

Beyond the Future to the Past: Notes Toward a Radical Agrarianism

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Agrarianism is the study of the practices and peoples who cultivate the land as their primary mode of subsistence. As a set of traditions expressing the concepts and values of farms, farmers, and farming, it aims to account for how food and its production, distribution, and consumption bear on other areas of life, human and not. In this way, agrarianism is a form of inquiry based on a set of questions into the relationships between cultivating the soil for the foods and fibers necessary for human lives, and the cultures emerging from their various intersections. It is the study of the social, ethical, political, spiritual, and ecological aspects of agriculture and agricultural ways of living.

Within this formulation, however, lies the germ of a larger question. Here agriculture is what one nineteenth century observer called that “indispensable preliminary to civilization,” whose origins are now located in the global wave of Neolithic revolutions beginning between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago.¹ For many, these near simultaneous transitions of human subsistence patterns from hunting and gathering to settled agricultural cultivation mark the literal beginnings of human civilizations. And though the details of these transitions continue to change, the point is that the advent of *farming* marks the temporal and technical boundaries of civilizations. By emphasizing the evolution of certain techniques and practices that manipulate the environment to produce more than it otherwise would, such developmental narratives inevitably turn on a certain set of questions concerning technology and historical progress that are correlated to a given stage of civilization. At work within such narratives, moreover, is an ever present (but often tacit) philosophical anthropology that places the various modes of food acquisition and production – and the individuals with whom they are associated – within a categorical hierarchy that functions to demarcate humanity proper from the primitive, savage, and animal others that haunt the edges of civilization.

In this sense, agrarianism is not merely a standard “ism.” This suffix incorrectly suggests that agrarianism is simply or primarily a *theory* open for adoption, an ideology to be taken up that in turn makes people “agrarians”. Rather, if agrarianism concerns the complex networks of relations between a people and their practices of soil cultivation, then it is not so much a choice of theory – adopted as a belief among other beliefs, or an ideology expounded as a systematic body of ideas – as it is a set of *questions* occasioned by a concrete set of *practices*.² And precisely because practices express values without speaking, showing instead how beliefs are more precisely the habits of actions imbued with meaning and justification over time, agrarian practices form the soil in which agrarian concepts and values are rooted. As a particular set of habits transmitted across generations, such practices form an inheritance in which the act of eating invokes, and literally transmits, the domestication of

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, H.C. Mansfield and D. Winthrop, eds. and trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 313. For the latter point, see Colin Tudge, *Neanderthals, Bandits, & Farmers: How Agriculture Really Began* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 30. While there is a vast literature on this subject, see also David R. Harris, ed., *The Origins and Spread of Agriculture and Pastoralism in Eurasia* (London: UCL Press Limited, 1996) and C. Wesley Cowan and Patty Jo Watson, eds., *The Origins of Agriculture: An International Perspective* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

² See also Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*. (Emeryville: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002), 238.

generations of plants, animals, and the humans that depend upon them for survival. This transmission forms the material basis of agrarianism, a by now species-wide institution that is also the primary mode of production for the means of human subsistence.

So to claim that agrarianism is a set of questions occasioned by a set of practices is not to say that these questions lack normative roots and comprise some type of objective or value-free inquiry. Wholly on the contrary: every question and every practice is situated with respect to some specific content and some particular purpose. The formulation of any agrarian question immediately establishes a frame or field whose limits form the scope of possible conclusions. In this sense, agrarianism may be understood as a *praxis* wherein the ideals and principles directing agricultural modes of life are taken to arise from, and become reintegrated into, the concrete practices of agricultural production. These processes and products run deep and wide within our bodies and our bodies' politic; they concern the necessary conditions for life, and therefore comprise a bio-politics where food, sex, work, and death operate within various – but always particular – economies of life. The broad scope of this *praxis* stems from the contingent necessity of food for human life.

The frame of agrarianism, then, is not simply or even primarily conceptual, but bound by a collection of practices having determinate consequences for actual communities. Whether it is through land reform or urban agriculture, whether it is by analyzing the spread of industrial agriculture or evaluating the consequences of international patent rights in seed, agrarianism attempts to account for the sustaining connections of peoples to places, and to highlight how these connections are at once deeply personal and profoundly political. And so to reduce agrarianism to a conceptual topography is to efface its actual geography. If agrarianism is a set of questions inquiring into the actual production and distribution of food, if it is to think about farms and farmers in their concrete contexts, then it is not an area of inquiry that can simply be written off as relevant to only a few. After all, at least for now, human beings continue to derive sustenance from real food whose roots are fixed within real soil.

