



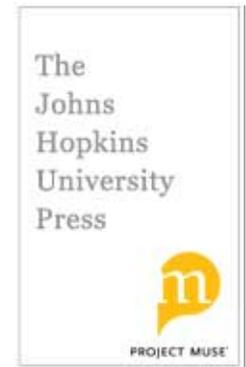
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The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love
by Fritz Oehlschlaeger (review)

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(Review)

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(creative love, self-emptying incarnation),” the test of which is “the presence of something like that pattern in a human life seen as a whole” (152).

“Heaven’s earthly life,” which serves as the subtitle to this book, comes from one of Berry’s Sabbath poems (2004), a poem about Blake’s painting, “Jacob’s Dream,” and the account thereof in Genesis. The speaker of the poem asks whether Jacob, in his reverie, is living “his part / Of Heaven’s earthly life” and ends with the assertion that Jacob’s “meager sod” and “low estate” is in fact “the household of God. / And it is Heaven’s gate.” This is a thoroughgoing sacramental view of nature. It would please the likes of Flannery O’Connor, who never tired of saying that we approach the infinite by the penetration of the finite. And it is to the credit of Shuman and Owens that, whatever the weaknesses of this book, they have given us a collection alert to this very sacramentalism. No one who reads Berry well can be other-worldly without first being profoundly *this-worldly*—an important fact not lost on any of the contributors here.

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The Achievement of Wendell Berry: The Hard History of Love. By Fritz Oehlschlaeger. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8131-3007-1. Pp. 322. \$40.00

Fritz Oehlschlaeger’s book pieces Wendell Berry’s extensive writings into a carefully crafted quilt, revealing the pattern of love that runs through Berry’s entire oeuvre and binding this pattern into a unified whole. While this task is made easier by the cohesive vision that informs Berry’s essays, fiction, and poetry, it remains a Herculean effort because of the thematic and generic range of his work. Other recent assessments of Berry take more focused approaches: Kimberly K. Smith’s *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition: A Common Grace* (2003) considers Berry from an Agrarian perspective, J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens’ *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader’s Guide* (2008) introduces Christian readers to Berry, and the essays collected by Mark T. Mitchel and Nathan Schlueter in *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry* (2011) reflect on Berry’s contribution to conservative thought. But instead of bringing Berry into any particular conversation, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry* attempts, in the words of its dust jacket, to “provide a comprehensive introduction to the philosophical and creative world of Wendell Berry.” This bold endeavor is both its strength and weakness: the lack of any specific focusing lens enables Oehlschlaeger to offer a sympathetic overview of Berry’s thought, but the absence of a more narrow thesis

causes the book to lapse, at times, into a simple summary of Berry's essays or stories. It is certainly no slight to Oehlschlaeger's lucid prose to note that at these points, I would rather read Berry's writings themselves. Nonetheless, *The Achievement of Wendell Berry* serves as an affectionate and knowledgeable guide to the prophetic essays, reflective fiction, and attentive poems by which Wendell Berry calls us to act out an exacting love for our places.

Oehlschlaeger's sympathetic attitude toward Berry is clear from the first page, where he acknowledges the difficulty posed by the "Notice" that Berry posts at the beginning of his novel *Jayber Crow*: "Persons ... attempting to explain, interpret, explicate, analyze, deconstruct, or otherwise 'understand' it will be exiled to a desert island in the company only of other explainers" (1). Berry's choice of location for his exiles is fitting since he views our culture's tendency to explain and analyze everything rationally—to the exclusion of an imaginative, affectionate understanding—as one of the ways we turn our places into isolated deserts. Oehlschlaeger avoids reductive explanations, then, and instead responds to Berry with affection, reading his "work with an eye toward learning from it, not simply about it" (3).

In the first chapter, Oehlschlaeger addresses himself to learning "a language of practices, particulars, and virtues" from Berry and then considering in turn several of the virtues—such as "prudence, courage, justice, equity, and friendship"—that are central to Berry's vision (10). Oehlschlaeger views Berry's work as a teamster through the lens of Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a practice; both entail submission to formal limits and to a tradition that instructs us in the virtues needed to work well within these limits. By ordering his work according to the particular standards of the field, the team of mules, and the disciplines handed down by past teamsters, Berry can work out an affection for his farm and the creatures who live from it. These virtues learned through concrete practices enable individuals to act as loving "members" of their places who "care for all the particulars of specific places in ways that will allow for them to be healthy indefinitely" (27). Oehlschlaeger contrasts this view with the scientific, technocratic attitude that marks much contemporary environmentalism and leads Berry to call the "environment" an "idiotic term." Berry returned to Kentucky and the practice of farming partially because, as Oehlschlaeger perceives, this practice teaches virtues that do not preserve an abstract "environment," but rather work out a kindly care for a beloved place.

