The Land and the People are Indivisible:
Wendell Berry on Patriotism and Prejudice

Review by David Cayley

Berry, Wendell. **The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice**. *Shoemaker and Company, 2022, p.528*

In 1964 Wendell Berry abandoned the cosmopolitan life that might have been his as a "promising" writer and returned to his roots in rural Kentucky. At the time of this abrupt change of direction, he was living and teaching in New York City, having earlier been a Wallace Stegner fellow at Stanford University and then lived in Italy and France on a Guggenheim fellowship. The year after moving back to Kentucky he and his wife Tanya bought Lane's Landing Farm in Port Royal, not far from the Berry "home place" where his family had farmed for generations. He didn't stop writing – not at all as his large and still growing body of poems, stories, novels and essays will attest – but he did start farming, and he did resume his membership in the local community in which he had been born and raised.

Nearly thirty years later, when the series American Authors devoted a volume to Berry's literary achievement in 1991, his old teacher Wallace Stegner contributed a letter which noted that Berry had defied almost every rule which had governed the writing of American fiction in the twentieth century. The rules Stegner had in mind, among others, hold that estrangement is a more engrossing theme than belonging, the city a more vivid scene that the countryside, leisure a more interesting subject than work, and evil a richer topic than good. Berry has reversed all these rules. His subject in his novels and stories, and in many poems and essays as

David Cayley, dccayley@gmail.com
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well, has been the goodness of a vanished way of living and working in a tiny region of rural Kentucky. He has celebrated the art of farming as it was still practiced in his childhood in the 1940's and 1950's – Berry was born in 1934 – drawing attention to the balance that existed on the old mixed farms – between men's and women's work, between cash crops and subsistence, between cultivated and wild land, and between the many elements of the farm's internal economy. He has written of the extraordinary range of competencies that this way of life fostered, and of its arduous but unhurried pace in which there was still time for talk and for the flowering of individual characters. Given this subject matter, Stegner wrote, in his letter to Berry, "By every stereotypical rule of the 20th century, you should be dull." But Berry, as Wallace Stegner knew, and many other readers will attest, is far from dull. Indeed, I would say, speaking just for myself, that Berry's stories and novels have not only entertained me, but also heartened, nourished and strengthened me in a way that almost no other contemporary literature has, a way that has called me back, again and again, to places and people and stories already deeply familiar. Berry's characters and scenes exist in my mind *sub specie aeternitatis* – as if seen from the perspective of eternity – and deserve the name Northop Frye applies to romance, in its largest sense – a secular scripture.

Now, in his 88th year, Wendell Berry has produced what seems to me a crowning glory – a 500 page book called *The Need to Be Whole* in which he pleads with his divided compatriots for peace, understanding and mutual forgiveness. No one could be better placed than Berry to issue such a plea. On the one hand, he is a man who has written against racism – *The Hidden Wound* – opposed his country's foreign wars, and, with others, occupied the office of Kentucky's Governor in opposition to the depredations of the state's powerful coal industry. On the other, he has consistently spoken up for

that rural America which is now the great reservoir of support for Donald Trump, and deplored the contempt in which its people are held by many of his erstwhile allies in peace, civil rights and environmental causes.

Berry's plea for wholeness rests on the idea that a land and its people are, or should be, indivisible. "The danger of dividing land and people into two thoughts," he says, is something that he has understood "more and more clearly" as he has gone on, but the idea was there from the start. From the time he returned home in 1964, he saw that if he was to be an advocate for this "endangered" place, it must be as an advocate for the people as much as for the place. He was, as he says, "a native" – his affection "unspecialized." He couldn't love the land and hate the people, as so many "environmentalists" seem to do. "So without quite knowing what I was doing," he writes of his early years back in Port Royal, "I had entered the way of love and taken up its work." As the word *work* suggests, he means nothing sentimental here by "the way of love." He speaks as Simone Weil speaks when she says that "faith is the experience that intelligence is enlightened by love." Berry writes, "…We know…things by means of love that we cannot otherwise know." And this means, he goes on, that "…we know in the fullest sense only what we love and… we love and know in the fullest sense only what we have imagined." It follows, he concludes, that change must "begin in the heart."

