Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography (J-READING), 1, 5, June, 2016, pp. 47-56
DOI: 10.4458/6964-04

J - READING
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND DIDACTICS IN
GEOGRAPHY
homepage: www.j-reading.org

Agriculture and landscape. From cultivated fields to the wilderness, and back

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Received: November 2015 – Accepted: March 2016

Abstract

The paper focuses on the relationship between human culture and the agricultural landscape. First of all, it briefly reviews the evolution of the perception of the landscape, showing how the modern era has gradually bridged a gap between aesthetic values of the landscape and cultivated landscape, culminating in the romantic vision of the landscape whereby we are still "prisoners". The idea that the important and beautiful landscapes are "exceptional", on the one hand, and the prejudice in favor of the "wild" and "natural", on the other hand, still limit our perception of the agricultural landscape. However, nowadays some changes are taking place. On the one hand the recognition that all kinds of landscape - not just the "exceptional" one - deserve protection is growing; on the other hand, the cultivated land is increasingly perceived as a "rare commodity". The paper also stresses the role that agriculture exercises in favor of the landscape particularly in a country like Italy.

Keywords: Aesthetic Categories, Agriculture, *Locus Amoenus*, Nature

1. Introduction

The subject of the present essay is not the influence of agriculture on the lie of the land. A topic of this sort could hardly be discussed in general terms, especially by a scholar of philosophy. The landscape transformations brought about by agriculture, particularly in countries home to ancient civilisations such as European countries, are so extensive, wide-reaching and firmly entrenched that illustrating them requires painstaking investigation and in-depth competences. In Italy, moreover, as is shown by Emilio Sereni's still crucial book *Storia del paesaggio agrario italiano*, landscape and agriculture are a close-knit pair, given the extent to which agriculture has contributed to shaping, organising and transforming our landscape throughout the centuries.

The topic I will be exploring, then, is a narrower one, which concerns not the alterations made to the actual landscape but those which have taken place in our own attitude towards nature and the landscape.

I will outline a twofold movement which has occurred at two very different moments. I will

show how for a long time the kind of nature that was loved, perceived as agreeable, and hence appreciated within the landscape, was the nature developed by man, the object of agriculture or at any rate of human labour – in other words, the cultivated countryside.

2. The Love for Cultivated Landscape in Antiquity

Broadly speaking – and leaving aside certain antecedents which I will be considering – it was only over the course of the 18th century that wild, inhospitable and hostile nature came to be appreciated. Over the last two centuries, however, this idea of the wilderness has become the dominant paradigm for natural beauty as a whole. The kind of landscapes to be admired have been identified with those less affected by human intervention, for instance mountain or marine landscapes: in other words, the kind of landscapes that seem most distant from the domesticated agricultural landscape. Only in recent times – over the last couple of decades, I would say – have we witnessed a reverse movement, a rediscovery of the value of the cultivated countryside even from the point of view of the landscape, so as to restore its centrality in relation to our perception of natural beauty in general. It would not be far from the truth to argue, then, that while it took us two millennia to develop a love for the wilderness, we have only been following the inverse path for a few years.

Antiquity – meaning Greek and Roman Antiquity – harboured suspicion and repulsion towards the wilderness, whilst being aware of its charm. Certainly, the issue of the perception of the landscape in Antiquity might be discussed at length, since many different opinions have been expressed on the matter, starting from J. Ritter and A. Berque's thesis that the notion of landscape is essentially a modern one and from the opposite views held by G. Carchia and M. Venturi Ferriolo[1]. Certainly, the ancient world possessed a keen sense of space and of what we may describe as the *feeling* of nature, as witnessed by the always clearly perceived connection between given places and myths, or indeed by the very establishment of temples, sanctuaries and oracular sites in highly evocative places and – in Rome at least – by the arrangement of space for military or urban purposes[2]. Still, it is just as certain that the men of Antiquity detected natural beauty in nature *as a whole* or, conversely, in individual natural beings (for example, in the human body), rather than in a specific, concrete aspect of nature, as seems bound to be the case when we speak of landscape sensitivity. What is highly revealing, in this respect, is the almost complete lack of individualising representations of places either in art or in literature and poetry. What are most commonly found in these fields are stereotypical depictions of abstract places, such as rural environments in Theocritean poetry (but also, albeit not as distinctly, in Latin poetry) and the representation of ideal landscapes in Hellenistic and Roman painting.

