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American Bucolic: The American Farmer in Three Works

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by

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Introduction

The Poetics and Politics of the American Farmer

In farming there are words like furrow, fallow, harrow, field. Harvests just after dawn, followed by the midday lull when cows blink quietly under shade, leaves droop. Lunching under a tree. Seeds soaked in inoculant, sown in sandy loam. A tree trimmed before spring. Trowel. Pollinated blossoms. Dust in the bed of a pick-up, buckets of compost.

Plants tucked into a bed by a dirt-caked hand. Overwintering under remay. A warm greenhouse in early spring, its humid-smell. Blight: early, late. Cobwebs in the barn's corner. Rotary tiller, brush hog, subsoiler. High-tunnels planted with frost-hardy greens in late fall. Hitch: backhoe, chisel plow.

Words like tractor-work, irrigation-line, hoop-house, cover-crop. Pasture, acre, orchard. The farmer trellises, repels pests. Applies lime. Words like growth, row-cover. Pruning suckers. Scouting pests. A cloud accumulates; so does rainfall in the gauge. Grafting onto rootstock. A syringe filled with lutalyse or colostrum for calving. To butcher. The granary, the corn crib, the silo, the pack-shed, the shop, the walk-in, the milking parlor, the hayloft. Grit. Through the barn-slats the sun sets on the hummock, a vineyard.

The poetics of farming, whether or not you've spent any time on a farm, is an undeniably beautiful and rhythmic proliferation of images, sensory experiences, and jargon. Its vocabulary is as musical as it is technical, its imagery entirely earthly. To employ and embody these poetics, or at least to be familiar with them, is to be in touch with one of the oldest and most necessary

occupations. In its simplest definition, farming is the work of growing crops or raising livestock for food. This work is not suited for those who are averse to hard labor and unpredictability. It is often uncomfortable, at the very least, and grueling at its worst. Farming is a job, yes, but it is also a lifestyle. It is its own art informed by the seasons and the soil, by weather, water, crops, stock, and above all, the farmers who practice their profession.

A society that practiced agriculture was once considered more advanced than most. Farming meant that people could settle in an area without having to constantly scavenge for food and that they could survive long winters by storing food when hunting and gathering became scarce. As agriculture became standard practice, the global population increased. Towns, cities, and civilizations all thrived because of farming. In turn, farming was improved upon and advanced, becoming what is now a huge global industry– a far cry from its humble origins as a necessary occupation to provide sustenance.

This shift in agriculture is especially clear in America where farmland was once plentiful and lush, populated by families that had owned their own land for many generations, where the farmer was a symbol of prosperity and a kind of defiant self-reliant freedom, dependent only on one's self and the soil beneath them. The American Farmer carved out a living on the land by toiling on it, coaxing things to grow, caring for animals. This work is what made the American Farmer independent and free. In an essay by one of the great champions of both poetics and agriculture in America, Ralph Waldo Emerson professes that "the glory of the farmer is that, in the division of his labors, it is his part to create.[1]" He goes on to write that "every man has an

[1] Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Farming." *The Portable Emerson*, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer, Penguin Classics, 2014. p.570

exceptional respect for tillage, and a feeling that this is the original calling of his race, that he himself is only excused from it by some circumstance that made him delegate it for a time to other hands." Emerson's assertion that farming is "the original calling" does carry some truth to it for agriculture is how civilization flourished in the first place. But the respect for farming (evident in "the *glory* of the farmer") now seems outmoded, mostly because the majority of Americans do not need to do it anymore. As Emerson says, the average individual has delegated the work of tillage to some other person, an anonymous farmer who will provide them their most basic need, regardless of whether they are acknowledged or not. This divorce from agriculture is an unfortunate consequence of its advancement, the enlargement of its scale. By no fault of any individual, the reverence that once surrounded the work of farming has slowly been replaced by a dangerously ambivalent reliance on an agriculture that is extractive, over-productive, far from the original idea of farming as a means of survival.

This de-familiarization with agriculture and its vernacular is indicative of first, the drastic shift away from agriculture-as-culture in the last century (and most acutely in the last half century) in America and second, a clear relationship between a community's language and their landscape. As the American landscape changed from bucolic and pastoral to industrial, so, too, did the culture. Fewer families stayed on the once-ubiquitous homestead, opting instead to move to cities for better jobs and a less grueling way of life. Farmland was largely abandoned. This migration away from the pastoral tradition in America is especially apparent in its literature. The literature of a place is largely defined by its landscape and so for a time this meant that the literature of America was largely agrarian or bucolic, informed by the farmed fields, barnyards, meadows, woodlots, and villages built around plots of land for growing food and rearing

livestock. As America became more industrial, its literature did, too, increasingly set in urban environments with prose and plots that reflected the shift from rural to urban lifestyles. Given that at one time America was a primarily agricultural nation, and that most families farmed or lived in close proximity to farms, it feels natural that the poetics of farming, its vocabulary and its sensory and aesthetic experience, was once a main theme of its literature. Its primary embodiment is the American Farmer, a figure who has been profoundly affected by the shift in agriculture in America.

The three works I've chosen to represent the pastoral tradition in America come from three distinct periods of agriculture in America. Each deals with the American Farmer in a different way, reflective of the progression of agriculture in this country. The earliest work, *Letters from an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur offers a fictional account of a colonial farmer in early America. *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder sees the farmer in an America that is becoming industrialized and moving away from agriculture. And lastly, *The Mad Farmer Poems* by Wendell Berry deals with the reality of farming in the 21st century and endeavors to preserve the sanctity of the American Farmer in poetry. Each of the three works is written in a different genre: fictional epistolary, historical biography, and poetry. This breadth of genres and styles represents the multiplicity of the American Farmer, the multitude of representations that attempt to contain and define this figure of American independence, self-reliance, and sustenance. The three works I've chosen to write about all feature male protagonists/poets so I'll largely be deferring to the "he" pronoun in writing about the figure of the American Farmer for the sake of clarity but this is not to say that farming is an exclusively masculine tradition– far from it, actually. My decision to focus on these three works in particular

was not decided on the basis of identity politics but by how well the American Farmer was represented in them.

Each of the three works, *Letters from an American Farmer*, *Farmer Boy*, and *The Mad Farmer Poems* approaches the American Farmer from the perspective of an actual farmer, someone who is versed and fluent in its politics and poetics. This was important to me because the actual experience of farming, the tangibility of hands on earth and skin on sun, is integral to the formation of the American Farmer. It is the soil that makes up this figure. It is the weather and the water and land that informs this archetype. The American Farmer is, in this literature, as mythic as Odysseus, treated with the respect and reverence that is due to the person that creates nourishment from nothing, the person who works the earth and is a caretaker to all of us who eat.

Letters from an American Farmer

The American Farmer as Cultivator

> *...cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independant, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to its liberty & interests by the most lasting bands.*
>
> –Thomas Jefferson[2]

For thousands of years before the plow, before the ox, before the introduction of wheat and dairy cows, before Europeans even landed, agriculture was central to the lives of the native people in America. Theirs was an agriculture that, out of necessity, used very few resources, didn't focus on high-yielding production, and was majorly influenced by the wheel of the seasons. The epitome of the Native American relationship to farming is what is now known as the Three Sisters, a practice in which corn, beans, and squash are planted together in an excellently engineered trinity. While the corn grows, reaching toward the sun, the bean sprouts climb the tall stalks for support and sunlight while the wide, flat-leaved squash shades the ground and retains soil moisture. The beans provide the corn and squash with a much-needed nitrogen-boost (both are heavy feeders of nitrogen), gathering nitrogen from the atmosphere and releasing it slowly through nodules on their roots. The trio, apart from growing in perfect

[2] "Extract from Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, Paris August 23 1785." *Monticello,* https://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/69.

symbiosis, is also nutritionally dense: the corn provides basic carbohydrates, the beans provide protein, and the squash provides vitamins like carotene.[3] This trio, so simple in its implementation but so complex in its complementarity, is indicative of a deeply agricultural society, one that considers the needs of their crops, their people, and the land in conjunction.

So when Europeans arrived in America, they adopted some farming practices from these Native Americans, and in turn brought their own agricultural methodology– one that was albeit less reciprocal and more extractive than the agriculture of the Native Americans. Europeans introduced cereal crops like wheat and barley. They brought over domesticated fruit trees and livestock like cows and sheep. They cleared forest-land to make room for fields. European settlers along the East coast found great agricultural success, mostly because the land was so fertile and had already been cultivated. The Hudson Valley was especially known for its abundance, deemed "the breadbasket of the colonies" due to land that was (and still is) incredibly rich in minerals due to glacial deposits.[4] Henry Hudson, for whom the area is named, called the valley "the finest land for cultivation I have ever set foot upon."

Areas like this, in which fertile land was plentiful and food abundant, became hubs for civilization. Communities formed around the farms that dotted the landscape: rolling gold fields of wheat and winter-rye, Jerseys grazing slowly behind fences, hills of impossibly green clover and vetch, orchards whose blossoms could be smelled from miles off. Early America was undoubtedly an agricultural nation. So it makes sense, then, that one of the earliest notions of American identity was that of the American Farmer. The archetype of the American Farmer was

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[3] While I learned about the Three Sisters in a high school botany class, there's a great resource about this and other Native American farming practices in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass.*

[4] "Agriculture and the Abundance of the Hurley Flats." Hudson Valley Farm Hub, https://hvfarmhub.org/about/history/.

officially introduced in a widely circulated book, *Letters from an American Farmer* by J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. The book, a series of letters from a fictitious farmer named James residing in the colony of Pennsylvania, is the earliest literature that features the American Farmer as a defining figure of American civilization, the answer to the question "what is an American?." The book's charming descriptions of pastoral America, written by the modest but brilliant farmer James, explored the idea that America, still a fledgling nation, was composed of hard-working cultivators of the earth. These people, these new Americans, in their cultivation of the landscape, also cultivated a new identity for themselves.

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, the author of *Letters from an American Farmer*, was born in Normandy in 1735. After a stint as a surveyor for the French Colonial Militia in 1755, de Crevecoeur sailed to America in 1759 and from there earned his living as a surveyor, trader, and explorer, writing about his experiences traveling through all of the colonies. In 1765 de Crevecoeur became a naturalized citizen of the New York Colony where he met his future bride, Mehitable Tippet, daughter of a wealthy Dutchess County family. The two were married in 1769 and settled on a 120-acre parcel of land called Pine Hill in Chester, New York. De Crevecoeur proved to be a successful farmer, leading efforts to improve drainage in arable meadows and increase the size of his farm.[5]

The American Revolution in 1776 disrupted the tranquility of Pine Hill and the surrounding farms and towns. De Crevecoeur returned to France in a bid to establish his childrens' right to family land in New York, and was subsequently imprisoned by British soldiers

[5] "J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's papers." Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Archives at Yale. https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/819.

for suspicion of enemy collaboration. When he was released in 1781, he sailed for Europe, landing back in his home country of France. Two years later, he returned to America (on the same ship, as it happened, that carried the Treaty of Paris) having been appointed by France as consul to the colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. On his arrival, he found his farm in New York destroyed by British soldiers, his wife deceased, and his three children in the care of neighboring farmers. In spite of this, de Crevecoeur carried out his role as consul by establishing French-American cultural and artistic trading until 1790. He retired to France, spending the remainder of his life until 1813 on a farm in Lesches, France.

