

being in a futile attempt for contact with a remote deity, the human remaining essentially alien in the cosmic existence.

The overwhelming impression remains that we face the individual in modern times—in future time from Kafka’s perspective—who is powerless in the face of the regime and the social situation in which he finds himself. Such concern was expressed in futuristic novels of the twentieth century, represented by Yevgeny Zamiatin’s *We* (1924), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, (1932). The systems depicted may have been vicious, as in the first two examples, or ostensibly well-meaning, as in Huxley’s novel. However, in each case the system rules the individual, and does not allow him autonomous development and freedom of judgment. Kafka sensed this danger and therefore critics look for Kafkaesque motifs in modern fiction. Zweig, mercifully, was spared the nightmarish prospect.

How does one explain the divergence of views and style of these two contemporaries and compatriots? Conceivably, their different backgrounds account for the contrast. Zweig was born into an affluent family, while Kafka had to worry about his livelihood. Zweig was given freedom to choose his career, while Kafka was constrained by his father to choose a “sensible” profession that did not suit his temper and his genius. Zweig lived in Vienna, while Kafka lived in a Czech setting where the benefits of the Austrian rule were doubted.

All such explorations may have a degree of plausibility. Yet, in the end, the way of a writer, a gifted and inspired writer, cannot be adequately explained by accidental circumstances. The essential genius of a writer remains an enigma and a revelation, which shows that he is not a product of a system.

## *In the Agrarian Conservative Tradition*

*George A. Panichas*

ARTHUR VERSLUIS’S *Island Farm* (2000) is an exemplary piece of writing, a personal memoir of his life on a generational family farm near Grand Rapids, Michigan. It also tenders probing reflections on the agrarian conservative tradition as it, too, disappears into “the sterile new American

landscape, devoid of farms and of lived history on the land.” No less poignant in this book is its evocation of spirit of place struggling to survive in an environment of mega-machines and mega-technology that annul the human factor and mercilessly regulate the rhythms and the seasons of our works and days. In short, it is a synecdochic work about the consequences of loss of human connections and continuity, and about a land and

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GEORGE A. PANICHAS is the editor of *Modern Age* and the author, most recently, of *Joseph Conrad: His Moral Vision* (Mercer University Press, 2005).

culture ceding to the idea of progress at any price.

Perhaps it will be said that what Versluis is conveying are his nostalgic perceptions of farm and farmland vanishing “forever under earthmovers and pavement” in the midst of flux and drift, of rootlessness and alienation and absurdity, which, cumulatively, define an era of visual squalor and social disorder. The neoterists among us will doubtlessly dismiss Versluis’s witness as being incipiently insular, romantic, escapist, elegiac, out of touch with the daunting demands of present-day realities. The author, on the contrary, is acutely aware of our contemporary realists and what they will say, and say with a brutishness born of indifference to a “stable landscape.” Versluis’s question, “Do we not as much reflect as create our landscape?” is a commanding question in our troubling situation. Indeed, what he shows, in effect, is that we choose to be ignorant of our sacred patrimony; that we eagerly enact modern versions of impiety; that we too easily betray our trust, our loyalty, our self-esteem to an ephemeral “technomagic”; that we rush to surrender both the legacy of our ancestors and the permanencies of values and tradition, our “grand unseen inheritance of understanding.”

To be sure, *Island Farm* is specifically about “the lay of the land,” “ancestors,” “characters quick or dead”: “tree of knowledge, tree of life,” “words, soil, plants”; and gives us salient descriptions of life on the farm (the last working farm within the Grand Rapids city limits) and about those who live there and sustain it, often against forces that “insist that the marketplace determines all values.” In reading the author’s luminous descriptions of farm life and scenes, one inevitably absorbs the author’s philosophical and aphoristic ruminations, as one enters the deeper metaphysical terrain of the book: its visible and invisible world of farm living, planting, harvesting; and, of course, of

the morality of work.

Repeatedly and consistently one is arrested by Versluis’s meditations, which are felicitously and fluently expressed. Again and again, one stops to consider what Versluis is describing or discerning, what he is saying about the human situation, about ancestors, about ourselves and our interrelationships. Clearly he has thought long and hard on troubling life questions and on our even more troubling times. Here we are in contact with a living text anchored in reverent attitudes and in humanist convictions and concerns. Often, then, we are suddenly surprised to discover that we must pause and ponder and wonder, generously invited and guided by the author to enter a sacred world; to behold a holy event as it unfolds, palpitably; to glimpse the divine in nature and in man, to bring us into intimate union with otherness; to feel the touch and smell of nature, when an intrinsic and creative sense of order and stability prevail in the community and in the soul.

