

Reviews

world. By definition, this protest is largely being made by people who have found no place in "the new economy" or who are looking for a different way of life. It is these people who turn out by the thousands every time a meeting of the World Trade Organization attempts to convene. They see the WTO as an agency that would work against cultural differences, and lead, in a manner of speaking, to French farmers making coke rather than calvados.

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Life is a Miracle : An Essay Against Modern Superstition by Wendell Berry, (Washington: Counterpoint, c. 2000) 153 pages, cloth, \$21.00 (\$30.95 Canada)

Wendell Berry, essayist, poet, teacher and farmer, is probably well known to many readers of the *Review*. Certainly he deserves to be, for he is one of the few voices in North America raised against the juggernaut of the centralisation and commercialisation of life by scientism and rationalism, with their accompanying industrialism, urbanization, and the removal of all sense of mystery from life. Berry's latest book is an eloquent continuation of this critical work, a work that has much in common with the Distributism of G.K. Chesterton and his companions. Much of this book is a bitter, but fair, critique of Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge* (1998), a book that

sketches a project for the unification of all knowledge under the umbrella of a reductionist and materialistic science. Wilson stands for the opposite of nearly everything that Berry values, and Wilson's book is a convenient and effective way for him to make his own views known.

Wendell Berry is not a philosopher, and consequently his language sometimes lacks the precision that one looks for in a philosopher. But this makes little difference in his writing, for he writes from a love of concrete things, of this piece of land, as something to be known and loved, not a commodity to be subdivided and put on the market. Berry therefore has that love of place, of one's own things, that ought to characterise ordinary men, though ordinary men, at least in the United States, have been robbed of that sort of love by decades of mandatory schooling in which industrial "progress" and chauvinistic military adventures were lauded as national achievements. My high school chemistry textbook, for example, said that one could gauge the level of a country's civilisation by the amount of sulfuric acid it used! Even farmers are often caught up in the craze for the latest technology, eager to find export markets for their crops, embracing factory farming and the warehousing of animals, blind to the denaturing of the soil by the use of chemical fertilizers. Wendell Berry thus comes on the scene somewhat as a prophet, but a prophet announcing truths that ought to have been taught to us by

our grandfathers, though they seldom were.

The subject of Berry's writing is the destruction which modern science and modern thought have wrought upon mankind and its home, the earth. What he deplors is the modern penchant for reducing everything to the simplest explanation, usually a material one. Of this kind of explanation, Berry writes: "Explanation is reductive, not comprehensive; most of the time, when you have explained something, you discover leftovers. An explanation is a bucket, not a well. What can't be explained? I don't think creatures can be explained. I don't think lives can be explained. What we know about creatures and lives must be pictured or told or sung or danced. And I don't think pictures or stories or songs or dances can be explained. The arts are indispensable precisely because they are so nearly antithetical to explanation. The arts are constitutionally resistant to the reduction that Mr. Wilson wishes to subject them to."

One of the best things in Berry's book is his willingness to make a frontal attack on modern science, or as he sometimes calls it, "science-and-technology." Berry points out that, willy-nilly, all of us suffer from science, from its mistakes, its excesses, its ambitions: "The scale of experimentation," he writes, "has become too greatly enlarged, for now science may be said to be conducting many of its experiments on the scale of the world. Among the re-

sults are Chernobyl, the ozone hole, the acceleration of species extinction, and universal pollution." Moreover, science is now in thrall to corporations and big money: "That there has been no effective criticism of science is demonstrated, for instance, by science's failure to attend to the possibility of small-scale or cheap or low-energy or ecologically benign technologies. Most applications of science to our problems result in large payments to large corporations and in damages to ecosystems and communities. These eventually will have to be subtracted (but not, if they can help it, by the inventors or manufacturers) from whatever has been gained."

One of my favorite passages in this book is the comment about what Berry calls "boomer science." "Boomers" are "those who pillage and run," in contrast to "stickers", "those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." Berry writes: "unquestionably the dominant theme of modern history has been that of the boomer. It is no surprise that the predominant arts and sciences of the modern era have been boomer arts and boomer science. The collaboration of boomer science with the boomer mentality of the industrial corporations has imposed upon us a state of virtually total economy in which it is the destiny of every creature (humans not excepted) to have a price and to be sold. In a total economy, all materials, creatures, and ideas become commodities, inter-

changeable and disposable. Only such an economy could seek to impose upon the world's abounding geographic and creaturely diversity the tyranny of technological and genetic monoculture. Only in such an economy could "life forms" be patented, or the renewability of nature and culture be destroyed. Monsanto's aptly named "terminator gene"—which, implanted in seed sold by Monsanto, would cause the next generation of seed to be sterile—is as grave an indicator of totalitarian purpose as a concentration camp."