Letters from an American Farmer was published in London in 1782 shortly after de Crevecouer's imprisonment, just before his return to America. The book was extremely well-received in Europe. The character of the "American Farmer" was embraced as an answer to the (European) question about emerging American identity (the third letter is titled bluntly "What is an American?"). De Crevecouer's dual perspective as an educated French emigrant and American citizen appealed to a wide European audience. His accessible prose featured travelog-like descriptions of rural American life. In his book, he introduced the philosophy of the American Farmer, a philosophy based on principles of self-sufficiency and freedom (even then the buzzword of the fledgling American colonies). Both the prose and the content made de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* not only an interesting read, but a key for foreign audiences to understand America as a nation of primarily agrarian people.

The "premise" behind *Letters*, for Crevecouer invented a fictional persona to serve as the penman of the letters, is that a Pennsylvanian farmer named James is recruited by a gentleman from Cambridge, known as Mr. F.B, to describe life in the colonies. Mr. F.B, once a guest of

Farmer James and his wife in Pennsylvania, was impressed not only by their hospitality and friendship, but also by James' intelligence and articulateness despite being "a simple farmer." In the "Introductory Letter," James reveals his surprise at being asked to be a documentarian of rural American life, citing the fact that there must be "persons more enlightened and better educated than I am[6]" and that he is "neither a philosopher, politician, divine or naturalist but a simple farmer.[7]" He consults his wife about Mr. F.B's proposition and she urges him not to participate, worrying that somehow the proposition was meant in jest because surely a "great European man, who hath lived abundance of time in that big house…where, they say, that worldly learning is so abundant that people get it only by breathing the air of the place…who hath conversed with very many king's men, governors and counselors[8]" would not choose a simple farmer to be the spokesman of colonial life. James seems to agree with this sentiment until his minister urges him to reconsider Mr. F.B's offer, saying:

> Your pencil, assure yourself, is not a bad one for the pencil of a farmer; it seems to be held without any labour…Ah, neighbor, had you received but half the education of Mr. F.B. you had been a worthy correspondent indeed. But, perhaps, you will be a more entertaining one, dressed in your simple American garb, than if you were clad in all the gowns of Cambridge. You will appear to him something like one of our wild American plants, irregularly luxuriant in its various branches, which an European scholar may probably think ill-placed and useless. If our soil is not remarkable as yet for the

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[6] de Crèvecoeur, J. Hector St John. *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013. p.4

[7] Crevecoeur 12

[8] Crevecoeur 4

> excellence of its fruits, this exuberance is however a strong proof of fertility which wants nothing but the progressive knowledge acquired by time and to correct.[9]

The minister's speech reminds us of the stark difference between a manicured, espaliered Europe that had been plowed and maintained for centuries before, and the wild, "irregularly luxuriant," and, in a literal sense, largely uncultivated America. Using botanical and agricultural metaphor to describe James, the minister is also describing America as a whole. James, the simple farmer, is America personified, unruly and sprawling, but also flourishing in his own way. In this expansive "exuberance" there is the promise of fertility and growth. From the very beginning of *Letters* it is clear that the farmer is meant to be a symbol for a new nation, America. The proximity of these metaphors, the abrupt broadening of scope from the individual to the national, makes it clear that James is an extension of America, that he will serve as a metaphor or symbol for America: a farmer, a husband, a tradesman, a writer, many-branched and containing multitudes. He is one of a

> …people of cultivators…united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws without dreading their power, because they are equitable. We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained because each person works for himself.[10]

In this passage from the second letter, appropriately titled "What is an American?," the scope of agricultural metaphor again extends to America as a whole. James is saying that America is a nation of cultivators, a place where the "farmer is the only appellation of the rural inhabitants of our country.[11]" America is a *people of cultivators*, a community of people who tend to and care

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[9] Crevecoeur 9-10
[10] Crevecoeur 29
[11] Crevecoeur 29

for their home. "Cultivate" stems from the Latin *colere* meaning "to till" but also "to inhabit; to frequent, practice, respect; tend, guard.[12]" This etymology speaks to the responsibility that is inherent to the farmer's work. If the farmer is a cultivator then he is, by definition, also a caretaker.

Implicit in this etymology, too, is the idea that the farmer "practices." In one meaning of the word, this might mean that the farmer carries out his duties by habit– which is true, for the work of farming relies heavily on daily rituals: waking at a certain time to feed stock, the repetitiveness of walking up and down field-rows with a precision planter or a scythe. These duties are performed with relentless devotion. In the second letter, James, considering other career paths he might have taken, likens the work of clergyman to the repetitive work of the farmer:

> Fool that I was, what would I wish to be, a lawyer, but it must be very troublesome to write and talk so much as they do about nothing. I should not like to be all my lifetime busy in making black white and white black, tho' to be sure they often reap what they have sown and gathered what they have not mowed…Would I wish to be a clergyman? It must be a dull, very dull business to teach and recommend all the year round virtues and maxims which the people won't follow and to be forever with the hoe in one's hands, forever stubbing sprouts forever shooting up…Where is that station that can confer a more substantial system of felicity than that of an American farmer, possessing freedom of action, freedom of thoughts, ruled by a mode of government which requires but little from us?[13]

[12] "Cultivate (v.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/cultivate#etymonline_v_451.
[13] Crevecoeur 15

“Forever stubbing sprouts forever shooting up” is an apt description of the relentlessness of the primary task of the farmer, cultivation. Cultivation, in the most literal sense, is to prepare land by tillage, plowing, digging, or weeding. And this is central to the farmer’s work, the preparation of land. That James uses this innately agricultural language seemingly by reflex is indicative of the psychic imprint of his livelihood, the way it has ingrained itself into his thought processes and speech. Even in his musings about the work of a lawyer or clergyman, he cannot help but to use agricultural metaphor. Lawyers “reap what they have sown and gathered what they have not mowed,” and clergymen are “forever stubbing sprouts forever shooting up,” cultivating their congregations. Although James applies this metaphor to a member of the clergy, it really speaks to the Sisyphean nature of farming, the unrelenting labor, sprouts forever in need of cultivation and care. The work is repetitive by nature and James’ choice of metaphor is evidence of this repetition-as-practice: the continual effort of farming and the way it becomes part of the farmer’s everyday life outside of the labor itself.

In another definition of practice, the farmer is constantly improving his methods, honing his skills season after season. In “Letter XI,” written not by James but by a Russian gentleman, Mr. Iw-n Al-z, visiting America, the author visits John Bartram, a celebrated early American botanist known in botanical circles as the “father of American botany.” In Mr. Iw-n Al-z’s account, Bartram describes the evolution of his farmland from a barren, scraggly piece of earth to a fertile and productive acreage:

> This is altogether the fruit of my own contrivance; I purchased some years ago the privilege of a small spring, about a mile and a half from hence…therein I throw old lime, ashes, horse dung, etc., and twice a week I let it run, thus impregnated. I regularly spread

> on this ground in the fall old hay, straw and whatever damaged fodder I have about my barn. By these simple means I mow, one year with another, fifty-three hundreds of excellent hay per acre from a soil which scarcely produced [weeds] some years before.[14]

Aside from being an agriculturally valuable insight into caring for one's cropland, Bartram's explanation of his fertigation system (which simply means fertilizing via irrigation) is an example of this farming-as-practice, an inexact science or an exact art which is developed over time by close observation and experimentation. It requires the application of knowledge that is either acquired by one's own experiences on the farm, and/or knowledge that is shared between farmers, who in turn have learned either by their own experience or by the wisdom of their fore-farmers. The Russian gentleman is astounded by Bartram's methods of husbandry: "Happy the country which is cultivated" (note the use of agricultural language, suddenly uptaken in proximity to the American Farmer) "by a society of men whose application and taste lead them to prosecute and accomplish useful works!" He proceeds to call Bartram's work "a miracle," suggesting that this American way of farming is one that is new to him, unseen in his native country of Russia, and much more efficient. Bartram protests:

> I am not the only person who does these things…Wherever a farmer can water his meadows, the greatest crops of the best hay and excellent after-grass are the sure rewards of his labors. With the banks of my meadow ditches, I have greatly enriched my upland fields; those which I intend to rest for a few years, I constantly sow with red clover, which is the greatest meliorator of our lands. For after three years, they yield abundant pasture. When I want to break up my clover fields, I give them a good coat of mud,

[14] Crevecoeur 142

> which hath been exposed to the severities of three or four winters. This is the reason that I commonly reap from twenty-eight to thirty-six bushels of wheat an acre; my flax, oats, and Indian corn I raise in the same proportion.

A couple of things worth pointing out in this second detailed explanation of Bartram's agricultural methodology: the first, that there is a great deal of time involved in his process, planning which would require intentionality and a deep familiarity with the land one is working with. In letting a meadow "rest" for three years, the farmer sacrifices production in favor of restoration, regeneration, and renewed fertility. Imagine a county of farmland in which each parcel of land is given this kind of attention and devotion. This is indicative of a level of respect for the land that again aligns with the definition of cultivator-as-caretaker.