Thus if agrarianism thus first appears to be irrelevant to contemporary problems, out of touch with the realities of twenty-first century life, this is because these very issues are undergoing a necessary occlusion with the continuing spread of capitalist forms of agriculture. As Marx pointed out in *Capital*, the spread of capitalist modes of agricultural production tends to convert “one part of the globe into a chiefly agricultural field of production for supplying the other part, which remains a re-eminently industrial field.”³ And indeed, within the last century, the circulatory system of capital, whose blood is a lifeless power pulsing relentlessly toward valorization and accumulation, has rearranged the locations of food production beyond the borders of the developed world, to places whose fertility represents a resource yet to be consumed, a market yet to be opened, and a people yet to be subjugated. For those sustained by this occlusion, our mandibles no longer hang together, our mastication incomplete and uneasy.

It is here that the question of the *radical* potential of agrarianism finds fertile ground. Stemming from the Latin *radix* – to relate to or form a root or network of roots – to be radical is to be basic, necessary, or inherent to the processes of life; it is to be that inner moisture, that vital humor that is the pulse common to all living things. Thus to understand and interrogate the ways in which the life-giving economies of food have been integrated into global capitalist markets – the logic of which necessarily includes violence, domination, and exploitation – requires an inquiry into how life happens by way of roots, how culture is

³ Karl Marx. *Capital, Volume 1*. Ernest Mandel, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 580.

sustained through a mediation between the microbes in the soil and the creative powers of human labor.

Strictly speaking, then, to speak of “radical agrarianism” is to be redundant. Agrarianism is already about roots: roots of the plants that sustain the stalk that is the common physical and social bond of food. On the other hand, however, through this adjective it is important to emphasize that *there is nothing necessarily politically progressive or radical about agrarianism*, and that the farm has not, historically or at present, been the happiest or most libratory place on earth. To be radical in this sense, agrarianism must account for the way the farm represents a (perhaps *the*) principle site of transmission for a wide variety of violent practices, such as masculine domination and slavery, and the physical control and exploitation of nature.

If the above characterization is correct, then central to agrarianism are questions of gender, race, and class, and the technologies of domination and domestication that occur by way of agrarian forms of life. There are, indeed, many problems with which agrarianism today must come to terms if it is to be sufficiently radical, including: the so-called “backwards” nature of rural people, i.e., their lack of progressive, forward-looking social organization, as well their lack of education; agriculture and its rapid historical association with slavery and patriarchy; the development and application of machines and other technologies that have destroyed, and continue to destroy, peoples and the planet; the accumulation of capital that agricultural makes possible, and the concentration of wealth and power whose necessary constitutive correlate is poverty, exploitation, and subjugation; the dramatic urbanization and mass migrations from the country to the city, and from the South to the North; and the discourse of private property rights, and the consequences of the various enclosures and tragedies of the commons.

Far from comprehensive, this list is meant simply to highlight how agrarianism is situated at the confluence of a set of nesting and overlapping relationships between labor and life, time and technology, and slavery and freedom, and that to be sufficiently radical, agrarianism must actively confront these difficult historical inheritances so as to be able to work toward a more libratory future. To recover the radical potential of agrarianism, it is crucial to understand how its disparate iterations are joined at the root, how they both turn on a larger set of concerns related to the production and reproduction of life. In this sense, radical agrarianism begins with the hypothesis that various arrangements of agricultural production are already expressions of power. Agriculture as a primary form of biopolitics, then, points to the way in which agrarianisms have always been contestable discursive spaces as much about plants as power, as much about domestication as domination.

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With this preliminary definition of radical agrarianism, I now turn to examine the way time and technology function in two American agrarianisms of the twentieth century, namely, those of the Southern Agrarians and Wendell Berry. Here two questions guide my critical inquiry. First, in what ways are these agrarianisms unrealistic, conservative, and backward looking in their frame of reference? In what ways are they nostalgic or pejoratively utopian, desiring to return to a past that never was or a future that can never be? Second, in what ways are they reactionary with respect to technology? How do they conceive of the appropriate and inappropriate uses of machines and technologies, and on what grounds are these normative claims made? In short, I address two critiques commonly leveled against these agrarianisms – namely, that they are romantic or sentimental or nostalgic modes of

analysis, and that they are synonymous with a sort of neo-Luddism, out of touch with the present state of technology – on the way to reassessing their radical potential today.

