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A POET, A PLANTER, AND A NATION OF FARMERS

Richard Lyman Bushman

For the past few days in Harpers Ferry we have been inventing and reinventing American nationalism in a marvelous variegation of scholarly papers. We have heard about nationalism and travel, nationalism and antislavery women, nationalism and male identity—and southern artisans, and black nationalists, and even luxury hotels. Although we try to put ironic distance between ourselves and the more egregious forms of nationalism, the papers seem to share the popular fascination with American identity. We cannot resist staring into history and asking who we are as a nation, how did we come to be so wonderful, and why have we failed so miserably.

As my own contribution to the convention festivities, I want to offer a few comments on national society in the United States. By national society I mean the construction of social types suitable for life under a republican political regime, the foundation of our national identity. The republican state was created in a stroke at the Revolution, but that was only the beginning of nation formation. Thereafter, American cultural workers had to conceive of a republican society to go with republican government. Writers and intellectuals accomplished this feat of the imagination partly by making sweeping statements about the nation, but more specifically by dressing individual social types in a republican guise. Everyday lives had to be reconceived as exemplifications of republican values. Hence, the famous republican mothers, and the less famous republican children, republican wives, republican merchants, republican artisans and laborers, all were represented in public discourse in their relation to national values.

Often the discourse on national social types began in controversy. People fought over these new social identities, because they implied norms of personal behavior, standards for government policy, and degrees of

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social power. Especially after republican language entered into actual conflicts in American society—between workers and employers, for example, or common people and bankers—the imagining of republican selves sparked debate.

In this war of words, however, one group rose above the fray: farmers. The single most common social type in American society escaped controversy, so it seemed. Since farmers were known to be ideal republican citizens by nature, they required no definition. They enjoyed the most important condition of a republican life—the independence which enabled them to rise in defense of their rights when the dependents in society cowered before power. As James Madison put it:

The class of citizens who provide at once their own food and their own raiment, may be viewed as the most truly independent and happy. They are more; they are the best basis of public liberty and the strongest bulwark of public safety. It follows, that the greater the proportion of this class to the whole society, the more free, the more independent, and the more happy must be the society itself.¹

Since eighty percent of the American work force in 1790 consisted of people who worked the land, an actual society of freehold farmers and the need for independent citizens under republican government seemed to have miraculously converged on American soil.

Or so it has appeared looking back. But when we look more closely at the writings on farmers in the early republic, the miraculous correspondence of society and government vanishes. Instead of farmers calmly assuming their rightful place at the center of the imagined republican society, the literature on farmers is filled with pushing and shoving. Writers had trouble imagining a nation of farmers. Many different farm types came to life in the literature on rural society, some of them mutually contradictory: the poet Timothy Dwight of Connecticut, and the planter John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia, disagreed as much about farmer identity as people writing about workers and merchants. Moreover, descriptions of farm society are riddled with tensions. Even within representations by a single author, rural life did not unfold peacefully in republican simplicity. Writers more often depicted farmers under assault. Rather than being a happy homeland for republican society, farms stood as a bulwark against the republic's enemies. Judging from Dwight and Taylor,

¹ *National Gazette*, Sept. 5, 1792, in Marvin Myers, ed., *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison* (Indianapolis, 1973), 241-42.

the farm was more notable for its capacity to withstand dangers and threats. The power of the farm icon in American culture cannot be accounted for by the natural fit of farmers and republicanism. Republican farmers had to be invented and reinvented like everyone else in national society.

One reason for the disagreements among the writers on farming was their loyalty to the farm systems of their particular locales. The rural life they wished to preserve was the one they had known from their childhoods. That is why I have chosen a northern and a southern writer for my examples of rural representations. Dwight offered a New England version of republican farmers, and Taylor was a southern agrarian.

One could scarcely expect anything but a New England version of the American farmer in *Greenfield Hill*, Dwight's long poem—181 pages divided into 7 parts—celebrating rural life in his Connecticut parish.² He was a Connecticut Valley blue blood, a descendant of Solomon Stoddard and Jonathan Edwards, son of a Northampton merchant, and a Yale graduate. The year he published *Greenfield Hill*, 1794, he assumed the presidency of Yale and became the dominant intellectual presence in the Connecticut Valley for two decades.³

So while the poem may seem on first reading like a variation of Jefferson's republican farmer, it is imbued with England's values. True, *Greenfield Hill* is a hymn of praise to rural life in the Jeffersonian spirit. As Dwight wrote, "who can boast such scenes, as here inchant the lingering eye?" (I:422-23). In fact, I initially chose Dwight for study thinking that he offered a singularly clear expression of Jeffersonian agrarianism. He seems to have believed that life in a farm village approached perfection: "Fair Verna! loveliest village of the west; of every joy, and every charm, possess'd" (II:1-2).