The second important truth in this passage is that intentional farming practices such as this one were clearly central to early American agriculture for Bartram is not "the only person who does these things." Meaning Bartram is only one of many farmers who meticulously cares for his meadowlands and field, who invents new ways of improving the fertility and abundance of the soil. It is a privilege, in the eyes of the Russian gentleman, to be able to care for one's land like this, for in his homeland, "so few of our farmers are possessors of the soil they till that they cannot execute plans of husbandry with the same vigour as you do, who hold yours, as it were, from the Master of Nature, unencumbered and free.[15]" This privilege, this *freedom* is central to the American Farmer. That he owns the land he works on is what allows him to practice, to take time to give his fields a break from production, to observe and learn about the botanical

[15] Crevecoeur 143

goings-on in his meadowlands. In explaining to the Russian gentleman how he first became interested in botany, Bartram describes a scene on his own farm:

> One day I was very busy in holding my plough (for thee see'st I am but a ploughman), and, being weary, I ran under the shade of a tree to repose myself. I cast my eyes on a daisy; I plucked it mechanically and viewed it with more curiosity than common country farmers are wont to do and observed therein very many distinct parts… 'What a shame,' said my mind, or something that inspired my mind, 'that thee shouldest have employed so many years in tilling the earth and destroying so many flowers and plants without being acquainted with their structures and uses![16]'

Bartram's sentiment is especially powerful because he actually admits to mindlessly "tilling and destroying" the earth (a dark foreshadowing of the future of America's farmland). Should a farmer stop to consider a daisy, they might see the shame in going about their necessary work of tillage without knowing what exactly is underfoot (or plow, as it were). It feels a little naive to believe that this slowing down to observe is what might prevent agriculture from being a completely extractive industry. But by familiarizing oneself with one's surroundings, there is an implicit connection to one's environment, a very real grounding in the reality of the names of things. Naming plants and knowing their characteristics and uses is a way in which one's relationship to land becomes reciprocal rather than extractive. The attention to detail, the interest in the minutiae of a field or meadow, is characteristic of a mode of agriculture that is not merely focused on production. It treats the farm as a site of observation and discovery, an interactive landscape that should be respected and studied. It is clear in *Letters to an American Farmer* that

[16] Crevecoeur 144

these moments of observation, and the appreciation that follows as a result, are what kept farming an art as opposed to an industry. The constant process of discovery and improvement that is implicit in the ownership of a piece of land, and working on that land every day, tending to it and harvesting from it, is what the American Farmer once prized above all else.

Land is a luxury, however, that is not afforded to most farmers today. In the modern-day agricultural system most farmers either lease land, have land handed down to them, or else must contest with developers and wealthy landowners to purchase scarce parcels of acreage. An April 2022 article of *The Progressive Farmer* (the longest-running agricultural magazine in the United States) cites a 40% increase in farmland value in the past year in places with virtually no development potential. Investors, "fueled by sky-rocketing commodity prices, relatively low interest rates and increasing inflation fears,[17]" drive up the price of land in these rural areas so that it becomes impossible for small farmers to compete with bids as high as $19,300 per acre (a figure cited by a real estate agent in Iowa). When you factor in that the average farm size in America in 2019 was 444 acres (and this number only continues to increase[18] according to the United States Department of Agriculture), prices like these are simply unsustainable for anyone other than multi-millionaire investors and developers.

What this means is that small farmers are either forced into becoming tenant farmers or else driven out of rural areas entirely. Neither option bodes well for the preservation of farmer-owned farmland in America. Instead of dedicating time and attention to the betterment of soil, to observing the intricacies of the flora and fauna that proliferates the landscape, farmers are

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[17] Williams, Elizabeth. "Will Farmland Prices Keep Rising after Setting Records in March?" *DTN Progressive Farmer*, DTN Progressive Farmer, 8 Apr. 2022.

[18] "Farms and Land in Farms 2019 Summary." *USDA*, United States Department of Agriculture, February 2020.

focused on forcing the land to produce more, tilling land faster for their next crop in a bid to appease landlords and to barely turn a profit. The overwhelming majority of these large farms are growing commodity crops like corn, soy, and wheat, or else devoted to feedlots that host massive herds of cattle on pasture that has been so completely grazed that livestock must eat highly processed grain to fatten up. These farms are highly mechanized, using massive tractors (and massive amounts of fossil fuels) to till, sow, and harvest. Work that would once have taken a team of people days to accomplish can now be completed in an afternoon by a single tractor-operator– a blessing, in some ways, but in many more a curse. With this level of "efficiency," cultivation has become less about caretaking and more about cultivation as a means of faster and more extractive production.

The farm that is characteristic of modern America is, of course, a far cry from the farm of de Crevecoeur's America. We see this in Bartram's descriptions of his own farm, the way he intentionally lets fields rest to improve fertility, sowing them with red clover to ameliorate the soil. We see this in the way James speaks of his land and his profession– a refreshing change from the language that surrounds farming today, language that is all profit, investment, extraction, yields, language that is entirely harsh and un-musical. James writes:

> The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property of exclusive right, of independence exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without distinct possession of that soil? It feeds, it clothes us; from it we draw even a great exuberancy, our best meat, our richest drink; the very honey of our bees comes from this privileged spot…This formerly rude soil has been converted by

> my father into a pleasant farm, and in return it has established all our rights. On it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens, our importance as inhabitants of such a district. These images I must confess I always behold with pleasure and extend them as far as my imagination can reach, for this is what may be called the true and the only Philosophy of an American farmer.[19]

The word "soil" is repeated three times in James' passage, showing a reverence for not just the land but the substance of it. On a farm, one has the freedom to turn "rude soil" into an orchard, a meadow, a farm. "There never was a people, situated as they are, who with so ungrateful a soil have done more in so short a time,[20]" James writes admiringly. There is a great emphasis in James' letters on turning barren soil into fertile ground, turning inhospitable earth into a place of growth and life. The steward of this transformation is, of course, the American Farmer. There is something about turning "rude soil" into a place of fertility and beauty that speaks to the importance of the American Farmer. The soil, when properly cared for, is what fills the needs of the farmer and his family: food, shelter, clothing, work. James includes that the soil provides "even a great exuberancy," suggesting joyful times spent perhaps in a pasture or meadow: picnics with home-made ale, his children running and playing amid bales of timothy hay, the evening walks in which James takes great delight. The soil provides not only sustenance but beauty, too. "If ever man was permitted to receive and enjoy some blessings that might alleviate the many sorrows to which he is exposed,' James writes, "it is certainly in the country, when he attentively considers those ravishing scenes with which he is everywhere surrounded.[21]" The

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[19] Crevecoeur 17
[20] Crevecoeur 30
[21] Crevecoeur 24

Philosophy of the American Farmer is, then, to appreciate the land he works and lives on as the site of his sustenance and independence. The original American Farmer was not obligated to produce commodities for a global market. His work was for himself, his family, and community. This scale of agriculture made it possible (and necessary) for a majority of early Americans to become farmers in some capacity– for subsistence, at the very least.

Modern agriculture, on the other hand, has "freed" the majority of Americans from the obligation of producing their own food, but it has also led to a massive appropriation of land on which methods of farming are implemented that disregard not only the health of the soil but the health of the farmers who work the land. And in most cases, these farmers do not actually *own* the land they work on. In passages like the one on the previous page, in which the Philosophy of the American Farmer is laid bare, it becomes clear that the idea of the American Farmer and what he stands for has changed drastically over time. Once, the idea of the American Farmer was shaped and informed by these "ravishing scenes" of rural life: orchards speckled and scented by blossoms, a sun-warm hayloft filled with sweet smelling hay, dirt so fertile that it is almost black when turned over. Once, the American Farmer was a steward of the land he worked on, a cultivator in the truest sense of the word.

Just as the farmer ameliorates the soil and cultivates his crops, the inhabitants of a new nation cultivate ideas, aesthetics, a new and unique vernacular. In the creation of a new nation everything, from its government to its culture, is practice, is, as the minister suggested, "acquired by time." That "precious soil" is where this practice takes place, where new ideas and methods of cultivation occur. The soil is symbolic of a new nation, a new people. Without it, James asks a

fair question: "what should we American farmers be?" The connection between land and identity is implicit in this question, a connection which James explores further in the letter titled "What is an American?." It should be noted that the letter does not ask "*who* is an American" but "*what*." This might suggest that James is speaking in broad terms, synthesizing the individual into the general. Or it might mean that the letter is knowingly catering to an audience which demands a definitive and almost technical definition of what it means to be an American. In either case, it is a literary document which describes, in detail, what the "new" American citizen stands for, what he works for, and what he believes. In the letter, James writes:

> Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow. We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess and the nature of our employment.

This passage, in which James again uses agricultural metaphor ("men are like plants"), is followed by an analysis of the temperaments of the people who inhabit different geographical regions in the new colonies: those who live by the sea, those who live in the woods, and "those who inhabit the middle settlements, by far the most numerous…the simple cultivation of the earth purifies them,[22]" farmers. However, this is not to say that farmers are the only ones who make up America– there is a place for everyone:

> The variety of our soils, situations, climates, governments, and produce hath something which must please everybody…There is room for everybody in America. Has he any particular talent or industry? He exerts it in order to procure a livelihood, and it succeeds.

[22] Crevecoeur 32

> Is he a merchant? The avenues of trade are infinite. Is he eminent in any respect? He will be employed and respected. Does he love a country life? Pleasant farms present themselves; he may purchase what he wants and thereby become an American farmer…Does he want uncultivated lands? Thousands of acres present themselves…Instead of starving, he will be fed; instead of being idle, he will have employment, and these are riches enough for such men as come over here.[23]

The American Farmer, then, is blessed by the abundance of land, work, and food. "Ubis panis ibi patria is the motto of all emigrants[24]" Latin for "Where my bread is, there is my homeland." So the farmer finds a homeland in America, in the soil of a new nation. He will not starve, and his life will be beautiful because it will be spent in labor that is meaningful, that feeds him and his children.

De Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* depicts the original American Farmer as a humble but brilliantly multifaceted individual who prizes freedom and the cultivation of the soil above all other virtues. "If [our] manners are not refined," James writes of himself and his neighbors, "at least they are rendered simple and inoffensive by tilling the earth. All our wants are supplied by it; our time is divided between labour and rest, and leaves none for the commission of great misdeeds.[25]" In a way, this description of the American Farmer perfectly encapsulates the definition that is at the core of de Crevecoeur's book. The American Farmer, a cultivator of the earth, seamlessly blended his labor and industry with his leisure because the two

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[23] Crevecoeur 40-41
[24] Crevecouer 31
[25] Crevecoeur 38

were located at the same site: the farm. On soil so fertile and rich that crops sprang up with no amendments, so, too, did the notion of the American Farmer, a figure that once informed a fledgling nation.

Farmer Boy

The American Farmer as Caretaker

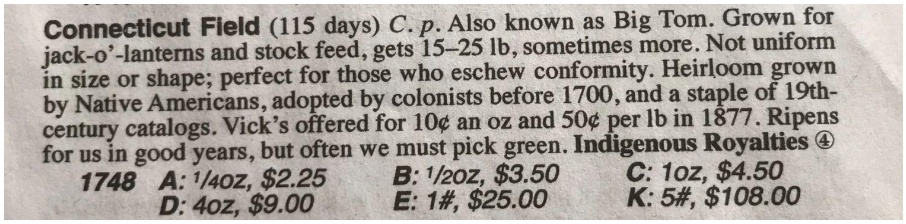
Rhythmic labor is deeply spiritual labor.

-Karl Bucher

Snow is falling and I'm lying on my living room floor reading seed catalogs, picking plants for this year's garden. An assortment of heirloom tomatoes, of course, summer in sunshiney spheres of streaked red, gold, ink-black; greens for spring (frilly mustards, fragile lettuce, arugula) and greens for fall (hardy collards, kale, chard); dainty radishes, pink as lips, the seeds that I'll plant with a forefinger while the soil is still cold; ground cherries with papery shells that peel back to reveal a pop of pineapple-flavored fruit. Experiments: burdock root and horseradish in buckets. Shell beans and peas that I'll mound on pallets to dry in late summer and hopefully shell during the first cool nights of fall.

