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PREFACE

This book concerns Wendell Berry's reformulation of democratic agrarianism, one of the most enduring and influential of America's political traditions. In the following pages, I explore Berry's critique of American society and his case for an agrarian republic by analyzing his social, moral, and political theory. More fundamentally, however, this study is an exploration of Berry's moral vision—a vision that becomes more relevant, I believe, even as we move farther from our agrarian past.

Berry's central teaching is that the world is not, and never will be, a safe place. Humans have always faced danger and uncertainty, and human action has always had unpredictable and often deadly consequences. His understanding of the human condition echoes in many respects that of the classical philosophers, who warned that if we are more than beasts, we are also less than gods. As individuals, we will never be fully self-sufficient, and even as a community, we will never have full control over the conditions of our own existence. This lesson is crucial, according to Berry, because our misguided attempts to make the world safer and more predictable can lead only to violence, brutality, and cruelty. He suggests that instead of seeking greater control, we must learn how to achieve a fully human life—to realize our best possibilities—in a dangerous and unpredictable world. And that, in turn, requires us to cultivate certain virtues—moderation, prudence, propriety, fidelity—as well as a deep understanding of our dependence on one another and on the natural world. This book, then, is not only an attempt to introduce Wendell Berry's work to students of agriculture, social theory, moral philosophy, and political thought. It is also an exploration of the problem of living a meaningful life in a world filled with both deadly perils and unimagined possibilities.

Berry sometimes describes his intellectual activities, like his farming,

as group projects—the products of a community engaged in the task of cultural stewardship. I've come to look on my own writing in the same light. This book was a collective effort, and one that I hope others will continue. Those who have already contributed to the project (albeit unwittingly) include Wendell Berry himself and Jack Driscoll, who first introduced me to Wendell Berry's work. Others have provided more direct support, in the form of comments, conversation, criticism, and research assistance. They include Barbara Allen, Bob Pepperman Taylor, Eric Kos, Mika LaVaque-Manty, Ted Clayton, Connie Price, Carol Rutz, Jim Fisher, Ionia Italia, Jennifer Manion, Mary Freier, Sheri Breen, Steve Campagna-Pinto, Jon Lauck, Dave McGowan, Jim Chen, Fred Woodward, and the excellent editors and staff at the University Press of Kansas. Not all of these people would approve of the final result (some would even consider the whole project misguided). Nevertheless, they deserve much of the credit for what is valuable in the following pages. I will, as always, take the blame for the rest.



INTRODUCTION

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* begins with the return of Jess Clark, a tree-hugging, draft-dodging organic farmer, to his rural Midwest hometown. The neighbors greet him with open arms and poorly concealed suspicion. They're dismayed as much by his unorthodox farming methods as by his cosmopolitan lifestyle (he's a *vegetarian!*). Resentment simmers. "He doesn't *feel* critical," they complain, "and he wants to be our friend, but he wouldn't do things our way, and he probably wouldn't have us do things our way, truth to tell."¹

Truth to tell, he wouldn't. But he *does* at least want to be their friend, and that's an improvement—a sea change, in fact—in the long-standing conflict between environmentalists and farmers. Smiley's Jess heralds an important, if incomplete, transformation in farm politics: the "greening" of American agrarianism. Jess is a fictional representative of the ecology-oriented "back-to-the-land" movement of the 1970s, which brought an influx of young, college-educated erstwhile suburbanites into the countryside. There they organized into groups like Rural America and Rural Coalition, aimed at joining traditional farm politics with issues such as the environment, housing, health care, education, and energy. Their activism, as historians Theo Majka and Patrick Mooney put it, "began to erode the traditional political animosity between environmentalists and agriculture as a whole."² Thanks in large part to their efforts, the defense of rural community and the small farm has become intimately—if problematically—linked to the defense of the earth.

Wendell Berry is a central figure in the greening of American agrarianism. Since the 1960s, he has been a leading expositor of a set of ideas designed to forge a politically effective union of small farmers and environmentalists. His success, as Smiley's story suggests, has been mixed; in addition to persistent political conflicts, class, religious, and lifestyle differences

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continue to trouble the tenuous partnership. But the effort promises to leave a durable legacy nonetheless. By importing an environmental sensibility into traditional agrarianism, Berry and his fellow travelers have revived and transformed a major branch of the American intellectual heritage.

Like the twentieth-century environmental movement generally, Wendell Berry's ecological agrarianism is a response to the social and environmental problems created by the transition to an advanced industrial economy. But while most American environmentalists have concentrated on the use and protection of the wilderness, Berry has focused on how industrialization has affected the countryside. Born in rural Kentucky in 1934, Berry witnessed firsthand the rise of corporate, industrial agriculture after World War II and the resulting dislocation and decline of rural communities. That transition is both the impetus and the context for most of his writing. From a political standpoint, his work can be read as a defense of small farmers and rural community, which he treats as a critical and diminishing resource in American society. From a philosophical standpoint, however, his work is an attempt to understand the meaning of the life of the traditional farmer, a way of life seemingly at odds with the values on which industrial capitalist society depends. Thus Berry's agrarianism aims to explain and defend the value and meaning of a particular conception of farm life in an industrial capitalist society.

Of course, Wendell Berry is hardly the first American to champion the yeoman farmer. The claim that small family farmers are especially valuable to the republic has been a commonplace in American politics since the founding. Agrarians have argued that farmers, by virtue of their labor and economic circumstances, are more likely than most other kinds of citizens to develop virtues that are essential to republican government, such as frugality, discipline, self-reliance, and respect for law and order. Berry's argument is similar, but instead of contending that small farmers are vital to the political or economic health of the country, he claims they are essential to its *ecological* health: it is environmental rather than political values that farmers cultivate—virtues that are (he claims) otherwise lacking in industrial capitalist regimes. This apparently minor refinement of conventional agrarianism leads to surprisingly unconventional results. To make his case, Berry has to reexamine, reinterpret, and sometimes even reject the values that have traditionally been central to American agrarian thought, including individual independence, the sanctity of property rights, and the meaning of economic freedom. In short, he reworks the basic assumptions, both moral and sociological, underlying the agrarianism he inherited from his Populist pred-

ecessors. The result is an incisive critique of industrial, corporate capitalism and the concepts of autonomy and freedom it rests upon—as well as a provocative blueprint for an alternative, ecologically sensitive agrarian society based on the value of stewardship.

This study offers a summary and critique of the social, moral, and political dimensions of Berry's ecological agrarianism. It is necessarily a very general overview. Over the past thirty years, Berry has written on topics ranging from agricultural technology to theology to literary criticism, and produced more than thirty books of essays, poetry, and fiction (as well as countless uncollected pieces). This is a daunting body of work just to synthesize, much less examine in detail. I have therefore focused on explaining how the various aspects of his thought—on ethics, sustainable agriculture, religion, politics, and technology, to mention a few—might be brought together to form a coherent agrarian philosophy. This is just a road map to his ideas; a more nuanced and detailed exploration of each subject I must leave to future commentators.

It may seem surprising that such a road map is needed—that Berry's ideas, which have been circulating for over thirty years, haven't already generated more critical commentary.³ But such inattention is perhaps to be expected, given the status of agrarian ideology in the scholarly community generally. Richard Hofstadter's interpretation of agrarianism as reactionary nostalgia for a preindustrial, noncommercial past remains academic orthodoxy. Scholars tend to assume that agrarian ideology has little intellectual content or practical significance; indeed, they have been proclaiming its demise for over fifty years.⁴ Those of us who venture into this apparently unpromising field may dispute that judgment; we may insist that agrarianism is a complex and dynamic tradition that has generated a wealth of progressive ideas.⁵ Our conclusions have (so far) failed to disturb conventional wisdom. In vain do we insist, with Andrew Angyal, that Berry's agrarianism "is no mere sentimental attachment to the past, but a compelling critique of progress and of the kind of society ours has become." Or agree with Patrick Murphy that

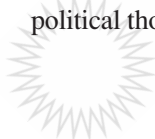
Berry does not seek a return to some "Golden Age" of good farming, but rather the restoration of a relationship to the land, a rooting of the individual to a specific place, one that will compel him through identity and a sense of responsibility to seek the most ecological means to maintain both sides of that identity in harmony.⁶

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Despite his popularity, Berry's agrarian philosophy suffers the critical neglect usually afforded history's losers.

But if agrarianism is no more than a nostalgic longing for bygone days that has long since outlived its usefulness, then how can we account for its persistence in farm politics? The periodic resurgence of grassroots farmer protest movements—in the 1950s, the 1970s, and more recently—tells another story: all of these movements drew on agrarian language and images to win broad public support for policies that would benefit the ever-shrinking minority of American farmers. Agrarian ideology has, if anything, become more ubiquitous as farmers seek allies and policy makers try to make sense of the economic and social problems facing rural America. Its persistence suggests that there is more to this tradition than scholars have recognized: that it expresses values many Americans embrace, that it offers a useful way to understand the problems of farmers and the rural community generally, and that it may even point us toward solutions.

