Jean-Francois Millet’s (1857) *Les Glaneuses* (*The Gleaners*; Figure 1) places three peasant women into the central foreground of an agrarian landscape. In the background of *The Gleaners* and to the right sits a field warden, the *garde champêtre*, who from his horse monitors the gleaners and their take. In the center background are the collected sheaves of wheat, the work cart, the horses, reapers, and other apparatus of the harvest. The village is still further in the distance, domestic, settled, hiding nearly over the horizon and separate from the field. [p. 745]

Millet’s work is a spatial representation of various characters in the temporal agricultural process. The harvesters finish their work close to the village, with their homes and kitchens; they are the purportedly noble workers of French society. The peasant gleaners, who follow the harvest to gather that grain which is not valued enough for the harvesters to take, are outcasts, distanced and isolated from the group. Although they are closer to the viewer they operate later in the process, arched and fatigued, drab and hunched. In Millet’s rendering of it they are marginalized women, separate from the harvesters. Their earth-toned clothes are faded, their feet blending into the dirt with brown shoes as muted as the ground. The guard on his horse, placed subtly yet visibly, helps confirm and define the class distinction. The image thus is not only a static representation of a set of culturally identifiable environmental characters working the land, but a moving picture without the motion, a portrait that indicates active stages in a process.¹
After training in nearby Paris, Millet had moved to Barbizon in the 1840s where he painted most of his well-known works, *The Gleaners* among them. Son of the peasant class himself, contemporary biographers referred to Millet as the peasant painter; others considered his work peasant naturalism. The Barbizon school of the mid-nineteenth century has sometimes been referred to as a pre-Impressionist school, though art historians argue that they deserve to be understood as a school in their own right. While I do not enter the conversation as an art historian, or for the purpose of contributing to a characterization of the Barbizon school, one feature of their work that helped distinguish it from prior works (if not later ones) was the shift from using the landscape as a background feature in which to set the portrait’s human characters, to considering the non-human landscape as a character itself.

Contemporary to the sublime and epic landscapes of the Hudson River School of Thomas Cole and friends in the United States, Millet’s naturalist representations instead present working landscapes, active and connected scenes of human intervention. Rather than place *The Gleaners* and Millet into a discussion of French art or of landscape portraiture itself, then, I read the painting as evoking an environmental ethic, representing human intervention into the non-human world. There is a subtle yet notable difference.
between a representation of nature and a representation of the experience of humans living and acting in nature. The latter reading allows the moral dynamic of the image to hold sway; it allows for the environmental ethic of human intervention in the world to become the thing represented. An image such as this from the industrializing nineteenth century is noteworthy, on my reading, not only for showing a working landscape of indigent humans in the field, but for insinuating a contested ethic of value-laden interaction.

Such an approach got Millet into trouble. There are historically proper ways to live in nature and improper ways. There are likewise proper as well as improper ways to represent humans in nature. In large part, the dominant Parisian art class bristled at Millet’s scene for cultural and political, not environmental, reasons. “Millet’s affront,” historian Robert Herbert writes, “was to show poor gleaners, those licensed by the commune of Chailly to glean in the fields after the harvest had passed.” Millet’s contemporaries were concerned that these central peasant figures suggested a certain socialist appreciation for the workers. Charles Baudelaire would write about the “monotonous ugliness” of Millet’s subjects, of his “little pariahs [of] pretentiousness.”

The critic for *La Presse* saw the gleaning women as “conceited” and denigrated the certainty with which they wore their rags. In a view placing those political critiques with a larger sense of environmental representation, Millet’s recent curator Alexandra Murphy has written that “The hostility of so many reviewers in the nineteenth century was not based on the idealization of labor and peasant life that drove later critiques but…on his growing interest in confronting physical landscape in itself and not as background or literary context.”