Remember and be glad! That is what Versluis is implicitly saying, joyously, sincerely, and what he recalls of his innocent world—the innocence of childhood caught in a rapidly changing world at the mercy of “our modern econotheism, our worship of economics.” The chapter on “Childhood” is especially vivid, catching as it does the visionary gleam of “the social-natural” world even when “the apocalypse comes not with four horses but with horsepower.” One does not forget the predications in this chapter, as when it renders brilliantly a barn scene, the rain diminishing the fitful squalls: “After a rainstorm, before the light breaks through the clouds, everything glistens, the grass and the trees look luminous and glow greenly, lighted from within by the lightning’s passing and the water.”

The earthy temper and effulgence of the prose and the rhythm of the day and season synthesize, almost magically,

drawing the reader at one memorable point into a summer-world. When a traveling circus happens to come to a neighboring farm and casts a net of fascination over young and old alike, an eighteen-foot-long python, seeking some natural sanctuary, escapes and is pursued and finally caught by an officialdom of burly hunters who would deny any semblance of “the unpredictability of wildness and dreams.” Versluis compels us to look at a world retreating before the collective might of progress as it stalks trespassers, human and non-human. Alas, not only the python but also the “island farm” is being hunted down, pursued zealously by the spirit of mercantilism. Here, too, still another important lesson is to be learned in Versluis’s book, as we intuit the flight of the numinous in existence and of the idea of the holy. Sacrosanct inward feelings, higher values, the belief that there is right and wrong, it is abundantly clear, are under assault.

The law of regulation and regimentation, as one encounters it in *Island Farm*, slowly but irrevocably invades the old world as it bends its knees to modernity. The modern plight, in effect, is moulded by the process of change and disconnection, and Versluis renders this process in its full powers—and invincibility. The farm, we see, no matter how much it opposes this process, cannot stop it, and this is what makes this book a grim commentary on American rural life. This is the selfsame process that D. H. Lawrence so insightfully catches in his early stories and novels, and the deeper psychology of which Joseph Conrad makes us profoundly aware of in his moral vision.

Even the bravest gestures against “the juggernaut of progress” are in vain as the fearsome beast of modernity slouches its way into the heartland and the spirit of “unboundedness” instinctively cringes and vanishes. In recalling the men and women he has known, Versluis discloses a large sympathy as he pays tribute to the

uniqueness of both the human personality and the land’s character. “There’s a kind of resurrection by remembering,” he writes, as he conjures up the past and its people, its fields and pastures and orchards, subject as they all are to the edicts of dissolution and death. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*. Things have their tears, as Virgil reminds us.

Even when Versluis sometimes approaches the frontier of reverie, he comes down to earth, as the natural and the human are ultimately cloaked in reality, exploding like the “roar of a tractor or a chain saw, the blast of a shotgun or a rifle,” everpresent reminders of dissonance, of danger, of mortality; of an engineered world revolving around “machinery and convenience,” as well as abasement and profit. Throughout Versluis evinces deep sympathy with the land, with “birds, beasts, and flowers,” and this sympathy transforms into compassion: an understanding of a sense of values, born of farm work, and of communion with the earth and the farming tasks that breed a sense of responsibility, of belonging, of creating: “In good work there is satisfaction, and sometimes also a triumph over oneself.” The farm engenders values and virtues; it manifests the victory of toil and patience. “There is an inextinguishable nobility and goodness in authentic work,” Versluis declares confidently.

What particularly characterizes *Island Farm*, to repeat, is Versluis’s exceptional ability to interfuse descriptive richness and reflective acumen, his narrative flow confluent with both a moral sense and a religious sense, as found, for example, in his chapter “The Old-Time Religion.” Though born into an anachronistic American Dutch-Calvinist ambience, his religious perceptions have a latitudinarian understanding and a sapiential resonance. Indeed, his general observations, rooted as they are in his love and respect for farm work as pure labor, and his dis-

dain for mercantilism and consumerism, affirm a “deeper tradition of inward focus and redemption.” To be sure, he apprehends the petrifications and paradoxes of institutional religion in a modern setting, but at the very same time he underlines the paramountcy of the religious idea as an affirmation of transcendent meaning and as a protest against the braying empirio-critical, anti-spiritual voices that “dictate life and faith” in “the Land of Nothing.”

