Farming according to ‘the laws of beauty’:
Aesthetics and Agriculture

I

My title is borrowed from a remark of the young Karl Marx, still under the influence of German Romanticism, in a work of 1844. The remark occurs in the context of Marx’s complaint that, under capitalism, human beings are ‘alienated’ - from their work and its products, and from their very humanity. In essence, he writes, a person is a free, creative producer who expresses himself through work. But, in modern societies, people instead work simply in order to satisfy their physical, animal needs, to earn a wage. This stunts their human potential, for under less alienating conditions, ‘man … fashions things according to the laws of beauty’, not the laws of necessity (Marx 1979: 140). This is an intriguing remark, and one whose importance can be detached from Marx’s critique of capitalist economies in particular. Quite what he means by this remark, I return to later – but, in the meantime, it can serve as the launching pad for my discussion in this paper.

Marx’s remark was not confined to agricultural production in particular. But several radical, influential thinkers of the twentieth century have invoked the idea of beauty in their critiques of, specifically, modern agriculture. The forestry expert and ‘father’ of environmental ethics, Aldo Leopold, demanded that people ‘quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. Examine each question in terms of what is ethically and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient’. For, he famously continues, land-use is only right when it ‘tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community’ (Leopold 1970: 262). In a similar vein, E.F. Schumacher, the Buddhist-inspired champion of ‘small’, intermediate technology, urged that ‘there is more involved in “agricultural operations” than the production of incomes’ – nothing less, indeed, than ‘the whole relationship between man and nature, the whole life style of a society, the health, happiness and harmony of man, as well as the beauty of his habitat’ (Schumacher 1993: 89).

Despite such influential voices, however, aesthetic considerations – ones of beauty, for example – play only a modest role in contemporary debates about agricultural policy and in agricultural education. Perhaps we should find this surprising. Ordinary people, after all, tend to care about ‘the beauty of habitats’, so that a farming industry that preserves and even enhances natural beauty is more likely to win public support than one which ignores it. But several factors explain the relative neglect of aesthetic concerns in agricultural debate. Farmers and agriculturalists are focused on an essentially practical enterprise – on such goals as increasing yields from seeds, reducing costs and raising incomes. Aesthetic concerns with, say, how nice the wheat or paddy fields look and smell can seem trivial or frivolous in comparison. Moreover, there is a familiar perception that people’s aesthetic preferences tend to be highly conservative, and are liable therefore to obstruct technological innovations, which often require radical changes to the traditional appearance of farms and farmland. If concerns with beauty had prevailed, it is argued, there would have been no silos in arable areas, no plastic tunnels for vegetables and fruit in arid regions, and perhaps no combine
harvesters, just horse-drawn ploughs. I’ll return to this alleged conservatism and its implications later.

If agriculturalists are largely without interest in the aesthetics of farming, so are aestheticians. In university departments, teachers and students of aesthetics tend to be preoccupied either with issues about art or with the beauty of ‘wild’ nature – leaving little room for attention to ‘middle’ or ‘cultural landscapes’, including farms and parks, that seem to fall somewhere between art and nature, between culture and wilderness. And this is largely because of a feeling that the aesthetic realm – of taste and beauty - is quite separate from the realm of practice, utility and function. In effect, therefore, the agriculturalists and these teachers or students of aesthetics accept the same premise: either there is no connection, or there is even a tension, between practical and aesthetic concerns. Everyone might agree, of course, that, other things being equal, farmers should make their hedges, fences, rows of vegetables or whatever look attractive. But this, it will be said, is just icing on the cake – a consideration that is no more central to successful farming than ones about the decorations on swords or pistols were to successful warfare.

II

I want to challenge this perception of a lack of connection, or of a tension, between aesthetic and practical concerns in agriculture. In a moment, I identify a number of ways in which aesthetic issues can and should impact upon farming practices. Before that, though, a few more general, conceptual remarks on the perception I’m challenging. First, it is indeed true that when a person’s appreciation of something is confined to its utility or practical benefits, this is not aesthetic appreciation. The farmer who admires his field solely for the income it yields or the number of mouths it feeds is not admiring the field for its beauty. But, second, it does not follow from this that aesthetic appreciation is generally unrelated to practical function. When I admire a temple for its beauty, I admire it for what it is – a building designed to serve a certain purpose. A practical interest in something is distinct from an aesthetic interest in it, but this does not exclude an aesthetic interest in the practical. (See Benson 2008: 148.) And, self-evidently, all of us are constantly admiring objects with a practical function – pottery, carpets and so on. Third, it would also be quite wrong to think that aesthetic appreciation needs to be that of detached, passive viewers. Much aesthetic appreciation of things and places, in fact, is that of people who are practically, actively engaged with and involved in these. The way the violinist or the batsman appreciates the charm of the music she plays or the grace of the off-drive he makes may be different from the way the listener or the spectator does - but it is no less real and valuable.