In 1977's *The Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry denounced the depopulation of the American countryside, the industrialization of agriculture, and the tendency of urban America to become "a nation without a country." The divorce he then deplored between land and people, country and city, citizen and citizen has grown acutely worse in the forty-five years since that book appeared. "Oversimplification" and "exaggeration," he writes in the book under review, have increas-

ingly replaced civil discourse. Caricatures have pushed aside full-dimensional persons, as people have "withdrawn into subcategories." And "language [has] overpower[ed] knowledge." "Public conversation about race and racism" is conducted, he says, "in terms highly generalized, unexamined, and trite: bare assertions and accusations, generalizations, stereotypes, labels, gestures, slogans and symbols." Victory and vindication count for more than clarity and understanding. "Public causes," he says, "become specialized in various movements" and, in being separated they are inevitably deprived of context and set into competition with one another – "each one a distraction from every other one." "Powerfully felt abstractions," without pertinence or sense, are deployed in futile wars of words, as people "angrily accuse one another of anger, and hatefully accuse one another of hate."

Berry's diagnosis is that there has come to be "a prejudice against community life itself" insofar as this means encountering, loving and suffering one another as situated and ensouled persons. More particularly, he thinks that the proper relationship between the general and the particular has been lost. "We must think of [general] terms," he contends, "as always in search of particular examples, just as a particular event or memory will go looking for the general sense or truth, if any, that it embodies." Without this constant resort to particulars, he says, there is no chance of ever solving the gigantic, aggregated problems that are made to loom over us in that simplified "public conversation" of which Berry speaks. When, for example, "white liberals" take on the symbolic burden of racism in its entirety – "systemic racism," as one now says – anything "so ordinarily human as friendship or neighborliness or help in solving a human problem" must necessarily be marginalized and trivialized – dwarfed by the need for "something public, large, symbolic and monumental."

One of the particulars that Berry thinks is being fatal-

ly lost is historical memory, and a substantial section of his book is devoted to the Civil War and its aftermath. Again Berry is well placed. His native Kentucky was what was called a border state during that war – a slave state that didn't secede from the Union in 1861. It maintained an officially neutral government throughout the war but also possessed a shadow "Convention of the People of Kentucky" that participated in the government of the Confederacy. In effect, Kentucky was at war with itself and bears the scars of that internal division to this day, Berry says. But that self-division is just one figure for Berry of the complex reality that the Civil War reflected and bequeathed to the United States of today. A paradigmatic figure for him in this regard is Robert E. Lee, who commanded the Confederate armies. Lee held contradictory views on race. He freed slaves that he personally owned and denounced slavery as a "moral and political evil" in private correspondence, but he never opposed the institution publicly and was certainly a racist who opposed voting rights for blacks after the war, holding that they would not vote "intelligently." He was offered a high command in the Union army and opposed secession, but, when secession came, and invasion of his native Virginia was imminent, he chose to fight for the Confederacy. "I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children," he said. For Berry, "he embodied and suffered, as did no other prominent person of his time, the division between nation and country, nationalism and patriotism that some of us in rural America are feeling at present." Nation and nationalism, in Berry's usage, refer to an abstract allegiance, while country and patriotism describe a vital and demanding relationship – to a place to which we belong as much as it belongs to us. Lee, limited and even culpable as he may have been, was a man grown in such a place, and he put his obligation to it above any other claim. When the terrible war ended at last, he preached and practiced reconcilia-

tion between North and South, but, while the war continued, he fought. This makes him, for Berry, a tragic figure, a man caught in a web not of his weaving, who was guided by "loyalties that he selflessly respected and intimately felt rather than by general principles telling him what he ought to feel."

In 2017 a decision by the Charlottesville, Virginia City Council to remove an equestrian statue of Lee from a city park led to a pitched battle in the streets of the city. It became one of the defining events of the first year of the Trump presidency, when the President spoke equivocally about the pro-statue protestors rather than unconditionally condemning them. The statue was finally taken down in 2001. Berry regards such actions as an attempt to "kill the past" and render it "obsolete." This is dangerous, in his view, on several grounds. First it removes from sight and mind a living history which still informs the present and which ought to be faced and discussed rather than purged. Second it shows contempt for local loyalties and affections – the Confederate soldier toppled from his pedestal is not just an incarnate abstraction, but somebody's brother or son, friend or lover. And, finally, the statue topplers perpetuate the very war that they ostensibly want to end. The forces of righteousness "refuse…to imagine…the humanity and suffering of an 'enemy'," Berry writes, "and, to me, this is the most troubling revelation of the movement against monuments… for such a principled numbness foretells only more killing."

