

□ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC 279**

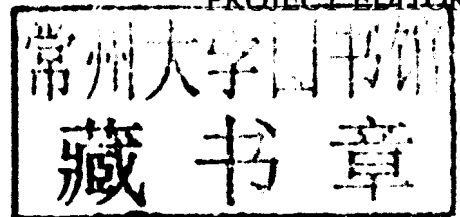


Volume 279

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Jeffrey W. Hunter**  
PROJECT EDITOR



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**N**amed “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

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Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

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- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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# Wendell Berry

## 1934-

(Full name Wendell Erdman Berry) American poet, novelist, short story writer, essayist, nonfiction writer, and author of juvenilia.

The following entry presents criticism on Berry's career through 2009. For additional information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 4, 6, 8, 27, and 46.

### INTRODUCTION

A noted conservationist and social critic, Berry is recognized for his preoccupation with the preservation of the traditions and customs of rural America. His corpus of poetry, novels, essays, and short stories is imbued with a pragmatic passion for environmental issues and an equally strong conviction for the values of marriage and community. Although he usually writes about his personal experiences as a farmer in his native Kentucky, Berry's concern for the stewardship of nature and human affairs extends to the whole nation. Critics have compared him to author Henry David Thoreau in terms of his profound affinity for the delicacy and resilience of the natural world.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Berry was born in Henry County, Kentucky, to John M. Berry, an attorney, and Virginia Berry. He lived as a youth in New Castle, the county seat, where his father practiced law and served prominently in the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. Berry and his younger brother John spent much time in their formative years on family farms near Port Royal and at "the Camp," a family-owned property on the riverbank. Berry attended the University of Kentucky, receiving his B.A. in 1956 and M.A. in 1957. He married Tanya Amyx in 1957, and the couple later had two children. In 1958 Berry moved with his family to the West Coast, where for the next two years he studied, wrote, and taught in the creative writing program at Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner fellowship. *Nathan Coulter*, Berry's first novel, was published in 1960. In 1961 he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship that took him to Italy and France. After briefly holding a teaching position at New York University, he committed himself to a life

of farming, following in the footsteps of five previous generations of his family. In 1965 Berry bought the Lanes Landing property, a hillside farm overlooking the Kentucky River, near Port Royal. It was not long before he rejected modern agricultural methods and farm machinery in favor of more traditional and conservational means; this concern for the land is a defining theme of his poetry and prose. He began teaching at the University of Kentucky in 1964, eventually resigning his position in 1977 to work on his farm full-time. After being offered a teaching schedule that would allow him time to attend to his farm, he returned to the university from 1987 to 2004. Berry has received a number of prestigious literary awards throughout his career, including the Bess Hokin Prize from *Poetry* magazine in 1967, an Academy Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1971, a Jean Stein Award for Nonfiction from the same institution in 1987, a Lannan Literary Award for Nonfiction in 1989, the Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry in 1994, the Thomas Merton Award in 1999, an O. Henry Award for his short story "The Hurt Man" in 2005, and the Art of Fact Award from the State University of New York at Brockport in 2006. Berry is also a Fellow of the Temenos Academy, a London-based organization devoted to "the learning of the Imagination."

### MAJOR WORKS

In both his prose and poetry, Berry's style is deceptively simple, featuring plain speech stripped of linguistic excesses to more closely resemble the stoic profundity of the natural world. In particular, Berry's poetry brings to life the physical and social world of his native region, and a deeply rooted sense of place informs all of his verse. At the same time, his poems celebrate the traditional elements of family—love, marriage, and generational momentum. Throughout his career, Berry's poetry has remained consistent both thematically and stylistically, displaying the urgency of a singular purpose. His first three collections of verse—*The Broken Ground* (1964), *Openings* (1968), and *Findings* (1969)—explore the mutual dependence of nature, culture, and domestic life, while also treating topical issues, including the Vietnam War. Written in free verse, these poems have an elegiac quality, conveying Berry's wistful longing amid a world whose