More to the point, that bristling also brought with it a sense that the non-human landscape too—the field itself and not just the members of it—was improperly rendered. As readers of this journal would note, proper ways to live in nature (an ethicist’s concern) and proper ways to represent that interaction (an artist’s concern) are both historically contingent and susceptible to the historian’s eye. The moral component portrays not just a contested ethic of cultural placement, as Millet’s detractors made clear, but a contested environmental ethic of connection and engagement. Part of the conservative response to Millet, to quote Murphy again, was that he “defied the centuries-old Parisian prejudice that dismissed the peasant population of France as lazy, dirty, and ignorant, more attached to their animals than their families.” Instead, he allowed the attachment and connection to their surroundings to become a point of repute, not denigration.

In a past Gallery essay for this journal, Thomas Zeller discussed a photograph of the Rhine by August Sander to make a similar point: that representations of the environment are, as Sander showed in his evocative photography, “testimonies of human interaction with nature.” What is more, Sander would depict “the agricultural landscape as the product of human labor, and the total landscape as a cultural product.” As Zeller found, artists depict and environmental and art historians interpret what we call cultural landscapes. Millet’s long-studied portrait suggests that environmental historians might also take a line of flight from these landscapes to examine the shifting views of the ethic of intervention itself—what people consider the right way to participate in nature, the wrong way, and the dynamics through which we have historically answered such questions. I read Millet’s image in that vein, as a portrait that captures a historically contingent view of the ways humans intervene in non-human nature. In that sense, a
portrait such as Millet’s not only offers a vision of fields and crops, of harvesting and processing, but of the moral content of the agricultural process. The interaction between humans and the harvested field in *The Gleaners* is a study of active participation, not a static image of an already enacted motion. The process rather than the end product might be our focus.

On the front end, that process is about manipulation of the land and the soil; on the far end, the process leads to food in homes and to our daily bread. In other words, *Les Glaneuses* contributes to a larger field-to-food dynamic. First the reapers, then the gleaners. Before the scene are the planters; outside the scene are the processors and, ultimately, the eaters. While Millet’s work offers an image of the middle of agricultural production by showing the gleaners, his landscape also allow viewers to glimpse the later parts of the process with the village’s homes in the background. Inside those homes are the kitchens where women prepare, and families consume, the products of the land. Millet and those who would critique him debated the representation of this process from production to consumption—from field to food; in so doing they offered environmental historians an image of a contested ethic of human intervention into non-human nature.

While examining such representations of human intervention recently, I was surprised to find the gleaners at the very end of that process, showcased as an advertisement for a food product. Figure 2 appropriates Millet’s *Les Glaneuses* some sixty years after it was painted, presenting an updated version as a bright and colorful label on Ronzoni Macaroni label. The juxtaposition of the two images is not just visually curious and startling, but telling for providing bookends to a momentous period in the history of agro-environmental production, of changes in that process from field to food. While *Les Glaneuses* suggested historical meanings surrounding production, this second image on Ronzoni boxes represents instead the experiences of consumption. [p. 748]
The label for the Ronzoni Macaroni Corporation’s “Le Mietitrici” (“The Harvesters”) macaroni provides a pleasant and evocative scene of the old country (nevermind that for the Italian-American pasta maker it was the wrong old country). Its bright coloring pairs with sharp outlines of the women, their brilliant yellow shoes, and their clean and crisp sleeves, collars, and dresses. The homes in the distance sit on top of the horizon, with clean walls and crisp roof lines. The golden landscape here is a subordinate feature to the eye-catching array of colors. Ronzoni’s larger frame is red with yellow border lines and light blue lettering underneath—“MACARONI”—inside a dark blue box. The central scene is couched not in a painting’s wooden frame but with curvy green corbels, flowing embellishments that couch and cradle the field inside them. Whereas in Millet’s version the woman to the viewer’s right appears as if recovering from the pain of stooping, here it appears she may have just noticed the “Gragnano Style” lettering printed under her feet. The label’s colors and central scene would offer an appealing image to consumers who encounter the image in local grocery stores and then in their own cupboards.12

As an element of a marketing enterprise and as a requirement of its mass use on boxes of pasta, the label flattens both the texture of the field and the faces of the women to remove any sense of difficulty or pain. The character of the labor is also different. In one notable change from Millet’s original, Ronzoni has added a sickle to the third
gleaner’s hand. Also, by calling the gleaners “harvesters,” the company collapses the agricultural process into fewer steps while negating the [p. 749] class character of those women. In keeping with this new presentation, there is also no garde champêtre on his horse in the background. Even the scene’s staging is more sparse. But for the horse-drawn wagon in the background there are no active harvesters that could contrast the women within a larger scene. They stand, or hunch, alone, ennobled by their work near the village to present a genuine experience. Ronzoni meant for the gleaners in this version (now harvesters) to represent the authenticity, and by extension the natural derivation, of the macaroni. The women as agents of a land-based agricultural story became agents of the process from field to food.

The traffic of Millet’s gleaners over these sixty years transformed them from marginalized figures in the Barbizon fields of Second Republic France to representatives of a new authentic experience in New York’s late progressive-era storefronts. Along the path between those two points the women lost their political content and emerged as elements in a marketing effort: they went from laborers in post-harvest fields to icons of eating, from counter-pastoral marginal women to avatars of a golden-hued idyll. I see the two images, separated by half a century, as representing a shift from the experience of a production-based form of human interaction with the land to that of a consumption-based one. In the earlier instance, the agrarian agents themselves, the ones represented, interact with the land not just with human labor, animal power, and the other material apparatus of the harvest, but as dictated through morally contested codes of conduct. Viewers, in turn, confronted that scene in a world shaped by agrarian contours. The gleaners would be seen as actual women and the audience would view them as part of landscapes with which they were familiar. In the later instance, Ronzoni’s pleasing image of harvesters (née gleaners) suggests that the connections to a landscape are no longer part of the everyday life of citizens. The lack of depth and individual character of the Ronzoni women also confront viewers as consumers; the audience interacts with the land through the pasta box at the store and in their cupboards. The landscape on the box of pasta was a different cultural product, framed by a different agro-environmental context.

Posing these two images of field workers side by side affords a wide-ranging analysis that joins environmental history, landscape portraiture, industrial agriculture, and a new consumer society. Doing so also illustrates the transition from a world of productive labor on the land to a world of consumer choices far removed from the land. Put another way, in the early twentieth century human interaction with the land was mediated less by the experiences of the agricultural process than by the experience of, for instance, selecting a box of macaroni from a grocery store shelf. Instead of considering the identity of the land or the meaning of environmental surroundings after a day in the field, Ronzoni’s customers encountered the field as a colorful icon in the cabinet of an urban home. The macaroni box image drastically abbreviates the long process from field to fork: the artistically flattened image reflects the culturally flattened understanding of the field itself, allowing for the kind of romanticism that relies on the laborers as pastoral agents. The images, in the end, suggest that the [p. 750] environmental ethic of intense human, peasant intervention had been replaced with an ethic of pleasant occupation.


4 The moral overtures of Millet’s work were not incidental to the painter’s oeuvre. “Choosing images of land that is cultivated or gleaned or scavenged for subsistence,” Alexandra Murphy writes, “Millet invented what [historian Robert Herbert has] called ‘moral landscapes’.” Murphy, *Jean-Francois Millet: Drawn into the Light*, 25.

5 Herbert, *From Millet to Leger*, 85.  [p. 751]

6 As quoted in Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois*, 73.

7 Murphy, *Jean-Francois Millet: Drawn into the Light*, 16.

8 Thomas Zeller, “On August Sander’s Rhine Landscapes,” *Environmental History* 12 (2007): 394-98, on 395. Sander, incidentally, also took a famous photograph called “Three Farmers On Their Way to a Dance,” from which this essay’s title is drawn. The art critic and nature writer Rebecca Solnit adds a useful point to commentaries on landscape like those by Zeller and the present essay. With admiration for landscape art, she also cautions that “Landscape as a way of describing what’s out there tends to reduce it to vegetation and form, and in so doing it misses or at least de-emphasizes the forces, processes, beings, and energies coursing through it on every scale from the microscopic to the galactic.” As I read Millet, his work sought to avoid this absence and, in so doing, invited criticism by those who were less enamored with the forces, processes, beings, and energies evoked by peasant women. See Solnit, “The Limits of Landscape: Going beyond traditional ways of seeing,” *Orion Magazine*, November/December (2007), accessed 7 July 2009 at [http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/465](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/465).

9 The portrait in this sense fits within recent and productive work in environmental history to carry forward the point Donald Worster made some time ago about beginning “in the belly” with historical accounts of environmental activity without suggesting that the belly is
disconnected from the land. See in particular the attention in this journal to a reinvigorated focus on food in environmental history, as with Robert Chester and Nicolaas Mink, “Having Our Cake and Eating It Too: Food’s Place in Environmental History, a Forum,” *Environmental History* (2009): 309-311.

Millet’s choice to render the middle scenario as he did was not incidental to his portrait. An earlier study he prepared shows a black-and-white chalk sketch of the three gleaners much closer to the harvesters, as part of the harvesting process. In that study, the gleaners are members of the larger group, participants in the same culturally ennobled activity. Comparing the preparatory sketch to the final portrait evokes a stark difference in meaning, a difference defined by the location in the field of the gleaning women and by their role in the extended process of production. The study, “Etude pour ‘L’été, les glaneuses’,” is housed at the British Museum, London, inventory number PD1906, 0213.1.

Warshaw Collection, Food, Box 22, Archives Center, National Museum of American History (NMAH), Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC. The Ronzoni Macaroni Corporation first catered to the Italian immigrant population as pasta writ large became a popular cross-cultural food in the first half of the twentieth century. Emanuele Ronzoni had emigrated from a coastal village near Genoa, Italy to New York in the later 1800s. After working in several capacities to convert flour into pasta for first- and second-generation Italian-Americans, he founded the company that bore the family name in 1915. Personal Communication with New World Pasta, 2 July 2009. (Note that my call may have been recorded for quality assurance purposes.)

While pasta itself had become one of the earliest ethnic foods to find common purchase in the urbanizing and immigrant-filled United States, by the beginning of the next century macaroni in particular was well known in middle-class America. It had even taken on a distinct American cast with the use of hard flour from midwestern wheat—semolina flour—that Italian immigrants found worked well for their preferred al dente style of cooking. See Harvey Levenstein, *A Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 152, and Levenstein, “The American Response to Italian Food,” *Food and Foodways* 1 (1985): 1-23.

I cannot help but observe the retrospective view of that sickle: given the socialist fears of conservatives when responding to Millet’s portrait, it is interesting to see the sickle put into the hands of the gleaner at a time when it was elsewhere being paired with the hammer as a symbol of the Leninist Soviet Union.

With rural depopulation across the later nineteenth century in Europe and a subsequent reduction in the threat of a “disgruntled revolutionary force in the countryside,” Liana Vardi notes, it became possible to “sentimentalize rural poverty.” By the progressive era and across the ocean in the urbanizing, immigrant-heavy New York, “Millet’s figures…became imbued with a nobility, piety, and passivity that struck an overwhelmingly sympathetic chord.” Vardi, “Construing the Harvest,” 1426. Although Millet met with resistance at the French Salon in mid-century, his works would soon travel widely across the Atlantic and within middlebrow and high art circles. Bidders from Boston brought his paintings to the United States as early as the 1850s and by “the 1880s and 1890s…reproductions of such paintings as *The Gleaners* decorated the walls of homes throughout Europe and the United States.” Michael Conforti, “Foreword,” in Murphy, ed., *Jean-Francois Millet: Drawn into the Light*, vii.