In effect, Versluis’s text constitutes a pious synthesis of the order of labor and the order of the soul, recorded in “the lessons in farming, the discipline and the faith it requires [which] are in themselves religious”—and which conduct us to higher things. These words go to the very heart of his book, validate the essence of his message and the ethos of his testimony. Even an abject slave of “machine society” in a post-modern, post-religious world may be hard pressed to reject Versluis’s testimony in its humility and clear conscience.

*Island Farm* reveals not only metaphysical depth in its affirmation of the agrarian conservative tradition, but also a quintessential awareness of the principles of conservatorship: that we are the custodians of a sacred patrimony, that we must preserve and protect humane civilization, that we must say No to “Nothing,” which Versluis condemns as the state of “blankness, the absence of vitality, the meaninglessness that infects moderns like the plague.” “To plant rare apples is to preserve the human inheritance,” he writes, as he accents the responsibility of the conservator to resist the powers and the ideas that proceed “to make all our farms into factories.” Above all else, Versluis authenticates the role of the guardian of the agrarian conservative tradition, and, beyond that, of the body of tradition, the continuity of which Edmund Burke aptly envisioned as a tripartite “partnership” between “those who are living, those who

are dead, and those who are to be born.”

Born in 1959, Versluis acknowledges that he has been fortunate to grow up on a farm, “an opportunity granted to less than one percent of the American population these days.” His lifelong and passionate attachment to the land makes him unusually sensitive to corruptions that assail the earth’s integrity and that impede the continuity, the intercommunion, and the unity of “spirituality, family, fertile land.” Not surprisingly, he singles out the dangers that inhere in “hydroponic agriculture,” with the aim “one day for synthetic *everything* emerging from some ‘replicator.’” By vocation, it should be added, Versluis is a university teacher who laments the growth of “hydroponic literature” based on “works that begin and end nowhere” and reflect a pattern of emptiness, “distorted, disjointed, frenetic, hyperbolic or nihilistic.” His veneration of humanistic and eternal values both as a farmer and as a teacher is indelibly engraved in the pages of *Island Farm* and shapes its inspiration.

Versluis’s respect for the land is akin to his love for it, a sentiment that, alas, is not shared by many Americans who too often prefer to abandon or to desecrate the land and sacred places, and who have not any inkling of “the wisdom that joins this world and the invisible.” Versluis’s scenes of farmhouse and farmland ruins are chilling in their details of despoliation—all this for the sake of “progress” and “development”! Here, as elsewhere, he peers into some of the conditions of debasement that characterize modern American society as it turns into a demonized “No-Man’s-Land.”

Perhaps nothing in our time better emblemizes this debasement than the new malls that have been erected as centers of a “skewed economy” and the destructive might of the bulldozer pitilessly flogging earthworks and expunging memories of farmlands and woodlands. Today the phenomenon of the mall

spreads on a global scale, from the Mall of America in Minnesota, the largest shopping center in the United States, to Bashundara City, the gigantic eight-storey shopping mall in downtown Daka, Bangladesh. To the countless inmates of malls the existence of an old Hubbardston apple tree near a spring creek's path through an old orchard has absolutely no consciousness of its own, no meaning, no glory, no mystery. Man, "intoxicated by 'progress,'" becomes a destroyer, not preserver.

The respected Australian writer-ecologist James G. Cowan has said of *Island Farm* that he has read "no other book that captures so poignantly the transition from agriculture to economics that now so bedevils us." Indeed, "Versluis has created a *Walden* for our time." As in *Walden*,

so in *Island Farm*, one finds an amalgam not only of "mystical intimations" and "sociological deductions," but also a magnanimity of literary and philosophical verities that confirm a book's classic standing: the astonishing coalescence of vision and style, of simplicity, clarity, and vigor of language, thought, and judgment. Thoreau's evocation of New England woods and streams, and Versluis's of Michigan farmland and woodland, are directly expressive of each writer's love and reverence for the soil. Celebrators and conservators of the things of the soil, Henry Thoreau, "poet-naturalist," and Arthur Versluis, teacher-farmer, are imparters of that most enduring of life-lessons signaled in *Walden*: "Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice."