asked? How far are we willing to go internationally to preserve the

---

<sup>35</sup> Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 50.

<sup>36</sup> Berry, *Presence*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

euphemistically-charged “American way of life?”<sup>38</sup> That Berry chose the weeks after 9/11 to ask these questions may have struck some readers as particularly opportunistic when the wounds of that day were still raw, as Stevens intimates.<sup>39</sup> To be fair, however, his response to the attacks in the form of a sometime scathing critique of American militarism is of a piece with his writings for well over three decades, starting at least with *The Long-Legged House*.

As was true in 1968, in 2001 Berry chose a rather fraught moment in history to challenge the regnant *doxa* regarding the intersections of industrialism, militarism, and security—and what all of this means for the land and local communities. Berry’s critique of the “unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended on that day [9/11],” coupled with his disdain for the “dominant politicians, corporate officers, and investors” who believed such optimism would continue, dramatizes his refusal to capitulate to the bellicose orthodoxy sweeping the country.<sup>40</sup> More to the point, in line with his earlier writings Berry connects 9/11 to a pervasive industrial mindset, a worldview that fails to see the events of 2001 as a logical extension of the economy’s war on “farmers, farmlands, and rural communities, their forests, wetlands, and prairies, their ecosystems and watersheds.”<sup>41</sup> If Berry understood the connections between Vietnam and strip mining as arising from industrialism as an ideology, he also understands that the United States’ nationalistic response to 9/11 coincides with, even result from, an originary and ongoing ecocide so naturalized as to be virtually invisible. For Berry, it is as if the violence of 11 September and all that followed were part of an eschatological script written at the birth of the industrial age.

Berry’s examination of the bonds between militarism and ecocide asks us to question the politics of complacency exemplified in the idea that our security will magically arrive if we can only stop others from attacking us, when in fact we are perfectly capable of fomenting our own ecological ruin—and thereby undermining our security—apart from the charismatic terrors of international jihad. Consequently, the contours of industrial violence have only shifted slightly since the 1960s: the ruin of the Appalachian mountain range and its peoples, first described and lamented by Harry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s, continues into the present in the apparatus of mountaintop removal coal mining, a diabolical form of economic, environmental, and communal destruction that even such a witness as Caudill

---

<sup>38</sup> Curt Meine proposes similar questions in the chapter “Home, Land, Security” from his book *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation* (Washington: Island Press, 2004), 222-246. He discusses security from an ecological and conservationist point of view, noting that the notion of impermeable borders (upon which the idea of national security is often based) is simply not found in nature: “Ultimately, for us in our social lives, but also for our prized protected places and biodiversity generally,” Meine writes, “security cannot be found in simple sequestration; it must entail good relations. The *content* of all gardens, no matter how well-walled, no matter how successfully isolated, managed, and fortified, is connected to and influenced by their *context*—obviously, by elemental processes involving sunlight, temperature, topography, bedrock, soil, air, fire, water, and plant, animal, and microbial life; but also by human political, economic, and demographic forces. There is not security for biodiversity, or in the long run for people, if our interests as individuals and communities are harshly segregated.” (229).

<sup>39</sup> Stevens, “Living Peace,” 116.

<sup>40</sup> Berry, *Presence*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

could not have foreseen.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, between 2001 and 2009, the pace of mountaintop removal quickened even as the war efforts expanded from Afghanistan into Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan.

This almost perpetual domestic violence against the land exemplified by industrial coal mining and agribusiness is consequently more than an *analogy* to foreign war; it is its foreground and warrant. For this reason, the “domestic terror” of the techno-industrial economy is strategically juxtaposed in the same *Citizenship Papers* with the War on Terror, just as Vietnam and strip mining were examined together in *The Long-Legged House*.<sup>43</sup> We cannot know what this threatened “homeland” consists of, for the “estrangement of our people from one another and from our land” makes a mockery of the very concept of peace and security. “Increasingly,” Berry argues, “Americans—including, notoriously, the politicians—are not *from* anywhere. And so they have in this ‘homeland,’ which the government now seeks to make secure on their behalf, no home *place* that they are strongly moved to know or love or use well or protect.”<sup>44</sup> Being from nowhere, and having at most a flimsy connection to land and to each other, we make war elsewhere—and in so doing create the most ephemeral of attachments to the land itself. The absentee industrial engineers responsible (in part) for strip mining from the 1960s to the present are now and also the engineers of modern warfare. The comforting *idea* of America becomes more important than the material thing, the soil, the community. And as our estrangement grows, so does the basis for a politics rooted, as it were, in something real. Berry makes this clear in his discussion of the post-9/11 National Security Strategy of the United States: “All our military strength, all our police, all our technologies and strategies of suspicion and surveillance cannot make us secure if we lose our ability to farm, or if we squander our forests, or if we exhaust or poison our water sources.”<sup>45</sup> Where is the domestic security strategy that addresses these threats?<sup>46</sup> If it does not exist, he argues, we need to construct our own by rejecting the philosophy of competition and industrialism that brought us to where we are and replace it with a personal, local, peaceable orientation to the earth.