Now, if we keep to the level of stereotyped descriptions, it is possible to identify an underlying opposition between the *locus amoenus*, on the one hand, and the *locus horridus* on the other. This amounts to a contrast between an environment favourable to human life, and often shaped by man, and an environment hostile to life – an inhospitable environment. A pleasant environment may take the form of a verdant meadow strewn with flowers, rich in running water and offering travellers the cool shelter of shady trees. An example would be the spot on the shores of the Ilisos where Socrates and Phaedrus meet in the Platonic dialogue named after the latter. By contrast, a *locus horridus* will be marked by a lack of vegetation reflecting the aridness and sterility of its soil, by vastness and the lack of points of reference – as in the case of Lucan's Libyan desert.

No doubt, the *locus amoenus* is not always a cultivated place. However, it is an idyllic rural and bucolic setting inhabited by shepherds, if not farmers. In this respect, the *saltus* is not the *silva*, a threatening wood or forest perceived as

[1] See Ritter, 1963; Berque, 1995; Venturi Ferriolo, 2002; Carchia, 1999-2000.

[2] A very useful outline of the topic is provided by Bonesio's recent essay *Il contributo della letteratura latina alla comprensione moderna del paesaggio,* 2013.

something alien and dangerous. Alongside the pastoral landscape we find the cultivated field and the garden, the *ager* and the *hortus*, the ancient Romans' natural setting of choice. For the Romans the best vantage point for the observation of nature was provided by the country villa, the rural dwelling of wealthy citizens. The perception of agricultural space is always associated with that of the concrete activities that take place within it, what we would call the agricultural industries, as in Horace's celebrated ode: "That corner of the world smiles for me beyond all others, where the honey yields not to Himettus, and the olive vies with green Venafrum, where Jupiter vouchsafes long springs and winters mild, and where Aulon, dear to fertile Bacchus, envies not the clusters of Falernum. That place and its blessed heights summon thee and me; there shalt thou bedew with affection's tear the warm ashes by thy poet friend!" (Horace, *Odes*, II, 6).

Another example might be the following epigram by Martial: "The Baian villa, Bassus, of our friend Faustinus keeps unfruitful no spaces of wide field […] but rejoices in a farm, honest and artless. Here in every corner corn is tightly packed, and many a crock is fragrant of ancient autumns. Here, when November is past, and winter is now at hand, the unkempt pruner brings home late grapes" (Martial, Epigrams, III, p. 58).

An antecedent of the modern view of the landscape may be found in Pliny the Younger's description of the environs of a country villa at Tifernum Tiberinum. The author here stresses the beauty of the place, speaking of "regionis forma pulcherrima". In the writing of agricultural theorists from Varro to Columella, considerations regarding the fertility of the soil and high yield of agricultural estates go hand in hand with an acknowledgement of their beauty as an added value, so to speak: when having to choose between two equally productive estates, one should opt for the most beautiful one, since *utilitas* and *voluptas* must not be separated – most importantly, they should never be set in contrast. As Emilio Sereni has noted, "in Varro, aesthetic requirements coincide with rational and utilitarian ones" (Sereni, 2010, p. 60).

A typical feature of the ancient world's outlook on nature is the link drawn between inhospitable areas and faraway places, particularly ones inhabited by enemy peoples: the interior of Anatolia which provides the setting for Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the German forests described by Tacitus, the wilderness of Caledonia that Hadrian chose to cut off from colonised Britain: "Roman culture defined the contrast between wild nature and cultivated nature through a conciliating perspective that sought to drive the dangers and snares of the former to the furthest edges of the civilised world and to assign undisputed ideological supremacy to the latter, to the point of turning it into the seal of the grandeur of the Empire" (Vitta, 2005, p. 35).

