

Georgic Marvel: Agriculture and Affect

Ethan Mannon

Mars Hill University, United States

emannon@mhu.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozone.2021.12.2.4193>



Abstract

How do humans respond, emotionally and psychologically, to georgic spaces and places? What do we think and feel when we encounter “working landscapes”—those rural places (primarily farms, but also mines and working forests) where labor produces goods that meet our material and metabolic needs? Despite increasing attention to the georgic literary tradition, these questions remain unsettled. In fact, much of the growing body of georgic scholarship disagrees about the kinds of responses generated by georgic landscapes. One task that remains, then, is to map the current scholarly terrain and synthesize, if possible, a theory of georgic affect. A related, equally important task is to ground such a theory as much as possible in the realities of soil and sun and water. Without attention to such fundamentals, the georgic mode will likely remain solely the property of academics or, equally unfortunate, become as steeped in myth and therefore as untethered from the material world as the pastoral mode. Thus, in “Georgic Marvel” I derive from scholarship and experience a nuanced but intelligible concept describing the human response to georgic places. In short, my intention is to begin to do for working landscapes what the concept of the *sublime* has done for wilderness. I argue that the experience of georgic places generates marvel and humility. At least two different kinds of catalysts initiate this reaction: encounters with either an epic past or with some kind of biotic mystery trigger marvel—a kind of negative hubris that tears down anthropocentrism by reminding us of the past and of other actors and agents. In its challenge to our self-centeredness, georgic marvel approximates the sublime, but relates to a different land use category and represents a distinct response. Whereas terror is integral to the experience of the sublime, georgic marvel creates intrigue and curiosity rather than fear. Marvel leads us deeper. The article concludes with an exploration of the ways in which a theory of georgic affect rooted in marvel would productively reorient our understanding of the human place in the world.

Keywords: Georgic, affect, marvel, sublime, agriculture.

Resumen

¿Cómo responden afectiva y psicológicamente los seres humanos a los espacios geórgicos? ¿Qué se piensa y se siente cuando uno se encuentra con “entornos laborales”, esos espacios rurales (principalmente granjas, pero también minas y bosques) donde el trabajo humano produce los bienes satisfacen nuestras necesidades materiales y metabólicas? A pesar de un creciente interés por la tradición literaria geórgica, estas cuestiones siguen sin respuesta. De hecho, mucha de la investigación sobre este asunto no está de acuerdo con las respuestas humanas generadas por los paisajes geórgicos. Una tarea pendiente, entonces, es esquematizar la investigación actual y luego sintetizar, si es posible, una teoría del afecto geórgico. Otra tarea igualmente importante es fundamentar dicha teoría en las realidades de la tierra, el sol y el agua tanto como sea posible. Sin prestar atención a estos principios básicos, el modo geórgico quedará vinculado únicamente a la esfera académica o, de forma igualmente desafortunada, se volverá lleno de aspectos míticos y, por lo tanto, desconectado del mundo físico como por ejemplo el género pastoral. En este artículo exploro la investigación y la experiencia, y de ellas obtengo conceptos matizados pero inteligibles que describen la respuesta humana a los lugares geórgicos. En resumen, mi intención es empezar a hacer por los entornos laborales lo que el concepto de lo *sublime* ha hecho por los territorios salvajes. Defiendo que la experiencia de los lugares geórgicos provoca asombro tanto como humildad. Hay por lo menos dos catalizadores que inician esta reacción: un encuentro con vestigios de un pasado épico o con algún tipo de “misterio biótico” que desencadena el asombro, algo como una arrogancia negativa que destruye el antropocentrismo al recordarnos el pasado y otros actores y agentes. En este desafío a nuestro

egocentrismo, el asombro geórgico se parece a lo sublime, pero se relaciona con otra categoría de uso de la tierra y representa una respuesta diferente. Mientras que el terror es fundamental en la experiencia de lo sublime, el asombro geórgico produce intriga y curiosidad más que temor. El asombro nos lleva más a lo profundo. Este artículo concluye explorando las maneras en las que una teoría del afecto geórgico basada en el asombro nos reorientaría de forma productiva hacia una nueva comprensión de nuestro lugar en el mundo.

Palabras clave: Geórgico, afecto, asombro, sublime, agricultura.