The alternative hypothesis, at any rate, seems to be that agrarianism persists because a significant number of Americans are merely irrational—hopelessly nostalgic, impractical, sentimental—on the subject of farming. That may sound right to their critics, but it's all too easy to assume irrationality on the part of one's political opponents. It's more reasonable to assume that many proponents of agrarian ideas are intelligent and serious-minded, and that the persistence of those ideas into the twenty-first century is due to their philosophical or political value. That is not to say that agrarianism has survived unchanged since Jefferson's day, however. On the contrary, its vitality is due to its ability to adapt to new conditions; Berry's agrarianism is not Jefferson's, nor the Populists'. That is precisely his significance: by importing environmental ideas into the framework of agrarian thought, he has revitalized agrarianism and helped to ensure its continued relevance to American social and political thought and practice.



If Berry has been neglected as a philosopher, his literary accomplishments have attracted more attention. A partial list of his honors includes a Guggenheim Fellowship (1961–62); a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship (1965); a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1971); a Friends of American Writers Award for his novel *The Memory of Old Jack* (1974); the Jean Stein Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1987); the T. S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing from the Ingersoll Foun-

dation (1994); and a number of honorary doctorates.⁷ As one would expect, Berry's rise to prominence in the literary community has been accompanied by the development of a considerable body of literary criticism examining his imaginative prose, his poetry, and his poetics.⁸ Those familiar with this critical work will likely be disappointed that I haven't engaged it more directly in this study. Instead, I have treated Berry's novels and stories primarily as elaborations of his social and moral theories. Admittedly, that decision is problematic; disregarding the literary dimension of these obviously literary works undoubtedly limits my ability to explain them. Reading Berry's novels as exercises in moral and social philosophy, for example, leads me to downplay the subtlety of his thought as it is revealed in those novels—which are, by the nature of the genre, more open to ambiguity and complexity than the essays. As literature, Berry's fiction and poetry lead us beyond the clarity of philosophical systems into the particularity, contingency, and mystery of human experience. Thus in my search for consistency and clarity in Berry's thinking, I confess I've failed to convey the richness, the openness and ambiguity, of these literary works. My only defense is that Berry is not always a novelist or poet; often, he is a social and moral critic, attempting to realize not only literary but also philosophical and ethical values. If I don't do justice to his work as literature, I hope I may do justice to it as moral and social criticism. And it is perhaps not too much to hope that a better understanding of his philosophy will lead to more insightful critiques of his work as literature.

As for Berry's philosophy, it's fair to point out that Berry is a particularly lucid writer and probably does a better job of explaining himself than I do. My justification for this project is the sheer volume of his explanation; his body of work is so extensive that some attempt to distill, organize, contextualize—and of course critique—his ideas is called for. Nevertheless, as Berry himself points out, “Most of the time, when you have explained something, you discover leftovers. An explanation is a bucket, not a well.”⁹ I've discovered quite a lot of leftovers. For example, a literary career spanning more than three decades calls for a study of its development over time, which this book does not provide.¹⁰ I have for the most part treated Berry's philosophy as a consistent whole rather than a work in progress—an approach made possible by the fact that most of the basic elements of his thought are already present in his earliest works. They have been elaborated, but not substantially altered. I have remarked on the development of his thought only where I have noticed significant change (in his views on religion, for example).

I've also failed to investigate fully Berry's relationship to conservative

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thought. This may seem an unconscionable oversight. His insistence on the importance of tradition, the value of community, and the dangers of liberal individualism would seem to put Berry in the same company as Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott—or at least those peculiarly libertarian conservatives that we find in the United States.¹¹ The point is well taken; nonetheless, to read Berry as a conservative, or at least *merely* as a conservative, may be misleading. I've found Berry's debt to conservative thought harder to specify and account for than his debt to agrarianism and environmentalism. He was undoubtedly exposed to conservative ideas simply by growing up in Kentucky in the 1930s and 1940s; states' rights theories would have been prevalent in his childhood and in the 1960s, when they were revived in response to the civil rights movement. But when Berry discusses his intellectual influences, he never mentions conservative theorists (with the important exception of the Vanderbilt Agrarians). His inspirations are people like Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Albert Howard, Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey, and Gary Snyder. Moreover, many of the apparently conservative elements of his thought, such as his preference for decentralized government, his critique of individualism, and his case for strong communities, may in fact be derived from the environmental tradition. Untangling these influences is too complex a project to undertake in this study. I therefore leave them tangled, and address Berry's relationship to conservatism only briefly in chapters 4 and 8.

Instead, I focus primarily on Berry's relationship to the American agrarian and environmental traditions, which I spend a good deal of time exploring—most of the first two chapters, in fact. Working through this introductory material may discourage readers eager to get to Berry's own ideas. But it's essential if we are to understand both what Berry is saying and what he is trying to do by saying it. He insists that he is not inventing anything new; in fact, he tersely dismisses the whole idea of originality: "I fail to see how an individual brain alone can have any originating power whatsoever." The hope of humanity is not originality in any case but "our ability, in time of need, to return to our cultural landmarks and reorient ourselves."¹² His goal, then, is to *revive and renew* the intellectual traditions he has inherited. That interpretation of his project derives from an important element of his social theory: the claim that the way to establish a proper relationship with the past is through a conservative but critical stance toward tradition—and that industrial society undermines our ability to adopt such a stance. Thus Berry's attempt to recover his own intellectual heritage not only exemplifies what he means by renewing and reviving tradition, it is meant to rectify what he con-

siders to be a basic problem with industrial society: its lack of connection to the past. Clearly, in order both to understand this project and to evaluate how well he has accomplished it, we must begin where he does—with the agrarian and environmental traditions.

Beginning with those traditions will also help us to better appreciate Berry's significance to the history of American thought in general and to the modern environmental movement in particular. That significance is easy to undervalue, particularly if we make the mistake of reading contemporary environmental sensibilities and ideas into early agrarian ideology—an error all too common in histories of environmental thought. We are tempted, understandably but incorrectly, to read environmental concerns into Thomas Jefferson's economic and political arguments for small farms (Berry himself tends to misread Jefferson this way). Or to conflate Thoreau's pastoralism and celebration of the simple life with Jeffersonian agrarianism.¹³ As I will argue, both interpretations are misleading, and both obscure Berry's contribution to the agrarian tradition. If Berry's ecological agrarianism doesn't look particularly innovative to us, it is because he makes the marriage of agrarian and environmental thought seem so natural that we assume agrarianism *always* implied ecological sensitivity—or that ecological sensitivity always implied support for family farming. It did not; indeed, for much of American history agrarians had little interest in environmental issues, and environmentalists for their part have had little good to say about farming. Berry's importance to the evolution of these traditions lies precisely in his ability to resolve their fundamental ideological differences.

And so does his importance to environmental and farm politics. Here also it is easy to underestimate Berry's contribution. If we focus on conventional measures of political activism—protests, lobbying, formulating policy proposals, engaging in electoral politics—Berry doesn't look like a major political figure. He has for the most part eschewed such overtly political activities in favor of developing and publicizing his ideas. But ideas do matter to politics—even farm politics.¹⁴ Ideas and the languages in which they are articulated can have a number of consequences for political action. Berry himself insists upon this point, and explains his own motivation and purposes in explicitly political terms. I will examine that explanation, and Berry's understanding of the relationship between language and politics generally, in chapters 2 and 7. Here I will simply underscore the more obvious reasons that Berry's ideas may be relevant to environmental and agricultural politics. First, it is easier for a political actor to pursue a course of action if she has the intellectual resources to *justify* that action.¹⁵ An advocate for farmers, for

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example, will be more likely to form an alliance with environmentalists if she can justify that alliance—to herself, to her peers, and to the people she represents. An ideology that persuasively links environmental protection to the defense of farmers can therefore help to create and maintain such alliances. Second, an actor's ideology shapes her perception of what the problem is (is it poverty, environmental degradation, loss of community?) and what courses of action are possible (legislation, moral reform, community activism?). Thus the shape and direction of a political or social movement may be determined in part by the ideology the actors bring to the movement. Berry's ideas, I would argue, contribute to the contemporary environmental movement in both respects: his reformulation of agrarianism has helped to shape our understanding of the problems agriculture policy should be addressing, as well as facilitating actions, alliances, and strategies that earlier versions of agrarianism made difficult or even unthinkable.

That claim should lead us into a discussion of the meaning of the term "ideology," which one would expect to figure prominently in a study such as this. I'd like to bypass that discussion, however. In fact I seldom refer to "ideology," which carries connotations I'd like to avoid—particularly the implication that we are talking about an unchanging, coherent philosophical system that can be abstracted from and explained without reference to the way it has evolved in the context of political conflict. I rely instead on the concept of *intellectual tradition*, which I understand much the way Berry does: traditions are not unchanging systems handed down intact from one generation to the next, based on certain fundamental philosophical principles. Rather, they are an evolving collection of ideas and rhetorical strategies that tend to cluster together and to be associated with certain political goals. Traditions are not static; as they are passed down from one generation to the next, they must be reworked to apply to new conditions. People draw on their inherited intellectual resources to solve practical problems, and in doing so they leave those resources changed—enriched, one hopes, but sometimes diminished. Thus we should not expect traditions to be philosophically coherent systems (although one may develop a philosophically coherent system out of a tradition's elements). Of course, we can often find common threads that survive over the ages. But in general, political traditions are not defined by a set of fundamental philosophical principles so much as they are defined (often in retrospect) by the evolution of their principles or merely the continuity of their specific political goals. We recognize that John Locke and Martin Luther King Jr. both belong to the liberal tradition not because they adhere to the same basic principles but because

we can trace King's intellectual genealogy from Locke and because, in some broad sense, we understand them to be pursuing the same goals.

