



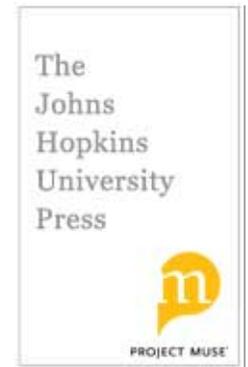
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Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life ed. by
Joel James Shuman, L. Roger Owens (review)

John Peterson

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(Review)

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depending on the professional choices made by the woman she focuses on in any given chapter. Throughout, her keen awareness of the full range of professional opportunities in Victorian print culture support her final comment: "Although this study of the Victorian woman of letters disclaims any large historical arc of rise and fall, it does finally reveal that the rise or fall of any individual woman author was dependent on the literary field in which she produced her work" (223).

The value of *Becoming a Woman of Letters* lies in its richly researched studies of these six individual women authors, and their place (or places) in their different literary fields. Peterson's generous incorporation of her findings from archival research gives particular value to her studies of Meynell, Martineau, Cholmondeley and the Howitts. She connects self-perceptions of these women in their letters with publishers' archives, arguments from their own reviews and reviews of other Victorians on writing women, as well as from their novels and poetry when appropriate, to develop rich analyses of variations on women's paths to, or away from, professional success. Peterson grounds her analyses in the critics who broke ground in Anglo-American feminist literary studies, inviting questions of feminine community and voice into dialogue with more recent New Historicists and material culture scholars. Furthermore, she draws originally on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, especially *Field of Cultural Production* (1993), to frame each of her studies, taking his understanding of the literary field as "a site of struggles." Peterson elucidates the particularities of those struggles for each of her intriguing subjects.

Becoming a Woman of Letters would have benefitted from more assertive editing; at points it reads like the collection of previously circulated work that it is, and there are a few surprising errors in detail. Alternately, Peterson's prose is often incisive, compact, and elegant. Her generous yet deftly chosen illustrations amplify her arguments and deepen the literary and historical richness of this insightful study of Victorian women and authorship.

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Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life. Edited by Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8131-2555-8. Pp. vi + 266. \$40.00

In the introduction to Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens' engaging book, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, Shuman writes: "This is not a book about Wendell Berry. It is not a biography, nor does it attempt a systematic critical analysis of his writing ... Rather, these essays are intended to be contributions to an ongoing conversation ... among a particular group of persons, over time and in a

particular place” (1). The “group of persons” Shuman mentions are “the Christian community—the church catholic—and some of its members who recognize in the work of Wendell Berry a kind of wisdom that might help them and their fellow Christians work, live, and think more faithfully” (1-2). According to Shuman, the diverse group of fourteen Christian writers whose essays comprise this book share “certain common convictions” with Berry, including a belief that “Christianity has often been insufficiently attentive to earth and flesh” (2). The book’s contributors work against this inattentiveness to “earth and flesh” by discussing the profound effect that Berry’s agrarian perspective has had on them, as well as by using his work to illustrate the ecological nature of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the means by which this ecological framework might be used to address various cultural ills. One can’t help but feel that Berry would approve of this approach to his work, that he would take pleasure in his writing serving not simply as the focus of additional scholarly analysis, but as a context in which his readers explore the relationships between his writing, their personal lives, and the issues confronting the places and communities they inhabit. This approach also makes Shuman and Owens’ book accessible to the first time reader of Berry’s work, as it relies less upon a detailed understanding of his writing, and more upon an interest in the Christian dimensions of his work and the issues addressed by the book’s essayists. While longtime readers of Berry’s essays, poems, and novels may wish to look elsewhere for a more thorough treatment of his writing, they too will enjoy the rich and stimulating conversations these writers engage in with his work.