very existence is threatened by the progress of industrialized society. At the same time, Berry does not wholly decry industrialization itself, but endorses the recognition of all human processes as subordinate to a higher, divine reality. The religious tenor of Berry's poetry is more pronounced in *Sabbaths* (1987), *Sabbaths, 1987-90* (1992), and *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997* (1998). Composed on the titular holy day over the course of a decade, these poems are formal meditations on the spiritual connection between humanity and wilderness that depict nature as a place for meditation and inner renewal. Unlike Berry's earlier poetry, these pieces feature such formal structural techniques as stanzas and rhyme schemes. Some critics have asserted that Berry's themes of farming, family, and spirituality find an ideal balance in *The Country of Marriage* (1973). In this collection, Berry adopts the voice of the "mad farmer," a zealous persona through whom he emphatically espouses his views on democratic agrarianism and rails against the avaricious and ecologically ignorant practice of agribusiness, or corporate farming. This polemical strain is interwoven with a romantic affirmation of domesticity and family as part of a larger union with the land and the cycles of the earth. The poem "Stay Home" from his collection *A Part* (1980) encapsulates the author's stance on the importance of personal communion with nature. In it, Berry reinforces the notion that each individual is a steward of the land and that tending to this relationship with the natural world is integral to the well-being of the larger community. Concurrently, the poem displays a sense of the solitary and sacred space offered by nature to man.

Berry's fiction and nonfiction feature the same basic thematic concerns that mark his poetry. His fiction focuses on seven generations of three farming families—the Coulters, the Feltners, and the Beechums—in fictional Port William, Kentucky. Many of his novels and stories are structured around patterns of loss, work, and healing. For example, *A Place on Earth* (1967) deals with the process through which Mat Feltner copes with the loss of his son, Virgil, who had been overseas fighting in World War II. Feltner comes to grips with this heartbreaking reality by turning to the work of the farm. As he learns to accept life's uncertainty and mutability, he begins to heal. Although the work to which he has devoted himself is inherently cyclical and therefore fleeting, he understands that it is his duty to do his work well. This attitude becomes his worldview, allowing him to move on without his son. The close association with the natural world is a focal point of Berry's nonfiction, a platform from which he also speaks out against the ecological side effects of the global economy and America's

dependence on fossil fuels and other unsustainable resources. Like his poetry, Berry's nonfiction features a strong spiritual sensibility, suggesting that the earth's precarious ecological condition is due to the failure of people to live religiously. Derived from his inherited faith, Christianity, Berry's religious stance encompasses a belief in the mystery of the universe and a reverence for all life. In *The Unsettling of America* (1977), Berry argues for a holistic religion that respects all of creation and recognizes humans as one small piece of a complex mystery. *Home Economics* (1987) refers to the concept of life's interconnectedness as the "Kingdom of God" or "The Great Economy." The book endorses an ecologically sensitive religious practice that cultivates a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment. In Berry's opinion, living devoutly requires care for the health of the body and the earth, as both are intimately connected. Some of his nonfiction has successfully affected social change. The publication of *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (1971), a rumination on the natural beauty of Kentucky's Red River Gorge, helped prevent the area from being flooded for the purposes of creating a manmade recreational lake.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have lauded Berry's multifaceted exploration of religious, domestic, and interpersonal themes, although some have criticized him for demonstrating an excess of romanticism and conservatism in his work. Scholars have contrasted his relative adherence to the Judeo-Christian tradition with the eclectic religious approach of fellow nature poet Gary Snyder and have extolled his merging of Christian motifs and nature-based imagery in *A Timbered Choir*, specifically. Similarly, commentators have viewed Berry's use of formal structure as an expression of the meaningful order that the poet sees in the world around him due to his religious beliefs. According to scholar Jeffery Alan Triggs, "Berry does not luxuriate in currently fashionable notions of the indeterminacy of meaning. For him, form is not merely abstract or arbitrary, but is the animating structure of life as it is really lived in all variety." Berry's idiosyncratic view of religion has been likened to the worldly variety of Christianity adopted by iconic nature writer John Burroughs. Furthermore, reviewers have studied the spiritual implications of marriage in Berry's writing, particularly with regard to the role of the husband as a caretaker of both family and land. Critic Jack Hicks, in his analysis of *A Place on Earth*, cited this aspect of Berry's work as a central component of the man himself, stating: "The model of Berry's own life . . . has nourished and been nourished by an extraordinary