So it is with the agrarian tradition. We can trace Berry's intellectual descent from Jefferson (whom he quotes frequently) through the Populists and their political successors (including Berry's father), and identify the ideas he borrowed from the twentieth-century back-to-the-land movement and the early sustainable agriculture advocates. I will argue in the following chapters that he is part of an identifiable tradition of agrarian thought aimed at protecting the interests of small farmers, as well as a tradition of environmental thought aimed at establishing a more meaningful and less damaging relationship to nature. But, as we shall see, to place him in these traditions is to say very little about the content of his agrarianism. The point of talking about traditions is not to categorize Berry's thought but to understand how he uses his inherited intellectual resources to make sense of the new and perplexing problems facing agriculture, rural communities, and American society in general.

The plan of this book is as follows. Chapters 1 and 2 offer a brief history of American agrarianism and environmental thought, respectively, with a focus on clarifying the ideological conflict between them. Ironically, this conflict centers on the one commitment that both traditions share: the moral ideal of rugged individualism. Their respective interpretations of that ideal, I argue, account for the ideological divide that separates them. As I demonstrate, however, over the course of the twentieth century, environmentalism and agrarianism gradually moved away from their concern with individualism and converged on the political goal of defending family farming. That convergence prepared the ground for the sustainable agriculture movement of the 1960s and the emergence of Wendell Berry as a major voice in the environmental movement.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to Berry's social theory, exploring his argument that a vital rural community of small farmers is essential to maintaining a sustainable, ecologically sensitive agriculture. This section shows how Berry's emphasis on the conditions necessary to creating a culture of stewardship unites environmentalism and agrarianism on the common ground of supporting rural communities. Chapter 5 then addresses the most frequent criticism of Berry's social theory: that it is mere utopianism, born of a romantic nostalgia for a way of life that never could or did exist. I argue that this charge is based on a misunderstanding of Berry's rhetorical strategy and method of moral reasoning.

In chapters 6 and 7, I explore Berry's moral theory, reviewing his critique

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of individualism, his interpretation of the virtues of the small farmer, and his understanding of the meaning of a life of stewardship. I contend that Berry's moral philosophy attempts to shift agrarianism and environmentalism away from rugged individualism and toward a new moral ideal, a concept he calls "grace." In the process, he elaborates an ethical system based on ecological virtues, reinterpreting the meaning of both farming and the wilderness in light of this ethic.

Finally, chapter 8 reviews Berry's critique of contemporary politics and his argument for decentralized democracy. Berry's political theory, which echoes Thoreau's critical perspective on politics, is less developed than his moral and social theories. Nevertheless, it offers insight into the relationship between language and politics and the role of political action in a life devoted to stewardship. Moreover, his analysis of the conditions necessary for meaningful political action offers a starting point for revitalizing national politics and humanizing government. I conclude by considering Berry's contribution to American agrarianism as an intellectual tradition and his significance to contemporary environmental and farm politics.



Chapter One

Agrarian Visions



When asked why he has devoted his life to the defense of small farmers, Wendell Berry recounts a story his father used to tell him:

The first time he [Berry's father] remembered waking up late in the night was when he was about seven years old. His daddy sent the crop . . . to Louisville. Then the night before it was going to sell, they sat up talking about what they were going to do when they got the money, and it was kind of a happy, optimistic evening. Then my father heard his daddy get up, at probably two o'clock in the morning, to get on his horse to go to the train and go to Louisville, to see his crop sold. And he got back without a dime. They took it all. The crop . . . about paid the warehouse commission.

My father saw men leave the warehouse crying and he said, when he was a little boy, "If ever I can do anything about this, I'm going to."

Inspired by that memory, John Berry spent his life pursuing what his son calls an "agrarian vision": "to have an economy here that could support small farmers and keep them on the land."² That vision, Berry tells us, informs his own life and work as well. In short, he describes himself as the inheritor of his father's quest for agrarian justice.

But to say that Berry is just following in his father's footsteps is to oversimplify the complex process of inheriting a tradition. John Berry was a farmer and lawyer in Henry County, Kentucky, where his family had lived since before the Civil War. Henry County is characterized by small, self-supporting farms and a highly diversified agriculture. But, as in much of Kentucky, tobacco is the primary cash crop, and John Berry's involvement in farm politics centered on tobacco. In 1924 he became involved in the effort to found a cooperative association of burley tobacco growers, which

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brought him into contact with Democratic congressman Virgil Chapman. He worked for Chapman in Washington D.C. for three years; when he returned, he helped to found the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, serving as its vice president and then president for many years. Through this legal and political activism he tried to protect the economic interests of the local farming community, to ensure that they would realize an equitable return on their labor. His younger son John would take up the same cause as a lawyer and politician, representing small farmers in the state senate and serving as president and general counsel of the Burley Co-op.³ For Wendell, however, pursuing his father's vision would mean traveling a less conventional path.

The farming community Wendell Berry grew up in was, in some respects, very much like the one his father knew. The transition to industrial agriculture was slow in Kentucky; hard hit by the Depression, in the 1940s it still lagged behind the rest of the country in urbanization and economic development. Berry learned to farm with mules and horses as his father had, and to value the community of small, independently owned farms that still survive in Kentucky. Between 1954 and 1987, the number of farms in Kentucky declined by only 9 percent; 75 percent of Kentucky's farms are still under 180 acres. The majority of these farms remain in the hands of individuals or families, and in 1980 over half the population of the state lived in rural areas (compared with less than 25 percent in the United States generally).

But Kentucky was not unaffected by the forces that were transforming the agricultural economy throughout the country. During the second half of the twentieth century, the relative importance of agriculture in the state's economy declined dramatically. In 1940, more than one-third of the labor force worked on farms; by 1990 that figure had declined to less than 4 percent. Significantly, few farmers now derive their principal income from farming, and, as of 1990, agriculture constituted the largest source of income in only five counties. Meanwhile, the number of factories in Kentucky increased by 42 percent between 1939 and 1947, and the number of manufacturing workers increased by 69 percent.⁴ This transition to an urban, industrial economy forms the general context for Berry's thinking about agriculture, community, and the environment. "I began my life," he says, "as the old times and the last of the old-time people were dying out." Thus in his "acceptance of twentieth-century realities there has had to be a certain deliberateness." His thinking, he says, has been critically shaped by the fact that he was "born with an aptitude for a way of life that was doomed."⁵

Actually, Berry's early career suggested an aptitude for a very different way of life. He received a bachelor of arts in English from the University of Kentucky in 1956, then continued on to receive a master's degree, apparently intent on pursuing an academic and literary vocation. His first job was teaching English at the small Baptist Georgetown College near Lexington. After marrying Tanya Amyx, daughter of a University of Kentucky art professor, in 1957, he took a fellowship to study creative writing at Stanford with Wallace Stegner. His first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, was published in 1960. In 1962, he took a position in the English department at New York University, after traveling in Europe for a year on a Guggenheim Fellowship.⁶ In short, he was following a typical career path for an aspiring writer, moving from his rural roots to an upwardly mobile, cosmopolitan lifestyle. Reflecting on this period, he mused,

Hadn't I achieved what had become one of the almost traditional goals of American writers? I had reached the greatest city in the nation; I had a good job; I was meeting other writers and talking to them and learning from them; I had reason to hope that I might take a still larger part in the literary life of that place.⁷

Instead, however—to the surprise and consternation of his friends—after a year Berry gave up his position at New York University to join the faculty of the University of Kentucky. He had decided to move back to Kentucky and become a farmer.

That decision cost him “considerable difficulty and doubt and hard thought.” Well-intentioned colleagues urged him to reconsider, insisting “you can't go home again” and warning him of “the Village Virus.”⁸ “It was feared,” he reports, “that I would grow paunchy and join the Farm Bureau.”⁹ But those who see in Berry a nostalgia for an imagined utopian past should take note of his response to these warnings:

I knew as well as Wolfe that there is a certain *metaphorical* sense in which you can't go home again—that is, the past is lost to the extent that it cannot be lived in again. I knew perfectly well that I could not return home and be a child, or recover the secure pleasures of childhood.¹⁰

Nevertheless, “home—the place, the countryside—was still there, pretty much as I left it, and there was no reason I could not go back to it if I wanted.” On a deeper level, he concluded that “Kentucky was my fate—not an altogether

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pleasant fate . . . but one that I could not leave behind simply by going to another place.” The world, he believed, “would always be most fully and clearly present to me in the place I was fated by birth to know better than any other.”¹¹

Berry’s return to Kentucky baffled his friends, but in retrospect we can see it as an early manifestation of the broader social trend in the 1960s toward “dropping out” and pursuing alternative lifestyles. Berry was hardly a hippie, of course, but neither was he a typical farmer. Rather than following the advice of experts and modernizers to “get big” and make use of the latest agricultural technology, he bought a small “marginal” farm and set out to reclaim it, using traditional methods of farming. His aim was not to be successful by conventional standards—to pursue wealth and status—but to find a level of satisfaction and independence in a life not overly dependent on government, corporations, or markets.

