

Lecture #9: Improving Nature

Suggested Readings:

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 1962.

R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, 1994.

Steven Stoll, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2002.

Richard Wines, *Fertilizer in America: From Waste Recycling to Resource Exploitation*, 1985.

Outline:

I. Domesticating the Sublime: Towards the Middle Landscape

several tactics in response to emerging tension between society and sublime landscape

1) embrace wilderness without human presence: nostalgic recollection of vanishing world:

Frederic Church's *Twilight in Wilderness*, Albert Bierstadt's *Yosemite*

domestication of sublime: no longer terrifying, but suffused with mystical beauty

also: new version of sublime that emerges after mid-century: not the romantic sublime of the peaks, but the mystical,

Transcendental sublime of Emerson's "transparent eyeball"

Luminism: ocean shores, wetlands, pastures suffused with light as icons of new sublime:

classic composition, horizontal planes, minimize brush stroke and artist's ego, stillness and quietness as

icons for mystical sublime (cf Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*?)

Representative painters: Fitz Hugh Lane, Martin Johnson Heade, John Frederick Kensett

divine light is everywhere that we can perceive it, not solely on the mountaintops: if artist stands ready to see its

presence in landscape, sublime found even in pastures

2) alternatively, embrace progressive change of landscape, Nature's Nation could build itself within landscape without destroying older virtues (Asher Durand's "Progress")

wilderness goes into nostalgic retreat, with sublime no longer present in romantic form; icons of vanishing frontier in wilderness ax, decaying canoe, expanding pastoral

efforts to incorporate icons of industry into pastoral landscape. George Inness's *The Lackawanna Valley*, c. 1855

most famous; Inness's visual sensibility much more modern: landscape in which people and nature in

harmony, romantic sublime retreating

Frederick Edwin Church's *Olana*: estate reshapes landscape to match romantic expectations

the middle landscape: nature had lost its wildness, but gained pastoral beauty

II. Progressive Agriculture

von Thunen rings: countryside becomes rural hinterland, shifts character of farm life

19th c fascination with improvement, progress of knowledge leading to better agriculture

European critiques of colonial ag: wasteful, and by late 18th c, American "progressive farmers" shared criticism,

seeking to improve efficiency with new techniques

Jared Eliot, *Essays Upon Field Husbandry*, 1748-59: drainage, manure, rotation

progressive farmers well-to-do, usually with ready access to market, capital to invest

Arthur Young (1741-1820) chief English promoter of new ag techniques: *The Farmer's Calendar* as model for

American books, more scientific than almanacs, efforts to reschedule agricultural year. Bernard M'Mahon's

American Gardener's Calendar, 1806.

(agriculture = crops & livestock, farm; horticulture = fruits, veggies, flowers, garden)

vehicles for improvement: state & local ag societies, fairs to share info, new breeds

agricultural journals as clearinghouses for farmers to exchange new scientific knowledge

Solon Robinson (1803-1880), promoted national ag society, eventual USDA; Jesse Buel (1778-1839), founded *The*

Cultivator, 1838, wrote guides, promoted ag schools; Peter Henderson, *Gardening for Profit*, 1866, as guide

for market gardeners

III. Selling Improvements: Soil, Guano, Bugs, and Seeds

note that many progressive techniques entailed capital investments, bringing more and more of agricultural production process within purview of market

potential class conflict of "progressive" vs "non-progressive" farmers, farmers vulnerable to debt, price shifts,

business cycle: ag protests 1870s, 90s: Grange, Populism

new capital inputs and progressive techniques: fertilizer (seaweed, bones, night soil, rock phosphate, South

American guano); drainage; natural and chemical insect controls

crop shifts: rise of new vegetable crops 1st near cities (leafy veggies, tomatoes, fruits, etc.), eventual addition to rural

garden root, bean, squash crops (storage, transport)

improvement of varieties applied to most fruits and vegetables, especially with rise of seed industry creating market

in new crops: cf. strawberry, not widely grown in 1800, dramatically improved by artificial breeding by C. M.

Hovey, 1838: the Hovey

flower gardening another aspect of rise of seed industry, gender-defined as feminine

sum: romantic embrace of sublime original nature as icon of American nationalism; regret about loss of wild coupled

with enthusiastic embrace of "improvement" in the progress of rural landscape and agricultural economy:

pastoral as landscape of American ambivalence