As I have intimated, the traditions of agrarianism are long and wide, and are by no means limited to texts. That said, however, in the Anglo-American academic context the term does indeed conjure certain ghosts – mostly, but by no means solely, dead and white and male. In the United States in particular, the term has since the 1930's often invoked one particular work of a group of white Southern intellectuals in and around Vanderbilt University, collectively known as the Southern Agrarians. The immediate, rather narrow association of this term with this one text is unfortunate, for not only does it represent a mere sixth of their published work, but there are also several other important strands of agrarianism being developed at roughly the same time.⁴ As Paul Conkin and others have shown, for example, while it is true that the Agrarians were all white men, this apparent homogeneity often obscures very real social, political, and intellectual differences between them.⁵ Moreover, as Kimberly Smith shows, there was a vibrant contemporaneous African-American tradition of agrarianism – found, for example, in the works of Lewis Woodson, Frederick Douglass, and George Washington Carver – that leveled a critique similar to the Agrarians, but obviously different in its emphases and conclusions.⁶ So while the common association of agrarianism with the Southern Agrarians is well established in the scholarly literature, here, as always, there is more complexity than commonly supposed, more diversity and plurality than its status as a movement would otherwise suggest. In such instances, there is no substitute for engaging the text.

Published collectively by “Twelve Southerners,” *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) contains a vitriolic indictment of industrial capitalism as well as a social and political manifesto on the values of tradition and place. Opposed to the industrial model of social organization then sweeping the nation, these men organized themselves around a loose alternative agrarian model holding “that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers.”⁷ To achieve these goals:

We consider the rehabilitation of the farmer as of the first importance to the South, the basis of all good remedial procedure; and we therefore favour a definite policy of land conservation, land distribution, land ownership. At risk of appearing socialistic to the ignorant, we favour legislation that will deprive the giant corporation of its privilege of irresponsibility, and that will control or prevent the socially harmful use of labour-saving (or labour-evicting) machinery.⁸

Given their social and historical locations, their arguments were no doubt conservative. From both a historical and a contemporary perspective, however, the important aspect of

⁴ Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001), 57.

⁵ See also John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and the Agrarians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), especially chapters 1-4;

⁶ Kimberly Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 51.

⁷ Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1977), xlvii.

⁸ Donald Davidson, “I'll Take My Stand: A History” in *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge, ed. (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1969), 198.

this conservatism is the tension produced between their trenchant critique of industrial capitalism and the reactionary orientation of their ameliorative social proscriptions. While this tension between their radicalism and their conservatism may be the source of the abiding yet politically disparate interests in their work, the source of this tension itself is located in the political economy of post-Reconstruction America, and particularly the South.⁹

Throughout the lives of all these individuals – which spanned from the Fugitive period in the 1920's, the Agrarian period in the 1930's, the New Critical period of the 1940's and 1950's, and into retirement and reunion in the 1980's – they all witnessed an ever encroaching industrialism, spreading from the North during and after Reconstruction, that dramatically reorganized the economy of the South. From 1870 to 1945, for example, the U.S. farm population declined from 75 to 17 percent of the total population, and the number employed in agriculture dropped from 53 to less than 15 percent of the total working population.¹⁰ As the country shifted from predominantly rural to urban, the Agrarians sought a more regional orientation, and attempted to situate their politics outside the increasingly polarized national ideological debates as simultaneously anti-communist *and* anti-capitalist. In fact, much to the chagrin of some members of the group, several wanted to change the title to *A Tract Against Communism*, but the decision was answered by an already set publishing schedule and remained.¹¹

Nevertheless – and perhaps precisely because they were attempting to take a stand between these ideologies – much of the criticism they received was mocking or simply dismissive, and focused on them being unrealistic, nostalgic, and out of touch with the realities of modern life.¹² Donald Davidson recalls that critics

begged to remind us of ox-carts and outdoor privies, and inquired whether we ever used porcelain bathtubs. If we admired agrarianism, what were we doing in libraries, and why were we not out gee-hawing? Had we ever tried to 'make money' on a farm? Did we want to 'turn the clock back' and retreat into a 'past that never was'?.¹³

While Davidson admits a certain nostalgic impulse, he argues that this criticism amounts to a simplistic dismissal of the substance of their critique and a basic misunderstanding of the form of their solution. By misjudging the latter, by dismissing their vision of an agrarian political economy that would counteract industrialism and restore life as the predominant value of economics, such critics evaded the full thrust of their social and economic projects. Anxious about the rates of mechanization, commodification, and fragmentation that were sweeping daily and social life, the Agrarians struggled to formulate a coherent political and economic vision that would complement their already developing aesthetic. One of their central targets was the modern understanding of time equating progress with machine technology and industrial development.

