

Michael R. Stevens, Associate Professor of English
Cornerstone University
1001 E. Beltline NE
Grand Rapids, MI 49505
mstevens@cornerstone.edu

**Abstract for Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture Fall '06 Conference:
The Blight of Modernity (and some possible cures) in Wendell Berry's Vision**

This paper will use the trenchant critiques offered up by America's foremost philosopher-farmer, Wendell Berry, to pin a diagnosis on the disease of modernity, namely, the abandonment of boundary and limit. I begin with Berry's essays, which point to the hubris of modernity and the dislocated version of human culture it has spawned. His dogged defense of farming communities, of local culture, of responsible economic discourse and meaningful intellectual exchange, has come at the expense of much frustration and weariness, but his voice always resonates with hope. It is a measured hope, a sober vision of what it will take to recreate a world of human connections and a proper love of creation and Creator. Such hope is predicated very much upon our willingness to be vulnerable in the right ways, to reassert the presence and necessity of 'mystery,' and ultimately to reach out our arms to hospitably embrace our places and our people.

This step of hospitality, of allowing our real and crucial boundaries of community and locality to be permeable, such that we invite people to stay and connect, while never constraining—this I see as the primary theme of Berry's fiction, and I will lean heavily on his novels and stories, all of which take place in the universe of Port William, Kentucky, a sort of test-case for whether we can endure all that modernity has flung at us. I'm interested not only in the main characters, whom Berry refers to as 'the membership of Port William,' and who show remarkable devotion to kith and kin; I'm also intrigued by the marginal characters that Berry shows being blown by the winds of modernity, those who drift in and out in search of the promise of progress. Berry shows the possibilities of hospitality to curb this madness, and also its limits in a fallen world that masks disease as health.

After plumbing Berry's critique of modernity in his essays, and scrutinizing his embodiment of a counter-modern world in the Port William fiction, I'd like to finish with his poetry, in particular his Sabbath Poems (written on Sunday morning walks around his farm through the years). Here, I think Berry finds voice for a profoundly Christian response to the drift the world has taken, and its manifestations all around us. His love of creation leads both to lament over its desecration by a renegade humanity, and yet also an eschatological hope that buoys up this present struggle. We can see the way we are meant to live, the way of healing and life, because we can know the Creator and redeem the times. These poems present a richly counter-modern understanding of human life, and are thus able to foster an imaginative redirection that must support all practical attempts to stem the destructive tide of modernity. We can thus come away from this brief encounter with Wendell Berry's writings with a sharper focus on the dilemmas modernity has created 'on the ground' in lived human communities, but also a clearer vision of the hopefulness, fragile and vulnerable, that we can sustain if we are faithful.