Inevitably, Wendell Berry’s lifestyle invites comparison to the traditional Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, for whom the chief goals of farming are independence and virtue. Indeed, Berry himself claims the Jeffersonian legacy, insisting that his goal is to revive and renew the American agrarian tradition.¹² But that claim raises more questions than it answers about Berry’s aims and reasons. The agrarian tradition he invokes is a complex phenomenon; it has been used to support economic liberalization and economic protectionism, political equality and social hierarchy, agricultural modernization and a return to “the simple life.” Berry may be attempting to realize an “agrarian vision”—but what exactly is that vision? Which agrarian tradition is he trying to revive?



The agrarian tradition has ancient roots in Western thought, but exploring those roots would take us farther afield than we need to go.¹³ I want to focus instead on American democratic agrarianism: a specific set of ideas, claims, and political programs that have been set forth over the past two hundred years by a varied assortment of Americans, most tracing their inspiration back to Thomas Jefferson.

Defining traditions is a tricky matter, both because they are always on the move—merging, mutating, bifurcating, spawning offspring—and because their meanings are typically the subject of political conflict. “Agrarianism” covers a lot of territory. For Carl Taylor, for example, agrarian politics revolves rather tediously around agricultural prices, markets, and the avail-

ability of credit. James Montmarquet, on the other hand, considers as central the belief that “farmers are, on the whole and as a result of their distinctive experiences, more virtuous than those engaged in urban, commercial activities.” Others emphasize the proposition of the eighteenth-century Physiocrats that agriculture is the true source of national wealth. The term has also carried the implication of coercive equalization of the ownership of cultivated land, and “agrarian” is sometimes used to refer to any movement defending the interests of farmers, or to movements expressing resistance to industrialization generally.¹⁴

My definition may only perpetuate the confusion, but it’s probably too much to ask that such an ideologically charged term confine itself to one meaning. Indeed, as I argued in the introduction, agrarianism should be viewed less as a static philosophical system than as an evolving collection of ideas and rhetorical strategies. Thus we should not expect to identify a set of philosophical principles shared by all agrarians. We can, however, identify a specific political tradition of American democratic agrarianism, characterized by a claim that all its proponents have made in some form: that the family farm is the chief repository of the virtues necessary to the republic. That claim links Thomas Jefferson with John Taylor of Caroline, Booker T. Washington, the Populists, and modern agrarians like Wendell Berry. Its rhetorical value to its proponents is that it allows each to present himself as an inheritor of the Jeffersonian tradition. Its analytic value is that it allows us to distinguish democratic agrarianism from related or similar intellectual traditions.

Consider, for example, George Washington’s Cincinnatus-like retreat from the cares and concerns of public affairs into private rural domesticity.¹⁵ Washington’s embrace of the simple life represents less a celebration of agriculture itself than a conviction that the ordinary life of the common man (typically, of course, a farmer) offers greater incentives to virtue than the life of great political leaders. This claim, a familiar support for agrarian views, stems from an ethical tradition rooted in a distrust of glory seeking and aimed at encouraging political leaders to retire gracefully from public life rather than causing personal and public chaos by clinging to power.¹⁶

Similarly, we should distinguish the literary tradition of pastoralism. This set of images, themes, and tropes is usually traced back to Virgil’s *Georgics*, which, as Victor Davis Hanson put it, “romanticized the harmony and community of the countryside, in implicit contrast to the bustle and impersonality of urban life.”¹⁷ Hanson contrasts Virgilian pastoralism with a tradition of complaint stemming from Hesiod, whose *Works and Days* was

“a more melancholy, more angry account of the necessary pain and sacrifice needed to survive on the land.”¹⁸ Both traditions have been influential in American letters; although Virgilian pastoralism may be the dominant mode, America is not without her Hesiods. They include Hamlin Garland’s bleak stories of the middle border, O. E. Rølvaag’s *Giants in the Earth* (recounting the misfortunes and hardships of Norwegian homesteaders in Dakota), and Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Hanson points out that this bleaker literary tradition focuses on the character of the farmer: independent, often unpleasant, not always virtuous, but a vivid and powerful alternative to the values of urban society.¹⁹

Histories of agrarian thought typically conflate the political tradition of agrarianism with its literary counterparts. There is some justification for doing so; pastoral themes often lend rhetorical support to agrarian politics, while agrarian ideology can offer philosophical support for pastoral tropes. Nevertheless, for our purposes it’s useful to distinguish the literary tradition of pastoralism from the political tradition of agrarianism. Agrarians do not always draw on pastoralism; on the contrary, they often explicitly reject romanticized visions of rural life in favor of hardheaded economic and political analysis. Similarly, pastoral themes and images may be associated with political programs other than agrarianism (preserving the wilderness, for example)—or with no political program at all. So treating agrarianism as conterminous with pastoralism can be misleading. Thoreau, for example, is undoubtedly a major figure in the pastoral tradition. Perhaps for that reason he is often cited as representative of a nature-loving kind of agrarianism that celebrates farming primarily for its spiritual value. There is a strain of romanticism, including the New England transcendentalists, that maintains that contact with nature and the cycle of birth and decay can bring one closer to God, or some sort of spiritual reality. But this tradition has been at least as hostile to farming as it has been to industrialization. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Thoreau himself exemplifies an ambivalence toward farming deeply ingrained in American thought.

That ambivalence, in fact, makes it unwise to insist too hard on the distinctions among these traditions that I have identified. Americans’ attitudes toward farming have actually been quite complex, often mingling varieties of agrarianism with related or opposing traditions. Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, for example, draws on many of the above traditions—a desire to live closer to nature, a complaint about the hard lot of simple farmers, and a conviction that virtue lies in avoiding involvement in high

politics—to justify his (or his protagonist’s) plan to abandon war-torn New England and go live with the Indians.²⁰

This ecumenical approach to agrarianism probably helps to maintain its richness and vitality. More problematic is the common confusion of democratic agrarianism with its aristocratic cousin, an elitist ideology that evolved in the South before the Civil War. The confusion stems in part from the fact that both traditions claim descent from Thomas Jefferson, whose endorsement of the agrarian life is familiar to the point of triteness:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of the morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. . . . While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a workbench, or twirling a distaff.²¹

Such language accounts for Jefferson’s reputation as friend and defender of the yeoman farmer. But it doesn’t explain his association with aristocratic agrarianism. Although he accepted the notion of a natural aristocracy, he insisted that the natural elite may arise in all walks of life. Hence his plan for public education and a vital local government, both devices to sift the wheat from the intellectual and political chaff.²² His democratic sympathies seem beyond question.

Nevertheless, it’s significant that many of his policy proposals, including his “ward” system of local government, aimed at identifying talented individuals and sending them to college, where they would be educated in the liberal arts in preparation for careers as statesmen. Farming may be adequate training for republican citizenship, but political leaders apparently need a different sort of education. This is not to suggest that Jefferson expected statesmen to abandon the farm altogether; he himself remained actively involved in operations on his plantation, and insisted his children do so as well. But the sort of work he thought appropriate for a gentleman farmer was not the backbreaking drudgery that constitutes the bulk of agricultural labor. Rather, he pursued scientific studies and other intellectually

stimulating pursuits—the kind of “work” usually considered appropriate to *leisured gentlemen*.²³

Is Jefferson’s agrarianism then inherently elitist, assuming a stratified society with a leisure class perched comfortably on the top? There’s little doubt that he considered leisure as well as labor important to cultivating republican virtues. His praise of the yeoman farmer is based in part on the dubious claim that they have plenty of leisure—and education as well: “Ours are the only farmers who can read Homer,” he boasted.²⁴ Thus the farmer he celebrated appeared to be a fairly prosperous one, with plenty of hired hands, if not slaves. Certainly he didn’t have in mind the subsistence farmers scraping out a living on the frontier.²⁵

On the other hand, like most eighteenth-century Americans, Jefferson worried about the corrupting effects of wealth and apparently believed that small-scale commercial agriculture would not allow the ordinary farmer to get rich.²⁶ So his vision of American agriculture turns out to be a *mélange* of elitist and democratic ideals: small family farmers relying principally on their own labor but not working too hard, producing enough for themselves but also for the market, actively engaged in commerce but not pursuing excessive wealth, and spending their spare time reading Homer and keeping informed about (but not too involved in) national politics. There may be a few American farmers who have achieved this ideal. It describes Wendell Berry pretty well, in fact. But most of Jefferson’s intellectual heirs have simplified his vision considerably, emphasizing either the elitist or the democratic elements. Hence his reputation as both champion of the small farmer and apologist for the planter aristocracy.