⁹Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 4. See also, Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ A. Whitney Griswold, *Farming and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 129.

¹¹ Donald Davidson, "'I'll Take My Stand': A History," 198.

¹² Alexander Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as social and literary critics* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 4-18.

¹³ Davidson, "'I'll Take My Stand': A History," 199.

In his contribution to the volume “A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress,” for example, Lyle Lanier argues that agriculture is “the pursuit which lies at the base of every social organization,”¹⁴ and that its industrialization will inevitably lead to “personal isolation, and a fractionation of life functions into an ever-expanding and differentiating system of formalized institutions.”¹⁵ Connecting the questions of time and technology:

By ‘industrialism’ is meant not the machine and industrial technology as such, but the domination of the economic, political, and social order by the notion that the greater part of a nation’s energies should be directed toward an endless process of increasing the production and consumption of goods. There is nothing inherently evil about a machine, although the operation of one on a lifetime scale would necessarily be pretty monotonous....It is not the machine, however, but the theory of the use of the machine to which I object, and if this theory, which we may call industrialism, is a valid hypothesis of the course of Western civilization, all discussion of ‘progress’ would do well to cease. The only intelligible meaning of progress implies social institutions for producing psychological effects just the reverse of those so outstanding in our Machine Age.¹⁶

Arguing that the conception of progress at the heart of industrialism actually produces subjects opposite of its stated aims, Lanier then suggests that the psychological effects of industrialism are as potentially odious as its material ones. Central to this analysis are two separate but related theses: one the one hand, an aesthetics of time wherein history unfolds linearly and progressively toward a future taken as natural and inevitable, and on the other hand, a politics of technology where the machine and its increasing application to life is the embodiment of social progress.

Within the narrative Lanier is working against, then, experience is oriented toward the future, where humans will be liberated from toil and work, from poverty and starvation, by means of the machine and its deployment in the form of industrial agriculture. Freedom from want *and* need is promised through the centralized, mechanized, and commoditized production and distribution of food and agricultural commodities, among much else. The form of this development, then, figures the inexorable march of industrial, i.e., capitalist, modes of production as an unalloyed social good. In this context, nostalgia recalls a time prior to the mechanization – and therefore industrialization – of agriculture. Crucially, then, nostalgia for the Southern Agrarians concerns an actual past that was then literally disappearing from the landscape.

From the Greek *nostos* – a returning home – and *algos* – pain – nostalgia is the longing for home and all its familiar surroundings, a homesickness, a longing for a period in the past, a painful memory evoking a former era. And so it is important to note how the meaning commonly added to the concept – to wit, that the past in question was never, in fact, a real past, that the past of nostalgia is merely fictional or imaginative, or that it is a naively sentimentalized or romanticized past – is inaccurate and misleading. And so the past for which the Agrarians pined was an actual past; its effects were palpable and real for the millions of Americans then undergoing the painful transition from a primarily rural, agrarian mode of life to one dominated by urban, industrial modes of organization.

¹⁴ Lyle Lanier, “The Critique of the Philosophy of Progress,” *I’ll Take My Stand*, 152.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

This point is important not only with respect to the Southern Agrarians, however, for the home of nostalgia functions in a similar way in the recent work of Wendell Berry. Beginning with *The Unsettling of America* (1976), Berry develops an agrarian critique of life under capitalism that relies at times on a certain nostalgic mood about past forms of social and economic organization. While Berry acknowledges some indebtedness to the Agrarians, he explicitly rejects their nostalgia for the Old South – with all its attendant wounds of racism, sexism, and colonialism – and focuses instead on life at the very local level.¹⁷ According to Berry, the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, the Africans they brought along with them in chains, and the indigenous peoples they destroyed in the process, inaugurates a modern condition of being homeless. For Berry, this homelessness is both literal and existential: it is the founding of a new order, decisively breaking with the past and opening up the frontiers for a brave new future. Resident aliens from birth, natality in the Americas is inescapably marked by an inheritance of violence, genocide, and domination, all circulating uneasily yet inevitably around eating, working, living, and dying in this strange new land.