---

<sup>42</sup> See Harry Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Ashland: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1963, 2001).

<sup>43</sup> Berry, *Citizenship*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> In 2005, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation formed a partnership with “states and private industry to protect the nation’s food supply from terrorist threats”: the Strategic Partnership Program Agroterrorism Initiative. As evidence that the protection of the nation’s food supply can only be thought of through the lens of militarism, the program refers to threats and vulnerabilities from outside attack, but nowhere is the threat to agriculture from factory farming and large-scale monocropping mentioned. Security is here defined as the absence of terrorism merely. See “USDA, FDA, DHS, and FBI Join States and Private Industry to Protect Nation’s Food and Agricultural Supply from Agroterrorism,” United States Department of Agriculture, <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentidonly=true&contentid=2005/07/0279.xml> (accessed 29 Nov., 2012) and “Pre-Harvest Security Guidelines and Checklist, United States Department of Agriculture, [http://www.usda.gov/documents/PreHarvestSecurity\\_final.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/documents/PreHarvestSecurity_final.pdf), (accessed 30 Nov., 2012)

Nearly four decades after Vietnam, Berry finds that the ideal of peace to be inextricably interwoven with agrarian practices—perhaps for this reason, both are just as elusive: “Starting with the economies of food and farming, we should promote at home and encourage abroad the ideal of local self-sufficiency. We should recognize that this is the surest, the safest, and the cheapest way for the world to live. We should not countenance a loss or destruction of any local capacity to produce necessary goods.”<sup>47</sup> Built into the agrarian economy, peacemaking inevitably requires the values and practices of care, thrift, and stewardship; once again, peace takes work. It makes sense that Berry theorizes security from its effect on the literal ground. Without the connection to the earth severed by industrialism and which is theorized (though not always explained) as possible for everyone, *no peace* can exist. Physical, agrarian, communal labor (as opposed to merely working for peace) on the small farm is the antecedent for Berry’s vision of a benign domesticity, one that would provide a necessary friction to the industrial economy. (And yes, one does hear the faint historical echoes of *other* far more nefarious calls to agrarian labor that had no such moral foundation.) Coupled with his reservations surrounding movement politics, however, Berry’s agrarian strategy becomes the more uncertain, the more utopian in its conflation of individual ethics and a dedication to stewardship, neglecting as it does myriad other ways to live kindly. This is certainly not to argue that an agrarian life dedicated to land stewardship and peaceableness is unattainable; rather, it is only to propose that its realization presumes that one can, with only the right effort of will and conscience, overcome both the blandishments of modernity and the often productive and salubrious attractions of the group. Moreover, even with the fairly recent shift by so many consumers and producers toward local and organic farming, the economic vector of the 21st century would appear to be moving in a direction not unlike that of the 20th, and one logically has to wonder whether the private solution is enough to turn this ship around.

The radical (from the Latin word for *root*) re-imagining of economic activity through the productive lens of the small farm and the conscientious worker would ideally reconfigure the militaristic relationship between humans and their environments. In this way, the farm becomes the actual and symbolic site of *making* peace through an economics of benevolence and love. This vision is utopian not merely because the prospect of small farming would seem to be anathema to many Americans (and Berry never argues that we should all become farmers), but also because it re-imagines the competitive nature of the industrial economy by substituting conflict with cooperation and care. This sympathetic economy consequently moves us away from the violence at the heart of the industrial mind. As Berry succinctly puts it, “the law of competition ... is the law of war.”<sup>48</sup> In enacting peaceableness through the right kind of *work*—sympathetic, cooperative, nature-centered—a different conception of peace and security may be achieved. As with every utopian vision, this one is both critical and optimistic. Berry would have us expunge the war in our daily lives through the material practice of agrarianism, which must be a daily, private, domestic habit that renounces an industrialism whose most potent ideology is that of domination. As I have argued, however, this is an approach highly dependent on a questionable separation between the public and private sphere, where only through the difficult work of personal transformation can we expect a

---

<sup>47</sup> Berry, *Citizenship*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

public revolution. Frustratingly radical and theoretically peaceful, then, the agrarian pacifist who is also by definition an environmentalist must draw upon enormous internal resources to achieve this pleasant rapport between self and other, private and public.