And pumpkins.

As ubiquitous to autumn as cornhusks and pie, pumpkins have been a decorative and culinary staple since before the landing of the pilgrims. One listing for a large-type pumpkin variety in FEDCO's 2022 seed catalog[26] traces the history of the seed to pre-colonization:


Connecticut Field (115 days) *C. p.* Also known as Big Tom. Grown for jack-o'-lanterns and stock feed, gets 15–25 lb, sometimes more. Not uniform in size or shape; perfect for those who eschew conformity. Heirloom grown by Native Americans, adopted by colonists before 1700, and a staple of 19th-century catalogs. Vick's offered for 10¢ an oz and 50¢ per lb in 1877. Ripens for us in good years, but often we must pick green. **Indigenous Royalties** ④

1748 **A:** 1/4oz, $2.25 **B:** 1/2oz, $3.50 **C:** 1oz, $4.50
D: 4oz, $9.00 **E:** 1#, $25.00 **K:** 5#, $108.00

[26] *FEDCO Seeds & Supplies 2022 Catalog.* 67.

Another variety, Long Pie, is "probably a Native American variety, or selected therefrom. Various relatives have included Algonquin, Indian, Golden Oblong, and possibly St. George."[27]

So by 1866, the year in which *Farmer Boy* by Laura Ingalls Wilder takes place, pumpkins had been cultivated in America for hundreds of years. They are a truly heirloom crop. The protagonist of *Farmer Boy*, nine year old Almanzo Wilder, raises his own pumpkin for the County Fair, learning some tricks:

> Father had shown him how to raise a milk-fed pumpkin. They had picked out the best vine in the field, and snipped off all the branches but one. Then between the root and the wee green pumpkin they carefully made a slit on the underside of the vine. Under the slit Almanzo made a hollow in the ground and set a bowl of milk in it. Then he put a candle wick in the milk, and the end of the candle wick he put carefully into the slit. Every day the pumpkin vine drank up the bowlful of milk, through the candle wick, and the pumpkin was growing enormously. Already it was three times as big as any other pumpkin in the field.[28]

In my own garden this year, I plan to try Almanzo's method. After all, it does earn Almanzo the winning prize at the County Fair for the largest and best pumpkin, a feat that makes the Wilder family proud. When asked how he did it, Almanzo is reluctant to tell the judges that he babied his prize winning pumpkin, fearing they'll disqualify him. But the judges approve, and admire Almanzo for his cleverness in growing such an impressive specimen.

This is one of the amazing things about farming. There are so many seemingly harebrained schemes and tricks of the trade, made up by mistake, come upon by happenstance, or

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[27] *FEDCO Seeds & Supplies 2022 Catalog*. p. 66.
[28] Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Farmer Boy*. 1933. Harper Trophy, 1971. p.191-192.

thought over carefully and implemented. "There's tricks in all trades but ours,[29]" says Almanzo's father, Mr. Wilder, referring to an old saying about tradespeople who cannot tell you exactly how or why they do what they do, but instead just keep doing what comes naturally. Farmers fall under this umbrella more often than not, employing a kind of felt knowledge to their work: feeling when it will rain, when to begin harrowing, when to harvest ("when a melon sounded ripe, it *was* ripe, and when it sounded green, it *was* green[30]"). This kind of knowledge has all but disappeared as we've shifted away from functioning as an agrarian society. We are no longer in tune with the work that literally feeds us and clothes us, keeps us warm and sheltered. The hallmark of modernity is accessibility, a reliance on commodities– which is why reading a work like *Farmer Boy* offers an important perspective on an alternative way of life.

Farmer Boy, an account of farm life in the late nineteenth century, is the second book in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series. *Farmer Boy* is a departure from what many know Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series for. The rest of the *Little House* books follow a frontier family, the Ingalls, Charles and Caroline Ingalls and their children, Laura, Carrie, Mary, and Grace, as they move from their *Little House in the Big Woods* (the first novel) to the *Little House on the Prairie* (third), to the *Little Town on the Prairie* (seventh) where, after *The Long Winter* (sixth) they finally experience *These Happy Golden Years* (eighth). *Farmer Boy,* however, follows nine year old Almanzo Wilder on his family's farm in upstate New York, hundreds of miles away from the Ingalls family out West. Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote *Farmer Boy* from stories that her husband, Almanzo Wilder, shared about his own experiences as a boy on a farm in Malone, New York in the late nineteenth century. It's part historical novel, part biography, an

[29] Ingalls Wilder 273
[30] Ingalls Wilder 207

intimate portrait of life on a farm: the beautiful parts, the difficult parts, the sensory experience of it that still reads so clearly.

Almanzo is a pretty typical farm kid, helping both his Father in the fields and in his Mother's kitchen churning butter, skimming milk, and putting up sausages for the winter larder. He does the daily chores with his Father which include feeding livestock, milking cows, pumping well water for the kitchen and weekly baths, tending to the fire in winter, chipping ice from big sawdust-covered blocks in summer. Almanzo's central desire is to have his own horse to train and care for. He is eager to grow up and achieve this goal, practicing himself the same method he used for growing prize-winning pumpkins: "He drank all the milk he could hold, and at mealtimes he filled his plate so full that he could not eat it all. Father looked stern because he left food on his plate, and asked: "What's the matter, son? Your eyes bigger than your stomach?" Then Almanzo tried to swallow a little more. He did not tell anyone he was trying to grow up faster so he could help break the colts.[31]"

To Almanzo, having his own horse means that he's trustworthy and responsible enough to care for another living thing, a job that his father does so admiringly in his eyes. Almanzo takes pride in the work he does on the farm:

> He helped to feed the patient cows, and the horses eagerly whinnying over the bars of their stalls, and the hungrily bleating sheep, and the grunting pigs. He felt like saying to them all: "You can depend on me. I'm big enough to take care of you all." Then he shut the door snugly behind him, leaving them all fed and warm and comfortable for the night, and he went trudging through the storm to the good supper waiting in the kitchen.[32]

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[31] Ingalls Wilder 192
[32] Ingalls Wilder 310-11

Passages like this one evoke feelings that are specific to farm life. Here, it's the animal-warm barn, insulated from the elements, quiet except for the sound of stock sighing and stomping, hay and the uniquely sweet scent of manure. It's the little living-thing noises, Almanzo's small hands holding out grain. The dark of the barn, the soft sound of its sliding door pulled closed, and the warm yellow light from the farmhouse in the distance. The feeling of getting something done, caring for things that depend on you. This passage in particular illustrates the pride that Almanzo takes in this job. "You can depend on me," he tells the animals. "I'm big enough to take care of you." This mantra is as much for the animals as it is for himself. It's an assurance that he's reliable, selfless enough to care for lives other than his own. What *Farmer Boy* establishes vis a vis the archetype of the American Farmer is that they are ultimately caregivers and stewards. *You can depend on me* is the farmer's mantra. *I'll take care of you*.

Almanzo's role model, the ideal caretaker and hard-working farmer, is his Father. An expert farmer, carpenter, and ploughman all in one, a man who provides for himself and his family, James Wilder appears throughout *Farmer Boy* to deliver quiet wisdom to his son and to teach him lessons about farming and morality. He's a good neighbor, honest, quick with a maxim. He's patient with the livestock, gentle yet firm. He applies the same principles to being a father.

An example of this occurs at the annual County Fair. Almanzo becomes jealous of a friend who is given a nickel for lemonade. His friend dares him to ask his Father for a nickel, so that he too might buy a glass, and he does:

> Father looked at him a long time. Then he took out his wallet and opened it, and slowly he took out a round, big silver half dollar. He asked:

"Almanzo, do you know what this is?"

"Half a dollar," Almanzo answered.

"Yes, but do you know what half a dollar is?"

Almanzo didn't know it was anything but a half a dollar.

"It's work, son," Father said. "That's what money is; it's hard work."[33]

Almanzo doesn't understand his Father's gesture, and tries to seem like "a smart boy" so that he can go buy lemonade. But Father persists:

"You know how to raise potatoes, Almanzo?"

"Yes," Almanzo said.

"Say you have a seed potato in the spring, what do you do with it?"

"You cut it up," Almanzo said.

"Go on, son."

"Then you harrow– first you manure the field, and plow it. Then you harow, and mark the ground. And plant the potatoes, and plow them, and hoe them. You plow and hoe them twice."

"That's right, son. And then?"

"Then you dig them and put them down cellar."

"Yes. Then you pick them over all winter; you throw out all the little ones and the rotten ones. Come spring you load them up and haul them here to Malone, and you sell them. And if you get a good price son, how much do you get to show for all that work? How much do you get for half a bushel of potatoes?"

[33] Ingalls Wilder 183

> "Half a dollar," Almanzo said.
>
> "Yes," said Father. "That's what's in this half-dollar, Almanzo. The work that raised half a bushel of potatoes is in it."
>
> Almanzo looked at the round piece of money that Father held up. It looked small, compared to all that work.[34]

The lesson that Father teaches Almanzo, who is still only nine years old, is the true value of a (half) dollar. He asks Almanzo to consider the amount of work that goes into raising a crop, the hours of effort and labor, and the outcome– a pretty meager sum, all things considered. He gives Almanzo a choice: "It's yours," said Father. "You could buy a sucking pig, if you want to. You could raise it, and it would raise a litter of pigs, worth four, five dollars apiece. Or you can trade that half-dollar for lemonade, and drink it up. You do as you want, it's your money." Almanzo thinks for a moment, wavering between the lemonade and the pig. He goes off with his new half-dollar to buy his own sucking pig (a piglet raised on its mother's milk), Lucy, who will come to live in the front yard of the Wilder farmhouse, rear her own piglets, and eventually provide the Wilder family with several winter's worth of sustenance.