Wonder is a feeling that is endangered, which puts me in a luckless position, since I am perhaps addicted to it. I get to jonesing for wonder. I have measured my life in its moments, and I have defined the quality of my life by its presence. When it happens, I am.

--Janisse Ray, *Drifting into Darien*

enchantment entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement. To be enchanted, then, is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound.

--Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*

How do humans respond, emotionally and psychologically, to georgic spaces and places? What do we think and feel when we encounter “working landscapes”—those rural places (primarily farms, but also mines and working forests) where labor produces goods that meet our material and metabolic needs?¹ Despite increasing attention to the georgic literary tradition,² critics have not directly addressed questions regarding the emotional impact of georgic places. One task that remains, then, is to map the current scholarly terrain and synthesize, if possible, a theory of georgic affect. A related, equally important task is to ground such a theory as much as possible in the realities of soil and sun and water. Without attention to such fundamentals, the georgic mode will likely remain solely the property of academics or, equally unfortunate, become as steeped in myth and therefore as untethered from the literal world as the pastoral mode. Thus, my goal in this article is to derive from scholarship and experience a nuanced but intelligible concept describing the human response to georgic places. In short, I aim to begin to do for working landscapes what the concept of the *sublime* has done for wilderness.

This article’s exploration of human responses to georgic places aligns with affect theory (in broad terms) and Jane Bennett’s work on enchantment in particular. Regarding affect, I share with Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino—the editors of *Affective Ecocriticism*—the premise that “place profoundly shapes our emotional lives” (2). Because affect theory de-emphasizes discourse and instead focuses on “reactions” that begin with “the senses, the personal and the body,” ecocritics who value embodied experience can draw upon affect theory as one way to articulate the power certain places

¹ Cannavo defines “working landscapes” as “agricultural lands characterized by a long-standing balance between human and natural forces” (220). See also Conlogue, whose focus on the anthracite coal region of Eastern Pennsylvania expands the definition of *working landscape* beyond farms.

² Along with the publications I go on to cite in the next section, see note 32 in my 2016 article for a fuller accounting of the scholarly engagements with the georgic mode.

have to elicit a (human) response (Berberich, Campbell, and Hudson 1). My own reflections have suggested to me that the way I respond to place aligns with the branch of affect theory that “understands affect as asignifying, precognitive bodily experience” (Bladow and Ladino 5).³ As Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth put it, “affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as invitations” (1). As I discuss below, place has the power to interrupt intellectual reverie and to overwhelm rationality and, in the process, to produce captivating experiences.

Jane Bennett, in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, describes such experiences (or “encounters”) with striking language. For Bennett, “enchantment” is an “odd combination of somatic effects” wherein a person is “simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense” (5). The tension between being “both caught up and carried away” produces the state of spellbinding immobilization mentioned in the second epigraph. Bennett also uses “wonder” to describe this condition. I use *marvel* in this article to signify a form of *wonder* or *enchantment* generated by working landscapes and especially by being at work in such places. Defined narrowly, *marvel* is wonder or enchantment that manifests in a georgic context; put another way, georgic labor makes marvel. Thus, marvel has much in common with the states described by Ray and Bennett in the epigraphs, but using a unique term—and, importantly for me, the term used most often in the translation of Virgil’s *Georgics* completed by H. Rushton Fairclough and subsequently revised by G. P. Goold⁴—enables one to recognize not only the connections between georgic marvel and related scholarship, but also some subtle distinctions.

Order in a Fallow Field: Georgic Literary Criticism

Critics regularly define the georgic and distinguish it from the pastoral and epic modes by focusing on humans’ physical response to georgic places. Scholars of the georgic mode agree that humans respond to agricultural land with labor; in fact, one could go so far as to say that the labor requisite to farming serves as the organizing principle of the georgic mode.⁵ Such work yields crops, certainly, but just as important to Thomas L. Altherr, also the satisfaction that comes from completing a task and earning one’s rest: “the farmer must work hard and rejoice in weariness as a worthwhile recompense” (110). Over a period of years or perhaps generations, this pattern of work and rest produces an intense knowledge of the land. In a 2016 article, I argue that in georgics this kind of intimate knowledge manifests as a deep sense of place that I call “georgic environmentalism.”

³ Bladow and Ladino follow this “vein” of affect theory through Brian Massumi and Kathleen Stewart back to Gilles Deleuze’s work on Baruch Spinoza. For more on this tradition of Affect Theory, see Melissa Gregg’s and Gregory J. Seigworth’s *The Affect Theory Reader*, pages 5-6.