One need not merely catalogue the Koreas, Vietnams, Iraqs, and Afghanistans to point out that U.S. power shows itself in infinite ways, from the War on Drugs to the War on Terror to the implied threat of its material presence in all corners of the globe. Yet the contemporary American citizen, unused to seeing such power on belligerent display, is as removed from its effects as if it didn't exist. By the same logic and the same separation, the ecological effects of the typical American meal are also hidden. If the 1500 miles this meal travels from farm to plate symbolize the distance of Americans from the land, work from its effects, and neighbor from neighbor, then they also represent the geographical separation that makes both industrial farming and militarism possible. All such attenuation gives the lie to the agrarian objective of a locally-secured homeland. Nevertheless, Berry's new agrarian ethic teaches us that this gap must be closed, that environmentalism and pacifism cannot be conceived separately. The peaceable work of the earth serves as a rebuke to the militarism of American life, even as it dramatizes the nearly insuperable distances between them.

**William Major** is author of *Grounded Vision: New Agrarianism and the Academy* (University of Alabama Press, 2011). His research appears in *ISLE*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *Mosaic*, *a/b*, and others, and his columns appear with some regularity in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. Email: major@hartford.edu

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** The author is especially grateful to Bryan Sinche, Jonathan Daigle, Aubrey Streit Krug, and Kristin Van Tassel for their insights. Special thanks go to Stuart Cooke, Deborah Rose, and Thom van Dooren for their help during the peer review and editorial process.

## Bibliography

- Bass, Gary J. "Endless War." *New York Times*. Accessed 15 November 2012.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/05/books/review/Bass-t.html>
- Berry, Wendell. "About Civil Disobedience." *The Progressive*. Accessed 14 November 2012.  
[http://www.progressive.org/wendell\\_berry\\_civil\\_disobedience.html](http://www.progressive.org/wendell_berry_civil_disobedience.html)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Christ's Teachings About Love, Compassion, & Forgiveness*. Berkeley: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Citizenship Papers: Essays*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2004.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Home Economics*. New York: North Point Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In the Presence of Fear: Three Essays for a Changed World*. Great Barrington: Orion Society, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Long-Legged House*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sex, Economy, Community, & Freedom*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1996.
- Brauer, Jürgen. *War and Nature: The Environmental Consequences of War in a Globalized World*. Lanham: AltaMira, 2009.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*, Intro. Linda Lear. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Caudill, Harry M. *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area*. Ashland, KY: Jesse Stuart Foundation, 2001.
- Eisenhower, Milton S. "Preface." "Historical Patterns of American Violence." In *Violence in America: Historical & Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr. 9-11. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979.
- Graham, Hugh Davis and Ted Robert Gurr, eds. *Violence in America: Historical & Comparative Perspectives*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979
- Hamilton, Bruce. "Smart, Safe, Clean Energy Future Top Goal," The Sierra Club. Accessed 29 November 2012. <http://www.sierraclub.org/planet/200601/fiveyearplan.asp>
- Hitchens, Christopher. "In Defense of Endless War." Accessed 11 November 2013.  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2011/09/in\\_defense\\_of\\_endless\\_war.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2011/09/in_defense_of_endless_war.html)
- Meine, Curt. *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation*. Washington: Island P, 2004.
- Mitchell, Mark T., and Nathan Schlueter. *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011.
- O'Connell, Aaron B. "The Permanent Militarization of America." *New York Times*. Accessed 4 November 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/05/opinion/the-permanent-militarization-of-america.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Roth, Philip. *American Pastoral*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- Sierra Club. "Sierra Club Purposes and Goals." Accessed 27 November 2012.  
<http://www.sierraclub.org/policy/downloads/goals.pdf>
- Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.
- Stevens, Michael R. "Living Peace in the Shadow of War: Wendell Berry's Dogged Pacifism." *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, edited by Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter, 106-123. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2011.



- Thoreau, Henry David. "Resistance to Civil Government." In *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, edited by William Rossi, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 227-245. New York: Norton, 1992.
- Tyner, James A. *Military Legacies: A World Made by War*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- United States Census Bureau. "Military Personnel on Active Duty by Rank or Grade" and "Military Reserve Personnel." Accessed 1 December 2012.  
<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0511.pdf> and  
<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0513.pdf>.
- United States Department of Agriculture. "USDA, FDA, DHS, and FBI Join States and Private Industry to Protect Nation's Food and Agricultural Supply from Agroterrorism." Accessed 11 November 2013.  
<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdamediafb?contentid=2005/07/0279.xml&printable=true&contentidonly=true>
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Pre-Harvest Security Guidelines and Checklist 2006." Accessed 30 November 2012.  
[http://www.usda.gov/documents/PreHarvestSecurity\\_final.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/documents/PreHarvestSecurity_final.pdf).