When you consider that a half dollar was the input for such a valuable contribution to the family table, a nickel for lemonade seems foolish. Money is a theme throughout *Farmer Boy*, often used to illustrate prudence in matters of spending. Thriftiness would have been a necessary virtue of the Wilder family who were primarily subsistence farmers and only earned money from selling excess crops and domestic products, like butter. In addition to selling storage crops, Almanzo's mother sells butter to the "butter-buyer" from New York City who is presented as a

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[34] Ingalls Wilder 183-84

contrast to the farming Wilder family: "He wore fine city clothes, with a gold watch and chain, and he drove a good team…He brought all the news of politics and fashions and prices in New York City.[35]" There is a sharp demarcation between those who live in the city and the countrified Wilders, but this doesn't seem to bother any of them, least of all Almanzo. He is proud because "his mother was probably the best butter-maker in the whole of New York State. People in New York City would eat it, and say to one another how good it was, and wonder who made it.[36]"

When the New York potato-buyers come to town early in the year, the Wilder family must hurry to load their stored crop of potatoes, five hundred bushels in all, onto wagons: "On the third day the potato-train left for New York City. But all Father's potatoes were on it. "Five hundred bushels at a dollar a bushel," he said to Mother at supper…That was five hundred dollars in the bank. They were all proud of Father, who raised good potatoes and knew so well when to store them and when to sell them.[37]" Aside from being a piece of historical information about crop prices (for context, the price of a bushel of unwashed, organic gold potatoes today is around $50), this anecdote shows the importance of being a *good* farmer, one who is expert in the timing of planting, harrowing, harvesting, and most importantly, selling their crops. Before the advent of refrigeration, the Wilders would have used a root cellar to store winter crops. Monitoring the conditions of an underground cellar would have required constant supervision to ensure that crops didn't freeze underground, that any rotten crops be sorted out regularly to prevent further decay. After all of the hours of labor that are required to simply grow a crop, the storage and preservation of said crop is actually the most crucial part, especially in the late

[35] Ingalls Wilder 237
[36] Ingalls Wilder 239
[37] Ingalls Wilder 117

nineteenth century when farming families relied on what they grew throughout the growing season to feed them throughout the winter.

Harvest-time, the period between the peak of the summer's heat and the first inklings of autumn's shorter days and colder nights, ensured a family's survival:

> Then the rush of harvest-time came. The oats were ripe, standing thick and tall and yellow. The wheat was golden, darker than the oats. The beans were ripe, and pumpkins and carrots and turnips and potatoes were ready to gather. There was no rest and no play for anyone now. They worked from candle-light to candle-light. Mother and the girls were making cucumber pickles, green-tomato pickles, and watermelon-rind pickles; they were drying corn and apples, and making preserves. Everything must be saved, nothing wasted of all summer's bounty.[38]

The steady industry required of farmers leaves little room for "rest and play." Even young Almanzo must take part in the annual harvest. Despite long days of hard work, however, there are no complaints from any member of the Wilder family, especially Almanzo. He even takes pride in being able to "shock oats as well as anybody[39]" after a day of practicing the task. The only complaint we ever read about is Almanzo's constant hunger for his mother's donuts or apple pie– a pretty normal response, all things considered, for a growing kid working in the fields all day. Farm work, as evidenced by the harvest-time passage, is constant and repetitive. Often, repetition is equated with monotony. While this may be the case, it's also true that repetition makes Almanzo more skilled at his task of shocking oats. The repetition of harvest-time every

[38] Ingalls Wilder 233
[39] Ingalls Wilder 234

year ensures that the Wilder family knows how to do their respective tasks quickly and efficiently.

In today's largely automated world, these kinds of repetitive tasks are deemed a waste of time and effort. Instead, they are outsourced to machines so that humans can perform more intellectually stimulating jobs, leaving the "tedium" to mindless robotics. The need to work from "candle-light to candle-light" is obsolete when we have machinery to thresh and hull grain, when we can buy canned and dried goods from any grocery store (nevermind the fact that virtually all produce is available year-round), and entertainment is so persistent and ubiquitous to modern life that its presence feels inescapable. There is little need for so-called "honest work," the kind of manual labor that leaves one's muscles aching, weathers one's face, and ultimately creates a sense of pride and accomplishment in one's work.

The shift away from back-breaking labor has been in many ways a relief, allowing more opportunities for advancement in areas like the arts and sciences. But this means that we have shifted away from trade work toward jobs that recognize a certain degree of education as a marker of one's success and a determiner of one's future, in many cases. These jobs exist only as a function of socially invented systems (the stock market, politics, advertising, for example) and actually do very little to provide tangible products. The fact that these kinds of jobs effectively eschew any kind of non-cognitive or bodily labor also means that collectively we are more disassociated from our bodies, the sensory experience of seasonality, and the land that surrounds us.

Strangely, the work that the Wilder family would have had to do to keep themselves alive is now classified as "unskilled labor." Supposedly, skilled labor, or labor that requires aptitude

and expertise, is best left to those who were educated in the walls of a higher institution or to those who wear a white collar to work. In my mind this isn't right. A farmer, a true farmer, has to know about and do so many things at once that the scope of his abilities and responsibilities is almost incomprehensible. A farmer in the Wilder's era had to be a carpenter, a veterinarian, a fencing contractor, a meteorologist, and a botanist all in one. A farmer today must also be a mechanic, an electrician, an accountant, a truck driver, a marketing specialist, and so on. I'd bet that the average Ivy League graduate or CEO of a startup wouldn't be able to attach a brush hog to the PTO on a tractor, or clean and eviscerate a chicken for dinner, or set up a portable walk-in cooler from an air conditioning unit and some wires, or tell the difference between spinach and beet seedlings. It is baffling, frankly, to think that the work that farmers do is considered beneath so many people, and that the American Farmer is no longer a bastion of American society.

Americans simply have no need to shock their own oats, pickle and pressure-can their winter food supply, and store food underground, much less to harrow a field and plant potatoes in it. Our survival is no longer dependent on how good the corn crop is, the slaughtered hog in autumn, the principle of waste-not-want-not. We don't have to think about when to plant peas in early spring, or how to hand-milk a cow before the sun rises. We now live entirely apart from our way of making a living.[40] The present-day attitude towards labor, especially manual or menial labor, is that it is something that must be endured, a means to an end: stable income, housing, groceries, sundries, vacations in warm places, etc. The reverence for tactile work has evaporated in a climate of office work, poor-paying service industry jobs, nebulous online opportunities, Big Tech/Pharma/Ag. While most of us no longer have to literally toil for our daily bread, it might be

[40] Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. Counterpoint, 1977.

that lack of toil that has created a culture that craves distraction and stimulation. The few precious hours of the day that aren't spent at work are consumed with a near-constant barrage of overstimulating advertisements, social media, the re-cycled news cycle, highways, box stores, beeps and buzzes. While this fate of over-stimulation might be somewhat unavoidable, there are ways by which its effects might be mitigated: rising with the sun, experiencing a day's progression (watching the light change, feeling the wind warm and cool, eating a meal under a shade tree at the peak of noon, turning in as the sun lowers in the sky), working with your hands on the same piece of land day in and day out. This work, the work of farming, is an oasis in which natural rhythms are still the guiding principle of how to do one's job.

In an interview with Gary Snyder, an acclaimed American poet and environmental activist, he states, "All of us will come back again to hoe in the ground…or hand-adze a beam, or skin a pole, or scrape a hive– we're never going to get away from that. We've been living a dream that we're going to get away from it. Put that out of our minds. The work is always going to be there.[41]" Growing food, even when the intricate systems of "order" that humans have created collapse, will still be necessary work. The dream of getting away from the manual labor that is inherent to farming is preposterous because the society that we've created would cease to function were it not for farmers and tradespeople. Even the large-scale agriculture that has kept America gluttonous on corn and grain is doomed to one day fail once petroleum dries up and the vast swaths of monocropped and exhausted acreage erodes. The dream that all of us (note Snyder's inclusive "us") will re-turn to the earth to toil, to live in complete seasonality again, to reconnect with natural rhythms, skills, and regain the knowledge of how to truly care for one's

[41] Snyder, Gary. *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964-1979*. Edited by Wm. Scott Mclean. New Directions, 1980.

self and community is an immensely frightening prospect for the majority of adjusted America and the rest of the first world. For others, it signals the promise of healed communities, connectedness to our bodies, and an opportunity to steward the earth in a more respectful way.

Farmer Boy offers an opportunity, in a small way, to reconnect to these natural rhythms. The book's sensory and elementary prose, with its abundant passages about the pleasures of farm life, is a refreshing antidote to the overstimulation that is so present in everyday life. Just reading some of these passages is a way to reconnect to a simpler way of life:

> Now the weather was so warm that they could go barefooted. Their bare feet felt good in the air and the soft dirt. They dribbled the carrot seeds into the furrows, and with their feet they pushed the dirt over the seeds and pressed it down.[42]

> [Almanzo] took a wedge of apple pie and went out to the pasture, smelling the clover and eating the spicy apples and flaky crust in big mouthfuls. He licked his fingers, and then he rounded up the sheep and drove them across the dewy grass…[43]

> Nothing ever smelled so good as the rain on clover. Nothing ever felt so good as raindrops on Almanzo's face, and the wet grass swishing around his legs. Nothing ever sounded so pleasant as the drops pattering on the bushes along Trout River, and the rush of the water over the rocks.[44]

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[42] Ingalls Wilder 130
[43] Ingalls Wilder 157
[44] Ingalls Wilder 196

> The sun grew hotter. The smell of the hay grew stronger and sweeter. Then waves of heat began to come up from the ground. Almanzo's brown arms burned browner, and sweat trickled on his forehead.[45]

Passages like these in which the sounds, smells, and tastes specific to country life are cleanly described are enough to make one *want* to return to the earth with a hand-adze or a garden hoe in hand. Almanzo favors these simple pleasures, the tactility of his work, over everything else: "He watched the moon anxiously, for in the dark of the moon in May he could stay out of school and plant pumpkins...He made the work [planting carrots] last till there were only three more days of school; then the spring term ended and he could work all summer.[46]" His desire to work on the farm, to care for the animals and to cultivate the crops, is ultimately what proves that Almanzo is a real farmer.

At the end of *Farmer Boy*, there is a crucial passage in which Almanzo is given the opportunity to leave the farm and apprentice to Mr. Paddock as a wagon-maker in town. Mrs. Wilder, upset by the proposition, snaps at the news over dinner. "A pretty pass the world's coming to, if any man thinks it's a step up in the world to leave a good farm and go to town!...I guess if [Mr. Paddock] didn't make wagons to suit farmers, he wouldn't last long![47]" Though she makes a point that Mr. Paddock relies on the business of carriage-owners and farmers alike, Father knows that the money in that business, or really any business besides farming, must be a consideration for Almanzo's future. Mrs. Wilder refutes that point, saying, "Maybe he'll make

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[45] Ingalls Wilder 229
[46] Ingalls Wilder 165
[47] Ingalls Wilder 367

money, but he'll never be the man you are. Truckling to other people for his living, all his days– he'll never be able to call his soul his own." Almanzo, listening quietly to this conversation at the dinner table, "could not speak till he was spoken to, but he thought to himself that he was old enough to know he'd rather be like Father than anybody else…Father was free and independent; if he went out of his way to please anybody, it was because he wanted to.[48]" This is not the first time that Almanzo expresses a desire to work by himself and for himself. He knows early on that he would like best to be a farmer, and he looks forward to the day that he does "not have to go to school anymore[49]" so that he can work outside.When his brother tells him, "You're a bigger fool than I be, if you drudge all your days on a farm," Almanzo simply replies, "I like horses," and thinks about how "he wanted to break colts, and he wanted to drive his own horses, himself.[50]" So this scene at the dinner table, in which Almanzo's Mother and Father argue about his future, and eventually give him autonomy to decide his fate, is important:

> Suddenly he realized that Father had spoken to him. He swallowed, and almost choked on pie. "Yes, Father," he said.
>
> Father was looking solemn. "Son, he said, "you heard what Paddock said about you being apprenticed to him?"
>
> "Yes, Father."
>
> "What do you say about it?"
>
> Almanzo didn't exactly know what to say. He hadn't supposed he could say anything.