⁴ Though questions of translation from the Latin are valid and perhaps compelling, they are well beyond the abilities of this writer.

⁵ In his definitive *The Georgic Revolution*, Anthony Low explains that *The Georgics* “is preeminently about the value of hard and incessant labor” (8). Low uses the centrality of this characteristic to delineate between the pastoral mode that “celebrates play and leisure” and the georgic mode that “celebrates work” (4).

Writing in 1989, Alan Liu also indicates that work defines georgic, but he argues that an important consequence of agricultural labor is the repression of the past. In his oft-quoted formulation, Liu says that “georgic is the supreme mediational form in which to bury history in nature . . . it is the form in which history turns into the background, the manure, of landscape” (18). Liu thus contends that humans respond to georgic places by focusing on the present and the future as well as the landscape itself. However, his manure metaphor betrays a fundamental lack of agricultural experience. However much one might like for piled manure to fade into the background, its aroma and the buzzing flies drawn by the same tend to attract attention. Further, even after a farmer spreads or tills in manure, a discerning eye can sense its presence. Indeed, the visible effect of manure—improved plant growth and vigor—is the point. Manure provides, then, a poor analogy for the deliberate repression of the past Liu has in mind; rather, manure more accurately represents the constant cycling of past, present, and future inevitably involved in farming.

The work of both Kevis Goodman and of Karen O’Brien also challenges Liu’s argument. Goodman actually cites Liu before going on to argue in her 2004 monograph that a vital function of georgic poetry is to turn up the past. She points to the passage towards the end of Virgil’s *First Georgic* wherein an unnamed farmer’s plowing unearths the remnants of a forgotten war: “javelins eaten up with rusty mould,” as well as “empty helmets” and “giant bones” (l. 493-97). Recognizing the incongruity between this kind of dis-covering and Liu’s claims, Goodman argues that this passage highlights the inevitable surfacing of history in the georgic mode, and that the farmer represents the “sensory discomfort” that always accompanies such an encounter (3). Such moments, she says, generate “unpleasurable feeling” and “cognitive dissonance”—mental and emotional states that she finds integral to the experience of georgic places (3, 8). For Goodman, then, farmers respond to georgic places with difficulty; confronting the past seems to generate a kind of existential crisis. Goodman’s argument reaches a confluence with the work of O’Brien insofar as they agree about history informing the georgic mode. However, O’Brien associates no shame, guilt, or “cognitive dissonance” with the farmer’s encounter with history. Instead, she argues that georgic texts serve an imperialist function and designedly express the “elation of empire” (162). Humans respond to farms and farming, she suggests, by implicitly celebrating the battles that opened land for cultivation or that protect it from invasion.

Taken together, the last thirty years of scholarship on the georgic mode presents a frustrating tangle of human responses to georgic places. Working landscapes require labor, which produces weariness and satisfaction as well as, eventually, a sense of place (Altherr; Mannon). However, that same labor can also generate, depending on the critic you read, obfuscation of the past (Liu), an unpleasant encounter with history (Goodman), or a kind of national pride rooted in imperialism, past and present (O’Brien). The human figure on the land, then, plays a variety of roles: denizen of the local practicing a nascent deep ecology, patriotic citizen of the nation-state, lay historian in crisis over agricultural imperialism, or a simple earth worker with a gift for repressing the past altogether. How can one account for such multitudinous and divergent accounts of responses to georgic landscapes? Is there order to be found within a field that appears so overgrown? I contend

that the experience of marvel offers a promising beginning. Though scholarship on the georgic mode does not reach a consensus, each of the literary critics discussed above suggests that georgic experiences lead to encounters that humble; humans come up against something outside of themselves—whether a relic from a prior epoch, a sense of one’s connection to an imperialist nation-state, or an awareness of natural cycles that predate and will outlast a lifetime of work—that stifles the ego. At least two kinds of catalysts prompt such moments of marvel: 1) uncovering human-made relics, often associated with an epic past, and 2) observing biotic events. A thorough accounting of these triggers suggests that marvel belongs on the list of things produced by georgic landscapes and by the labor that occurs upon them.