But examined more closely, Dwight's villagers are not Jefferson's farmer-citizens at all. Both Jefferson and Madison prized farmers for their independence in voting and defending popular rights. Never in *Greenfield Hill*'s thousands of lines do Dwight's farmers demonstrate political independence. In fact, politics are nearly absent from the poem. Dwight's farmers never vote, never defend a right, never discuss a political issue. The only politician in *Greenfield Hill* is an ambitious father who rises in

² *Greenfield Hill* is reprinted in William J. McTaggart and William K. Bottorff, eds., *The Major Poems of Timothy Dwight (1752-1817), with a Dissertation on the History, Eloquence, and Poetry of the Bible* (Gainesville, 1969). Although I take a different tack, I am indebted to the perceptive analysis in William C. Dowling, *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens, GA, 1990), chap. 3.

³ The best biography of Dwight is Kenneth Silverman, *Timothy Dwight* (New York, 1969).

the government from townsman to justice and as a result neglects his son. Allowed to grow willful, self-indulgent, and vain, the heir squanders his father's property and dies a gambler and a sot. The moral: the ambitious politician mistakenly gave up the better part, the domestic sphere, for the lesser, politics—hardly a Jeffersonian sentiment.⁴

Perhaps Dwight omitted politics from *Greenfield Hill* because the year he began writing, 1787, was not one to recommend farmer involvement in politics to a Federalist. The farmers who followed Daniel Shays in protesting high taxes and a shortage of money did not conform to Dwight's image of peaceful villagers, happily going about their business. Against the background of Shays's Rebellion, farmer politics meant trouble in New England, and Dwight stripped that role from his Greenfield parishioners with the result that his farmers are surely not Jefferson's.

Dwight's farmers depart from Jefferson's in another respect. They care nothing about agricultural improvement and production for the market. Jefferson's agricultural correspondence goes on and on about better breeds, crop rotation, and the best fencing.⁵ As a commercial farmer himself, supervising wheat production on a large plantation worked by his slaves, Jefferson experimented continuously with better methods of increasing production. Dwight's farmers say almost nothing about the economic order and agricultural improvement. A reader gets little sense of how farmers produced food and clothing or how they exchanged the fruits of their labor. Although his farmers toil in healthful labor to provide for their families, they show none of the improving spirit found in the agricultural reform literature of the period. The poem's fictional farmer who advises his fellows about running a farm says almost nothing about fertilizers, superior breeds, or crop rotation. The only advice along these lines is a recommendation to cultivate small plots rather than extensive acreage.⁶

Profits and markets are virtually never mentioned. One passing reference to marketing mentions rivers that "bear the sails of commerce through the laughing groves" (I:133-34). Another speaks of a swain who carried his produce down to the sea and "oer his rich returns exulting laugh'ed" (II:35). In Dwight's world, commerce seems to be a laughing matter. Indeed he advises his readers to stay away from the stores where "shelves, o'er shelves, inviting stand, and wares allure, on either hand" (V:267-68), and so avoid the burdens of debt that inevitably follow.

⁴ McTaggart, *The Major Poems of Timothy Dwight*, 499-500.

⁵ For a sample of Jefferson's correspondence, see United States Bureau of Agriculture Economics, *Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Agriculture* (Washington, DC, 1937).

⁶ McTaggart, *Major Poems of Timothy Dwight*, 485.

Instead of wealth, Dwight offers his readers “Competence” as the ideal of economic life, that condition of self-sufficiency that allowed the freehold farmer to provide for himself and his family with no concern for profits. To strive for anything more would carry a farmer over into pride, and “O Competence, thou bless’d by Heaven’s decree, How well exchang’d is empty pride for thee!” (II:91-92). Competence is not just a goal but a limit. By not urging farmers to better themselves, Dwight redefines the social meaning of competence. Poor farmers had long striven for competence as the fulfillment of their desires; in *Greenfield Hill*, competence defines the upper boundary of economic ambition. Dwight uses competence to cap economic growth. He does not foresee increasing wealth through improved farm methods and production for the market—the object of effort in a capitalist order. He foregoes the standard bourgeois narratives of increasing prosperity. The economic principle of competence freezes Dwight’s parish in one moment of rural development. He wants to halt Greenfield at its present state of perfection, that is, to fix the village and by extrapolation the nation, in a middle landscape.