Jefferson’s fellow southerners didn’t hesitate to exploit that ambiguity. His conviction that leisure and mental cultivation were critical to developing civic virtue, along with his distaste for manufacturing and industry, paved the way for the variety of agrarianism that emerged in the South during the antebellum years, an aristocratic ideology designed to defend slavery. John Taylor of Caroline, a contemporary of Jefferson, planted the seeds of this school of thought with his defense of the peculiar institution. Although he declared slavery “a misfortune to agriculture,” he disagreed with Jefferson’s contention that it was morally corrupting. On the contrary, he argued that masters would love liberty all the more for their practical experience with slavery.²⁷ Defenders of slavery such as George Fitzhugh later developed this idea. Fitzhugh maintained that slavery was necessary to the maintenance of republican government and higher civilization; democracy, he worried, leads to a general retrograde in “the departments of genius, taste

and art.” “The [modern] world,” he complained, “seems to regard nothing as desirable except what will make money and what costs money.” The march of democracy will therefore create a desperate situation in which “there is not a poet, an orator, a sculptor, or painter in the world.”²⁸ Fortunately, the South, because it has slaves, may be spared this decline into bad taste:

Our citizens, like those of Rome and Athens, are a privileged class. We should train and educate them to deserve the privileges and perform the duties which society confers on them. Instead of, by a low demagoguism, depressing their self-respect by discourses on the equality of man, we had better excite their pride by reminding them that they do not fulfill the menial offices which white men do in other countries.²⁹

According to Fitzhugh, civilization depends on aristocratic pride and a sense of noblesse oblige, which the institution of slavery promotes.

Fitzhugh’s elitist ideology was hardly representative of mainstream southern agrarianism, which remained predominantly democratic. In fact, some commentators, pointing to Fitzhugh’s negative view of agricultural labor, have suggested that he wasn’t an agrarian at all. But his defense of slavery appealed to more than a few defenders of southern agriculture, including the influential journalist Edward Ruffin.³⁰ Industrial production can rely on slavery as well, of course. But agriculture, according to many antebellum southerners, was a more appropriate pastime for a gentleman, and more conducive to cultivating the intellect and sensibilities than the crass, noisy, busy pursuits of industry.³¹ It would be self-defeating to preserve slavery in order to cultivate the arts and then abandon agriculture for soul-killing industrialization. Thus Fitzhugh’s defense of slavery did not depend on but was intimately associated with an endorsement of agriculture as more civilizing and humane than industry.

Emphasizing the superiority of agriculture to industry allowed aristocratic agrarians to rely heavily on Jeffersonian language. But aristocratic agrarianism differs from the democratic variety in stressing *leisure* as the defining characteristic of rural life. Aristocratic agrarians drew an important distinction between the dull, routine, *laborious* part of farming and the ennobling, intellectually stimulating “scientific” part—managing a farm and workforce, cultivating new varieties of crops, pursuing theoretical knowledge relevant to agriculture. The scientific part (the part Jefferson, for example, was actually involved in) was appropriate to a gentleman. The dull routine part was simply degrading.³² Aristocratic agrarianism therefore assumed a division of labor that would give the planter a good deal of leisure

time for democratic politics and other civilized pursuits. Yeomen farmers, while virtuous in their own crude, uncultured way, would hardly have the time or education for politics. Obviously, they would need a leisure class to provide leadership.³³ This recognition of the importance of leisure to politics and the arts is thus central to aristocratic agrarianism, providing crucial support for their hierarchical vision of society.

Its concern with leisure and the role of the liberal arts in maintaining civilization has earned aristocratic agrarianism adherents even in the twentieth century; as we will see, it remains an important source of inspiration for Berry as well. But it is democratic agrarianism that most powerfully informs Berry's work. Unlike their aristocratic counterparts, democratic agrarians want to lodge political power and the preservation of civilization in the hands of ordinary, hardworking farmers. They therefore emphasize labor, rather than leisure, as the primary source of agrarian virtue. For democratic agrarians, the virtues of yeomen farmers arise directly out of their constant, physical, and laborious relationship to the land, rather than their leisure to engage in intellectual, political, and artistic pursuits. This conviction has helped democratic agrarianism retain its vitality into the twentieth century—although not without undergoing significant transformations.



On one basic tenet, democratic agrarians from Jefferson to Berry would agree: The farmer's labor not only creates material wealth,³⁴ but cultivates virtues necessary to the nation's welfare. This concern with civic virtue derives from the tradition of civic republicanism, in which ownership of land figures as a central requirement of citizenship, providing both economic (and therefore political) independence and a concrete interest in defending the freedom and laws of the republic.³⁵ The republican and agrarian traditions are so closely connected in Anglo-American thought that it's probably pointless to try to disentangle them. But it's important to note that republicanism and agrarianism can fit together in different ways. For example, republican theorists influenced by the seventeenth-century British theorist James Harrington value land because it provides the wealth and leisure to participate in politics and perform one's military duties—arguments that were adopted by southern aristocratic agrarians.³⁶ America's democratic agrarians, in contrast, value not simply owning land but also *farming* it. Democratic agrarians share the conviction that actually working the earth

is necessary to cultivate republican virtues. Where they disagree is over which virtues the farmer's labor cultivates.

Jefferson's list of virtues reflects typical eighteenth-century concerns. He argued that farming instilled such desirable traits as industry, frugality, humility (in the sense of lack of unseemly ambition), and a reliable interest in law, order, and individual rights.³⁷ Most important, however, farming cultivated independence—specifically, independence from the ties of patronage and the economic influence of employers that threatened to corrupt the political process. “Dependence,” Jefferson warned, “begets subservience and venality.” Independence is a theme common to American democratic agrarians, but Jefferson wasn't worried about the dependence of commercial farmers on agricultural markets (which has proved to be among the most problematic of small farmers' dependencies). Rather, he was concerned about the dependence of workers on employers, which gave employers too much influence over workers' political opinions and activities. And equally troubling to his republican sensibilities was manufacturers' dependence on “the casualties and caprices of customers”—that is, on consumers' whims and fashions. Jeffersonians argued that markets for the “luxury” goods produced by manufacturers—like buckles, lace, or plated candlesticks—could collapse overnight when fashions changed, throwing people out of work. Markets for basic agricultural commodities, they claimed, were more reliable (“as long as eating is the custom of Europe,” as Tom Paine put it).³⁸

Jefferson, then, was concerned primarily with protecting farmers from economic dependence on the rich and on unstable markets. John Taylor went further, arguing that farmers must be assured of economic prosperity—not just independence—because political power follows wealth and farmers constitute the majority. If they are left impoverished, they will lack political power to check interested minorities and, instead of a healthy republic, we will be left with an aristocracy of the “idle classes” (bankers, speculators, and people living off government sinecures).³⁹ Thus Taylor gave considerable attention to what one might expect to be a major theme of agrarianism: how to be a good farmer. Because successful farming was important to his vision of an agrarian America, his ideal farmer had to have certain stewardship and intellectual virtues, as well as rugged independence. In fact, Taylor wrote extensively on soil fertility—not because he was concerned about environmental integrity for its own sake, but because it affected the prosperity and therefore political status of farmers.

This focus on political status was Taylor's legacy to democratic agrarians.

His argument that political status was linked to good husbandry, however, was never a prominent element of the democratic tradition. In fact, it was aristocratic agrarianism, which defended agriculture as a way to develop intellectual virtues, that held the most promise of developing into an environmentally sensitive agricultural ideology. By the time the science of ecology came of age in the late nineteenth century, however, aristocratic agrarianism was in decline—and those who sought to revive it in the 1930s had little interest in agricultural science or ecology. Research on soil fertility and erosion did continue throughout the nineteenth century, of course. Eventually (as we will see) such research contributed to the twentieth-century permanent agriculture movement. But in general, the science of agriculture evolved independently of both aristocratic and democratic agrarians. The former was more concerned with rescuing some remnant of antebellum southern society, while the latter (much to the frustration of the experts) remained more interested in economics and politics than in techniques for preventing soil erosion.⁴⁰

Thus Jefferson's legacy evolved as it fell into the hands of actual yeomen farmers, beginning with the Jacksonian democrats and culminating in the Populist uprising of the late nineteenth century.⁴¹ Instead of following up Jefferson's and Taylor's interest in a more scientific approach to farming, democratic agrarians revived their calls for political and economic independence. Drawing on what we have come to recognize as basic democratic agrarian principles—the moral and economic value of labor, the demand for economic and political equality, and the value of individual independence—the Populists launched a general attack on the emerging industrial order, particularly its concentration of wealth and erosion of competitive capitalism. Their struggles for reform and regulation of the money, land, and transportation systems demonstrate the radical potential of agrarian thought.⁴² Rather than examining their specific policy proposals, however, I want to focus on their reinterpretation of the Jeffersonian virtuous farmer.

The Populists' list of agrarian virtues resembled Jefferson's in some respects. Industry and frugality, certainly; Populists loved to compare themselves favorably to city folk who neither worked nor saved. Farmers' wealth, what little there was of it, came through labor, "business tact and thrift," while the city was filled with speculators: "The Ghouls of Wall Street," in Jonathan Periam's overheated rhetoric, are "intensely selfish, guilty of the meanest subterfuges, often lacking education, successful by dint of cunning, and unscrupulous to the last degree." They "rope in" the unwary clerk, steal his pitiful savings and reduce him to poverty and disgrace.⁴³ Such corruption is only to

be expected from people who make a living without breaking a sweat; Populists remained faithful to the long-standing agrarian conviction that labor is man's proper function and the true source of the nation's wealth.⁴⁴

For the Populists, however, it wasn't only agricultural labor that produced civic virtue. In an attempt to forge an alliance with workers, Populists developed a "producerist" ideology that held the labor of the industrial worker and the farmer equally valuable to the republic. For Jefferson, the superiority of agricultural labor had been premised in large part on the variety and intellectual stimulation such work provided. In contrast, Populists had little to say about how labor cultivated intellectual virtues. Labor, for the Populists, invariably meant manual labor; they valued such moral virtues as discipline and ruggedness, which were clearly shared by many industrial workers. Thus, although they never lost sight of the special claims and concerns of farmers, Populists did not rely on invidious comparisons between agriculture and industry; rather, they compared farmers and workers both to the "idle" (upper) classes.