Importantly, Berry argues the advent of this world was possible only by developing the very technologies that allowed the movement, enslavement, and extermination of entire cultures in the first place. And while he recognizes the logically contingent but historically necessary connections between colonialism and capitalism, he only barely addresses upon the specific relationship between agriculture and slavery in the context of Americas.¹⁸ Nevertheless, he attempts to construct a vision better able to resist and transform what he takes to be the extension of these forms of domination, namely, the industrialization and corporatization of agriculture on a global scale and the new visages of enslavement following in its wake. In such a world, he says,

[p]eople will be *allowed* to be free to do *certain* things in *certain* places prescribed by *other* people. They will be free to work in the places set aside for work, free to play or relax in places set aside for recreation, free to live (what that may mean) in places set aside for living...They will not live where they work or work where they live. They will not work where they play. And they will not, above all, play where they work. There will be no singing in those fields. There will be no crews of workers or neighbors laughing and joking, telling stories, or competing at tests of speed or strength or skill...The people will eat what the corporations decide for them to eat. They will be detached and remote from the sources of their life, joined to them only by corporate tolerance. They will have become consumers purely – consumptive machines – which is to say, the slaves of producers. What these model farms very powerfully suggest, then, is that the concept of total control may be impossible to confine within the boundaries of the specialist enterprise – that it is impossible to mechanize production without mechanizing consumption, impossible to make machines of soil, plants, and animals without making machines also of people.¹⁹

¹⁷ Morris Allen Grubbs, ed. *Conversations with Wendell Berry* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 40.

¹⁸ Berry does in fact provide a fuller discussion of these and related issues in *The Hidden Wound* (New York: North Point Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 75.

While this is no doubt but a part of his critique of life under capitalism, its force seems blunted by the nostalgic mode Berry slips into by suggesting that before the industrialization of agriculture people laughed while they worked, and competed with their neighbors in innocent contests of strength. After the displacement and destruction of such communities by corporate agriculture, however, such people, and the people who depend upon them for sustenance, are reduced to the status of “consumptive machines,” slaves to those now in control of the sphere between the soil and the seed; and few indeed live beyond this sphere.

But these two claims must be disambiguated, for the latter is not necessarily dependent upon the former. Berry’s critique of life under capital, that is, does not turn on whether life was *really* an idyll bucolic dream – for surely it was anything but. Rather it turns on the specific ways life has been reorganized in the present, for entirely different purposes and therefore with entirely different consequences. By situating the problems of contemporary life in terms of the scale and control of political economies, Berry attempts to redraw our attention to the social and ecological importance of local economies. Based within and organized for actual people in actual communities, such economies function as the primary means by which the fragmented lives, meanings, and values that have emerged over the last century can be rehabilitated, and thus work toward a new ethics of care for peoples and places.

Thus, perhaps some aspect of the nostalgia charge sticks. In a world where economies and societies are increasingly interconnected on a global scale, where capital roams freely across borders while people are restrained by hands invisible and armed, a return to local communities and small-scale economies might indeed be motivated by a longing to return to a time before such complexity was actual or perceptible. A telling example is seen in various colloquial expressions that the underdeveloped two-thirds of the world are “trapped back there in the present.”²⁰ Within this framework, the future can only be reached by industrial progress and economic growth, by the expansion of free markets whose rising tide of wealth will raise all boats into the future. Berry argues that this concept of the future is “the most prolific source of justification for exploitative behavior” because it contains an internal contradiction that endorses “using up future necessities in order to make a more abundant future.”²¹ And now that this future has colonized most of the agriculture in the so-called developed world, it is now marching across the underdeveloped world in increasingly conspicuous, if ambivalent, ways.

In their ethnographic study *Broccoli and Desire*, Peter Benson and Edward Fischer trace such consequences for an indigenous agrarian community in Tecpán, Guatemala. By analyzing the double commodity nature of foodstuffs in a globalized capitalist economy – i.e., how such commodities hide the origins and conditions of their production while contributing to a neoliberal ideology about how their purchase and consumption benefits those who labored in their production – they trace how a certain Mayan community view the reduction of its subsistence agriculture so as to increase the production of broccoli for export to the U.S.²² Developing a phrase the Maya use– *algo más*, or, something more, something better – Benson and Fischer frame the paradoxical situation of cultivating a crop

²⁰ Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson, *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 66.