Berry's book is rooted, as all his work has been since he entered on "the way of love," in a spirit of forgiveness. He takes the commandment to "love your enemies" seriously – though, I reiterate, unsentimentally – and he finds "an imperishable absurdity in the idea of war as a means of peace." Among the virtues that he thinks best support a spirit of forgiveness he includes a sense of humour – that "wise and generous laughter that is meant to wedge or wear a breath of space between our ourselves and our opinions" – and a sense

of humility rooted in a recognition of the fragility and evanescence of goodness – "We must bear in mind," he dares to say "that the language of division is more perfectible than the language of agreement – for the reason that, for humans, evil is simpler hence more perfectible than goodness and truth." The inevitable incompleteness of our knowledge provides yet another motive for a forbearing attitude. This is an old theme of Berry's, wonderfully developed a few years back, in an essay called "The Way of Ignorance." "…it is the unknowable, not the knowable and the known," he says here, "that ought to set the tone of our conversation about the past."

One of the most surprising, and, for me, most inspired elements of *The Need to Be Whole* is the amount of attention Berry gives to the idea of sin. It's a word rarely heard these days outside of theological circles, embarrassing even to most Christians, and yet Berry devotes a whole chapter to it. I have the impression that for most people sin is closely connected to guilt and is therefore regarded as a fetter on that glowing self-esteem that should be proper to a contemporary person. There is a good reason for this aversion to the idea. During the Middle Ages sin was "criminalized" by the Church. It was turned from a ground for contrition and mutual forbearance into a juridical and actionable fault within the Church's emerging legal order. Worse, it became a means by which the Church shamed and controlled its flock. Not surprisingly, people eventually rebelled against this oppression but, in the process, the baby went out with the bath water, and people were left with no concept at all to account for their inevitable short-comings. This has resulted, in Berry's opinion, in a thin and weakened morality. Not only is "our incompleteness and brokenness as a public culture" revealed by "our self-comfortably small selection of public sins," but "the issues of our merely public morality are incomplete, scattered, arbitrary and discontinuous." (His *we* here refers to Americans, but

Canadians, I think, share this vitiated morality.) With only "a meagre handful of highly specialized sins, he says, "an unprecedented multitude [can] be sinless." Getting down to cases about these "specialized sins," he writes…

> A properly educated conservative who has neither approved of abortion nor supported a tax or a regulation, can destroy a mountaintop [mountaintop removal is a method of coal mining in Kentucky] or poison a river and sleep like a baby. A well-instructed liberal who has behaved with the prescribed delicacy towards women and people of colour can consent to the plunder of the land and people of rural America and sleep like a conservative.

Neither trembles at their own sinfulness, and self-righteousness rules the field across the political spectrum. The complacently *woke* see no need to discover a country "filled only with Trump voters, disbelievers in science, climate change deniers, racists, sexists, homophobes, [and] backward 'non-college' country people." Those so vilified and patronized make equivalent caricatures of the "liberal elites" and become angrier and more defiant, as they are driven deeper into the character ascribed to them. Where there should be conversation, there is instead "a rhythm of retribution passing back and forth between two hostile sides."

I am only able to give a bare idea of this rich book in a short review, but one other feature that deserves note is the dialogue the book carries on with various black writers. One example is the work of his contemporary Ernest Gaines (1933-2019), with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship which began when they were both Stegner fellows at Stanford in 1958-1959. What Berry commends in Gaines' work is a "language [that] locates him particularly and exactly in his native place and its history." He continues…

> Ernest Gaines speaks so fully and responsibly of what he knows that in speaking for himself he speaks also for others. His language…is so attentive to the details and qualities of lived lives, and so mindful of itself, that it displaces us from the loaded abstractions and slogans of public confrontation and returns us to the lovely possibility that people can talk *with* one another. No language could be…more determinedly unavailable to the purposes of hatred and violence than that of this book or this writer. [Gaines' *A Gathering of Old Men*, set in Louisiana, is the book under discussion.] Because he speaks of and from his own small place, which, as he knows, is only one in a mosaic of thousands of small places, the South cannot be for him an abstract idea as it is for many less settled and located people. Having so particularly placed himself, he cannot speak as a representative southerner any more than he can speak as a representative black person.

Berry's book hopes to foster "the willingness to speak as and for ourselves" and to be known as ourselves rather than as types, emblems or instances of some category. He quotes William Blake's statement that "he who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars" and its corollary that "'General Good' is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatterer." Writing, like Gaines' novel, brings the unique and unrepeatable individuality of experience to light. Pro and con dissolve in understanding, and this, he thinks, is the proper function of literature – to bring us into the presence of "the lovely possibility" of talking *with* rather than *at* one another.