Uncovering the Past: Georgic Archaeology

Because georgic landscapes are often seeded with artifacts, working the earth can lead to the discovery of relics that, in turn, prompt marvel. Indeed, Virgil models this sequence of events in the passage already mentioned. Having uncovered signifiers of an epic past, the farmer in *The Georgics* reacts with “marvel”—a word coding the sudden appearance of javelins and helmets as *miraculous*. Goodman reads the farmer’s marvel as an initial stage leading to discomfort.⁶ While provocative and even possible—*farmer* is no monolithic category and Virgil’s fictional *agricola* could have had any number of thoughts and feelings, including unpleasurable ones—I find Goodman’s approach narrow and restrictive. In particular, her reading doesn’t apply very well to the farmers I have known—thoughtful and intelligent men and women for whom marvel and miracles would be more likely to generate curiosity and fascination than an existential crisis. Maybe Goodman and I know very different sets of farmers. More likely, I think, is the possibility that I am focusing here on the farmer’s experience, while Goodman is also considering the poet’s or scholar’s imagination. While she and I agree that a georgic context provides an opportunity for history to break into human consciousness and demand consideration, I view this passage in *The Georgics* as a moment when the past functions as a positive or at least a neutral disruption—troubling perhaps, but maybe also amazing. Though surprise certainly confounds the farmer, he need not emerge from the experience feeling only cognitive dissonance. Indeed, affect scholar Brian Massumi suggests that this kind of “shock” eventually transforms into a “positive” feeling because it help’s one perceive “one’s own vitality, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability” (36). Jane Bennett’s formulation of enchantment as a blend of pleasure and the uncanny (*unheimlich*) that creates “childlike excitement” applies here as well: what begins as a neutral or negative feeling might later emerge as joy (5). Other encounters with relics—epic or not—in a georgic context underscore the potentially positive resonance of marvel.

My own mundane version of a discovery made while working the earth occurred in the backyard of a rental property on Puddintown Road in State College, Pennsylvania.

⁶ For Goodman, the farmer’s sense of his place on the land and in its history becomes complicated. Confronted by the bones of giants, she implies that the farmer realizes that his fields were once a battleground, and may have even been home to a different people than his ancestors.

I offer this narrative not because it provides any kind of final and absolute proof (it does not), but because my experience informs my perception and shapes this argument in a way sharing much in common with other scholars who have employed narrative scholarship.⁷ Weeks after tilling up the backyard sod to install a garden,⁸ my hoe clinked against another piece of metal. Reaching down into the soil, I found and lifted out a triangular piece of rusted metal, not much bigger than a silver dollar coin. Sharpened along two edges and blunt on the third, I had enough agriculture in my biography to recognize the tooth from a sickle-bar mower. Though I was at work on a dissertation exploring twentieth-century American literature and the georgic mode, I think I would have reacted with marvel anyway. I was, after all, holding tangible proof of the crop-field or pasture that preceded suburbia on this piece of earth. Though this tooth was designed to sever blades of grass and other plants, it connected me to a remote past—perhaps to the era of horse power and ground-driven implements; more likely to the more recent epoch of fossil fuel and power-take-offs. Either way, I thought harder about where I was and when I was. I looked around and imagined the textures of the landscape before the crop of single-family homes sprouted in the 1960s. That thinking resulted in deeper enlacement—situated in the same space but now being confronted by something from its history and the succession of human cultures upon it.⁹ On the one hand I had stumbled upon a forgotten, rusted, useless chunk of metal; on the other hand, I felt lucky. I still have that tooth and remember the marvelous surprise that accompanied its appearance.

A scene from a 1992 book by Peter Svenson titled *Battlefield: Farming a Civil War Battleground* also recalls Virgil's accidental archaeologist, but Svenson's account contains no ambiguity about the positivity of the moment. As one might predict from the title, Svenson fills his book with discoveries that flatten time; his own historical moment constantly intersects with the past. There is, though, an element of predictability to these encounters, especially given that relic hunters often set out to find artifacts on his property. As Svenson explains, "the creek that ran through the woods at the bottom of the ravine was a favorite wading place for children because of the cannonballs that turned up in the mud" (17). Clearly, the discoveries in Svenson's book are of a different kind than those of Virgil's farmer or my own. First, the cannonballs are not uncovered by plowing or by some other agricultural work; Svenson's grammar suggests that they do the turning themselves. Also, the appearance of the cannonballs does not interrupt the children; they are not transported out of their work into a different time and landscape. Instead, the children operate with expectation—their wading is an active seeking of the past.