Similarly, like Jefferson the Populists valued political independence, but they reinterpreted independence as freedom from partisan influence (rather than freedom from wealthy patrons). Since partisanship interfered with their efforts to build a third party, freedom from unthinking party loyalty became an important item on the Populist agenda. But they qualified their endorsement of political independence with the recognition that effective political action requires organization, and organization involves some limits on individual autonomy. Populist rhetoric is thus littered with oddly dissonant calls for unity: "The independent manhood of the country is rising up," proclaimed James Davis—but those independent men are immediately lost in an organic unity: "An army of oppressed producers are organizing for victory. . . . Upon their banner they have inscribed 'Liberty, Justice and Equality.' A million hearts are beating in response to these sentiments."⁴⁵ If farmers fail to assert their rights, warned Periam, "they will cease to be free agents." But their best hope is in precisely that, in "their Societies, their Clubs, their Granges." "In *union* there is strength."⁴⁶

Nor was the conflict between organization and individual independence the only inconsistency in Populist rhetoric. They also lauded the farmers' traditional interest in law and order (based on the fact that farmers own property and therefore want protection for property rights)—but they undermined this lawfulness by insisting that the current government was hopelessly corrupt and lawyers and politicians were useless parasites. Respect for law, they pointed out, sometimes requires resistance to unjust legislation and police

abuse. (“The tree of liberty,” as Jefferson wrote, “must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”)⁴⁷ On the other hand, Populists expressed an almost touching faith in the power of legislation to cure the inequities of industrial society—a position that brought them into conflict with Jefferson’s famous endorsement of limited government. Even the cleverest Populists had a hard time finding Jeffersonian arguments to support their calls for national regulation of railroads, telegraphs, and other corporations.⁴⁸

The theme of humility also eroded under the pressures of the Populists’ political activism. Populist rabble-rousers, trying to stir up resistance, talked self-respect and empowerment, not humble acceptance of one’s lot. James Baird Weaver’s stirring 1892 “Call to Action” called on farmers to show their “enlightened self-respect,” and offered them the kind of fame usually reserved for the political elite:

It is glorious to live in this age, and to be permitted to take part in this heroic combat is the greatest honor that can be conferred upon mortals. It is an opportunity for every man, however humble, to strike a blow that will permanently benefit his race and make the world better for his having lived.⁴⁹

Obviously this call for farmers to abandon their traditional humility was driven by a desire to mobilize mass political action. But downplaying humility wasn’t just a matter of political expediency for the Populists; it also reflects the ideological distance between the early and later agrarians. Where Jefferson, the Virginia gentleman, saw a collection of small landholders minding their own economic business and uninterested in challenging the social hierarchy, Populists saw a downtrodden mass suffering from the depredations of the aristocracy of wealth and badly needing a dose of self-esteem. Humility was a problematic value for them, as it is for anyone involved in the politics of class and status.

Consider Booker T. Washington’s dilemma. Given the influence of Populism in the South, it made sense for him to use agrarian rhetoric to defend the interests of blacks, who were mostly southern farmers. But the problem of humility brought him up short: His advice to blacks to stay on the farm and cultivate agrarian virtues, while calculated to advance the economic status and therefore political power of the race, sounded to many like a cowardly refusal to challenge oppressive social conventions. In contrast, W. E. B. DuBois, who was sympathetic to the agrarian critique of industrial capitalism, drew more heavily on the aristocratic tradition. For DuBois, the virtue of the agrarian South was that it supported a class concerned with humane

values—a class (he contended) that should recognize its fellow natural aristocrats, no matter what color their skin. His somewhat elitist agrarianism sounds less humble, and has therefore seemed to later generations a better vehicle for status politics.⁵⁰ Humility, in short, is at the center of conflict over social status. If we interpret humility as the virtue of “knowing one’s place,” we must ask what one’s place is and whether it can be defined without reference to existing social hierarchies—a question that Berry takes up as one of his central themes.⁵¹

The basic concern of Populist politics, however, was not simply status but economic autonomy—interpreted, however, as the ability to make a fair profit on the market rather than merely the ability to subsist on the products of one’s own labor. Echoing John Taylor, Populists claimed that individual political rights are meaningless to the poor; political freedom requires an equitable distribution of wealth. The concentration of wealth in the hands of corporations, they insisted, turned yeomen farmers into “serfs” or “slaves.”⁵² James Weaver, for example, interpreted Anglo-American political history as a continual struggle against the concentration of wealth (“One of the main charges against Charles the First, was that he had fostered and created monopolies. His head went to the block.”) The current economic system, he maintained, was no better than “corporate feudalism.”⁵³ The power of money is the power to oppress; the struggle for a more equitable distribution of wealth is therefore a struggle for political liberty.

This concern for economic autonomy led to a broad attack on corporations, monopolies, and the institutions controlling credit—the centerpiece of the Populist agenda, and their most enduring legacy to twentieth-century agrarians such as Berry. Corporations, Populists complained, “are the forces against which we are to contend.” The corporation was a monstrous creature, an “artificial person.” Once brought to life, “this individual . . . soon began to bend to its uses the forms and powers of the law.” By its “gigantic combinations, its control of the money of the nation, by its gradual building up of a system of indebtedness of colossal magnitude,” it has made the “toiling millions” into “the tools of a few plutocrats.”⁵⁴ Corporations use their economic power to corrupt legislatures, which are then induced to grant them special privileges, resulting in monopolies destructive of economic competition and begetting the “un-republican vices of fawning, subservience, and venality.”⁵⁵

The problem with corporations, however, is not merely their economic power and ability to corrupt legislatures. Rather, it is the very nature of these amoral creatures: “These corporations . . . are moved only by an exhaustless

greed for lucre, without one human sympathy.” They are “soulless.” Sounding a theme that would echo into the twenty-first century, Populists complained that corporations *at best* act on self-interest; too often the “capriciousness of officials” governs their decisions; the welfare of the local communities that depend on them are “a secondary and trivial consideration.”⁵⁶ Moreover, because they act only through agents, “the natural persons who own and move their power, look to them only for an increase of gains, and feel no personal concern for the moral quality of the acts which produce money.” Thus “the individual is merged in the money-machine of which he is an integral part, and the morality of its action is the morality of the company, not his.”⁵⁷ Corporations, in sum, concentrate wealth, destroy competition, corrupt legislatures, disrupt local communities, disempower the citizens, and demoralize their own officers.

Populists therefore called for large-scale government regulation of corporations and limits on the acquisition of wealth—all in the name of protecting civic virtue and individual (economic and moral) autonomy. I don’t want to oversimplify their views, however. There is also plenty of Populist rhetoric extolling the virtues of organization, the unfairness of asking individuals to take care of themselves, and generally raising questions about the political and moral value of independence. We have to rise above “survival of the strongest,” insisted Lorenzo Dow Lewelling. “It is the duty of the government to protect the weak.”⁵⁸ Jacob Coxey frankly admitted that his ragged army had come to ask for help; the struggle for existence was just too hard.⁵⁹ Many Populists sounded as if the age of individualism were over: If “the corporation has absorbed the community,” then “the community must absorb the corporation. . . . A stage must be reached in which each will be for all and all for each.”⁶⁰ Nelson Dunning insisted that organization “is now the motive power that rules and guides the world”—and that’s a good thing. The people should simply learn how to use the advantages of organization to combat tyranny. Collectivization, according to Ignatius Donnelly, is the answer to corporate power.⁶¹

This inconsistency illustrates not mere carelessness or a lack of sincerity but a problem that will continue to infect agrarian politics up to Berry’s day: the difficulty of basing a political movement aimed at strengthening community control on the value of independent, individual action. That the Populists regularly asked people to accept all sorts of legal restrictions in the name of protecting individual liberty and economic independence apparently didn’t trouble them much. Berry’s point, as I interpret him, is that it should have. The problem of reconciling individualism with the needs and demands

of farmers should have led to a more thoroughgoing critique of a basic agrarian tenet: that the virtue most necessary for free, popular government is self-reliance. Instead, this celebration of individual autonomy remained central to the democratic agrarianism that Berry inherited, forming an important ethical basis for farmers' attacks on big business and industrial interests.⁶²

Conspicuously missing from those attacks on industrialism, on the other hand, is any hint of ecological sensibility. The Populists' perspective on the environment is summed up in Ignatius Donnelly's 1891 prophecy: "The time may come when the slow processes of agriculture will be largely discarded, and the food of man be created out of the chemical elements of which it is composed, transfused by electricity and magnetism. . . . Our mountain ranges may, in after ages, be leveled down and turned into bread."⁶³ Donnelly actually *looked forward* to a world without mountains or endless waves of grain. Like most Populists, he favored technological progress and showed little concern either for sustainability or for preserving the pristine beauty of the American wilderness. In this respect, too, Berry's agrarian vision would differ substantially from that of earlier democratic agrarians.