²¹ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 58.

²² Fischer and Benson, *Broccoli and Desire*, 33. In 2000, for example, Guatemala exported roughly 60 million pounds of cut broccoli to the U.S., which was up more than 900 percent over the previous twenty years, and most of this was grown in the Tecpán region.

they do not eat, broccoli, which involves substantial financial and personal risk, while at the same time struggling to survive. “The sense of ‘something better’ that farmers put forward to justify their engagement in the global broccoli trade,” they found, “reveals not a banal idea of the future opposed to the present but a vision of the future as an ongoing struggle between the past and the present. Here the future is always deferred, even as it enlivens risky practices.”²³ Within this frame of temporality, then, the actual future – as opposed to the ideal future – is forever being negotiated between the past and the present, and not between the present and some unknown yet desirable future.

In such an environment, nostalgia for agrarian modes of life finds little fertile soil on which to fall, appearing only at the edges for how little explanation it seems to occasion for those in the midst of experiencing a dramatic, sometimes violent, collision of worlds and the revaluation of values that follows. In place of nostalgia, I offer rue as an alternative temporal mood for agrarianism. As the interior echo of an imperfect past, rue is a sense of mournfulness over a real past remaining in the present. Remembering what remains, rue is a mood full of sorrow and compassion; it laments what is doleful and dismal about the past and how that past bears upon the present. Full of cries and utterances of remorse for the injustices of the past, the rueful is full of looks and actions seeking the sources of distress to engage in a regretful repentance and redress. While nostalgia lacks real critical potential with regard to the past, rue critically engages it, and along with it the violence and domination characteristic of so much of agricultural life, past and present, and situates the rueful to work toward the amelioration of such injustices. A verb, an adjective and a plant, rue is a perennial evergreen shrub that has bitter, strong-scented leaves used medicinally to treat blindness and internal spasms. Both a remedy and a poison, rue is a supplement in the true sense of the word. Just as the mad Ophelia says distributing her flowers, “O you must wear your rue with a difference,”²⁴ its application always already entails a difference.²⁵

So whereas nostalgia is a desire to return to the past, however real or ideal, rue is the desire to recognize the past as constitutive of the present, thus enabling it to serve as a point of departure for determining what ways that present can itself be transformed *in* the present. Rather than a linear temporality, rue invokes the way cultivation – the regeneration of the means of life – operates in a revolving temporality. As Berry notes,

cultivation is at the root of the sense both of *culture* and of *cult*...And these words all come from an Indo-European root meaning both ‘to revolve’ and ‘to dwell.’ To live, to survive on the earth, to care for the soil, and to worship, all are bound at the root to the idea of a cycle.²⁶

Rue as a temporal mood for agrarianism works to reconstruct linear models of life and economy. By accounting for the multiplicity of relations at work within the cycles of life in particular places at particular times, a rueful temporality moves around and through the processes of birth and death, of life and decay, in time with the spinning of the earth.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Scene IV, Act 5. G. B. Harrison (ed.). (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1948), 642.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*. Barbara Johnson, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²⁶ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 87.

Revolving into regeneration rather than into revolution, agrarian temporality is *not* a revolutionary time that seeks to sweep away the dead wood of history to re-found life on a new foundation. Rather, it is a form of *radical time* wherein the present is understood to reach back through the past, to be constitutive of the past. The present, in other words, is emergent from the past and is not merely a waypoint to the future; it is situated at the confluence of its many pasts, synthesizing new presents out of its many winding and overlapping roots in the soil of its own place. In this sense there can be little doubt that agrarianism involves a looking backward, a turn toward that which sustained communities and lives in the past. For people and their forms of social organization, maturation involves a movement away from a past that is as unrecoverable as it is inalienable. Indeed, you can never go home again. Home is thus something always made away from home. So at least in the context of the agrarians discussed above, the charge of nostalgia is ultimately symptomatic of a certain failure of imagination, a particular historical denial that fails to understand the present as inextricably connected to the past.

In this way, the failure nostalgia represents – and the strength of it as a criticism of agrarianism – is coherent only within a specific understanding of time wherein history unfolds inexorably into the future, erasing the past as it overcomes the present to reach a future that remains forever just beyond the horizon. Within this temporality, the machine and its products are the central means by which this future – one wherein life will be without toil or material want – is achieved. In this way, the charge of nostalgia, *as a criticism of agrarianism*, depends upon the very conception of time and technology that these agrarians are working against. Within this aesthetic of time, nostalgia is the naïve, futile, and indeed impossible desire to return to a past time. Within an agrarian temporality, then, nostalgia is groundless. It has no roots. And that is precisely its problem.