[48] Ingalls Wilder 369
[49] Ingalls Wilder 343
[50] Ingalls Wilder 297-98

That Mr. Wilder asks Almanzo what he thinks about the apprenticeship offer is indicative of the fact that Almanzo is growing up, a nudge toward his future as a self-reliant farmer. Mr. Wilder goes on:

> "Well, son, you think about it," said Father. "I want you should make up your own mind. With Paddock, you'd have an easy life, in some ways. You wouldn't be out in all kinds of weather. Cold winter nights, you could lie snug, in bed and not worry about young stock freezing. Rain or shine, wind or snow, you'd be under shelter. You'd be shut up, inside walls. Likely you'd always have plenty to eat and wear and money in the bank."
>
> "James!" Mother said.
>
> "That's the truth, and we must be fair about it," Father answered. "But there's the other side, too, Almanzo. You'd have to depend on other folks, son, in town. Everything you got, you'd get from other folks.
>
> "A farmer depends on himself, and the land and the weather. If you're a farmer, you raise what you eat, you raise what you wear, and you keep warm with wood out of your own timber. You work hard, but you work as you please, and no man can tell you to go or come. You'll be free and independent, son, on a farm.

This passage, in which Mr. Wilder lays bare the pros and cons of farming for a living, is the most important in the book in terms of Almanzo's development. Though he is still a boy, Almanzo knows that he does not want to "live inside walls and please people he didn't like, and never have horses and cows and fields.[51]" He is given a clear choice between a comfortable, easy life where he will likely want for nothing and possess nice things, or the life of a farmer, difficult in

[51] Ingalls Wilder 371

more ways than one, but which is ultimately rewarding and will ensure his personal freedom. Though he doesn't answer the question directly, it's clear that Almanzo will become a farmer: it's in his blood, and his heart is set on it.

The Mad Farmer Poems

The American Farmer as Revolutionary

Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down,
Learn of the green-world what can be thy place ...
–Ezra Pound*, Canto LXXXI*

Under the charm of the Dionysian not only
is the covenant between man and man again
established, but also…nature again
celebrates her reconciliation with her lost
son, man. Of her own accord earth proffers
her gifts…
–Friedrich Nietzsche*, Birth of Tragedy*

Imagine, if you haven't seen it while driving through flat, rural America, the farm of agribusiness' dreams: razed-flat acre upon acre of some scentless and yellowing monocrop like corn or soy, arranged in militaristic rows so precise that only a diesel-fueled GPS could have planted them that way. Every few days a plane drones over to spill a cloud of chemicals; that is the only sound, for all of the insects and birds that haven't been felled by poison have migrated to clearer air, warned by the fumes. No chickweed or purslane grows in the wheel tracks left by a tractor, no hand will harvest the tassels of grain that hang heavy in August. The food produced by this farm is dry, coarse, mealy, and unpleasant, its calories synthetically nutritious. Much of it is corn or soy used to produce some other commodity like ethanol or disposable cutlery. The pond at the edge of the farm is low; an abandoned tractor tire floats dumbly on its scummy

surface. The farmer himself is rarely present. His children do not play in the rows of corn. There is no singing during the fall harvest, no celebration. This is a farm devoid of everything that makes up a true farm: diversity, beauty, sound, life.

This is the reality of the majority of farmland in America today. In 2019, the USDA reported that "America's corn farmers planted even more than they did last year. U.S. farmers have planted 91.7 million acres of corn in 2019…That's about 69 million football fields of corn and 3 percent more corn than last year, far more acres than the next largest crop, soybeans.[52]" A third of the corn produced in that acreage supplies massive feedlots with genetically altered, sugar-dense grain, eliminating the "need" for stock to be raised on pasture– instead, they can stay in small pens and fatten up on grain, accumulating massive deposits of yellow lipid around their arteries and organs. Another third of that corn is converted to ethanol, primarily for use as a gasoline additive. The rest is used for human consumption in all manner of products like oil, beer, tortilla chips, and soda.

It is alarming to consider the breadth of land that this kind of farming requires, and then to imagine its byproduct funneled into cars or half-eaten at the bottom of a cereal bowl or clotting the stomach of a dairy cow or laying hen. The amount of resources required to maintain this level of production are plainly unsustainable, given increasingly common droughts (corn is a crop that requires a lot of water), skyrocketing fossil fuel costs, a growing consumer backlash against genetically modified food, and land erosion that is characteristic of monocropped farms. But it is unlikely that American farms will scale down in any meaningful way– if anything, as

[52]"Corn is America's Largest Crop in 2019." *USDA,* https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2019/07/29/corn-americas-largest-crop-2019, 29 July 2021.

the USDA cites, they're scaling up, producing more. More land is razed and plowed, its topsoil eroded and then studded with commodity crops or grazed to dust by beef cattle.

The advantage of this looming presence of the mono-farm in America is that one has the choice to rebel against it in a radical and tangible way. What Big Agriculture (as threateningly a moniker as Big Tobacco) has come to represent is the commodification of land and food, the disappearance of communities that were once strengthened by farming. Superficially, it also signals a loss of the aesthetic tradition of bucolic life. Fortunately, there are ways to counteract these effects. By embracing traditional knowledge (foraging, home gardening, raising livestock, tapping maple trees, preserving food, crafting, collecting spring water, saving seeds, etc.), one rejects what Big Ag imposes on the American landscape, literally and culturally. Staying close to local supply chains and interacting with one's farmers or, better yet, becoming your own farmer, is also required of the agrarian radical. Developing an appreciation for a piece of earth doesn't hurt. And reading about farming is also a key to preserving the tradition of agriculture.

Representing the Southern region of America, Wendell Berry is a poet, novelist, essayist, and environmentalist who has, for forty years, lived on and farmed a 125 acre parcel in Port Royal, Kentucky. The son of two fifth-generation farmers, Wendell Berry was born in 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky, a short distance from his homestead in Port Royal where he currently farms and writes. After receiving a B.A. and an M.A. in English Literature from the University of Kentucky, Berry attended Stanford University's creative writing program in 1958 as a Wallace Stegner Fellow[53] along with writers that included Larry McMurtry, Ken Kesey, and Ernest

[53] "Wendell Berry." *Americans Who Tell the Truth*, https://www.americanswhotellthetruth.org/portraits/wendell-berry.

Gaines. He went on to teach English at New York University from 1962-64, returning to University of Kentucky to teach English and creative writing between the years 1964 to 1993.[54] His first published novel, *Nathan Coulter* (1960), is part of a series of eight novels known as the Port William novels based on his home of Port Royal.

In addition to the eight Port William novels and a litany of short story and essay collections, Berry has published over twenty-five books of poetry. *The Mad Farmer Poems*, published in 2008, is a compilation of poems found in *Farming: A Hand Book* (1970), *The Country of Marriage* (1973), *A Part* (1980) and *Entries* (1994). This compilation succeeds because it collects sixteen of Berry's poems that deal with "the Mad Farmer," a Whitmanesque figure (in personam and in language) who personifies Berry's long-held philosophies of freedom, self-sufficiency, and a devotion to the art of farming.

The Mad Farmer Poems begins with a short ten line poem, "The Man Born to Farming." It is fitting, naturally, that the collection should begin with the birth of the farmer. The idea of "the man born to farming" suggests that the work of farming is part birthright, part calling. The language of the title implies that the man born to farming is born into a farming family or born on a farm, but also that he is born to do the work as someone might be born to be an artist or born to be a king. Indeed this is also the case in *Farmer Boy* in which farming is, for Almanzo Wilder, both an inheritance and a deliberate choice. No other work will feed his soul like the work of farming. Farming, with all of its hardships (financial, physical, mental), is a choice for most Americans in the 21st century, and for those "mad" few that choose it it is a thing of beauty,

[54] "Wendell Berry." *Library of America*, https://www.loa.org/writers/682-wendell-berry.

a consuming force, like any other art. “The Man Born to Farming,” in its entirety, illustrates this perfectly:

> The grower of trees, the gardener, the man born to farming,
> whose hands reach into the ground and sprout,
> to him the soil is a divine drug. He enters into death
> yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen the light lie down
> in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.
> His thought passes along the row ends like a mole.
> What miraculous seed has he swallowed
> that the unending sentence of his love flows out of his mouth
> like a vine clinging in the sunlight, and like water
> descending in the dark?

The language in Berry’s poem amplifies the idea that farming is an irresistible call, “a divine drug.” While the word “drug” has loaded connotations, what Berry is saying is that farming feels irresistibly *good*. Divine, even. Picture roots and tendrils growing from one’s fingertips in the soil, a warmth radiating from your extremities, and that’s what digging in the ground feels like, especially in spring.

That the farmer “enters into death yearly” and emerges “rejoicing” is a testament to the endurance and optimism required of the profession, and also to the idea that a farmer’s life mirrors the natural and seasonal cycle of a farm’s growth. To the mad farmer there is no joy comparable to the feel of the soil, the predictability of the sun’s location, the rhythm of yearly death and rebirth. Like these predictable rhythms, the mad farmer’s love is “unending,” fluid,

offering further proof that he who lives off the land lives *for* the land. The unending love is what drives the work. For who else would willingly walk into death every year, watching his crops die and decay into the ground, putting faith in a slow and eventual resurrection, but a farmer? Who but the farmer would sacrifice his hands to the soil as if before an altar? Give his love and his life to one thing freely, forever?

So in the line, "He enters into death / yearly, and comes back rejoicing," the first inkling of the mad farmer's madness, which is simultaneously his love, is revealed. It is reminiscent of Nietzsche's concept of Dionysian madness, that rabid and irrational passion which spurs the artist on. Its progenitor, the god of the grape-harvest, Dionysus, represents insanity, ecstasy, drunkenness, the vegetable world. The mad farmer, too, embodies these qualities: he is (or so he claims himself) mad. He is drugged, drunk on the "divine soil" of his own vegetative kingdom. He is satyric, "dancing at night in the oak shades / with goddesses.[55]"

The mad farmer is mad in his passion for his art, the art of farming. Nietzsche asks "...what then, physiologically speaking, is the meaning of that madness…the Dionysian madness? What? perhaps madness is not necessarily the symptom of degeneration, of decline, of belated culture?[56]" Perhaps instead the mad farmer's madness is a symptom of *regeneration* and cultural preservation in the face of industrialization. Indeed the madness ascribed to artists, poets and dreamers alike, is *not* derogatory in nature but dynamic, creative. That spark of madness, for madness is what we'll call it, is the genius behind cultural and aesthetic evolution. It is this same spark which starts the farmer to planting in spring, to harrowing his fields, harvesting with reverent hands the fruits of his labor.