This last point, about the aesthetic appreciation of the engaged participant, leads on to the first of those impacts of the aesthetic on farming which I promised to identify. There have been some interesting recent studies on such related topics as the ‘skilled vision’, ‘professional sensitivity’ and ‘aesthetic know-how’ of farmers and others working closely with the land and with animals. All of these studies indicate that – even though farmers themselves may be unwilling to articulate matters in aesthetic terms – aesthetic discrimination and appreciation plays a significant role in both the practical skills exercised by farmers and in the decisions they make. Where fences are placed, how fields are ploughed, which cows are bought and how they are then tended, the style in which wheat is scythed – these are just some of the many examples where what one author calls an
‘aesthetics of the hand’, as well as of the experienced eye, informs and shapes farming practices (Winkler 2005: 3. See also Bonsdorff 2008 and Grasseni 2004.)

This expert ‘professional sensitivity’ is related to a more general respect in which farmers’ aesthetic awareness impacts on their practice. It is no accident – but something explicable in evolutionary terms – that human beings enjoy the clean, the orderly, the tidy and related qualities of their home and working environments. Other things being equal, farms and gardens that are clean, orderly and tidy are more efficient and productive. The good farmer, therefore, has an eye for such qualities: they matter to him or her and are to be valued. A farming community in which dirt, chaos, and messiness were a matter of indifference would surely be a failed one.

If aesthetic perception or sensitivity is integral, as just suggested, to farming practices, it also contributes – as other recent studies show – to the well-being of farmers, and hence to the efficiency and good management of their farms. While farmers may be reluctant to speak the language of aesthetics, it is clear that the beauty of their farms, of their produce, of their animals, gives great emotional satisfaction to many of them. This was recognized by Martin Wickramasinghe, for one. Refuting the suggestion that ‘the peasant cannot perceive the beauty of the things he handles’, the novelist describes how – watching the paddy seedlings sprout, the maturing plants sway in the wind, and the ears that finally crown the plants – the peasant ‘experiences a deeper and more intimate pleasure than the complex aesthetic enjoyment which books provide for the erudite’ (Wickramasinghe 1964: 79).

The point Wickramasinghe makes here is confirmed by a 2008 report on Family Business Gardens in Sri Lanka by the Director of Agriculture for the Western Province. The report refers, for instance, to the gardeners’ ‘mental satisfaction’ and ‘mental fitness’ that are promoted by the creation of a ‘charming’ and ‘elegant’, as well as economically viable, environment. The report indicates, as well, another important dimension of human well-being promoted by work in Family Business Gardens – ‘the dignity of farming’ (Ranasinghe 2008: 4). What the English novelist, D.H. Lawrence, wrote with reference to the coal mining industry – that its great crime was to condemn workers to ugliness – is also true of some sectors of the agricultural industry (Quoted in Speed 2008: 30). Think, for instance, of those migrant Mexican day labourers in California, condemned to the monotonous ugliness of gigantic tomato packing factories between which they shuttle. (See McMichael 2000.) The human soul, Lawrence said, needs beauty as much as bread: and that is because, without it, men and women are without pride and a sense of dignity in their work. It is in the context of this kind of thought that one recognises the importance of charm, elegance and beauty in enterprises like the Family Business Garden. ‘A clean and beautiful environment’, it is worth noting in this connection, is the very first of ‘Basic Needs’ of villages identified by the Sarvodaya Shramadana organization.