rich metaphor: man as husband, in the oldest sense of the word, having committed himself in multiple marriages to wife, family, farm, community, and finally to the cycle of great nature itself." Moreover, Berry has been praised for espousing his political beliefs from a domestic perspective—one that values equally the roles of man and woman. Critic Kimberly K. Smith contended that "Berry offers three arguments that build on feminist insights: a critique of the traditional construction of masculinity, an analysis of the conventional nature of marriage and family, and an attack on the . . . desire to establish intergenerational continuity by passing the farm down from father to son." Despite a range of critical perspectives on Berry's works, scholars have agreed that his contributions to the genre of American nature writing are of lasting significance.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

Nathan Coulter (novel) 1960  
*The Broken Ground: Poems* (poetry) 1964  
*A Place on Earth* (novel) 1967  
*Openings: Poems* (poetry) 1968  
*Findings* (poetry) 1969  
*The Long-Legged House* (essays) 1969  
*Farming: A Hand Book* (poetry) 1970  
*The Hidden Wound* (essays) 1970  
*The Unforeseen Wilderness: An Essay on Kentucky's Red River Gorge* (nonfiction) 1971  
*A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (essays) 1972  
*The Country of Marriage* (poetry) 1973  
*The Memory of Old Jack* (novel) 1974  
*The Kentucky River: Two Poems* (poetry) 1976  
*Clearing: Poems* (poetry) 1977  
*The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture* (essays) 1977  
*A Part* (poetry) 1980  
*The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays, Cultural and Agricultural* (essays) 1981  
*Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* (essays) 1981  
*The Wheel* (poetry) 1982  
*Standing by Words: Essays* (essays) 1983  
*Collected Poems, 1957-1982* (poetry) 1985  
*Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (essays) 1987  
*Sabbaths* (poetry) 1987  
*Remembering: A Novel* (novel) 1988  
*What Are People For? Essays* (essays) 1990  
*Fidelity: Five Stories* (short stories) 1992  
*Sabbaths, 1987-90* (poetry) 1992  
*Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community: Eight Essays* (essays) 1993  
*Another Turn of the Crank: Essays* (essays) 1995

*A World Lost* (novel) 1996  
*A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems, 1979-1997* (poetry) 1998  
*Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (nonfiction) 2000  
*Hannah Coulter: A Novel* (novel) 2004  
*Andy Catlett: Early Travels; A Novel* (novel) 2006  
*Whitefoot: A Story from the Center of the World* (juvenilia) 2009

## CRITICISM

### Kenneth Fields (essay date winter 1970)

SOURCE: Fields, Kenneth. "The Hunter's Trail: Poems by Wendell Berry." *Iowa Review* 1, no. 1 (winter 1970): 90-9.

[In the following essay, Fields provides an assessment of the limitations and strengths of Berry's poetry through Findings, declaring *Openings* his finest collection.]

And change with hurried hand has swept these scenes:  
 The woods have fallen, across the meadow-lot  
 The hunter's trail and trap-path is forgot,  
 And fire has drunk the swamps of evergreens . . .