The second and third chapters form the book's core and constitute some of the most helpful critical work yet written about Berry. In these chapters, Oehlschlaeger addresses head on two of the most difficult and pressing questions about Berry: does his vision of agrarian community have any relevance to our contemporary economy, and does it depend on Christianity? Berry critiques the market economy because it devalues communal relations and encourages individuals to view all of life—including such vital areas as sexuality, education, agriculture, and medicine—

as so many shops in a mall, as means to fulfill the self rather than opportunities to practice loving relationships. In contrast, agrarians imagine an economic order that knits together the personal and communal, the body and the spirit and so understands these relationships in richly significant ways. In Berry's agrarian order, people are not free *from* the constraints of place and community but are rather free *to* participate in a healthy *oikos*—the Greek word meaning household from which our words economy and ecology derive. Oehlschlaeger acknowledges that in Berry's enthusiasm to portray a vigorous community he at times overlooks the flawed character of past agrarian communities (59). Nevertheless, he argues, Berry helps us envision a way of life that, rather than satisfying the postmodern self's "locus of desires," finds freedom in a "self that gives itself entirely" (60), whether in marriage, teaching, farming, healing, or other relationships. By refiguring the self and community, Berry offers contemporary readers redemptive ways of living in a diseased world. So while some critics see Berry's agrarianism as so focused on local, self-sufficient communities that it overlooks the reality of our increasingly global interdependence, Oehlschlaeger points out that "a local frame of reference is critical" to seeing our global connections "with the intimacy of love" rather than with abstractions such as nationalism (75). Berry's agrarian focus is not nostalgic, then, but attempts "to make another order of possibilities visible again and to move people to believe and take up the promise" of this vision (111).

The possibilities visible in Berry's local, loving communities are predicated on his "deep sense of our dependence as creatures on a world only rightly understood as sheer loving gift" (77). This, as Oehlschlaeger observes, is an essentially religious insight, and yet Berry has had a vexed relationship with the Christian church in which he was raised. Oehlschlaeger argues that Berry's reluctance, particularly early in his life, to write from within the church stems from the Gnostic strain that permeates American Christianity. Because American Protestantism has historically been otherworldly and has failed to emphasize the spiritual importance of the physical body, the church has not taken a firm enough stance on issues such as racism, war, and ecological destruction. Berry's criticisms of these failures are withering, but especially in recent years, he has grounded his writings on two related Christian doctrines: the Incarnation, with its implications for our treatment of physical bodies, and "mystery," or our creaturely need to live humbly by faith in a world we did not create and cannot control. Oehlschlaeger reflects on these doctrines to show how the mystery of our earthly experience becomes beautifully rich in Berry's incarnational and even sacramental understanding of the world. Take, these lines, for instance, that Berry quotes appreciatively in an early essay on William Carlos Williams: "There is nothing to eat / seek it where you will / but of the body of the Lord" (283 n. 17). Berry's writings challenge the church to live out the implications of its theology and find ways to follow the example of Christ's self-giving love. As Oehlschlaeger concludes in his chapter on Berry and the church, "For Berry, our most important freedom lies not in what we do or make, but in

what we are given, for what we most need is to be free of ourselves. Learning this is the lifelong work of love, the everyday practice of resurrection in making the self a gift" (116).

The next three chapters focus on Berry's short stories and novels, exploring how these forms unfold and en flesh his vision of self-giving love. Oehlschlaeger's readings of Berry's fiction are, in general, less illuminating than his synthesis of the essays. These chapters are at their best, however, when they reflect on the different ways that stories help community members live lovingly and peacefully in their places. By sharing stories among each other, members of Port William come to see love as "an inheritance" from their community rather than an individual "achievement" (117). Oehlschlaeger quotes from the end of *Remembering* to express how narratives can teach us to live well in time: "Time 'is told by love's losses, and by the coming of love, and by love continuing in gratitude for what is lost'" (156). Stories remembered and shared honor lives lived in particular times and places and so recognize each life as a gift for which to be grateful. Some readers may be concerned that Berry's emphasis on place could serve nationalistic ends, but as Oehlschlaeger shows, Berry responds to our willingness to go to war not by rejecting all loyalty to place—and so becoming cosmopolitan—but by hoping that we could love our particular places in such a way that we could not imagine destroying any place. Oehlschlaeger reads each of Berry's novels set during World War II in this way, but he offers the most insight into *Jayber Crow*. Drawing on Rene Girard, Oehlschlaeger draws attention to the rivalry between Troy and Jayber, noting that for most of the novel Jayber is not sure whether his story will be about Hell or Heaven. As much as Jayber dislikes Troy, he mimetically mirrors Troy's possessive desires until he finally learns to love Mattie faithfully and selflessly. Jayber's faithful love, given freely with no hope of return, models the peaceful love that can knit people into a placed membership.

In the final chapter, Oehlschlaeger turns to Berry's poems, which practice the intimate language required by love, "ceaselessly guiding us back to the particular" (239). By resisting the abstract language that technology and industry use to figure material objects as replaceable instruments, poems make each object present so that each can be known and loved as it is. This particularizing task is why Berry wants to "unspecialized poetry" (250), take it back out of academic English departments, and use it in the service of our relationships.

Oehlschlaeger ends here, choosing not to offer a concluding, overarching explanation of Berry's vision of love. Instead, he is content simply to unfold this vision while answering some of the most pressing objections that Berry's critics have raised. So although Oehlschlaeger's broad approach diminishes the clarity of his argument, his refusal to make particular, explanatory claims enables him to avoid the exile with which Berry threatens explainers, and this book will enrich the ongoing conversation about how Berry's writings can help us live in loving communities that sustain fertile places.