Shuman and Owens organize their book into four sections, each of which corresponds with a persistent theme in Berry’s writing. In the four essays that constitute the book’s first section, “Good Work,” Stanley Hauerwas, Brian Volck, Richard P. Church, and Kyle Childress examine Berry’s writing and their professional lives in order to demonstrate how the fields of teaching, medicine, law, and ministry have at times failed to do “good work” and how these professions might “recommit to working for the common good” (6). At the heart of these essays is Berry’s interest in work that is performed with an appreciation for one’s place within their local community and an understanding of their work’s impact upon that community. Hauerwas’ critique of the modern university’s “placeless” curriculum reflects this point:

Education is now job preparation for a career in a profession. But work, whether it is done in the academy, a profession, or industry, is now designed so that the workers are separated from the effects of their work. They are permitted “to think that they are working no-where or anywhere—in their careers of specialties, perhaps, or in ‘cyberspace.’” The university, therefore, becomes a home for the homeless, those whom Wallace Stegner calls the “boomers.” (21)

As a counter to this “placelessness,” Kyle Childress’ essay, “Proper Work: Wendell Berry and the Practice of Ministry,” describes the importance of “staying and committing to one congregation, one community” (74). Childress’ essay focuses on the immense influence that Berry’s writing exerted on his decision to devote the last twenty years of his life to serving as pastor of the Austin Heights Baptist Church in East Texas rather than continually relocating to pursue the “denominational success ladder” (74). In a scholarly book that foregrounds the personal narratives of its contributors, Childress’ essay shines as a deeply affecting example of a writer who is not simply using Berry’s work as a theoretical context to consider a particular issue, but as an individual who has digested and reshaped his ministry according to Berry’s agrarian wisdom. As Childress writes, “I want to pastor like Berry farms” (74). According to Childress, this means adapting one’s ministry to the “particularities” of a congregation, just as a farmer adapts his methods of farming and his crops to the “particularities of the land” (76). Childress’ emphasis on the connections between work, place, and community are echoed in the book’s second section, “Holy Living.”

According to Shuman and Berry, “holy living” should not simply be understood as “religious behavior” or the avoidance of “certain (often trivial) proscribed activities,” but rather as “living well in relationship—to other persons, other creatures, and God” (7). Each of the writers in this section—Elizabeth Bahnson, Fred Bahnson, Ellen F. Davis, Shuman, and Norman Wirzba—explore the concept of “living well in relationship” by examining the role that Berry’s work has played in helping them become more conscious of their “existence as a member of creation, which is constituted by an intricate constellation of dependencies” (7). In his moving and insightful essay, “The Salvation of the City: Defiant Gardens in the Great Northern Feedlot,” Fred Bahnson details the intricate nature of these “dependencies” through the story of a community garden that grew out of an unlikely source: the murder of a local shop-owner named Bill King. As Bahnson tells it, the prayer vigil held in King’s honor helped inspire another member of the town, Mrs. Scenobia Taylor, to donate five acres of land to the Cedar Grove community, land that would eventually become the Anathoth Community Garden. According to Bahnson, the garden now provides fresh produce to low-income families, various community service programs for at-risk youth, a place in which community members come to know each other by name rather than racial and ethnic stereotypes, and an organic, local alternative to the destructive use of fossil fuels, fertilizers, and pesticides by the North American industrial food system. This detailing of the garden is interspersed with Bahnson’s analysis of the book of Jeremiah in order to provide a biblical context for examining the importance of community gardens, and his descriptions of the significant role that Berry’s writing played in his becoming Anathoth’s manager. This weaving in and out of personal narrative, exegesis, and literary analysis is characteristic of the narrative style used by many of the book’s contributors and is one of the major reasons for its lively

quality. Those readers who find Bahnson's analysis of Jeremiah intriguing, will also enjoy Ellen F. Davis' astute use of Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson's agrarian thinking to illuminate the Old Testament's "pervasively land centered...theological perspective" (115). In her essay, "And the Land I Will Remember': Reading the Bible through Agrarian Eyes," Davis provides an excellent critical overview of the Old Testament's land-based concerns, while also bringing to life the relationship between the ancient Israelite farmers and the "precariously balanced ecological niche that is the hill country of ancient Judah and Samaria" (116). Davis' imaginative detailing of these ancient farmers and their land offers a useful segue to examining the book's third section, "Imagination."