Dwight’s villagers then, in contrast to Jefferson’s farmers, are neither republican citizens nor rational producers. Dwight envisions farmers of another sort. His farmers are primarily moral beings. He values rural life for its good cheer, its peace, and harmonious social relations. His farmers are kind, content, and cheerful. Greenfield is not a site for producing rural wealth or breeding independent citizens; it is a happy moral order where virtue reigns—not the civic humanist virtue of participation in the polis, but the simple religious virtues of kindness and good feeling. The village church reigns over the town architecturally, and people receive counsel from their minister. In the happy rounds of ordinary life, Dwight’s Greenfield parishioners have realized a Christian utopia. “Thrice bless’d the life, in this glad region spent, In peace, in competence, and still content” (II:635).

Life is so perfect that Greenfield became in Dwight’s eyes “th’ example bright, to renovate mankind” (II:708). He pictured Connecticut’s sons spreading Greenfield’s social order westward to the Pacific, pacifying the savage Indians as they went, and then leaping the ocean to awaken China to the happiness of Greenfield’s rural life. In a millennial climax, Connecticut would ultimately conquer the world and “the sacred promise full completion know, and peace, and piety, the world o’erflow” (II:743-44)—not as free and independent citizens, not as energetic producers, but as peaceful and devout farmers.

In presenting this non-Jeffersonian farm society, Dwight’s poetry sometimes drowns the reader in its stifling complacency. With the stress of politics and the dynamism of improving agriculture out of the picture,

many passages sound as if Greenfield has reached perfection with nothing higher to strive for and nothing dark or degenerate to expel. But on closer reading, the opposite proves true. Dwight was anything but complacent about Greenfield's perfections. The village is not settled on a rock solid foundation of competence and piety; it balances precariously on its own unstable virtues. The power of the imagined rural society lies not in its stability but in its resistance to danger and opposition. Dwight's celebration of rural virtue is less a hymn of praise than a defense against his terrors. Farm ideals flourished in the American imagination, despite contradictions and ambivalences, precisely because rural life was ensnarled in a web of conflicting tensions.

Dwight's fears do not appear on every page. They break through the sunny exterior of the poem only intermittently. He worries, for example, about the classic threats of indolence and self-indulgence. The village schoolmaster warns his charges of the miseries suffered in "the house of Sloth" where broken down fences surrounded fields of briars, crowding out starved potatoes. Everything there is broken, crumbling, gaunt, while the lazy farmer snored in a hammock heedless of his hungry children and sad wife.⁷ Dwight's descriptions of a desperate spouse, and "little boys, half-naked from the waist" (II:437), of broken window panes and crumbling walls makes clear that he knew dissolute farmers, hapless men leading dreary and degraded lives. These lazy men cast a shadow on the poem's sunny passages; Dwight knows the happy moral order will collapse if farmers ever stop working.

More distressing still is the tale of the politician's sons who are left to their mother's care while her ambitious husband pursues his political career. She struggles to discipline them, but they defeat her and celebrate their victory by running rampant. "Rejoicing, see their father roam, and riot, rake, and reign, at home" (II:639-40). Moved only by pleasure, one of the heirs "whirls on a wild career of sense," borrows money on his father's estate, loses all. With everything gone, "to dirtiest company he flies, whores, gambles, turns a sot, and dies" (II:651, 663-64). This fate befalls him because his father let the boy slip out of his control. The story implies that without discipline willful children will go to wrack and ruin. Unconstrained, they yield to pleasure and sacrifice all for a "wild career of sense." That being true, it followed that Greenfield's happy moral order was only held in place by strict regulation. Freehold land did not in itself produce a happy society. Released from the governance of minister,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 409-10.

schoolmaster, and a wise older generation, people would degenerate and the social order decay. To persist, Greenfield had to be regulated.