Ron Rash's 2006 novel *The World Made Straight* also features Civil War relic hunting, and directly relates the manifestation of epic artifacts to other agricultural uncoverings. The characters in the novel return, repeatedly, to the site of the Shelton Laurel Massacre in Madison County, North Carolina, where in the winter of 1862-63,

⁷ See Slovic 28; Marshall 7, 8, 147; and Tallmadge 36.

⁸ I had a lenient landlord; we agreed that if the next tenant wanted lawn, I would seed the garden to grass.

⁹ I discovered the tooth from the sickle-bar mower before reading *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art, and Everyday Life*; however, my experience closely aligns with the affect "chain reaction" described by the editors. They write that "what affect . . . achieves is to . . . make us think" (2). From that thinking, the affected moves outward from self toward an engagement with the land and its history.

Confederate troops summarily executed thirteen prisoners.¹⁰ When the characters in *The World Made Straight* visit the site of the killings, their use of a metal detector helps them discover a pair of eyeglasses that they believe must have belonged to David Shelton, only twelve years old in 1863, the youngest of the victims. Though they are already awed by the place because it “feels more real than [they] are,” the appearance of the glasses prompts even greater reverence (86). They marvel about “the glasses literally rising up out of the past” (170).

Rash emphasizes the unearthing of the eyeglasses by including other moments when the past bursts into the present. The central character in the novel, Travis Shelton, seems born to contemplate the past. Arriving at the site of the massacre for the first time, he is struck by the gravitas of the place, but remembers feeling a similar sensation more than once before:

that was what he felt, not just now but over the years when he'd turned up arrowheads while plowing. Rubbing off the layers of dirt, he'd always had the bothersome notion the arrowheads were alive, like caddis flies inside their thick casings. He'd tried to make sense of the notion that time didn't so much pass as *layer over things*, as if under the world's surface the past was still occurring. Travis had never spoken of this feeling because it was something you couldn't explain or show, . . . But just because it was inside you didn't mean it wasn't real. (86; emphasis in original)

Like the metal detector he later uses, Travis seems to be an instrument particularly sensitive to the temporal dimensions of a place. Instinctually understanding himself as only the most recent layer of human culture, he notices or seeks evidence of the past, and marvels at his discoveries. His gift for historical thinking is nurtured by Leonard Shuler, a former history teacher aware of the connection between the Shelton Laurel site and other blood-soaked grounds. As Shuler and Travis undertake a kind of independent study together, the older man is surprised to see Travis linking Civil War atrocities to similar, international events, like the persistent unearthing of “cartloads of bones . . . planted outside Stalingrad in the winter of 1942” (Rash 272). Rash's novel provides, then, an insistent fusing of working landscapes and history; because the past refuses to remain buried, turning the ground and working the earth provide frequent opportunities for artifacts to appear and, in the process, to generate marvel.

Rash's novel also equates the deliberate search for relics with the kind of agricultural activities that inadvertently reveal them. Travis Shelton makes no distinction between the use of a metal detector at the site of the Shelton Laurel massacre and the plowing that uncovers arrowheads. Each activity generates a marvelous encounter with the past.

There are, of course, notable differences between the experience of the relic hunters in Rash's and Svenson's texts on the one hand and the earth worker in the *Georgics* on the other; however, they all arrive, finally, at marvel. The sweat-soaked plowman is interrupted by the intrusion of an epic past that demands consideration. He is wrenched out of the present and, in Virgil's description, his concentration on his work

¹⁰ Rash cites an account of the massacre in a July 1863 issue of the *New York Times* and acknowledges Paludan's book. See also Williams 178-79.

is replaced by marvel. Conversely, Civil War relic hunters operate with expectation; they explore a landscape with a known epic past in search of relics. Thus, their discoveries surprise them less than the unexpected appearance of javelin points and human bones. However, operating with expectation does not eliminate the possibility of marvel. Some might even argue that the act of searching builds anticipation, and thus heightens the emotional response to a discovery. Those who have walked a cultivated field after a sprinkling of rain in search of arrowheads would agree, I think, that the actual discovery remains marvelous. In short, surprise and delight can find even the deliberate seeker. Wading in a creek hoping to find cannonballs and wielding a metal detector in search of relics are linked to the moments when working the earth uncovers mementos: all these encounters involve bodies moving across the land and bumping into some kind of affective object that transports one's mind to an earlier era and prompts one to reflect on the succession of land use. The next section builds upon the idea that georgic affect includes more than the unexpected occurrence of marvel: the mode also models the search for and *cultivation* of marvel. Marvel results not only from accidental discoveries that interrupt farming; marvel also blooms forth from deliberate action.