As the new century opened, however, the agrarian tradition was about to undergo another transformation. During the early decades of the twentieth century, a new, broader discourse about American agriculture took shape in the academic and policy community. While the Populists and their successors continued to pursue economic reform almost exclusively, a small but influential back-to-the-land movement brought attention to rural communities and to the social, spiritual, and aesthetic rewards of farming.

The twentieth century witnessed an increased interest among policy makers and social reformers in the condition of rural America. Ironically, this interest coincided with one of the most prosperous periods in American agriculture. Farm prices rose regularly every year between 1897 and 1910, and farmers actually began to sound optimistic about their economic prospects and the future of agriculture.⁶⁴ From another perspective, however, agriculture was in decline. Although the number of people on farms continued to increase until World War I, the percentage of the population involved in agriculture was decreasing, from 50 percent in 1870 to 30.7 percent in 1910 to less than 25 percent in the 1920s. The decline was due in part to the very success of agricultural development; the increased use of machines and other intensive practices allowed for more production with

less labor. But it also reflected agriculture's inability to compete with other sectors of the economy for labor. Farmers, despite their increasing prosperity, continued to make less money than workers in many other occupations. In addition, the quality of rural life left much to be desired; rural folk complained of bad schools, bad roads, isolation, and the lack of urban amenities.⁶⁵ So views on farming in the early twentieth century were mixed: While the more successful farmers would look back on this period as the golden age of American agriculture, others viewed it as the beginning of a major crisis in rural America.

Those who saw a crisis brewing were an eclectic group of intellectuals, including literati, professors, government officials, and urban reformers, who worried that the loss of farmers signaled the end of the Jeffersonian vision of America. As the country became urban and industrial, they feared, agrarian virtues—virtues critical to maintaining a republic—would disappear. Thus to halt or at least slow down this urban migration, they called for improvements in the quality of rural life and the rewards of agriculture. Americans, they insisted, must be induced to go “back to the land.” Although never as strong as its European counterpart,⁶⁶ the American back-to-the-land movement did boast some eloquent spokespersons: John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Ralph Borsodi, and Scott and Helen Nearing were among those who embraced farming as a way to cultivate independence, security, health, and leisure. Their efforts to halt the forces of industrialization were entirely unsuccessful, of course; although some of these writers were widely read, the movement as a whole never enjoyed mass support. Nevertheless, these advocates for rural revitalization made a significant contribution to agrarian thought, developing themes that the Populist tradition had largely ignored.

Such themes are illustrated in *I'll Take My Stand*, a classic statement of postbellum southern agrarianism and an important precursor to Wendell Berry's work.⁶⁷ *I'll Take My Stand* is the manifesto of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, a philosophical and literary group that took shape in the 1920s around the leadership of John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren.⁶⁸ The immediate impetus for the book was the 1925 Scopes trial, which prompted many caustic attacks by eastern journalists on southern rural “backwardness.” Annoyed, the group (calling themselves “Twelve Southerners”) published this collection of essays to defend southern agrarian society as superior to northern industrialism.⁶⁹ The result is a critique of American industrial civilization that, to many scholars, sounds quite contemporary.⁷⁰ But the Twelve Southerners' agrarianism is actually

rooted in the past. In *I'll Take My Stand*, the aristocratic version of the Jeffersonian vision is revived, along with its endorsement of social hierarchy and its concern with leisure, aesthetics, and the intellectual and spiritual virtues of the good farmer.⁷¹

The Twelve Southerners hardly spoke with one voice, but they all agreed that industrialization destabilizes community, threatens the humanist tradition, and destroys any possibility of achieving a good, truly human life—conceptualized as “a kind of imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition.”⁷² Their major themes are the moral effects of industrialization, the case for social hierarchy, and an analysis of the social conditions necessary to preserve the intellectual tradition of civic humanism. These are, rather unconvincingly, marshaled in defense of the South against northern industrial imperialism. The result closely tracks the aristocratic agrarianism of nineteenth-century theorists such as George Fitzhugh. For example, John Crowe Ransom’s “Reconstructed But Unregenerate” begins with a defense of the antebellum South, which was, he claims, “unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture.”⁷³ In other words, it was feudal, hierarchical, and traditional. These features allowed it to cherish a set of values antithetical to those of industrial society. Southern society, uninterested in material “progress,” was characterized by leisure and, therefore, culture. Southern agriculture involved little physical labor, he insists. Rather, its goal was “to put the surplus of energy into the free life of the mind.”⁷⁴ This was its chief virtue; a lifestyle devoted to leisure allowed for the cultivation of the arts and an appreciative, humble stance toward nature. In contrast, northern “urbanized, anti-provincial, progressive and mobile American life” is “in a condition of eternal flux.”⁷⁵ This condition of constant change prevents people from developing attachments and therefore impoverishes their emotional life. Moreover, devotion to material progress forces them into a combative relationship with nature and enslaves them to constant toil. The desire to dominate nature eventually “brutalizes” their lives.⁷⁶

Ransom’s debt to antebellum southern agrarians is clear in his one-sided picture of planter culture as leisurely and civilized. But in case his aristocratic tendencies need further evidence, he goes on to criticize social mobility as destabilizing to community.⁷⁷ Although he suggests that slavery was merely an inessential local custom, he insists that the South’s virtue lay in its stable social hierarchy: “The good life depends on leisure, but leisure depends on an establishment, and the establishment depends on a prevailing magnanimity which scorns personal advancement at the expense of the free

activity of the mind.”⁷⁸ In other words, unquestioning acceptance of one’s lot in life frees one from all that pointless striving for material goods.

This elitism, which infects most of the essays in the book, mars what would otherwise be a persuasive, if not particularly original, critique of industrialism. The claim that industrialization destabilizes community, undermines tradition, and cultivates a hostile, combative stance toward nature has been echoed by more egalitarian and progressive theorists, including Berry.⁷⁹ But the Twelve Southerners’ critique of industrial society is tied inextricably to their case for social hierarchy. Agrarian society, under their reasoning, can escape the defects of industrial society only if it maintains a leisure *class*. Unfortunately for their argument, farming is a leisurely way of life only for the gentleman farmer who relies on slaves, hired workers, tenants—or machines—to work the land. Thus if the Southerners’ agrarian society is more hospitable to noninstrumental values, it’s not because that society has more farmers, but because it has more *aristocrats*. The heart of the Agrarians’ argument is that only a leisure class commanding traditional authority can maintain the cultural cohesion necessary to sustain a humane civilization. Their goal is not to improve the political or economic status of farmers, but to create an aristocracy that would pose a counterbalance to the values of industrial capitalism—a class concerned with tradition, leisure, and the art of living.

The Vanderbilt Agrarians represent only one vision of a reformed rural America, of course. Not all back-to-the-land advocates were so enamored of rigid social hierarchy. But those who shared the Twelve Southerners’ concern about cultural decay resulting from industrialization often shared their elitist attitudes. For example, Ralph Borsodi, a prominent spokesman for the back-to-the-land movement in the 1930s, revealed his ideological orientation by quoting Nietzsche approvingly and complaining of the way industrial society favors inferior, “quantity-minded” men over superior “quality-minded” men—men who appreciate beauty and the finer things. Individuals, he insisted, are not equal, so “we cannot say that all men are equally entitled to a voice in the counsels of the state.”⁸⁰ What mankind needs “is an aristocracy of truly superior persons.” Only when the masses understand and accept that fact will we achieve cultural renaissance.⁸¹

On the other hand, Helen and Scott Nearing, among the most well-known advocates of the simple life, were socialists whose goals were eminently democratic. In *The Good Life*, Helen Nearing explains why she and her husband left the city in 1932 to live on a small farm in Vermont: “We were against the accumulation of profit and unearned income by non-producers.” They wanted to dissociate themselves from such exploitation

and cultivate a true sense of community: “individuals, householders, villagers and townsmen living together and cooperating day in, day out.”⁸² Although the Nearings shared the aristocratic agrarians’ concern with leisure, aesthetic values, and intellectual cultivation, their case for the simple life sounds more like Thoreau than George Fitzhugh. They merely sought “a simple, satisfying life on the land, to be devoted to mutual aid and harmlessness, with an ample margin of leisure in which to do personally constructive and creative work.”⁸³

Whether they drew on aristocratic agrarianism or Thoreauvian simplicity, however, most back-to-the-land advocates focused on the aesthetic and spiritual rewards of farming. Although economic independence was a chief goal, particularly for those writing during the Depression, they had little interest in the Populists’ plans for reforming the market economy to make commercial agriculture more rewarding. Instead, resurrecting Jefferson’s notion of economic autonomy, they advocated subsistence agriculture as a way to reduce dependence on international markets and on industrial production, as well as fostering a more spiritual and less instrumental relationship to nature. It’s important to note, however, that this call for a more spiritual relationship to nature was not typically accompanied by a keen ecological sensibility. Borsodi and the Vanderbilt Agrarians showed no awareness of ecology at all. And even the more progressive Nearings, who sought “at-one-ness,” were informed about soil conservation, and cared deeply about animal rights, did not develop sustained ecological arguments for adopting the simple life. The back-to-the-land advocates were less interested in ecological integrity than in social and moral reform.

