

## **Nature and Reason Harmonized in the Pursuit of Practical Husbandry:**

### **The Perspectives of Two Eras.**

by Conrad Vispo.

The book is stout but not fat, bound in scuffed and blotched leather like a well-travelled suitcase. Whoever made that binding, presumably at some point near its 1825 publication date, shortened its official title from *Nature and Reason Harmonized in the Pursuit of Practical Husbandry* to *Lorain's Practical Husbandry*. While befitting the enforced brevity of a book spine, that abbreviation lacks some of the original title's philosophical depth.

The book itself captures aspects of an era. John Lorain, its author, was born in Maryland in 1753 and died around 1823 as a farmer, merchant, postmaster and justice of the peace on the Pennsylvania frontier. His posthumous 563 page book rambles through many interesting fields, but in part it can be seen as an attempt to reconcile various realities of his times: the urgent practicality of farming on the frontier; the insights from a fast-diminishing natural world; the spirit of experimentation and observation that emerged from the Enlightenment; and the expanding ranks of agricultural pundits who were trying to elevate systematic (or scientific) farming, disparagingly sometimes referred to as 'book farming'.

In the context of an older, more vitalistic view of farming coming face-to-face with scientific farming, the 'nature' and 'reason' of Lorain's title can be seen as partial stand-ins for those forces. 'Nature' harkens to the idea of some larger, diffuse vital force that permeates life, including farming, while 'reason' represents the hard, observation-based eye of the researcher needing to know and document how things work. The unifying 'harmony' that Lorain alludes to might be what we today call ecology. In trying to assess the value of book farming for addressing particular agricultural situations, Lorain repeatedly asks, essentially, 'how would Nature do it?'. He does not, out of hand, dismiss all book farming (after all, he is writing a book on farming!), but rather tries to pull inquiry away from the detached agronomic particulars and towards learning from nature. It is not for nothing that Lorain has sometimes been heralded as far-sighted.

With notable exceptions, the rationalism foretold largely came to pass in mainstream agriculture during the later 19<sup>th</sup> and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, a study of pests and beneficials based largely on understanding the natural history of those creatures (and hence how best to intervene in order to encourage or discourage them) gave way to an entomology more focused on the details of pesticide application. Soils went from being near-mystic repositories of plant-nurturing forces to the physical matrix upon which the requisite nutrients could be applied. In the short-term, the triumph of these viewpoints produced levels of food production that Lorain could probably not have dreamt of. And yet it has also brought challenges – in terms of long-term sustainability or resilience and in terms of our impact on nature - that Lorain may not quite have fingered but that might not surprise him. Thankfully, there is now hearty discussion of many of these issues, and a diversity of farming philosophies, such as organic farming, permaculture and biodynamics, have explicitly laid out alternatives.

Nonetheless, if we were now to write a work entitled *Nature and Reason Harmonized in the Pursuit of Practical Husbandry*, aside from replacing the somewhat archaic term “husbandry” with “farming”, there would yet again be an important dichotomy we would seek to harmonize: that of holism and reduction. One of the strengths and weaknesses of much of the ‘reason’ that has developed since Lorain’s period is reductionism, the idea that one can dissect any aspect of the natural sciences into comprehensible, observable parts. This approach has empowered scientists to make important discoveries for, indeed, ‘fleas have toenails’; that is, natural phenomena do have smaller, observable parts, and those smaller parts are often relatively tractable for research. And yet as eminent ecologists such as Darwin, and Humboldt before him, were pointing out, those particles of nature are not the entire picture. One way in which reductionism might enter into our wider world views is in our tendency to compartmentalize, in our habit of seeing pieces before wholes.

Imagine, for a moment, a landscape with which you are familiar. Is it a patchwork or blanket? In other words, are its farms, its woodlots, and its lawns self-contained parcels or are they textures of a whole? As with Lorain’s characters of vitalism and science, reality encompasses both poles: for the most part, practicality and land ownership mean we manage our farms, our lawns and the like as discrete units; terms like ‘pastoral’ or ‘agrarian landscape’ conjure up Hudson River School tableaux, not practical management plans. And yet, I think it is in that conscious scaling up, together with approaches to visualize and act upon that larger understanding, that there is an important forefront in the future of agriculture. And again, as Lorain surmised, ecology is probably the connective matter.

Recall your landscape. It is awash in life from microbes to moose. Organisms ebb and flow across that landscape at the stoic speed of oaks or the frenetic pace of a bee. There is no doubt both that our compartments are real to them (for example, a killdeer will settle on farm or parking lot, not forest) and that, at the same time, the farm fence as boundary is a human construct. The coffee shop is part of our neighborhood, but it is not our entire neighborhood. As we begin imagining how our farming can best co-exist with wild nature, conserving it and benefitting from it, we have to work with nature’s neighborhood; we have to realize that, despite the practical inconveniences, life’s bounds are rarely exact duplicates of the ones we create. If our own work as researchers attempting to document the life of this county, on-farm and off, can contribute anything, we hope it is in illustrating this fact, we hope that it is in blurring the artificial lines we have overlaid on the landscape and then stepping back and asking an agroecological ‘so what now?’

Written on the first few pages of our scuffed and stout volume are the names of its earliest owners, a pedigree of sorts. The volume seems to have been purchased for a prominent Pennsylvania lawyer by his son. He then passed it along to a farmer friend. We will never know if the book resounded with his practical recipient. There is no underlining or marginalia highlighting important passages or opening a dialogue with the text. Perhaps our own researched words warrant no underlining by those working the land, but maybe, just as Lorain stressed the practical value of knowing nature’s little tricks, we can convince some of the practical value of knowing its larger patterns.