Response to the Essay - “Technology and the Tragic View” - Samuel C. Florman

According to Wendell Berry’s strong, credible opinion, technology acts as more of a harness than a key, serving as a distraction from the user’s reachable goals and erecting a barrier between the user and the outside world.  Furthermore, technology and consumerism, according to Mr. Berry, are causes of the so-called “rape of nature (page 31).”

People are often defined by where their uncertainties lie, as Mr. Berry sees the shortcomings of modern technology, but fails to recognize its merit and potential value. Admittedly, Mr. Berry is correct in pointing out some of its various shortcomings, particularly when on the subject of his wife. He says on page 32 that “[his] wife, [his] critic, [his] closest reader, [his] fellow worker” would be “superseded” by the convenience of the machine. This fear of losing his close relationship perhaps correlates to the distraction of a computer, which often acts as both a literal and figurative barrier between two people.

In some ways, Mr. Berry is correct; computers do weaken strong relationships, putting virtual friends above concrete friends.  For many people though, technology enables people from around the world to connect easily and quickly.  Berry would probably disagree, alternatively believing that having fewer, stronger relationships is better than a multitude of weaker connections. He takes this to the extreme, seeming to have just one relationship with his wife.  Perhaps his great fear of computers replacing his wife originates from needing to maintain his relationship with his wife, instead of having other people in his life to help him, specifically his writing.

In addition to the effect of a computer on his relationship with his wife, Mr. Berry raises an interesting perspective on environmentalism and the consumers’ roles on nature. Specifically, his valid point states that consumers and computer manufacturers, by buying and making computers contribute to the destruction of non-renewable nature, along with energy companies.  Mr. Berry therefore does not want to have a “direct dependence on strip-mined coal (page 31).” His reasoning proves correct through further analysis of the carbon footprint between a computer and a 1956 typewriter. In addition to using paper and ink like a typewriter, albeit not to the same degree, a computer has to be manufactured through strip-mining, which meets Berry’s strong dissatisfaction.

Berry, on page 32, lays down explicit rules for his ideal new piece of technology, including being “cheaper,” fairly easy to repair, and using “less energy” than the previous tool.  No tool seems to fit these strict guidelines, with the tool coming closest probably a pencil, as one can repair it on one’s own, a pencil is small and cheap, and a pencil does not “replace or disrupt anything good that already exists,” including relationships. Mr. Berry’s standards appear to be too high for any tool.

In conclusion, Mr. Berry’s handicap lies in his fear of technology, preventing him from ever buying a computer while his wife is still alive. He criticizes technology and its flaws, but never mentions ways in which technology can be helpful.