F. G. Tuckerman

Pound and Williams continue to be useful paradigms in our poetry: the one, an erudite antique collector who, after many expansions of shop, found himself with more curious merchandise than even he could inventory; the other, a provincial dealer in small pieces of Americana, a few of them perfect, but the rest easily duplicated. Pound shows the legacy of the Symbolist movement, for, like so many of its other inheritors, he writes poems which are intended not to be read but to be explicated. Language, one feels while reading him, is arcane and, save for flashes of suggested meaning, opaque to all but the most devoted researchers. Williams, on the other hand, believed that "the particles of language must be clear as sand," and his poems are illustrations of the theory. The best of them are written in plain, conventional language, and though they are not ultimately for the man on the street, it's plain that he would be able to get through them, often with pleasure. It's important to keep these two types in mind while reading modern poets, and to be aware that there *are* two. Reading a poem by someone like Robinson for the first time, I would almost certainly not understand it completely, but I would recognize it as *understandable*. Whereas after reading someone

like Crane for the first time, I might say, "Not only do I fail to understand this poem completely, I don't understand it at all." But (and this perhaps only because I am an academic) I might declare it to be *figurable*. Figurable and Understandable poets are still with us, some of them as friendly to each other as were Pound and Williams: Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, and Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, though far declined from their masters, are obvious examples.

Wendell Berry (b. 1934) is an Understandable poet, and a good one. I can give no better example of his distance from much of what is fashionable than an exchange I overheard between Berry and a friend who wrote surrealist poems. The subject was teaching the writing of poetry. The friend said that his students did their writing in class, automatically, without reflection and without trying to make sense. He added that they often needed "inspiration" and, as an example, he told how he had once brought into the classroom a dressmaker's dummy and, placing a beer can on its head, had merely told his students, "Write!" It is typical that Berry did not comment directly, but instead gave his own example. "When I taught at NYU," he quietly replied, "I used to take kids who had grown up in the city to a park and ask them to write about a tree or some flowers." Without much time for reflection, the surrealist objected, "Naw, you've got to give them something unusual, something that shocks them—like a boxing glove and a piece of raw liver." Hanging fire just for a moment, or so I saw it as an outsider, Berry in his modest way changed the subject.

Plainly a man at work who loves to write, Berry seems to have natural good taste: and rarest of all, he seems to be an author for whom writing comes easily. Perhaps a little too easily, for in some ways he has been willing to publish too much. He has written two novels, *Nathan Coulter* (1960), and *A Place on Earth* (1967), a book of essays, *The Long-Legged House* (1969), and three books of poetry, *The Broken Ground* (1964), *Findings* (1969), and, though published earlier than *Findings*, his latest book, *Openings* (1968). *Farming: A Handbook*, most of which I have seen in manuscript, should appear shortly. This comes to seven books in nine years. His best work is plain and deals with the things closest to him: the Kentucky landscape, a few of its inhabitants, and his wife. Fine as they are, however, the best poems were a long time coming.

The subject and style of *The Broken Ground* purport to be plain, and two of the best poems, "The Apple Tree" and "May Song," show the influence of Williams. But the book is often curiously labored and even ornate, and the style comports oddly with the simplicity of the subjects. Consider these lines:

Until morning comes say of the blind bird:  
His feet are netted with darkness, or he flies  
His heart's distance into the darkness of his eyes.  
A season's sun will light him no tree green.

Or these:

The river clears after the winter  
floods; the slopes of the hills renew  
the sun, diaphanous flower and leaf, blue-green  
with distance, patina of their substantial  
bronze . . .

"The blind bird, heart's distance into the darkness of his eyes," "no tree green," "diaphanous flower and leaf," "patina of their substantial bronze"—here, the poet may be standing on the broken ground, but the quality of his perceptions, that is to say, his language, is that of a self-conscious literary man, and he writes in clichés. Occasionally, one gets extraordinary details, as in the second part of "The River Voyagers," or these lines from "Diagon," reminiscent of Hérédia, in which the floridity is a part of the strangeness of the description:

By night the great fish  
Hunt the shallows, their silent breathing  
Opening red flowers of their gills.

In these lines, and in poems like "the child born dead," "Sparrow" and "The Wild," we can see promises of poems to come.

The ornateness of the first book disappears in *Findings*, a very curious piece of work. Consisting largely of poem-sequences, it strikes me as the work of a talented novelist. Only occasionally does a whole poem come off successfully, though scattered through the book are several excellent passages, such as the following one, describing the conversation of an eighty-year-old grandfather and his grandson:

The quietness of knowing in common  
is half of it. Silences come into it  
easily, and break it

while the old man thinks  
or concentrates on his pipe  
and the strong smoke

climbs over the brim of his hat.  
He has lived a long time.  
He has seen the changes of times

and grown used to the world  
again. Having been wakeful so long,  
the loser of so many years,

his mind moves back and forth,  
sorting and counting,  
among all he knows.

His memory has become huge  
and surrounds him,  
and fills his silences.

Perhaps the description ought to have its place in a story or a novel, but the writing is genuine and, in contrast to the first book, unpretentious. He has the low-keyed tone of ordinary life, the studied leisure of prose. The chief trouble with the book is its prolixity: he uses too many words, often diminishing his effects. Even the passage just quoted is marred by the redundancy and flatness of "He has lived a long time." The fault appears again and again. Who, save aficionados of Eliot, will read lines like these without exasperation?—

[The dead] went out like fires  
that burn into recollection,  
consuming memory also,  
and the memories of memory  
and the rememberers also.

A final example should make my objections to the book clear. Here are three lines, about an old man near death, which are sharp in themselves and moving, especially the phrase, "fading script":

His garden rows go back through all  
his summers, bearing their fading

script of vine and bloom . . .

But in its context the fine edge of his perception is blunted by redundancy:

His life has been a monument to the place.  
His garden rows go back through all  
his summers, bearing their fading

script of vine and bloom,  
what he has written on the ground,  
its kind abundance, taken kindly from it.

This is simply easy writing, and it is a pity that Berry did not know when to stop. Most of the second section, for example, does little more than set up part two of "An Epilogue."

*Openings*, however, is another matter: it is far and away his best book. Here, he is on solid ground, and he gives us several whole poems, the fulfilled promises of his earlier work.

As we learn from his interesting collection of essays, *The Long-Legged House*, Berry had spent several years away from Kentucky, and finally decided to leave the Eastern literary and academic world to return to his birthplace. "As a writer, then, I have had this place as my fate," he tells us, and the essays make it clear that he has scarcely chosen his subject; instead,

it has chosen him. The small rural area near Port Royal, with its myriads of details, has a power over him that is close to being an obsession. Now no longer a self-conscious interloper, or a man coming home for vacations, Berry is home to stay. In *Openings* he moves easily through his woods as a native hunter, sure of his footing and of his language.

And for the first time, really, we see him using the language of a poet. We can give poetry its simplest definition by saying that it is "language written in lines," and to my eye and ear Berry only occasionally uses the line well in his early poems. But notice his control in "The Finches," as he lets the turns of his short line place the emphasis exactly. We know how the sentences sound by the ways in which the syntax runs across line and stanza endings: "comes / the song," "bright, then / dark," "they move into / and then against the light." And the rhythms of the second half of the poem are even more effective.

The ears stung with cold  
sun and frost of dawn  
in early April, comes

the song of winter finches,  
their crimson bright, then  
dark as they move into

and then against the light.  
May the year warm them  
soon. May they soon go

north with their singing  
and the season follow.  
May the bare sticks soon

live, and our minds go free  
of the ground  
into the shining of trees.

He is usually strongest when his poems are descriptive, with a minimum of commentary, for his mind deals much better with the concrete than with the abstract. Throughout his work one feels that his mind moves with the seasons; in fact his mind seems to be dominated by them. He is like Yoshinobu's deer, startled and moved by the season:

The deer which lives  
On the evergreen mountain  
Where there are no autumn-leaves  
Can know the coming of autumn  
Only by its own cry.

(trans. Arthur Waley)

In a sense Berry is the entranced captive of process, and while for me his captivity restricts his range, it nevertheless results in considerable beauties. Two passages from his prose resemble "The Finches" in tone and feeling: