Book Review

Joseph R. Wiebe, *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 272 pp., \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-481-30386-6.

Wendell Berry is most often known among academics for his non-fiction, a vast body of writing that has proven to be prescient; decades after the publication of *The Unsettling of America*, many of his concerns for the future of religion, agriculture, ecology, and culture have come to pass. In his chapter, 'The Body and the Earth', Berry turns to Homer's *Odyssey* as an exemplar of 'the connections between marriage and household and the earth' (1977: 124), a homecoming narrative that is instructive even to modern readers, a narrative that is concerned with natural limits, with human flourishing, with community. If we follow Berry's claims here, we must agree that imaginative stories have the power both to shape our affections and to effect change.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Berry's own fiction has given life to a growing body of secondary literature. *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity* is one such important contribution to such literature, drawing our attention to the instructive nature of Berry's fictional Port William community.

In my experience, many readers of Berry's fiction do not spend their lives in the walls of the academy, but in the fields, pews, and cubicles—such is the far-reaching appeal of his writing. Regardless of the reader's station, though, I have found a common sentiment among first-time readers of his fiction: Berry's Port William is moving and realistic, but this way of life is gone and unlikely to return, marked by nostalgia. Of course, I do not believe this to be true of Berry's fiction, as I have argued elsewhere (Baker 2018); nevertheless, the perception remains. Wiebe is careful to note that, though Berry's fiction is often accused of being nostalgic, he is under no illusion that it is. Berry's fiction is 'no panacea' for broken communities (p. 3); it is likewise neither prescriptive nor clinical. It is, however, an offering that shapes how we imagine goodness in community, in our loves, and in our selves. How Berry's fictional community accomplishes such work 'is not straightforward. It is not self-evident that a fictional community possesses the capacity to address existing problems, the resolution of which...are actual communities' (p. 3).

One thing the Port William community of Berry's fiction does accomplish is that it encourages in the reader a sort of self-reflection that leads to imagining the wholeness of her own place: 'As an act of imagination, fiction pierces through the barriers of preconceptions and clarifies readers to themselves. Great works of literature, therefore, do not engage the will first but the imagination' (p. 25). By his own creativity in place, Berry invites readers of his fiction to imagine problems local to them as well as their potential solutions.

Because Berry is occasionally (and falsely) critiqued for offering ‘templates meant for imitation’ (p. 5), it is important that Wiebe clarifies from the outset that this work of the imagination is local and particular. In the latter half of his book, he devotes a chapter to each of three prominent members of the Port William community—each with their own griefs, heartaches, loves, and joys. Jack Beechum is a ‘new Odysseus’ (p. 83), Jayber Crow is a lover on the margins of community, and Hannah Coulter is a patient (with all the connotations of suffering in that word) woman whose bodily life ‘incarnates divine love, the characteristics of land, and the connectivity of community’ (p. 131). If we read these stories and their characters as parables, Wiebe argues, we avoid the narrowest sort of reading of Berry’s fiction, opening our affections and lives in the world to be shaped by their narratives.

Wiebe argues that Berry’s fiction works foremost on our imaginations, which are not ethereal, but rooted in place:

To imagine is to recognize the unique qualities of a place in such a way that they are acknowledged. Seeing a place this way evokes a response that forms a connection, a relationship, involving obligations that are felt, which is to say, consciously thought... Imagination makes real the life of a place, which simultaneously reveals the various claims a particular environment makes on those who share its life. (pp. 15-16)

In this way, his fiction offers so much more than entertainment—it demands a response, one that requires acknowledgment that Berry’s fiction might shape our lives in community with both people and the earth.

Though Berry’s fiction is accessible to non-academics, Wiebe’s book is written for the specialist familiar not only with Berry’s works but also with contemporary ecocriticism and literary studies. The prose is at times overwrought and can tend to stifle the imagination it seeks to inspire. Nevertheless, *The Place of Imagination* is especially appropriate for those of us who teach Berry’s fiction to undergraduates and have been looking for ways to draw out the real-world implications for young people who have been shaped by narratives of flight and upward mobility.

References

- Baker, Jack R. 2018. ‘Re-membering the Past Rightly: Elegy and *Ubi Sunt* Tradition in Wendell Berry’s Fiction’, in Jack R. Baker and Jeffrey Bilbro (eds.), *Telling the Stories Right: Wendell Berry’s Imagination of Port William* (Eugene, OR: Front Porch Republic Books): 3-20.
- Berry, Wendell. 1977. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon).

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