Besides the threats of natural depravity, forbidding societies in the world around Greenfield assaulted the village. Judging from events inside the poem, Dwight felt pressure from rival societies where oppression and force reigned. Without warning, dark images erupt into the verse, images of cruel societies that distant though they were, apparently existed next door in his imagination. A few lines after lauding the village where "Kind Hospitality attends the door, To welcome in the stranger and the poor" (II:111-12), there bursts into the poem a long discourse on the merciless exploitation of the poor in the European countryside: "Ah, yonder turn thy wealth-inchanted eyes," he admonishes Europe's haughty lords, "Where that poor, friendless wretch expiring lies! Hear his sad partner shriek, beside his bed, And call down curses on her landlord's head" (II:129-32). There follows an attack on the injustices of English exploitation worthy of the most vitriolic English radical: "See the pale tradesman toil, the livelong day, To deck imperious lords, who never pay!" (II:135-36), or "See half a realm one tyrant scarce sustain, While meagre thousands round him glean the plain!" (II:141-42).

And England's aristocratic society is not the only threat to Dwight's happy moral order. Not many pages later, a still more chilling image breaks into the verse. Only a few lines after praising the sweet blend of gentle minds in Greenfield, Dwight abruptly turns to the plight of the poor blacks in Connecticut, who actually labored in some numbers along Long Island Sound where Greenfield stood. Dwight tries to mitigate the injustice of Connecticut slavery by assuring his readers of their kind treatment. Connecticut slaves do not drag galling chains about or receive brands on face or hand.⁸ Yet he cannot deny their lack of liberty and their "fix'd submission to another's will" (II:214). The Connecticut slave child is blind to his misery at first, but "soon he sees himself to slavery born; Soon meets the voice of power, the eye of scorn," and realizes he is "condition'd as a brute, tho' formed a man" (II:224-28).

Then leaping abruptly to West Indian slavery, Dwight presents a catalog of inhuman tortures that he claims to have found in actual reports: slaves thrust into ovens, children's brains dashed out, captives forced to eat their own flesh as punishment for spilling gravy on a guest's coat.⁹ Dwight spares nothing in his description of cruelty and pain, leading him to say of all slavery—the humane Connecticut version and the base West Indian kind

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 405-06.

alike—"O thou chief curse, since curses here began; first guilt, first woe, first infamy of man" (II:253-54).

Having surveyed a realm of chains and blood, without transition Dwight suddenly returns to Greenfield and the New England sabbath: "Beside yon church, that beams a modest ray, with tidy neatness reputedly gay" (II:345-46), the villagers troop to meeting in neat attire. Though seemingly worlds apart, Greenfield and tortured West Indian slaves adjoined one another in Dwight's imagination. Along with Europe's exploitive landlords, slaves were Connecticut's immediate neighbors.

Greenfield was not then an unassailable preserve of New England farmers. The happy moral order Dwight constructed in his idealized parish was under assault from natural evils in every human heart and from antithetical regimes bordering Greenfield in his imagination. Indolence and self-indulgence could destroy his happy village from within and European landlords and West Indian slaveholders pressed against the borders of the village from without. Worst of all, slavery, the infernal curse, had a foothold in Connecticut. The village he so loved was troubled and endangered.

Greenfield Hill was written to protect the village against these dangers. His poetic picture of the parish erected a wall against misery, a fortress around what he loved most. The moral order of the rural village embodied his highest values as a cleric, intellectual, and New Englander. In line after line, he lauded Greenfield as the place of perfect happiness, the best he could imagine for millennial society. And yet the village was in jeopardy, caught in a network of tensions. The poetic Greenfield was meant to secure a homeland for the good society, a bulwark against evil. In this power to defend New England's happy moral order and to repel the terrors that erupted in Dwight's imagination lay the farm's fascination and its strength.

John Taylor of Caroline County was as much a man of Virginia as Timothy Dwight was a son of Connecticut. Reared by Edmund Pendleton after Taylor's father died, he attended the College of William and Mary, fought in the Revolution, practiced law, acquired land and slaves, and set himself up as a planter. Though gripped by politics and frequently serving in the state and national legislatures, he also was repelled by government. He resigned from office nearly as often as he was appointed, and at one point he resolved never to run again, retiring instead to his farm where he believed the important work of the world went on. Yet a few months

before he died in 1824 he was once more in the United States Senate speaking against the tariff.¹⁰

Taylor can be considered the preeminent philosopher-statesman of early southern agrarianism. Writing far more about farming than Jefferson, Taylor's influence on southern agrarian thinking probably was considerably greater than his fellow Virginian's. Taylor's *Arator* essays were wildly popular in the South. Many common farmers read them, and Edmund Ruffin took his inspiration from their pages. Taylor certainly equaled Jefferson in his love for farming, and the two were as one in believing that farmers were the only trustworthy foundation for national society. But when it came to the farmer's role in American society, Taylor like Dwight departed from Jefferson.