3. Landscape Representations in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Representations of open natural spaces are rare in the Middle Ages. What are relatively common, instead, especially from the 12th century onwards, are depictions of agricultural labour, particularly with the so-called cycles of the months. In these representations natural space is often reduced to a minimum and almost allegorised through the inclusion of an ear of wheat or vine shoot, as in the sculptural calendar adorning the so-called Porta della Pescheria of Modena Cathedral. Moving closer to the modern age, however, and directing our gaze to Northern Europe, we can almost catch a glimpse of some landscapes. For instance, the representation of the month of February in *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, an illuminated manuscript from the early 15th century now in the Condé Museum in Chantilly, offers a view of snow-covered hills under an overcast sky and of a valley dotted with village rooftops. To be sure, what stands in the foreground are agricultural tools, a sheep pen and women huddling around a fireplace, whereas the stark forest on the right is shown in relation to the woodcutter who is collecting wood for the fire. Besides, in other cases the background only consists in a single building and its walls, as in the depiction of springtime haymaking and ploughing.

In Italy, the most famous – and almost unparalleled – instance of the representation of a

territory in relation to the agricultural work performed within it is no doubt the large fresco which Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena in 1338-1339 to illustrate the effects of Good Government. Here too we find a broad view of a hilly landscape. A procession of knights makes its way through the walls of Siena, as a country dweller moves in their direction, driving a dark-bristled pig, and other farmers carry produce into the city on mules. In the foreground, reapers are scything hay, while other men are busy harvesting wheat. In the distance, rows of vines already dot the hills. The co-presence of agricultural tasks typical of different seasons clearly betrays the allegorical character of the scene which, after all, does not illustrate any identifiable stretch of the Siena,l countryside. Although the town is undoubtedly Siena, the surroundings of the town are not exactly described: there is no description of the real places.

What we have, then, is not genuine landscape painting: at the earliest, this only emerged in the West two centuries later, in relation to experiences of a different sort, not primarily related to the representation of the cultivated countryside. Thus Van Eyck's famous *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* offers the view of a river winding its way across forest and city; Antonello da Messina's *Crucifixion* in Sibiu clearly shows the gulf and harbour of Messina in the background of Mount Golgotha with the three crosses; and the imaginary landscapes by Patinier ("the fine landscape painter" praised by Dürer) are all fanciful ones made up of dense forests, crags and caves. Indeed, if the prototype of the modern perception of the landscape is to be found in Petrarch's description of his ascent of Mont Ventoux, as suggested by Burckhardt and Ritter, then what we have is the very opposite of cultivated farmland. Petrarch ascends the mountain against the advice of a shepherd, who warns him that only thorns and stones, sweat and toil await him. The emphasis is on the wild and inhospitable nature of the place, a high mountain that offers nothing agreeable to man[3].

What emerges, then, is the contrast between a feeling of nature that for centuries was destined to remain the prerequisite of a tiny fraction of the population and the common man's perception of nature. Petrarch does not provide the only example of the love of the mountains, which is to say of an environment not marked by human labour and indeed hostile to the presence of man. The Swiss Humanist Konrad Gessner loved the mountains and devoted a short book to the subject, *De montium admiratione*. Similarly, painted landscapes often feature, if not high mountains, at any rate a glimpse of semi-wild nature. Things are rather different in the case of the common man: for many centuries still, travellers and writers continued to show appreciation only of nature that had been made productive by man. In his *Journal de Voyage*, written in the late 16th century, De Montaigne warmly describes the beauty of the Po Valley ("a nos costés des plaines très fertiles, aiant, suivant l'usage du pais, parmy leurs champs de bleds, force arbres rangés par orde, d'où pendent leurs vignes") (de Montaigne, 1889, p. 147). Almost two centuries later, Charles de Brosses waxes lyrical over the same landscape ("the land extending between Vicenza and Padua alone is probably worth the whole journey through Italy. No art scene is more beautiful and embellished than such a countryside") (de Montaigne, 1858, vol. I, p. 153). The kind of landscape that elicited admiration and was contemplated with most pleasure was the cultivated plane, not the inhospitable mountain landscape. As late as the end of the 18th century, when descending into Italy Goethe had no eyes for the landscape at all until reaching Verona.