It is, I suggested, no accident that people have an aesthetic preference for such functionally useful qualities as cleanliness and tidiness. And it is no accident either – since, once again, an explanation in evolutionary terms is available – that by and large our aesthetic preferences are ‘eco-friendly’. At the very least, to cite a FAO(UN) Paper (‘Preserving agriculture landscape’), there are ‘important synergies’ between ‘landscape aesthetics’ and ‘the provision of wild biodiversity’. Generally, for example, people prefer the spectacle of varied landscapes – of a mosaic of fields growing different crops, say – to that of ‘blandscapes’, endless hectares on which a single crop, like maize, is monotonously grown. If, therefore, good farming is to be ecologically responsible – to contribute positively to bio-
diversity – then it is in harmony with most people’s aesthetic sensibilities. So-called ‘forest gardens’, for instance, are not only environmentally beneficial, but pleasant to move around in, smell, listen to, and look at. Or to take another small, but telling, example: the Tamil author, C. Suriyakumaran, recalls how, in the Jaffna small-holdings of his youth, practices that were inspired at least in part by aesthetic concerns – for tidiness and picturesqueness – represented ‘an acme of “environmental resources management” long before our new fangled slogan mongers came in’ (2002: 17).

The final impact of the aesthetic upon farming practices is an obvious and increasingly significant one. In many European countries, a combination of overproduction in some agricultural sectors, concern for food security, and political reluctance to see farmers go out of business has put pressure on finding new roles for farmers to play. They have had to ‘diversify’. Among these roles - ones supported both by governments and environmental pressure groups – are those of ‘stewardship’ of the natural environment and the management of ‘agro-’ and ‘eco-tourism’. In Italy, for instance, working ‘farmhouse holidays’ have become an extremely popular form of vacation. The relevance of aesthetic concerns to these new roles hardly needs pointing out. If farmers spoil the beauty of natural landscapes, they fail in their role as ‘stewards’; and if their farms are ugly or are out of harmony with the surrounding natural environment, they will fail as managers of a viable ‘agro-tourism’. The emergence of these new roles for the agricultural sector is not confined, of course, to Europe. In Sri Lanka, where the revival of tourism is a political and economic priority, one would expect a significant expansion of eco- and agro-tourism – a multiplication of places, not so far from where we now are, like ‘Mirissa Hills’, a cinnamon plantation with bungalows to rent, and ‘Samakanda’, a former tea plantation and now a forest garden where people come to stay and study. (The National Symposium dinner, I notice, is to be held at a local ‘eco-hotel’.)

Here, then, are several of the ways in which aesthetic concerns can and do or should impact upon farming practices. They range from the place of aesthetic experience in the work of farmers to the contribution of this experience to their well-being and self-esteem; and from the relevance of aesthetic preferences both to functional efficiency and bio-diversity to the obvious importance of aesthetic considerations in a diversified agriculture where new roles and responsibilities, like ‘stewardship’ and tourism management, are emerging.

III

The more or less salient impacts of aesthetic concerns on farming practices, which I have chronicled, do not exhaust the relationship between aesthetics and agriculture. And in this section I want to explore a further dimension – a more ‘spiritual’ one, perhaps – of this relationship. In order to do so, it is useful to recall something mentioned earlier, but not at that stage pursued: the accusation that aesthetic taste tends to be highly conservative and, for that reason, can be an obstacle in the way of technological innovation in agriculture.

The first thing to say is that accusations of conservatism can easily be exaggerated. While people’s aesthetic preferences can be slow to change, change they often do. Think of how new and ‘difficult’ forms of beauty in painting and music have come to be appreciated over the last century. The appreciation of natural landscape can also change. Famously, most Europeans up until the eighteenth century found nothing to admire in the spectacle of mountains. Now they flock to see or climb them. Or consider the moving passages in
Leonard Woolf’s autobiography where he describes how, during his years in the Ceylon Civil Service, he came to appreciate and love the almost ‘featureless’, ‘austere’, ‘immobile’ and ‘melancholic’ beauty of the arid landscapes in the north-west and south-east of Sri Lanka – a beauty very different from that of the English countryside (1975: 27, 34, 78).

The second thing to say, however, is that in comparison to art and nature appreciation, people’s appreciation of ‘cultural landscapes’, farms and farmland included, does appear to be relatively static and ‘traditional’. Despite the occasional attempt, like Allen Carlson’s (2000: Ch. 12), to whip up aesthetic enthusiasm for agro-industrial ‘monosclapes’, most people resolutely prefer the spectacle of more agrarian, pastoral farmland and the traditional style of buildings – red barns in the USA, for example, or thatched cottages in England – that go with them. I suspect that in Sri Lanka, too, there is a traditional ideal of farm and farmland beauty, one realized perhaps in the places that figure in Wickramasinghe’s novels or in those bright, picturesque Jaffna small-holdings written of by Suriyakumaran.

My third remark is that while, no doubt, nostalgia, romance, and Arcadian myths of a ‘golden age’ play a part in explaining the persistence of these traditional preferences, this is not the whole story. For this appreciation of traditional family farms reflects, I suggest, an admiration for the way of life of those who work, or once worked, on them. It reflects, indeed, a sense of the beauty of that way of life – a beauty missing from the lives of those who work in the industrialised agro-business, in tomato packing factories, or in CAFOs (Central Animal Feeding Operations – animal factories, in effect). Someone will say that this remains over-romantic and starry-eyed, for surely traditional family farms have often been, and remain, places of hardship and suffering. But it is perfectly possible for someone to combine a realistic recognition of the hardship and pain which is an inevitable component in a way of human life with a perception of the beauty of this way. An idea of beauty that excludes the possibility of sadness and suffering is a thin one.

There are at least three aspects of traditional family farming at its best which invite a perception of its beauty. First, it is a way of working life that brings both family and community together. It is not simply that such work requires more than one person: the point, rather, is that it reflects and creates a unity – of effort, hope, and purpose – among men and women who enter intimately into one another’s lives. The need for such unity explains, of course, the essential place of the rituals and festivals that traditionally punctuated the farming year – events to celebrate planting, harvesting and so on, by bringing people together and affirming their common purpose. Second – something already touched on when talking about ‘skilled vision’ and an ‘aesthetics of the hand’ – there is the beauty, grace, poise and athleticism of much of the work performed in traditional ways of farming. Ploughing, making wattle fences, peeling cinnamon, pruning – these are exercises neither of brute strength nor of mechanical expertise. They are closer to exercises in craftsmanship, and the practices of craftsmen, we know, can be as rewarding to watch as the objects that they produce. Here, for example, is a description of a French peasant scything wheat by a novelist who spent his life in a farming village:

It was really something beautiful … His scythe never wavered, never twice in the same rhythm … [his] muscles were all constantly in full play … each time the necessary gestures came exact and perfectly timed … for the wheat to be cut off at the ground. It was a joy to watch. Everybody watched. And when they too begin to mow, following the steps and movements of the first man, it was as if ‘there was a single mower’. An old man observing their work reflects that it is ‘too
beautiful’, this doing of something ‘for pleasure, for joy, for the sake of doing it well’ (Giono 1999: 413).

The third aspect of traditional farming that invites a perception of beauty concerns the relationship it represents between human beings and nature. Here there is again a risk of sentimentality and misplaced nostalgia, of utopian images of peasants’ ‘oneness with nature’. Yet it is surely true that traditional farming practices display a more ‘harmonious dialectical relationship’ (Brady 2006) with natural things – with animals, plants, trees – than do the processes of industrialised agriculture. The family farmer, for example, has to care for and take account of the good of his animals if they, and his business, are to flourish. In the terrible world of factory and battery farms, however, the good of the animals is entirely overridden by technological and economic imperatives. On the traditional farm, as in the garden, the good of living things is inseparable from that of the people who live and work there.

This is a suitable point to return to the remark of Karl Marx’s that inspires the title of this talk. I postponed, if you recall, explaining precisely what he meant by ‘fashioning things according to the laws of beauty’. Well, what he meant is closely related to the point just made about the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Here is the longer passage in which his remark occurs:

The animal only fashions things according to the standards and needs of the species it belongs to, whereas man knows how to produce according to the measure of every species and knows everywhere how to apply its inherent standard to the object: thus man also fashions things according to the laws of beauty (op.cit.)

Human beings, he is saying, not only know what is good for them, but what is good for other species. Men and women, therefore, act well – act beautifully – only when they take into account the integrity and flourishing of the animals, plants, and places with which they engage. Ugly work – the kind we witness in factory farms - is work that imposes purely human standards, that takes into account nothing but human needs, and whose relationship to other species is warped. (See Speed 2008: 120f.) The good farmer – one who produces ‘according to the laws of beauty’ – is one who respects the ‘inherent standards’ of living beings. (I have cited Marx but, on this point, I could as well have cited the many remarks of Lord Buddha that attest to the consideration human beings must have for all living beings.)

IV

Most of you listening to this talk are agriculturalists, professionally concerned therefore with one of humankind’s great practical enterprises. In this final section of my talk, I want briefly to indicate the relevance of my remarks to some current policy issues in agriculture.

A debate in some countries concerns the level of public support, if any, that should be given to mainly urban kitchen gardens, like the Colombo Family Business Gardens I mentioned earlier. No doubt there are plenty of economic and ecological reasons that could be cited in favour of such support. After all, in some major cities, such as Havana, as much as 50% of the produce consumed is grown in urban gardens. But if we are to follow Schumacher’s advice, and consider ‘the beauty of habitat’, as well as income, costs and health when assessing ‘agricultural operations’, then there is surely also an aesthetic case for urban gardens. It is not simply that, as one community gardener in New York puts it, ‘our
gardens are an oasis of beauty in the deserts of urban decay’ (in Pretty 2002: 186) – a partial antidote, therefore, to what Prince Charles has called ‘degraded and dysfunctional conurbations of unmentionable awfulness’. In addition, we saw earlier, the making of urban gardens that are beautiful as well as productive contributes significantly to the well-being of those who make and work in them – to their happiness and to their sense of worth.

It is hard to mention Prince Charles without mentioning organic farming, of which he is a leading practitioner and champion in the UK. This is a sector of agriculture which, I understand, is still a small in Sri Lanka, with only 0.65% of cultivated land devoted to it. However, one might expect a momentum in favour of organic methods to gather pace in the future, as it has done in Europe. I have neither the time nor expertise to enter into the general pros and cons of organic farming, but some of my earlier remarks suggest sympathy with its ideals. For the early pioneers of the organic, like Sir Albert Howard, the aim was never solely that of dispensing with chemicals: the ideal was a wider, more ‘spiritual’ one of a right relationship to nature with which, they felt, the use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers and so on was incompatible. Well, if I am right – and if Marx was right – in recognizing a beauty in fashioning and producing in ways that honour the integrity of nature, of species of living things, then organic farming is, from an aesthetic point of view, at least, a practice to endorse. It is difficult, surely, to imagine the manager of an industrial farm speaking with any conviction, as one organic farmer does, of ‘the sheer ecstasy of life’ that is the ‘greatest asset’ of his farm, and of ‘the whole synergistic ballet of chickens and cows, and pigs and grass’ that takes place on the farm (Pollan 2006: 225).

Finally, I return to the matter, of ‘agro-tourism’. Earlier, I cited this as a clear-cut case of the relevance of aesthetic concerns to agriculture: if farmers want to attract tourists to their land, then they must ensure that it looks and smells good. So it might seem that aesthetic concerns speak directly in favour of agro-tourism. But the issue is, in fact, a complex one, and it is possible to feel ambivalent, from an aesthetic perspective, about agro-tourism. Given the conservative character of people’s taste in cultural landscapes – their preference for pretty cottages and the like – there is the danger that the farms which succeed in attracting tourists and ‘farmhouse holiday-makers’ will be fake, sanitised versions of real farms. It won’t be an authentic, living farm that they come to enjoy, but a fictional replica. The farmers themselves will no longer be farmers so much as people who are playing the role of farmers in some theatre production. (See Benson 2008: 154f.) The beauty of farms, farming, and of farming life of which I spoke above is a beauty embedded in real working relationships between human beings, animals, and the land. And the danger is that, in the search to attract agro-tourists, those real relationships will be eroded. When Marx wrote of fashioning according to the laws of beauty, he was certainly not thinking of the prettification or decoration of farmhouses and fields, but of a relationship to nature that respected the integrity of living beings. I am sure that some people engaged in promoting eco- and agro-tourism share Marx’s view. Others, one fears, may not. And for this reason, the aesthetics of agriculture provides no blanket endorsement of agro-tourism.

I do not know if I have persuaded you that aesthetic concerns deserve a serious hearing in discussions of agricultural policy, or that it deserves a place on the curriculum of agricultural studies. But I hope that my remarks may encourage reflection on how farming according to the laws of beauty is a dimension of farming that is worth attending to.
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References


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