Taylor had little interest in the small freeholder, either as Jefferson's independent citizen, or as Dwight's virtuous villager. In the opening number of the *Arator* essays, Taylor underscored a sentence saying that "an order of men, earning a bare subsistence, in low circumstances, and whose inferior rank is wretched in the extreme" cannot possibly defend "the liberty and prosperity of a country."¹¹ In other words, the small farmer failed as both citizen and producer. The effective defenders of American liberty in his view were the slaveholding large planters, not men of inferior rank. What Dwight termed competence, Taylor called "bare subsistence," and he considered it entirely inadequate for effective republican citizenship. Taylor's was an agrarianism of wealth not equality, wealth of a magnitude that could only be acquired with slave labor.

How did Taylor arrive at this incongruous position, one that casts his republicanism in doubt? In actuality, he was every bit as orthodox as Jefferson, but in his own way. Jefferson placed his hopes for a republican society in small freeholding farmers; Dwight the Federalist did the same. Taylor's republicanism took a different turn. He disregarded the freehold farmer portion of republicanism and emphasized instead the republican diagnosis of corruption. Taylor's stress on the agricultural abundance of the plantation over the mere competence of small farmers grew out of a republican understanding of the ills of government.

His critique followed classical republican lines, going back to the attacks on Robert Walpole in the 1730s and reinforced by republican criticisms of Alexander Hamilton in the 1790s. The commercial-financial

¹⁰ Robert E. Shalhope, *John Taylor of Caroline: Pastoral Republican* (Columbia, SC, 1980).

¹¹ John Taylor, *Arator: Being a Series of Agricultural Essays, Practical and Political, in Sixty-Four Numbers*, ed. M.E. Bradford (Indianapolis, 1977), 66.

interests in the nation, in this "country party" view, conspired with the politicians to exact taxes from the hard-working segments of the population, taxes that went into the pockets of an insidious alliance of government officials, manufacturers, and bankers. American government in other words suffered from a classic case of corruption. The nation's capital interests, located primarily in the North, connived with legislators and government ministers to drain wealth from the people who had earned it through their labor, diverting funds from farmers, primarily in the South, to a parasitic class of officials and speculators. Paper currency, the bank, and bounties to manufacturers all benefited one class of citizens at the expense of another.¹²

Starting from this standard diagnosis, Taylor added a few twists and turns of his own and ended up with the necessity of agricultural abundance. He arrived at this conclusion because of his belief that the nation's capitalist interest was draining away people as well as wealth from the rural population. New members were being recruited from the once solid ranks of farmers. They were going over to the enemy to enjoy the easy money coming to the conspirators. Why work hard for a living when greater rewards with less effort came to the beneficiaries of government largesse?

The analysis turned on Taylor's understanding of human nature. Basically he believed that people did not like work. "The two strongest human propensities," he argued, are "a love of wealth, and a love of ease." People desired the greatest gains for the least effort. Why should a man labor on his farm for returns far below the profits of manufacturers and currency speculators who did little work? Seeing government bestow "more profit and ease upon paper capital or fraudulent credit, than he can derive from solid land and honest labour . . . if he is wise, he will prefer a share of profit and ease, to a share of loss and toil." Consequently, capital and men were "flying from the agricultural interest" to manufacturing and the "credit shops."¹³ Agriculture was sinking while the dealers in money and credit rose. Both wealth and wisdom migrated to the side of bigger government and corporate charters.