At the same time, the horror of the wilderness and fear of threatening places endured. These feelings gave rise to popular legends about "accursed" mountains home to monstrous creatures. A traveller such as John Evelyn, in the late 17th century, saw the Alps as nothing but a rubbish dump in which nature had piled up all the filth and horrors from the plains[4].

[3] See Besse, 2000.

[4] With regard to these topics, I will refer to R. Bodei's volume *Paesaggi sublimi. Gli uomini davanti alla natura selvaggia* (2005). On the endurance of a view of the landscape centred on the concrete activities which may take place within it, starting from agricultural labour, see Camporesi, 1992.

Particularly revealing, in this respect, is the curious geological theory developed by Thomas Burnet, the author of *Telluris theoria sacra*, who posited that the Earth was originally flat but was then corrugated, creating the mountains, as a divine punishment.

4. The Turning Point: Rise of the Appreciation of Wilderness during the XVIII Century

It was only in the early 18th century that this view of the mountains started changing even in the common perception. What is often mentioned as a first sign of this change is the journey across the Alps made by the Englishman John Dennis in 1686. For the first time, an author here speaks of "delightful Horrour" and "terrible Joy": the feelings of fear and bewilderment caused by a threatening landscape are no longer exclusively presented in negative terms, but are also regarded as a source of pleasure, albeit of a different sort from that caused by beauty. As nature came to be perceived in a new light, the feeling of the sublime in those years passed from the rhetorical domain, to which it had been confined for two thousand years, into the broader aesthetic sphere, becoming a central element of 17th-century poetics. Albrecht Haller's 1732 poem on the Alps marked the consecration of the new outlook on the wilderness, paving the way for countless literary variations, as well as – at a later stage – a new pictorial *vague*. This was given full expression and widely promoted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in the novel *Julie, or the New Heloise*, sung the praises of high mountains and their moral influence on man: "On the high mountains, where the air is pure and subtle, one breathes more freely, one feels lighter in the body, more serene of mind. […] It seems that by rising above the habitation of men one leaves all base and earthly sentiments behind" (Rousseau, 1761).

The first ascent of Mont Blanc took place towards the end of the century, in 1786, a date which marks the beginning of modern mountaineering. The practice was destined to acquire increasing popularity over the course of the 19th century, to the point that in 1871 Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, claimed that the Alps had become "the playground of Europe", a sort of vast amusement park (Stephen, 1871).

Alongside the sublime, a new aesthetic category emerged in the 18th century as a way of marking a break from "beautiful" nature, which is to say nature that is well-arranged, chiefly for cultivation. The new category was that of the *picturesque*, a term which originally meant "suited to making a fine subject in painting". In particular, it referred to rough, jagged, dark landscapes, by contrast to the smooth, regular and sunlit countryside. One example of picturesque art is first of all provided by Salvator Rosa's *vedute*, in which a varied and irregular nature, often filled with forests, crags and caverns – a fine shelter for brigands and other villains – provides a new paradigm for the landscape. As witnessed by Kant, the sublime indicates on the one hand the boundlessness of nature – unreachable mountains and ocean expanses – and, on the other, the power of nature – storms, volcanoes and floods. The picturesque, on the other hand, does not go as far: as theorised by William Gilpin, for instance, it describes an irregular nature, a rugged, jagged land, as opposed to an orderly, flat or only slightly sloping landscape with an uneven contour. A round and gently sloping hill or a flowery meadow will be regarded as beautiful; a moor dotted with clusters of trees and streaked with gorges and ravines will be perceived as picturesque. The cultivated countryside, then, might still be considered beautiful, but not picturesque or sublime.