The one thing in Berry's book that I am inclined to question is the way in which he uses the word *public*. With him this is often a pejorative term. "The public," he writes, "is not, except in the most remote and theoretical sense, a membership." It is "nobody's home," there is no "spirit of hospitality," its freedom is "the freedom of the richest and most pow-

erful to reign." He approvingly quotes the essayist Paul Tenny, who defines the public as "a collection of unrelated individuals whose interactions are mediated through various shallow and transactional mechanisms, where common ground with a neighbour can only, at best, be found, in the most banal of trivialities." Elsewhere he says, "We are now defining our society as a public composed of individuals persons with no intervening structure." The opposition here between community as a hospitable membership and the public as an empty assortment of easily manipulated strangers strikes me as too stark. Berry undeniably has his roots in Port Royal, but he is also a writer who has spent his life assembling his readers into what I would like to call *publics* – with the accent on the plural rather than the singular form. He does not know and will never know most of his readers and yet they form a kind of community – an intervening structure? – nonetheless. I think my difference with him on this point might be terminological rather than substantive, and yet it might still be important. Between the mass or general public and the face-to-face community are many smaller publics, sustained by loyalties, interests and affinities that are neither entirely personal nor entirely impersonal. It is just such an assembly that Berry's book seeks, as it reaches out for readers, and I would like to call this hoped-for but always open and incomplete gathering *a* public. In this way the hollow and impersonal public that Berry deplores can be contested; the associations that mediate between the lonely crowd and the local community can find an honourable name; and a necessary concept can be retained.

Wendell Berry's book is quite explicitly addressed to his fellow Americans, but I think that Canadians will find it pertinent nonetheless, as we too are in the midst of a brutal simplification of our past, and one that has arguably struck even closer to the heart of the country than in the U.S. Take the exemplary

case of Egerton Ryerson whose statue, on the grounds of the university that used to bear his name, was recently defiled and dishonoured. Ryerson was accused of being an architect of the residential school system. In fact, he was a man closely connected with indigenous people who had – to quote his entry in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* – "worked and lived alongside Ojibwa people and learned to speak the language." He counted Kahkewaquonaby (Peter Jones) as a lifelong friend and himself received the Ojibwa name Cheechock in 1826 as a tribute from the people of the Credit River among whom he had lived. A year later, writing in the American *Methodist Magazine*, he recalled "the affectionate manner in which they received me [which] removed all the strangeness of national feeling, and enabled me to embrace them as brethren, and love them as mine own people." Ryerson went on to become the architect of Upper Canada's system of public schools. He continued in conversation with indigenous leaders, and, in 1847, after wide consultation with them, he wrote a memo recommending the establishment of agricultural training schools for indigenous youth. (This was fifty years and more before there was anything even resembling the residential school system of the first half of the 20th century.) These were imagined as voluntary boarding schools which would aspire to self-sufficiency as the students learned the techniques of farming. That's the history, and that's Ryerson's crime – to have cooperated with indigenous leaders who had come to think that the uneasy entente that had prevailed between natives and newcomers in the 17th and 18th centuries was coming to an end and that they would now have to adapt to a rapidly modernizing society. However, I have not found that there is much interest in history amongst the Ryerson (now Metropolitan) faculty and students whose views I know. Excepting the handful of historians who know something about the man, most seemed eager to get the name changed and "move on" without reference to who or what

Egerton Ryerson may have been.

This case, among numerous others, embodies many of the tendencies that Berry identifies in the U.S.: extreme simplification, keen self-righteousness, uninformed contempt for the past, and a taste for vindication and victory at the expense of understanding. I find these tendencies ominous. To say what should be obvious but no longer is: the present, for good and ill, continues the past. If we don't at least try to see the past in its true colours, we will be able to form little or no idea of what we are currently doing insofar as what we are doing is inevitably shaped and constrained by the past. With the past erased and unremembered, a seemingly boundless present will lose itself in fantastic and impossible futures. These are good reasons, I think, for Canadians to attend to what Berry is saying.

A *New Yorker* profile of Berry recently reported that "several of Berry friends urged him to abandon this book" as, in his words, "a dire breach of political etiquette." (Dorothy Wickenden, "Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age," Feb. 21 2022) I can see why. It's a brave book, and I imagine it cost its author more trouble than its affable style might, at first, seem to indicate. Berry speaks, by his own admission, into a "great silence," and takes his stand on a common ground that is quickly disappearing. He risks almost inevitable misunderstanding in using a word like patriotism – a word which men like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin invoke on behalf of the very nationalism that Berry despises. But someone must speak for wholeness in world of dichotomies where one must be either a globalist or a nativist, a statist or a libertarian, a technophile or an "anti-vaxxer," because no other positions are recognized. Berry speaks for practical wisdom and practical judgment which he believes can be exercised only where people know each other as whole persons. If this should prove his final book, it will stand, in my view, as a worthy summing up of all that he has created throughout his long life.