In his introduction to this section, Shuman notes that its authors—D. Brent Laytham, Philip A. Muntzel, Scott Williams, and L. Roger Owens—"rightly see that Berry's fiction and poetry (as well as his essays) help us live better by allowing us to imagine a better way to live" (9). The importance of this proposition is made strikingly clear in Williams' essay, "Alien Landscapes: Christianity and Inevitable Violence." The "alien landscapes" that Williams describes are mountains that have been shorn of their tops as a result of "mountain-top-removal methods of coal extraction" (212), a destructive mining activity each of us are implicated in through our ravenous consumption of coal-produced electricity. According to Williams, our seemingly insatiable desire for more electricity underscores the fact that "our lives are constructed in such a way that we can't imagine them without a great many things that seem impossible to procure without supporting all kinds of violence that we would normally deplore" (213). This inability to imagine human life without electricity is, for Williams, a sort of technological idolatry. For, as he points out, "it grants a kind of ultimate significance to something—electricity—that doesn't merit it. We know this because our Lord has taught us that even *food* doesn't have this kind of significance" (217). The goal of Williams' essay is not to argue on behalf of a life lived without electricity, but to illustrate how a "commitment to love God above all things," (219) means "avoiding as a matter of greatest urgency the kind of violence to our brothers and sisters that electricity production so often entails" (217). Whereas Williams focuses on the violence associated with electricity production, co-editor L. Roger Owens' essay, "Let the Place Judge: Healing the Division between Theology and Practice," examines a more abstract, but no less destructive form of violence: the cultural and communal damage that can ensue from evangelism which does not allow the particularities of a local place and culture to guide its practice. According to Owens, the "pastor who tries to shape a community faithful to the Jewish Messiah whose life they embody must think carefully about which aspects of that community's culture...are consistent with the shape of the life of Jesus and which are not, but the emphasis must be on letting the particularities of the place take the lead" (229). These comments recall Kyle Childress' account of adapting his ministry to the characteristics of his East Texas congregation. Thus, in the rich connections that exist between this book's various essays we find something akin to Berry's own novels, a community of interconnected voices and perspectives.

Shuman and Owens' book is not a work of impersonal scholarship; rather, it is a collection of fourteen essays that delve into the personal lives of their authors and the means by which Wendell Berry's writing has informed their own faith and work. Readers who prefer scholarly writing that avoids this narrative dimension need not worry; the book does not lapse into sentiment. Rather, it presents the sophisticated, yet accessible writing of clear thinking, principled individuals who care deeply about their faith and the places and communities in which they live. In so doing, the book manages to closely approximate the tone and focus of Berry's own writing, an impressive achievement for which Shuman and Owens deserve credit. While the book is not without detractions (one wishes for instance that Berry's poetry was dealt with in greater detail), it is a rewarding work that significantly expands the conversation regarding the Christian dimensions of Berry's writing. In the book's fourth and final section, "Moving Forward," which consists of a single essay, Charles Pinches reminds readers of "the difficult but redeeming work of caring for the land and for one another in our local communities" (254). This has been Berry's message to readers for the last fifty years. As Shuman and Owens' book makes clear, that message has never been more relevant than now.

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Rising from the Dead: Poems. By Paul J. Willis. Seattle: WordFarm, 2009. ISBN-10: 1-60226-004-4. ISBN-13: 978-1-60226-004-7. Pp. 99. \$12.00.

Since he began publishing creative writing in the early nineties, Paul J. Willis has become a literary powerhouse—prolific and versatile. *Rising from the Dead* appears just a year after his last poetry collection, *Visiting Home* (2008). These full-length collections were preceded by five poetry chapbooks. In addition to poetry, Willis has published several novels, a collection of essays, and—as co-editor—an anthology of poems responding to Shakespeare, which is not surprising given Willis' scholarly interests in Shakespeare. On that note, Willis has published or presented an abundance of scholarship as a Professor of English at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. A successful Christian writer and scholar, Willis has become a bit of a superstar within the Conference on Christianity and Literature. Longtime readers of *Christianity and Literature* have frequently encountered his poetry and book reviews (by him and about him), and conference attendees have heard his presentations.

If we do not already know Willis as a writer of faith, he introduces himself in the first two poems of *Rising from the Dead*: "When You Say" and "Paul Jonathan Willis." Here he contemplates his name as though the very sound of it "rising on