A neat counterpart to this change of taste may be found in the history of the garden. While the architectural, geometric, well-ordered garden to some extent represents an extension of the cultivated countryside and vice-versa, as clearly illustrated for instance by Giusto Utens' views of Medici villas, the Mannerist garden – exemplified by the Pratolino gardens and even more so those of Bomarzo – identifies a "third" nature alongside wild and cultivated nature. However, the most decisive break with the paradigm of beautiful cultivated nature was made by the picturesque garden, the English garden. Significantly known as the landscape garden, this was designed in such a way as to

conceal its underlying artificiality and create the impression of pure, wild nature. The gardens surrounding villas and castles, or the country mansions of English aristocrats, were not conceived as agricultural estates – unlike French and Italian gardens, which in a way stood as an intensification or magnification of agricultural processes – but were rather intended to be perceived, as far as possible, as a disorderly and spontaneous nature.

The landscape garden anticipated by a few decades the vogue of the Romantic garden, which was to ensure the ultimate affirmation of the predilection for wild, rugged and dark nature, along with the love of mountain vistas with Cozens as early as in the 18th century, of frozen landscapes, as in some of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, and of stormy seas, as in Turner's seascapes. What we find here is no longer the serene nature favoured by the Classical landscape painting of Poussin, Lorrain or indeed – well into the 18th century – Hackert; rather, it is a violent, inhospitable nature. It is no longer a pleasant and charming landscape in which one would like to live, but a barren, stark or threatening landscape in which, as Heinrich von Kleist wrote in relation to Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea*, "so ist es, wenn man es betrachtet, als ob Einem die Augenlider weggeschnitten wären" (von Kleist, 1992, p. 357).

5. The Gap between "Aesthetic Landscape" and Agricultural Landscape

The idea of conceiving the actual landscape as a projection of landscape painting onto nature started spreading precisely in the early 19th century and completed the process whereby the "aesthetic" landscape had gradually come to be separated from the agricultural one. The gap thus created between the kind of landscape to be admired, painted and described, and cultivated farmland was destined to remain open for almost two centuries. In fact, judging from the works of some contemporary environmental artists fond of hiking and dizzying heights, we might say that the gap remains open to this day.

There are many reasons for this. First of all, what contributes to the disrepute of the agrarian landscape is the still widely held assumption that the only landscapes of genuine aesthetic worth are "extraordinary" landscapes – uncommon, rare and exceptional ones. This tendency obviously runs against the perception of the agricultural landscape as an aesthetically pleasing one, since by definition it is a well-arranged landscape, shaped by everyday, common practices. If only landscapes of outstanding beauty are regarded as worthy of consideration, then what will be privileged will invariably be landscapes foreign to common transactions, landscapes of the sort we can only find by moving away not just from the city but also from the countryside – for example, by attaining great heights or venturing into dangerous areas. Unsurprisingly, Roberto Longhi, who was distrustful of natural beauty, ironically remarked that for tourist guides beauty is only to be found above 1,000 metres.

A second reason is probably to be sought in the endurance of an opposition as conventional as it is entrenched in common perception: the opposition between the useful and the beautiful. Although everyday experience teaches us that the two values, usefulness and beauty, do not necessarily stand in mutual contrast, and that an object, such as a building, may very well serve a specific function while at the same time constituting an artwork, with regard to the landscape the prejudiced assumption is still that only a landscape serving no utilitarian end can be beautiful – a landscaped not designed for human well-being, an unproductive one.