To stop this flow of capital and people, Taylor proposed to restore rural abundance. Virginia lands are failing, the British reformer William Strickland had announced after a tour of the Chesapeake, and Taylor accepted his observation as fact. They can be restored through proper manuring, he assured his readers, and by other improvements in farm management. Taylor believed the air was filled with manure that plants

¹² Taylor's political views are outlined in essays three through twelve of *Arator*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 111, 112, 113.

could capture and use to recharge the soil. He assured his readers “that by the use of vegetables, we may collect manure from the atmosphere, with a rapidity, and in an abundance, far exceeding that of which we have robbed the earth.” So restored, the earth “gives you plenty and happiness,” and “the returns not distant, but near; and the gain not small but great.”¹⁴

Taylor loved farming as much as Dwight loved the rural village. He was sure the earth would return plenty to its husbandmen if they were liberal with it. “Liberality to the earth in manuring and culture, is the fountain of its bounty to us.”¹⁵ Thus a properly worked farm would stanch the flow of capital and men into manufacturing and the credit shops. A tiny farm providing mere subsistence, one that required great exertion for little returns, would not serve; but one producing in abundance would. Abundant farms, if they could not reform government, at least could stop new recruits from joining the wicked conspiracy. Agricultural reform and political reform thus converged, each one aiding the other. The *Arator* essays are unique in farm improvement literature because they devote so much space to the “political state of agriculture,” but in Taylor’s mind these two converged. Oppressive government hurt the farmer more than pests or drought; on the other hand, good farming might slow the expansion of bad government.

In fact, everything fell into place when there was an abundance to dispense. The slave labor force worked more happily under a generous planter. “The farmer who starves his slaves, is a still greater sufferer. He loses the profits produced by health, strength and alacrity; and suffers the losses caused by disease, short life, weakness and dejection.” Productive abundance enabled farmers to “feed the hungry, clothe the naked and give drink to the thirsty.” The “agricultural virtues” as Taylor called them were thus “passports to heaven.” Expert husbandry served the nation, stimulated the mind, and, as he admitted “can even feed a morbid love of money, whilst it is habituating us to the practice of virtue.”¹⁶

Thus Taylor, like Dwight, ended up with a happy moral order in the countryside as the final end of his desires. Rather than a Jeffersonian hive of busy citizens, he aimed for a land of peace and contentment based on abundant production. The repeated use of the word “liberality” to describe proper farming underscores his sense of the farm as the place of freedom, the happy realm where virtue thrived, the mind expanded, and benevolence prevailed.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 309, 314-15.

And like Dwight's village, Taylor's abundant plantation is under pressure from without. As opposed to the expansive freedom of the abundant plantation, law and force rule in the dominions of government. In the familiar enlightenment dichotomy, the farm was natural, the government artificial. In the realm of the natural, human effort flowed freely without compulsion, while artifice required an exercise of coercive power. Taylor's farm was a bulwark against an evil regime—in his case the dominions of federal power. He clung to the farms he so loved in order to withstand the agency he hated: corrupt government.

On the surface, Taylor's planters face only an external foe—the power of government. His plantations are not subject to sabotage from within by enemies such as indolence and self-indulgence, Dwight's nemeses. Yet there are hints of internal contradictions below the happy surface of the abundant farm. Taylor may have recognized that coercion and force, the detestable practices of government, also underlay the abundant farm. He may have seen that force governed plantation labor as much as it did the collection of taxes. At one point, Taylor theorizes that the best constituted societies cannot be cured of “a disposition to command, and to live by the labour of others; it [society] is eternally forming sub-societies for acquiring power and wealth, and to these perfidious, ambitious, avaricious or unconstitutional sub-societies, the liberty and property of the rest of the body politic has universally fallen prey.” In context, a reader cannot tell if the passage is meant to condemn the schemes of the money interest, or to explain the inevitable appearance of slavery. The passage appears in a chapter titled “Slavery” and one cannot be sure if he refers to planters enslaved by government or Africans enslaved by planters. The two are so conflated that in describing the crimes of government against farmers, Taylor might just as easily be indicting the domination of slaves by planters. Planters used slaves to gain ease with less labor exactly as manufacturers and bankers reaped profits through the coercive powers of government. Taylor even pleads with southern legislatures to enact more laws to hold the slaves in place, thus resorting to artificial coercion to support slavery.¹⁷ Taylor as good as admits that planters exercise force on the abundant farm in exact parallel to the coercions of the federal government over its farmer citizens. The devil lay within as well as without.

Taylor's happy plantation then existed in a field of contending forces, just like Dwight's rural village. Bad neighbors threatened both. Dwight's poetry was interrupted by images of European landlords and West Indian slavery. Taylor felt the power of government pressing down on farmers.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 119 (quotation), 357-58.

Both fought against internal enemies, Dwight against indolence and self-indulgence, Taylor, at least subconsciously, against his own desire to oppress and coerce. To withstand these enemies, Taylor pled with southern farmers to restore agricultural abundance and thus prevent the defection of capital and talent to subsidized manufactures and chartered corporations. He promised planters virtue, benevolence, and peace simply by replenishing the soil.

One can try to imagine a conversation between these two American agrarians, one happy with the competence of small farmers, the other seeking abundance on slave-worked plantations. What would they say to each other if they chanced to meet? Would they discuss indolence and force? Would their mutual love of farming draw them together? Or, would they argue bitterly, foreshadowing sectional conflict?

Strangely, on one occasion, the Connecticut poet and the southern planter did exchange views. In 1805, Taylor wrote to Yale about entering his son George in the college. In September, Dwight wrote back to advise against matriculation, in effect turning George down. Of the ten or twelve Virginians who had attended Yale, Dwight explained, only two finished the course. "The rest despised and hated our manners, morals, industry, and religion," he reported. "No part of our system or conduct was agreeable to them." They were more opposed the longer they stayed. Connecticut people hold the Christian Religion in high estimation, Dwight went on, while Virginia youths "despised it entirely." "The people of Connecticut are universally industrious; these youths considered industry as the business of slaves and wretches only." In short they hated everything about New England's happy moral order, its manners, its religions, its industry. The southerners would, Dwight concluded, "regard their New England companions as plodding drudges, destitute of talents as well as of property."¹⁸

Writing back with equal venom, Taylor defended the religion of Virginia's youth and attributed Dwight's charges to fanatic zeal. Virginia religion allowed differing religious sects to "mingle and worship in harmony," he insisted, in contrast to New Englanders who compelled belief, backing their religion with government force. Picking up on the word "slave" in Dwight's letter, Taylor retorted that "the system of hierarchy patronage," meaning government bounties and other corrupt practices, was "making slaves of freemen" in New England. The facts show that "this system of indirect slavery extorts from the laboring people

¹⁸ "'Tix Sixty Years Since'—the War on the South in 1805," *Richmond Examiner*, June 20, 1863, reprinted in *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, 32 (Oct. 1950), 83-84.

of England far greater profit than direct slavery has ever produced to Virginia or even West India masters," and New England operated on the same system. It was, in short, the realm of force that Taylor detested. Look at the "Boston nabobs" he demanded, who "expend in a single entertainment a year's income of a good Virginia farmer."¹⁹ In short, Taylor saw the system of government privilege which he despised enriching the Boston merchants and money men and impoverishing farmers everywhere in New England and Virginia.

The common love of farming did nothing to bridge the gap between these two hot-tempered men. They saw in each other's agricultural systems all the qualities they hated and feared. Dwight found indolence, irreligion, and self-indulgence in Virginia students; Taylor blamed the practice of government exploitation on the North. Dwight saw in the southern world of slaveholding planters the negative of everything he valued in his moral rural villages. Equally attached to the farm, the two men had headed in opposite directions. To achieve a happy, moral order, one hoped for abundance, the other relied on competence. One wanted ease, the other industry.

In one respect, the two came together. They used the farm to resolve the social and political tensions that most troubled them. They rested their hopes for peace, freedom, and well-being in their respective evocations of rural life. For both, the farm held dangers both external and internal in check; it was America's best hope. If the farm survived as the predominant social type in national society, it was not because it naturally fulfilled republican expectations for the ideal citizen; Jefferson's independent farmer-citizen does not figure in either Dwight or Taylor. The farmer prevailed as the archetypical American because he performed so much cultural work. He kept dangers and terrors at bay.

The differences between New England and Virginia scarcely mattered in 1805 when Dwight and Taylor corresponded. They could pursue their incompatible idealizations of farm life without repercussions so long as no more than George Taylor's admission to Yale was at stake. The exchange between the poet and the planter sounds like nothing more than the ill-tempered barbs of two irritable old men. However, if ever the abundant Virginia plantation threatened the extension of New England's happy moral order across the continent, or if villages of small freeholders stood in the way of wealth-producing plantations, that would be another matter. Then the poet, the planter, and their comrades would have something to fight about.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.