But Berry is nearly as hard on practitioners of the arts as he is on scientists. "Scientists who believe that 'original discovery is everything' justify their work by the 'freedom of scientific inquiry,' just as would-be originators and innovators in the literary culture justify their work by the 'freedom of speech' or 'academic freedom.' Ambition in the arts and sciences, for several generations now, has conventionally surrounded itself by talk of freedom. But surely it is no dispraise of freedom to point out that it does not exist spontaneously or alone. The hard and binding requirement that freedom must answer, if it is to last, or if in any meaningful sense it is to exist, is that of responsibility. For a long time the originators and innovators of the two cultures [sc. C.P. Snow's two cultures] have made extravagant use of freedom, and in the process have built up a large debt to responsibility, little of which has been paid, and for most of which there is not even a promissory note."

Thus "this crowd has mastered a slang of personal 'liberation' that has done little for real freedom . . . , but has set many free from their rightful obligations and responsibilities—to, for example, their spouses and their children. The arts, especially in their well-paying popular versions, have become adept as permission givers for this sort of freedom. But there is too close a kinship between the personal freedom from reverence, fidelity, neighborliness, and stewardship and the corporate freedom to pollute and exterminate. When, if ever, the accounting is properly done, many of our present 'liberties' and 'necessities' will be seen to owe too much to the exploitation of 'cheap' labor, raw materials, energy, and food."

And he goes on to say pointedly: "The dominant story of our age, undoubtedly, is that of adultery and divorce. This is true both literally and figuratively: The dominant tendency of our age is the breaking of faith and the making of divisions among things that once were joined." Berry thus neatly shows that what our culture calls sexual liberation is of the same stuff as economic exploitation of man and technological exploitation of the earth. The fact that hardly anyone today sees this connection, and in fact, would place these behaviors on different ends of the everlastingly stupid socio-political spectrum, shows only that the Devil has done his work well and has managed to divide humanity into warring camps, each seeing only one part of the truth.

Wendell Berry's insights lie in his love for the things of his household and neighborhood, for the particularities that ought to accompany all of us as we journey through life. And likewise his fear and distrust of the reductionist schemes and empirical logic of modern science and modern thought. But there is another possibility that he does not see. Wendell Berry is a Protestant, and he appears to have the distrust that some Protestants have toward thought applied to faith, toward theology as a science or toward philosophy. Hating what goes today by the name of science and organized thought, he is perhaps too ready to take refuge in pure subjectivism. Speaking of what are cries of the human heart—such as David's lament over the death of Absalom or Robert E. Lee's lament after the battle of Gettysburg, "Too bad! Too bad! Oh, too bad!"—Berry remarks, "Statements of religious faith seem to me to be of the same general kind. . . . God and the devices of human understanding are not the same subject." Berry is not aware that genuine human understanding and explanation are respectful of mystery, and that the Catholic tradition of philosophy and theology are as aware as he of the value of connatural knowledge—a term that he does not use, of course. Just because the disciples of Locke and Hume claim to have a monopoly on the exercise of human reason does not mean that we have to accept their claim. We can rejoice in the knowledge and love of partic-

ulars without losing a true universalist and conceptual science. But it will be the science of Aristotle and Aquinas, not of Newton and Hume.

Wendell Berry has shown once again that the modern commercial and industrial world is a world built upon lies. As someone who continues many of the insights of G.K. Chesterton he has much to show us. Unfortunately, we must lament that those who need to hear him the most will not do so. For our civilization seems irrevocably committed to its ways of destruction and death. One wonders whether any change is likely, short of that final change in which will exist both a new heaven and a new earth.

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Life is a Miracle: an Essay Against Modern Superstition by Wendell Berry (Counterpoint, 2000)

Wendell Berry is a poet, farmer and essayist with a substantial and remarkably diverse following of readers. Though Berry himself resists a political label, he has been deeply influential among those who seek to restore to "conservatism" something of its humility, and a refusal to allow politics to be reduced to the economic terms of consumer culture. Berry is deeply critical of the effects of industrial capitalism on the human spirit and the places in which it dwells as steward. As such, he falls very much in line with a var-