A third reason, which in a way is the counterpart of the second one, emerges from the observation that usually people who live and work within a given landscape, exploiting it for their own purposes, have no eyes for its beauty. One might recall here Cézanne's observations on Mount Sainte-Victoire: Cézanne portrayed it countless times, with boundless love and devotion, on each occasion seeking to delve a little further into his beloved landscape. Yet when speaking with local farmers, he found it impossible to elicit the faintest hint of wonder or admiration from them. That space was the space of their everyday labour, not a magnificent setting for it. Farmers, at any rate traditional farmers, do not appreciate – and never have appreciated – the landscape. Indeed, the latter was usually only discovered and valued by

burghers who spent their leisure time in the countryside or by nobles who chose to leave their city palaces for their country mansions. The love of the landscape went hand in hand with the spread of an urban culture: paradoxically, it was city living that nourished the love of the countryside.

In the case of the European landscape, and the Italian one in particular, what has partially balanced these considerations, even in the past, is the awareness of the *historical* and *cultural* character of the landscape, and hence of the role played by agricultural labour with respect to its transformation and conformation (although only rarely have people grasped the full consequences of these circumstances). Elsewhere, even these scruples were missing. Let us think, for instance, of the extent to which the national conscience of the United States has been shaped by the myth of the wilderness, by the identification of the national spirit with the *natural* and *wild* roots of the environment in which it developed. While the protection of nature emerged in Europe as the protection of natural beauty, in North America it took the form of the conservation of the pristine environment, of nature yet untouched by human labour. The first large natural parks were established in America in the latter half of the 19th century: *nature*, in a way, replaced *history* as a communal bond. Hence, it represented a nature utterly *different* from history – not the kind of nature that encompasses human labour, but the kind that rules it out or, at any rate, makes it impossible on account of its own boundless might and vastness. This is the nature of the big parks of Yellowstone and Yosemite. Curiously enough, even European national parks, including Italian ones, were initially based on this prominent environmentalist motivation, as they were established to protect high mountain areas in territories scarcely affected by human activity, if at all, and in which agricultural transformations were limited or at any rate reduced to a minimum. Thus in the aftermath of World War I Italy established the Parco del Gran Paradiso and Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo.

Even landscape laws have long borne witness to this marginalisation of the cultivated landscape. To consider once again the case of Italy, where a pervasive and indissoluble link exists between landscape and agriculture, the protection of the landscape has long revolved around the idea of *natural* landscape, rather than that of an extraordinary combination of natural elements and artificial, historical ones.

The no doubt significant Bottai law of 1939 still had *picturesque* beauty as its point of reference, since it explicitly referred to "panoramic beauties regarded as paintings". Clearly, as one would expect, this law was still based on an acknowledgement of *exceptional* beauty, since it focused its conservation efforts on "fixed features that possess *conspicuous* qualities of natural beauty or geological uniqueness". Yet even the far more recent, and equally praiseworthy, Galasso law of 1985 operates within a context in which no trace of the agrarian landscape is apparently to be found. This law protects the coastline and the shores of inland waters, particularly "mountains above 1600 metres in the Alps and above 1200 metres in the Apennines", along with "glaciers, parks, forests, volcanoes and wetlands". One might say that conservation begins where agriculture ends.

6. The Return to the Aesthetic Appreciation of Cultivated Land

In recent decades – that is, over the last twenty-five years at most – things have taken a different turn. Farmland is no longer perceived as something opposed to the landscape from an aesthetic perspective: beauty is no longer exclusively sought in areas where we can harbour the illusion that no visible traces are left by mankind. Of course, I am not referring to an awareness of the fact that our landscape is a *cultural* landscape and hence a *cultivated* one, as landscape theoreticians have always maintained. What I am referring to is the new *widespread* perception of the countryside, including farmland, as a landscape.