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[55] Berry 5

[56] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. p.7.

In “The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer,” the mad farmer, speaking in first person, offers a manifesto of his madness:

I am done with apologies. If contrariness is my
inheritance and destiny, so be it. If it is my mission
to go in at exits and come out at entrances, so be it.
I have planted by the stars in defiance of the experts,
and tilled somewhat by incantation and by singing,
and reaped, as I knew, by luck and Heaven’s favor,
in spite of the best advice. (lines 1-7)

In a purely farm-related way, the mad farmer asserts his madness by going against “the experts’” advice, presumably advice that recommends abusive tillage and chemicals, ultimately a disregard for sustainable and personal farming practices. Instead, the mad farmer uses the stars and the moon as a planting guide (which is actually an ancient and still-observed custom in certain types of farming like biodynamics), tilling by song. There’s a mystical quality to his practices, as if by singing and living by the stars he curries favor with whatever divinity lives in the soil. He’s alone in his fields, his garden, drumming up miracles like a sprite or a satyr. From “The Mad Farmer Revolution:”

He led
a field of corn to creep up
and tassel like an Indian tribe
on the courthouse lawn. Pumpkins
ran out to the ends of their ines

to follow him. Ripe plums

and peaches reached into his pockets.

Flowers sprang up in his tracks

everywhere he stepped. (lines 15-23)

The fruits and flowers of the earth sally forth to greet the mad farmer. In lines like these, the character of the mad farmer is revealed. His crops "run out" after him, are eager to plop themselves in his pockets, "springing up" and sprucing the earth he walks on. He leads his corn to tassel and take over the courthouse in what is presumably an act of political defiance, and the corn obeys him. The mad farmer can use his power of coaxing the environment for good, proliferating the earth with verdance and abundance. But there's a duality to the mad farmer (another similarity with the Dionysian) in which he is eager to destroy what is not natural, what is erected by humans in the natural environment. He carries an immense power in the rural tableau, inciting fear in the locals:

'It is an awesome event

when an earthen man has drunk

his fill of the blood of a god,'

people said, and got out of his way.

He plowed the churchyard, the

minister's wife, three graveyards

and a golf course. In a parking lot

he planted a forest of little pines. ("The Mad Farmer Revolution," lines 5-11)

These lines precede the ones about the mad farmer calling forth the growth of corn and pumpkins and wildflowers, suggesting that whatever fury he has is used first and foremost for dismantling that which is distasteful. It's cryptic as to why he would plow the churchyard, other than the fact that it is likely a maintained and trimmed expanse of lawn and could be used as a field for growing sorghum or grazing sheep. Because the mad farmer is devious, the reference to the minister's wife could either be construed as sexual (which would again fit the Dionysian parallel) or a reference to her being buried in the graveyard. And the mad farmer dislikes graveyards, evidenced in the short, eight-line poem "The Farmer Among the Tombs:"

> I am oppressed by all the room taken up by the dead,
> their headstones standing shoulder to shoulder,
> the bones imprisoned under them.
> Plow up the graveyards! Haul off the monuments!
> Pry open the vaults and the coffins
> so the dead may nourish their graves
> and go free, their acres traversed all summer
> by crop rows and cattle and foraging bees.

The fact that he's hell-bent on plowing the churchyard and parking lots and graveyards signals that the mad farmer's utopia is that of rolling farmland, a place with plenty of room to roam. He is "oppressed" by space (another contradiction) that is, in his mind, wasted. Every acre's efficiency must be maximized by "crop rows and cattle and foraging bees." His vision of paradise, his dream, is not that of swaths of land encompassed by corn or soy or any one crop in particular, but of a multitude of vegetation and animals.

What big agriculture, and the industrial culture at large in America, would have us believe, however, is that in order to avoid discomfort, hunger, or even mild inconvenience, this kind of diversification of farmland is impractical and even undesirable. Instead, the landscape must be transformed into an inhospitable expanse of monocrops or else developments, factories, or other reflections of industrial modernity. The result is what Wendell Berry calls in his seminal book of essays *The Unsettling of America* a "manufactured Paradise.[57]" The disparity between those two words, "manufactured" and "Paradise," epitomizes the modern crisis of consumption and commodity as substitutes for self-reliance and the sensory experience of the diversity of the natural world. The modern Paradise depends on what can be produced or made, not what can be seen, felt, heard, tasted.

There is a clear relationship between a landscape and its culture, its aesthetics. The manufactured Paradise *is* a landscape, but it is a landscape on which strip malls are erected as temples of consumption, highways are smeared across once-fertile fields and hills, and rural communities are displaced by an influx of developers. With this proliferation of infrastructure, this manufacturing of Paradise, the tide of industrialization grows stronger and humans move further away from nature. In "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," the mad farmer confronts the culture that surrounds the manufactured Paradise:

> Not even your future will be a mystery
> any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
> and shut away in a little drawer.
> When they want you to buy something

[57] Berry, *The Unsettling of America,* 60.

they will call you. When they want you

to die for profit they will let you know. (lines 6-11)

There's an almost Beat quality to this part of this poem, the indignant and righteous distaste for the powers that be, "They." "Your mind will be punched in a card / and shut away in a little drawer" could be a line from "Howl," or part of a speech uttered by a Kerouac character. Interestingly, Berry tackles some of the same themes that are so characteristic of the Beat's writing: resistance and skepticism of authority, religion, personal freedom, and an overall rejection of the "mainstream." Berry's mad farmer is, like the Beats, a counter-cultural figure. He goes against "the experts' advice," he roams the countryside calling to his neighbors, spreading a message that is rooted in the tradition of agriculture and slow living and not consumerism or industrialization. He detests that which is manufactured, that which is ugly. His manifesto encourages its readers to "Denounce the government and embrace / the flag" ("Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" l.17-18).

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,

vacation with pay. Want more

of everything ready-made. Be afraid

to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head. (l.1-5)

Where Berry breaks his lines here, after "annual raise," "want more," "be afraid," "to die," "in your head," is itself a reinforcement of what the mad farmer is up against: mindless and continuous consumption, fear, living outside of one's body entirely and in the realm of the mind. And a battle of some kind is implied in the title of the poem: "The Mad Farmer Liberation

Front." All throughout the rest of the poems in *The Mad Farmer Poems* there is an undercurrent of revolution, a sense that the mad farmer is ready for rebellion and actively stoking it. We see this in the way he coaxes the corn to tassel on the courthouse lawn, the way he plows the graveyard and the parking lot. "When I rise up / let me rise up joyful / like a bird" ("Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer" l. 23-25). The mad farmer's "Manifesto" gives some instructions on how to rebel:

So, friends, every day do something

(Quick note where Berry breaks the line here, on "do something," on another prepositional phrase, suggesting action instead of passivity, movement instead of feeling.)

that won't compute. Love the Lord.

Love the world. Work for nothing,

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it. (l. 12-16)

"Love" was last seen in the first line of the poem "Love the quick profit, the annual raise." This Love is altogether different, not sardonic or sarcastic, not meant as a stab. Instead, this Love is soft, expansive, inclusive. It is repeated three times in this small span of four lines. Here, there is a cascading effect where love appears: first, "Love the Lord," then the world, then someone, someone who is undeserving, no less. The next time love is used in line 46, "Go with your love to the fields," it is implied that human love will at last be transferred to nature. The mad farmer returns, over and over, to the land, the fields, the forest:

Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest

that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested

when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. (l. 24-30)

The tongue in cheek, "Call that profit," is so characteristic of the mad farmer's defiant anger. The mad farmer is mad in the sense that he's "crazy" for going against social and agricultural norms, but he's also intensely angry– and for good reason. The industrialization of agriculture has contributed disproportionately to the destruction of open spaces, forests, meadows, and sustainable farmland. Climate change's unpredictably deleterious effects can be traced in large part to industrial agriculture's persistence. And aside from these very real and very visible changes to the American landscape, the shift in agriculture has contributed to a less-visible cultural crisis, the crisis of distraction and stimulation. Berry writes in *The Unsettling of America* that "once, the governing human metaphor was pastoral or agricultural, and it clarified, and so preserved in human care, the natural cycles of birth, growth, death, and decay.[58]" Agriculture as metaphor, as representative of the rhythm of entering into death yearly and coming back rejoicing, is what *The Mad Farmer Poems* endeavors to enlighten its readers to. So the lines in which the mad farmer urges his readers to plant trees and to consider their eventual decay as "profit" is yet another example of how to perpetuate the cycle of life and death that is at the core of agriculture.

[58] Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 60.

This cycle of life and death reminded me of the poem "This Compost" by Walt Whitman (who I can't help but imagine as the personification of the mad farmer, with his long beard and the butterfly poised on his finger). The last stanza of "This Compost[59]" reads:

> Now that I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
> It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
> It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless
> successions of diseas'd corpses,
> It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
> It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual,
> sumptuous crops,
> It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such
> leavings from them at last.

The Earth metabolizes leaves into mold, the Earth "grows," "turns," "distills," "renews," and ultimately "gives." These verbs, the ones Whitman chooses, all imply that the Earth has this immense power of transformation; it *terrifies* (in the sense, I imagine, that angels terrify, their power superhuman and awesome), but it is also "calm and patient," going about its business "with such unwitting looks." The Earth does what it always has done, continues despite "corruption" and "corpses."

The further away we recede from this truth, the more the cycle of birth, growth, death, decay, is feared. Whitman's poem uses fertile words like "endless," "prodigal," "annual," and "sumptuous" to enforce the idea that the Earth is capable of constant regeneration. It is reliable

[59] Whitman, Walt. "This Compost." *Leaves of Grass*, Bantam Classic, 2004, p. 308-9.

and trustworthy, like the farmer who goes about the same work on a human scale. The farmer accepts decay as an offering; compost is spread on fields that will grow food, feed families. The leaves that rot into humus are a gift: "The forest does not withhold / itself from death. What it gives up it takes back" ("Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer" l. 17-18). Reclaiming the cycle of growth and decay as something divine rather than something to be feared is an act of revolution in itself, for it suggests a return to a relationship with the agrarian metaphor, nature, Earth.