By invoking an irrecoverable past, a past that must be left behind in the blind deaf and dumb rush into the future, nostalgic criticism attempts to accomplish what on its own terms is impossible, namely, to return home. For the nostalgic, progress is impossible, and this is certainly neither what the Agrarians or Berry are claiming. Rue, on the other hand, operates within a different temporality, one that does not give up or reject the idea of progress precisely through its insistence on the ineliminable continuity of the present with its various and sundry pasts. Progress is not the movement *to* a given end, but is always a progress *from* a particular place, always already a determinate stage of development. For the rueful, progress is possible. Because rueful criticism lives in the movement between the present and its various pasts, progress is intelligible only by means of these pasts, which serve as waypoints redirecting economies, energies, and human lives toward ever better, more socially and ecologically sound ends. Rue connects individuals in the present to their sundry imperfect pasts, thus forming the condition without which intelligent, transformative action is impossible. Only from some actual location are the potential movements forward comprehensible at all.

In this way, it is clear that for both the Agrarians and Berry there are important connections between various conceptions of temporality and the politics of technology they occasion. For each, the modern developmental model that associates social progress with economic industrialization is neither necessary nor desirable. And so while the Agrarians reject the notion that the uncritical proliferation of machines to every area of human life is a synonym for social progress, they do not propose an equally uncritical rejection of the machine *tout court*. Their comportment to technology, rather, is critical; it seeks to understand how certain machines make machines of people, how they embody power concentrated in a certain form, not progress. Like them, Berry's comportment to technology

does not involve a wholesale dismissal of its application to agriculture (or any other area of production), nor is it some type a neo-Luddite reaction against the machine in general, though at times it can certainly seem that way.²⁷ Thus both are critical, circumspect compartments that, to be sure, call for a “restraint on the proliferation of machines,” but this restraint is guided by the actual social and ecological consequences of machines used in particular ways.²⁸

And so just as I have suggested rue as an alternative to nostalgia, I also suggest that rather than an aesthetic dominated by a reactionary attitude toward technology in general, a more appropriate agrarian compartment is one guided by an ecological aesthetics. Such an aesthetic turns, above all, on the way technology itself is natural, on a naturalized technology that situates *techne* as an aspect of *phusis* rather than its opposite.²⁹ Contrary to the traditional philosophical anthropologies holding technology in some general sense *sui genre* of human affairs, this stands to substantially broaden the common conceptions of biotechnology that are too often limited to the commoditized bio-manipulation of plants, animals, and (parts of) humans – to the biopolitical techniques deployed to control the fabric of life, the genetic code of living organisms. By challenging this dualism at its roots, where the question of human intervention *with* the environment gives way to a question of relationships *in* an environment, an aesthetic of ecology would cultivate technologies whose function serves a more robust symbiosis between humans and their environments. There is no better example of, or model for, such technologies as the living topsoil itself, what Berry identifies as “the basic element in the technology of farming.” He says:

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.... Because the soil is alive, various, intricate, and because its processes yield more readily to imitation than to analysis, more readily to care than to coercion, agriculture can never be an exact science. There is an inescapable kinship between farming and art, for farming depends as much on character, devotion, imagination, and the sense of structure, as on knowledge. It is a practical art.³⁰

Rather than an industrial technics of domination, an agrarian technics enlists already existing components of the environment to cultivate consequential, mutually beneficial, and multivalent relationships that harness the habits of dynamism and reciprocity. As the study of the art of cultivating life, agrarian inquiry seeks what Murray Bookchin calls “a life-giving technics,” that is, one whose technologies model and cooperate with the means and ends of life’s natural processes, enhancing life rather than dominating it.³¹ An agrarian compartment to technology, then, is not essentialist about the machine, but pragmatic and ecological, looking at the interaction between humans, their tools, and their environments for ways to

²⁷ See, for example, Wendell Berry, “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” *The Art of the Commonplace*.

²⁸ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 82.

²⁹ I am thinking here of a materialist reading of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Physics*, as well as an ecological reading of Marx’s *Capital*.

³⁰ Berry, *The Unsettling of America*, 82.