That interest in reforming American society through moral regeneration distinguishes the back-to-the-land movement from Populist-style agrarianism. Unlike Populism, the movement did not, in general, speak from or to the concerns and values of ordinary farmers; as many commentators have noted, the movement was largely the province of dissatisfied urban intellectuals seeking to escape from the pressures of city life. Thus we might not expect this variety of agrarianism to have a significant influence on a rural Kentucky farmer like Wendell Berry. On the contrary, however, the simple life did have a few advocates in rural America—even in Kentucky. The most important of these advocates, for Berry, was the writer and painter Harlan Hubbard.

Harlan Hubbard was an inspiration and role model for Wendell Berry. Born in 1900 in Bellevue, Kentucky, Hubbard moved to New York at age fifteen, studying art at the National Academy of Design and then at the Cincinnati Art Academy. But he returned to northern Kentucky in 1919 and

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settled in Fort Thomas, working as a day laborer and caring for his mother. When she died in 1943, Hubbard and his wife, Anna, built a boat and set off on what Berry calls their “great adventure.”⁸⁴ For forty-two years, they lived on a riverboat floating up and down the Mississippi and its tributaries and on a small homestead at Payne Hollow, on the Kentucky shore of the Ohio River. Their lifestyle was inspired largely by Thoreau, but as Harlan Hubbard explained, “I had no theories to prove. I merely wanted to try living by my own hands, independent as far as possible from a system of division of labor in which the participant loses most of the pleasure of making and growing things for himself.”⁸⁵ Thus they “departed from the life of the twentieth century as their families and friends were living it and as they had been expected to live it themselves.”⁸⁶

The Hubbards were still living in Payne Hollow in 1964, when Wendell Berry visited their homestead. Although the couple was “already more or less legendary by then,” he hadn’t yet heard of them, and the visit seems to have been serendipitous. Nevertheless, he tells us he wasn’t surprised by their lifestyle; he was in fact “somewhat prepared” for them.⁸⁷ He recognized that their way of life, although unconventional, was “an exemplary way of living in America.” Like other “American settlers,” they wanted “a kind of freedom and a kind of integrity that they could not have in any other place.” According to Berry, Harlan and Anna Hubbard were self-consciously seeking to realize the Jeffersonian ideal, to revive (in Harlan’s words) “a strain of Americanism almost lost.”⁸⁸ It was a project Berry not only understood but sympathized with; in Hubbard he found another link to the Jeffersonian tradition that would justify his own decision to return to Kentucky.

It is significant, however, that Berry’s account of the Hubbards’ life, like Harlan Hubbard’s own account, mentions Thoreau much more often than Jefferson. The Hubbards may represent one sort of twentieth-century agrarianism, but their “simple life” philosophy also has roots in a competing, and sometimes opposed, tradition—a tradition that claims Thoreau rather than Jefferson as its chief inspiration. We will explore that tradition and its relation to agrarian thought in the next chapter. First, however, we must consider the fate of the Populist legacy in the twentieth century and its influence on Wendell Berry.



While advocates for the simple life were exploring the social and cultural potential of rural living, the Populist tradition continued to focus on the eco-

nomic prosperity of the American farmer. Although the Populist party disintegrated after the 1896 election, the political tradition was inherited by a series of successors, such as the Non-Partisan League, the American Society of Equity, the Farmers' National Holiday Association, and the Farmers' Union. These organizations addressed a number of farm-related issues, but their primary interests were marketing and price control. Farmer cooperatives in particular were the centerpiece of much early twentieth-century Populist agitation, particularly in Kentucky.

Populism had always had a strong presence in the tobacco-growing regions of Kentucky, which boasted 226 chapters of Farmers' Union in 1908.⁸⁹ The most famous—or infamous—result of this influence was the violence that erupted in the Black Patch region of western Kentucky between 1906 and 1910. Vigilantes who came to be known as the Night Riders attempted to coerce farmers to join the Planters' Protective Association, a cooperative organized to oppose the international tobacco cartel.⁹⁰ The Planters' Protective Association failed, but the Populist spirit survived, if in less radical form. A wave of cooperatives were organized in Kentucky in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s—including the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, with which John Berry was intimately involved.

Of course, by the 1940s, most of the Populists' policy proposals—in particular price supports and other forms of protection from unstable markets—were accepted, even entrenched, elements of agricultural policy. When John Berry appeared before the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry in 1948, he sounded much like the staid Farm Bureau representatives, advocating price supports that would guarantee farmers “parity”—that is, roughly the same return on labor as other sectors of the economy receive. (In practice, parity meant a price that would give farm products the same buying power they had between 1909 and 1914, the golden age of American agriculture.) “The parity concept,” he declared, “is the happiest and most fortunate thought that has visited the minds of statesmen of this country in generations. It accords with our way of life and gives real and tangible meaning to the philosophy of equal opportunity.”⁹¹ The connection between price supports and equal opportunity was a legacy from the Populist tradition, but John Berry's optimistic, even cheerful, tone poses a stark contrast to the angry protests of the earlier era.⁹² His testimony is wholly free of the declamations against evil corporations or impassioned pleas for justice that characterized Populist rhetoric. This variety of Populism was a domesticated version, seeking accommodation rather than revolution.

Neither the anger nor the more radical style of protest disappeared from

Kentucky politics, however; in the early 1960s they erupted violently in the coal-mining regions of eastern Kentucky. For decades, eastern Kentucky had suffered under conditions of poverty and corporate exploitation similar to that of the Black Patch region during the Night Rider era. The situation became particularly desperate in the 1950s, when the “coal barons,” protected by their hegemonic control of politics in the region, adopted the environmentally devastating practice of strip mining. During the 1960s, however, federal poverty relief and community organizing programs disrupted the coal barons’ political control, giving rise to organizations such as the Appalachian Volunteers and the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People. These groups drew on the native history of popular resistance in the region to create opposition to the coal companies in general and strip mining in particular.

Among the leaders of the resistance was Harry Caudill, a Whitesburg attorney and author of *Night Comes to the Cumberland*, an eloquent and influential indictment of corporate abuse and exploitation in the Appalachians.⁹³ Caudill’s rhetoric, echoing the rich, effusive style of nineteenth-century Populists, contrasts strikingly with John Berry’s restrained testimony before the Senate. Coal, Caudill declared,

has always cursed the land in which it lies. When men begin to wrest it from the earth it leaves a legacy of foul streams, hideous slag heaps and polluted air. It peoples this transformed land with blind and crippled men and with widows and orphans. It is an extractive industry which takes all away and restores nothing.⁹⁴

By the 1950s, “the greater part of the region’s mineral wealth had lain in the iron clutch of absentee corporations.” Clinging to their archaic legal privileges, abetted by legal decisions “medieval in outlook and philosophy,” these soulless corporations turned to strip mining—and then “the shades of darkness moved close indeed to the Cumberlands.”⁹⁵ Sounding familiar Populist themes, he blamed morally bankrupt corporations and a corrupt political establishment for the disruption and demoralization of the agrarian communities of eastern Kentucky.

Wendell Berry first encountered Harry Caudill in 1965, at a meeting of the Appalachian Group to Save the Land and People. He had read *Night Comes to the Cumberland* two years earlier; its author, he remembered, spoke that night “with the eloquence of a resolute intelligence and with the moral passion of a lawyer who understood and venerated the traditions of

justice.”⁹⁶ Caudill’s speech indicted the corporations and the political system, the “gleeful yahoos who are destroying the world, and the mindless oafs who abet them.”⁹⁷ To the conservative (not to say paranoid) Kentucky political establishment, this sort of talk sounded like communist agitation. But to Berry, Caudill’s complaints were perfectly in tune with American political traditions: Like Harlan Hubbard, Caudill was “recalling us to what, after all, we claim as ‘our’ principles.”⁹⁸

Caudill, however, was not calling for a return to “the simple life.” On the contrary, he favored federal policies promoting economic development of the Cumberland, on the model of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). “The transformation of the Tennessee Valley,” he claimed, “demonstrates that enlightened government intervention under the auspices of careful planners can accomplish far-reaching economic and social improvements.”⁹⁹ Rather than withdrawing into private domesticity, he wanted to encourage industrial development and political action at the national level. Superficially, at least, his vision for a reformed rural America had little in common with Harlan Hubbard’s, or Jefferson’s—although Ignatius Donnelly might have approved.

The striking differences between Harry Caudill and Harlan Hubbard—both native Kentuckians, both major influences on Wendell Berry, and both arguably inheritors of Jefferson’s mantle—underscore the complexity of the agrarian tradition that Berry is trying to revive. His project is as much a synthesis as a recovery, a critical examination and careful selection from the variety of agrarianisms he has inherited. We will find in his writings echoes of Harry Caudill and the Populist tradition, celebrating the working man and teaching distrust of the establishment and corporate America. Similarly, we will discover a critical engagement with the Twelve Southerners’ highly literate defense of southern agrarianism against northern industrialism. And of course we can detect the inspiration of advocates of the simple life, such as Harlan and Anna Hubbard.

None of these influences, however, entirely account for Berry’s interest in environmentalism and sustainable agriculture. Protection of the environment was not a major concern for either the Populists or the advocates of the simple life. If it became a theme in both traditions, it did so late in the day—not until the 1960s, in fact, when Berry himself was already beginning his career. Berry may be an inheritor of the agrarian tradition, but he is also a reformer of that tradition, bringing to it an ecological sensibility lacking in earlier agrarians. The next chapter examines the intellectual sources of that sensibility.