Here too, we can easily identify some of the reasons behind this change. First of all, we come across two reasons that, at face value, may seem antithetical to one another and hence irreconcilable, but which upon closer scrutiny prove to be far from incompatible. The first of these two reasons may be described as the relinquishing of the privilege formerly assigned

to *exceptional* landscapes. Not just current theories but also current views of the landscape increasingly tend to assign value even to landscapes other than extraordinary ones – places of exceptional beauty. What is increasingly taking root is the belief that the landscape consists in a network, a seamless web, as opposed to the sporadic emergence of beauties as extraordinary as they are mutually unrelated. A typical example of this new way of perceiving the landscape is the underlying idea of the *European Landscape Convention*. The ELC tends to consider the landscape as being coextensive with the local territory, in such a way that by its own right it incorporates both the agricultural landscape and the wilderness. The Convention, moreover, explicitly recognises that any stretch of a given territory carries an aesthetic identity, thereby acknowledging the existence not just of excellent landscapes but also of common or degraded ones. Ultimately, this is something we experience in our everyday life: we realise that a landscape conveys an aesthetic experience not just when we are elated at the sight of landscapes of outstanding beauty and harmony, but also when we are saddened at the sight of spoiled, disfigured and desolate landscapes in which we would never want to live. By acknowledging the landscape as an essential component of peoples' living environment, the ELC delivers the agrarian landscape from its minority status, just as the Italian *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio* does by identifying the landscape as a "territory that expresses an identity" (Codice 2004, art. 131). The presence of different degrees of value within the landscape is reflected by the multiplicity of possible courses of action identified by the ELC: from the *conservation* of landscapes of exceptional significance and beauty to the *management* of common landscapes to the *reclamation* of degraded ones.

The second reason, which apparently stands in contrast to the one just illustrated, is the fact that farmland has become a *rare asset*. In developed countries – and here too Italy regrettably features high up on the list – *there is less and less farmland*. The number of cultivated plots of land is constantly dwindling. The UAA (Utilised Agricultural Area) is progressively decreasing. A recent volume by Salvatore Settis provides some data for the period between 1990 and 2005: in these fifteen years, the UAA decreased by 17.6% (Settis, 2010). Contrary to what people often believe or write, this drop is not only due to over-development, which is to say to the construction of new houses, roads, sports centres or other projects: in quantitative terms, the main factor is the extension of woodland, which has increased considerably in recent decades. From an environmentalist perspective, this might seem like a positive development; yet it worth bearing in mind that these woods are often left to themselves, whereas forests too require management and human labour, if we wish to avoid dangerous phenomena such as the spread of summer fires, poor water control and so on. Ultimately, the dwindling of agricultural land is due not so much to over-building, as to the depopulation of the countryside and the abandonment of marginal areas, especially mountain ones. This is a well-established pattern by now: after the peak in cultivated land reached around the mid-20th century, the number of agricultural plots of land has steadily decreased.

These data concerning farmland should further be combined with those pertaining to the number of agricultural workers, which is also progressively diminishing, as Italy approaches the bottom figures typical of highly developed countries. The number of people working in the agricultural sector dropped from 4.9% in 1999 to 3.9% in 2009. The crucial point is that in 1950 agricultural labourers still accounted for 30% of the overall workforce. The consequences of this decline are not always adequately taken into account: whereas two generations ago most families still had a close connection with the countryside (for instance, by having a father or mother with a rural background), today almost the whole of the population has no direct connection with the world of farming, which has therefore become an elusive one for most people. As a consequence, most people, including children (hence the spread of so-called "educational farms"), perceive the cultivated countryside as a new and unusual environment worth discovering. Perceptual factors too contribute to this assimilation of the agricultural landscape to the unproductive one conventionally associated with aesthetic experiences.

Silence and solitude, which are defining features of our standard view of the landscape, by now are also associated with the cultivated countryside – at any rate, with the extensive one in which the agricultural labour is concentrated in a few days per hectare, with a small number of farmhands.