³¹ Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*. (Minneapolis: Black Rose Books, 1996), 25.

duplicate, imitate, and integrate the functions already operative within the natural world. In short, such an agrarian aesthetic aims to reconstruct the modern ontological dualisms of nature and culture, on the one hand, and the natural and the technological, on the other, toward a more robust social ecology.

* * *

As a contingent necessity for human life, food stands at a unique junction between the social and natural worlds. As a multifaceted inquiry into its production, distribution, and consumption, agrarianism stands as a necessary set of questions into that which sustains life between the body and the body politic. Agrarianism, in other words, is an inquiry into the configurations of land and people whose labor produces the food that is the condition without which life could not be sustained. The basis of agrarian inquiry, therefore, is already at work whether recognized or not. The *living* nature of such questions lies precisely in their necessity for the continuation of life. Agrarianism thus turns not on the extent these questions are raised and brought to a wider consciousness, but in accounting for *how* these questions are always operative in conditioning the human social world. In this sense, agrarianism has always been a form of *radical* inquiry; it has always inquired after the roots of the lives that make culture possible.

From this perspective, central to agrarianism are questions concerning the powers of certain practices to condition the transmission of certain habits across generations. As a reconstructed form of past inquiries, then, agrarianisms in the present must begin by seeking the roots of those forms of domination that find fertile ground in those social formations whose primary means of subsistence turns on the cultivation of the soil. Aware of the ineliminable historical conditioning of the present, these agrarianisms cannot seek some crude elimination of machines, but must continue to press the question as to the uses of machines under given forms of life. Emphasizing the powers necessarily but contingently embodied in specific technologies, agrarianism can assist in the critical project of uncovering the consequences of those powers, as they are and might be distributed, for human communities living in wider nonhuman ecologies.

In this way, agrarianism is not a set of arguments about the need for society to go back to the way things were in some near or distant past, as if there were a stable enough *thing* to serve as an adequate means for such a transformation. Neither is it about everyone becoming farmers, nor about everyone going “back to the land” and abandoning the luxuries and lifestyles that, among other things, the globalization of agriculture has made possible. Indeed, such universal prescriptions are decidedly out of step with the agrarianism I have outlined here. As a mode of radical inquiry, agrarianism can pursue the roots of social reproduction by raising again the necessary questions occasioned between the production of life and the consumption of food, between the freedom of production and the slavery of consumption.

But this is not to say that aspects of the solutions to our current ecological and economical crises do not involve elements of past practices. They do involve such elements, more than likely, for there were and are ways of raising food before the invention of fossil fuels and patent rights. To do this, perhaps there is a need for a greater number of people living and working the land, providing local food for local mouths whose exchange benefits local pockets. But this is not saying that much. In the United States today there are more

prisoners than farmers.³² If economies are to be brought under the control of those they affect, if communities are to be revitalized by closing the temporal and spatial distance between their means of subsistence and their ends of flourishing, then we certainly will need more people to become involved in the sustainable production of food for the future. To this end, there ought to be public policy initiatives, including the granting of usufruct to land not in use, to encourage people who are interested and inclined (certainly a growing number) to move back to smaller communities and participate in local and regional economies. Partly based around agriculture, partly around the other necessary institutions of social life, such communities need not be rural backwaters. With the dramatic proliferation of communications technology, ideas, peoples, and movements across the world are increasingly *glocal*—simultaneously global and local—in present time.

Yet the place where each dwells is always particular. And it is from this particularity that agrarianism has always drawn its greatest strengths. Rather than abstract principles and politics, the most radical agrarianisms marking the history of the Americas have been those that aim, above all, at good farming, which involves caring for the relations that make life possible – and even pleasurable – in a given place. So whether it is understood as a natural theology or a secular ethic, a practice of subsistence agriculture or a utopian vision of the future, an economy of scale or a philosophy of technology, agrarianism stands as a powerful set of critical questions that seek to respond to the necessities of eating, loving, working, and dying within the contemporary world. And when these questions are ruefully pursued to their roots, when they mourn over a real past, however imperfect, they can begin to comprehend the necessary possibilities for the future. In this way, radical agrarianisms can begin *again* to serve those real places where individuals gather in community to live, love, and resist in the present, so that the hope for something more, for something better, may persist into the future.

³² Bill McKibben, “Localize,” “Forum: How to Save Capitalism,” *Harper’s Magazine*, November 2008, 45.