However, this relationship largely depends on the human body, for the body calls the Earth its home. A reclamation of one's body as not merely a vessel for one's mind but as an extension of the Earth, a tool to tend to the soil. From "The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough Branch, Secedes from the Union:"

> Come into the life of the body, the one body
> granted to you in all the history of time.
> Come into the body's economy, its daily work,
> and its replenishment at mealtimes and at night.
> Come into the body's thanksgiving, when it knows
> and acknowledges itself a living soul. (l. 38-43)

The anaphoric invitation, distinctly Whitmanian, calls for its listeners to reclaim their bodies. The body and its economy mimics that overarching cycle of death and rebirth: waking whenever your body wakes, working, slowing in the evening, eventually succumbing to rest. "The life of the body" mirrors the Earth, the agricultural cycle of seasonality. To everything there is a season.

The mad farmer, playing at the gracious and welcoming host, is almost coaxing his readers to return to not only their bodies, but to the Earth itself:

> Always disappearing, always returning,
> calling his neighbors to return, to think again
> of the care of flocks and herds, of gardens
> and fields, of woodlots and forests and the uncut groves,
> calling them separately and together, calling and calling,
> he goes forever toward the long restful evening
> and the croak of the night heron over the river at dark. (l. 48-54)

In a kind of abrupt change of narration, someone else begins to write about the mad farmer. This might be representative of the mad farmer's omnipresence, his presence simultaneously continuous and nonexistent ("always disappearing, always returning"). Or it might be a nod to the multiplicity of the mad farmer– that there are many mad farmers crossing the countryside, iconoclastic in their attack of the institution of industrialism, "the dire machines that run / by burning the world's body and / its breath" ("Some Further Words" l. 53-55), revolutionary in their call to return to the body, to "think again / of the care of flocks and herds, of gardens." And what an idea that is– a front of mad farmers calling in the woodlots, convening with herons and flowers, digging up asphalt.

The mad farmer is, in significant ways, a vessel for Berry's ideology, *is* Berry himself. Berry represents a way of life that directly opposes what American agriculture as a business has become in the last fifty-plus years. Berry, a farmer himself, is an advocate for "old-time" methods of farming such as using draft horses and opting out of using chemical fertilizers. Many

farmers, including a few that I know personally, scorn Berry for this "old-fashionedness," citing the fact that if we have improved methods of pest control by way of chemicals, and cultivation that relies on tractors that run on fossil fuels, we might as well utilize them. But this quick-fix mentality is exactly what has contributed to the state of farming as it is now. Farming is now an *industry*, something that has been relegated to specialists and scientists, to systems that have stripped the soil of health and life. The farm of de Crevecouer's America, the farm that Almanzo Wilder grew up on, is culturally obsolete. The modern farm is manufactured, but it is far from Paradise. Aside from the obvious negative environmental and cultural effects of industrial agriculture, there are also negative aesthetic consequences to the shift away from the once ubiquitous small farm or garden. Part of the appeal of farming is the beauty of it, the connectedness to earthly rhythms, close observation of the natural world, and simple pleasures. The sensory-rich passages of *Farmer Boy* are evidence of this, as are the passages in which de Crevecouer's Farmer James exalts his profession. The mad farmer has his own ode to the aesthetics of farm life in "The Satisfactions of the Mad Farmer":

> Growing weather; enough rain;
> the cow's udder tight with milk;
> the peach tree bent with its yield;
> honey golden in the white comb;
>
> the pastures deep in clover and grass,
> enough, and more than enough;

the ground, new worked, moist
and yielding underfoot, the feet
comfortable in it as roots;

the early garden: potatoes, onions,
peas, lettuce, spinach, cabbage, carrots,
radishes, marking their straight rows
with green, before the trees are leafed;

raspberries ripe and heavy amid their foliage,
currants shining red in clusters amid their foliage,
strawberries red ripe with the white
flowers still on the vines– picked
with the dew on them, before breakfast; (lines 1-17)

There's something about these satisfactions that feels original. I keep returning to the idea of pleasure in writing about the literature of farming because above all, pleasure is what makes farming divine, "a landmark I love to return to" ("Pleasures of the Mad Farmer" l.61). And reclaiming these easy pleasures of agricultural life is an act of rebellion against machinery, industry, the modern agribusiness farm that is devoid of diversity, color, life.

The mad farmer is the governing figure of this revolution. He is a reaction to the disappearance of the agrarian metaphor, the dissolving of farming communities, the societal shift away from an appreciation for (and a healthy fear of) that cycle of life, growth, decay, and death.

The Mad Farmer Poems are part manifesto, part ode to the work and art of farming. It is fitting, then, to close on this last passage from "Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer:"

> Don't worry and fret about the crops. After you have done all you can for them, let them stand in the weather on their own.
>
> If the crop of any one year was all, a man would have to cut his throat every time it hailed.
>
> But the *real* products of any year's work are the farmer's mind and the cropland itself.
>
> If he raises a good crop at the cost of belittling himself and diminishing the ground, he has gained nothing. He will have to Begin over again the next spring, worse off than before.
>
> Let him receive the season's increment into his mind. Let him work it into the soil.
>
> The finest growth that farmland can produce is a careful farmer.
>
> Make the human race a better head. Make the world a better piece of ground.

Conclusion

The Author as American Farmer

I myself came to farming instinctually. It was something I knew, from an early age, that I would do (in this way, Almanzo and I are very kindred spirits). It just lived in my heart, this dream of farming, laid there like a seed slowly growing. Where this urge came from is unclear because my upbringing was purely suburban: uniform houses and close-trimmed lawns, the drone of lawn mowers on Sunday, the predictable rattle of minivans and television, strip malls and soccer fields. The only farming I was exposed to was the annual-ish visit to the apple orchard to pick pumpkins. Given that I didn't see what a real farm with rows of vegetables looked like until I was in my late teens, it was somewhat abnormal that I wanted to grow my own food and milk a cow every morning and drive a tractor. By middle school, I had convinced my parents to let me build a chicken coop in our backyard, right next to the raised garden beds I'd built to host my first attempts at growing cucumbers, corn, radishes, and summer squash. A few years later I transferred to a Waldorf high school where Gardening was a mandatory class. There I learned how to prune fruit trees, prepare garden beds in early spring, turn the compost pile with pitchforks, and preserve herbs and fruit by drying, canning, and freezing.

When I graduated from high school, I started apprenticing at a thirty-acre organic vegetable farm to get a feel for "real" farming, farming on a larger scale. The days were long and hot and I spent hours hoeing rows of beets, laying lines of irrigation next to newly planted lettuce, harvesting clumsily and slowly because I was new. But I kept at it, getting faster and more adept with every season after that first awkward one. Despite the repetitive nature of the

work and the strain on my muscles at the end of every day, farming made me feel good. And six years later, now, it still feels good. It feels good to be outside, touching soil. It feels good to pick a perfectly ripe tomato or plant a row of cucumbers by hand. It feels good to sweat and be covered in dirt, sunned and tired at the end of a long day. Farming, both my first inexplicable dream and the reality of it, is a tangible tether to the world. It grounds me. The physicality of the work alone demands presence in the most literal sense, hands and feet securely in the dirt.

The work of farming dually occupies the realm of the mind. A farmer is expected to know when a crop is ready to harvest, how deep and how far apart to plant their seeds, how to identify a host of pests and what measures to take to prevent them, how to cure winter roots for long-term storage, when to rotate a herd to a new pasture, what temperature to store their produce at for optimal freshness, and so on. In this way, farming demands a constant mental presence as well as a physical one. The knowledge required to farm is cultivated over seasons of work and watchfulness. A farm manager once advised me, “Your eyes are your greatest tool,” and that has become my mantra when I’m examining eggplant leaves for aphids, listening to water flow through drip-tape (there’s a certain sound when it’s at exactly the right pressure), or deciding if a crop is ready to harvest. This level of observation is crucial to the work of farming, just as it is important to the work of literature and reading. This close observation is one of the main similarities between the two. Observation, and the ability to capture and translate one’s observations is the writer’s basic task, just as it is the farmer’s.

One of the things that occurred to me while writing this study of the American Farmer is how closely related farming and literature really are. Both are responsive arts. Both are cerebral, to an extent. And the reader benefits from literature as the eater benefits from farming. In a

purely consumerist way, literature and agriculture are valuable because they provide tangible products. But this is not why I chose to write about the literature of agriculture. For as long as I've wanted to be a farmer, I've also been a reader– a voracious one, at that. I liked losing myself in books, just like I like to lose myself in the experience of having my hands in dirt and my brain focused on some task like harvesting beans or something. Reading and farming have both been for me a kind of therapy, "divine drugs," as Berry would say.

So the American Farmer became the topic of my fixation and research because it seemed like the most natural thing to come back to. After a few failed attempts at other topics, I realized that the only thing I wanted to write about was the literature of what I want to do most: farming. Every time I'd sit down to write about something else, all I could think about was the idea of the farmer in literature: the farmer as the original man, the farmer as caretaker, the farmer as a figure of counter-cultural revolution. And I had already had profoundly affecting moments with the texts I chose to write about. I read *Farmer Boy* during the month of July last summer, when my own arms bronzed during long days in the fields and at night I'd wade into the rush of water of the creek behind my house to cool off. My dreams usually involved biting into a sun-warm tomato or hoeing beets. *Farmer Boy*, with its descriptions of the simple pleasures of farm life and its easy prose, was exactly what I needed to read when I read it, a nice little novel that affirmed everything that is good and difficult about farm life.

De Crevecouer's book was another affirmation that an agrarian lifestyle is the one I want. In it, I found exactly the sentiments I felt viscerally while growing up in suburban America– the want/need to work outside, an appreciation for nature, and an awe of growing things, harvesting, the sensuality of true abundance. James defies the idea that the farmer is merely "a simple

farmer," that a farmer can also be intellectual and can also write well. Of course, it was nice, too, to imagine America as it was originally, as an agricultural community, populated by small family farms and quaint towns with plots of land for livestock and gardens still in the center. It was nice to wonder what the land once looked like before it was overtaken by concrete and highways and factories and McMansions, like the one I grew up in. *Letters from an American Farmer* made me curious about whether or not a return to this original mode of America is possible, whether or not the cycle of history and time will revert back to this simpler mode of life.

Wendell Berry's work wasn't new to me, as he's well-known in the farming community for being a proponent of small-scale agriculture and a cultural revolution that involves a return to agriculture at its core. I had only read his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" from his *Mad Farmer Poems* prior to starting this project. Someone recommended it to me during my third farming season, and I printed it out and stuck it on the fridge in the barn where we packed vegetables as a reminder to "go with love…to the fields." Reading the collection of *Mad Farmer Poems* in its entirety was another great reminder to take that love and continue to go to the fields.

I was afraid that agriculture wasn't literary enough, wasn't "academic" enough to write about. Whether or not this is true is unimportant; I really don't care. All that matters is that now I can go to the fields with my love.

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