These are not the only reasons: other, more "objective" ones may be found. Agriculture increasingly appears to be a crucial way of safeguarding the landscape. No matter how widespread the mistrust towards agriculture and methods of cultivation entailing the use of chemicals, one indisputable fact remains: agriculture, in all its forms, is *the only artificial use of the soil that is also reversible*. Agricultural land remains free land, whereas built-up land or land used for other purposes is lost forever, unless expensive land reclamation procedures are adopted. Moreover, precisely because the Italian landscape is almost entirely shaped by the relation between agricultural labour, broadly conceived, and nature, agriculture is crucial for the preservation of Italian landscapes. This is precisely shown by the spread of woodland: a natural landscape may be extremely *unnatural* for Italy, as it lends its territory a configuration that is utterly alien to its traditional layout. Generally speaking, within the world of agriculture an increasing awareness of this responsibility has emerged, and hence of methods of cultivation compatible with the local environment and landscape.

Once again, a range of different factors contribute to this new awareness. First of all, it is worth noting that the clear-cut contrast between city and countryside, urban dwelling and country home, has been abandoned. As regards the positive perception of the agricultural landscape, we should consider not so much the phenomenon of urban sprawl, which rather leads to a degraded "third" type of landscape, as the increase in residential mobility and new forms of rural habitation, whereby a considerable percentage of city dwellers choose the countryside as their fixed or frequent abode.

Alongside the new perception of the countryside displayed by outsiders who choose it as their place of residence essentially for its aesthetic qualities and wholesomeness, we are witnessing a marked emphasis on immaterial values, such as those connected to the landscape, in agricultural economic activities. One example is the growing phenomenon of agritourism, where the attractiveness of the landscape clearly plays a prominent role. But let us also think of the emphasis on environmental and landscape qualities that comes with many typical food products, as a way of lending them a unique "aura". By now, even EU policies are taking into account the environmental and landscape function of agriculture (as opposed to its exclusively environmental one), by promoting traditional methods of cultivation, cross-compliance and *greening* practices.

Several indicators of this new approach to agriculture from the point of view of the landscape may be mentioned, starting from the attention towards these new phenomenon within landscape theory, illustrated by the number of conferences devoted to the agricultural landscape. In 2003, a seminar on the subject was hosted by Italia Nostra. A few years later, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage organised a major conference entitled *Paesaggio agrario: una questione non risolta* (*The Agricultural Landscape: An Unsolved Question*)[5]. On that occasion, Italia Nostra advanced a legislative proposal for the protection of Italian farmland as a whole: an explicit acknowledgement of what I have suggested so far, namely that all farmland by now is widely perceived as carrying aesthetic values worth safeguarding.

Another important indicator is to be found in documents such as the *European Rural Heritage Observation Guide*, which explicitly associates the value of the landscape with the preservation of agricultural environments: not only the countryside and methods of cultivation, but more generally rural buildings and artefacts connected to these activities[6]. The emergence of a new sensitivity is further reflected by the fact that many recently established parks are not merely "environmental" parks located in uncultivated areas, but also include agricultural areas. I am thinking here of the Parco delle

[5] See the acts of the conference: Di Bene and D'Eusebio, 2007.
[6] See Agnoletti, 2010.

Cinque Terre in Liguria and the Parco del Ticino between Piedmont and Lombardy.

In moving towards a conclusion, I wish to refer to the confirmation provided by a book and two films. The book is Giorgio Boatti's *Un paese ben coltivato. Viaggio nell'Italia che torna alla terra e, forse, a se stessa*: published in 2014, it explores several Italian regions to identify the new kind of farmer, far from indifferent to the landscape and its safeguarding, whom I have referred to as a new rural dweller. The two films, also released in 2014, are centred on country life. As the reader may have guessed, I am referring to Alice Rohrwacher's *The Wonders* and Jonathan Nossiter's *Natural Resistance.* In these films, the directors successfully combine an interest in particular settings with a focus on two typical agricultural productions, possibly the most ancient ones within our civilisation alongside oil production – I refer to honey and wine. These two tales, associating the most deep-rooted rural traditions in Italy with new, unexpected protagonists, provide a fitting ending for an essay on agriculture and the landscape.

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