Studying the Present: Georgic Agro-Ecology

In *The Georgics*, the uncovering of epic artifacts that transport one to a prior epoch provides only a single moment of marvel. Far more often, marvel results from the behavior of nonhuman actors common to agricultural landscapes. Though a farmer or horticulturalist works with a particular end in mind, the arrival of that moment, as well as the several stages leading up to it, nevertheless produces amazement and wonder that force one into an intense consciousness of the present. Virgil's account of grafting provides an example. After listing instructions, Virgil imagines what will result from a successful graft: "in a little while, lo! a mighty tree shoots up skyward with joyous boughs, and marvels at its strange leafage and fruits not its own" (II. 80–82). These lines reverberate with excitement: along with "marvels" as a verb, the word *joyous* and the interjection with its exclamation point underscore the surprise generated by a successful graft. In Virgil's poem, the surprise belongs to the plant itself due to its own production of "strange" leaves and fruit. How much more remarkable should the growth and fruiting of plants be to humans? Though utterly commonplace, germination and growth are marvelous.

For me, a bountiful tuber harvest exemplifies a biotic source of marvel. Uncovering full hills of Purple Vikings from the same garden where I unearthed the sickle-bar-mower tooth created joy. Though I had planted the chunks of seed potato and watched the plants grow, bloom, and wither, I did not know what the soil held. Finding those potatoes—orbs of sunlight in the form of carbohydrates—provided a sensation that we routinely undermine with words like *fruition* that make a metaphor out of something so solid and real.

My initial experience with growing sweet potatoes led to an even greater sense of gratitude. First-time homeowners since April 8, my wife and I spent our first month

cleaning, painting, and hauling furniture while we both also pulled the long shifts that accompany the end of the semester. The time we spent creating a triage garden felt like thievery—time stolen from piles of papers and exams, or from drop cloths, rollers, and brushes. This meant that many things went into the garden late. I was particularly skeptical about the sweet potatoes' chances. The young plants were so past their prime that the garden center had dropped their price, drastically, and I wondered if they were called "slips" because they were rapidly sliding toward compost. High temperatures, lack of rainfall, and our soil composition meant that the empty portion of our backyard garden patch had baked to a consistency more suited to tennis than tilling. Nevertheless, I socked in a double row using the best plants and wished them well. I didn't bother with the sorriest slips (many had lost all their leaves), but, as an experiment, potted them in a single quart sized container. After a week's time and occasional watering, I beheld the marvel of regeneration. What to do now? The garden was full, and dry. Hating not to reward these plants' determination, we set them out between the front walkway and a retaining wall. And they grew! (Proximity to a spigot certainly helped). When frost threatened, I bagged the best of the greens for the crisper drawer, and forked through the soil. Digging potatoes requires a meditative focus on the present; if the mind wanders into the past or the future, the digger is more likely to overlook or pierce a potato. Thus, I was living moment-to-moment as I turned the soil in search of tubers. The total harvest was nothing impressive, and none of the individual tubers were larger than a softball. Still, I was glad for each one: in part because the garden sweet potatoes all but failed, but also because even though the odds were stacked against these plants, they produced. Marvelous and tasty tenacity.

Though Virgil makes clear the marvels of plant life, the clear title-holders in *The Georgics* are honey bees. Especially in their remarkable unknowability honey bees embody marvel. In his description of swarming, Virgil refers to the "strange joy" felt by the hive as its numbers grow (IV. 51-66). Just as the Roman poet imagined a grafted tree would marvel at its own growth and production, here Virgil imagines that the bees and the hive experience a kind of delight. When the swarm emerges, humans are able to participate in the "joy" that is literally spilling out of the hive: Virgil notes that observers will instinctively "marvel at the dark cloud trailing down the wind" (51-66). Virgil's use of marvel to describe the human reaction to the sight of a traveling swarm likely grows out of the sheer number of unknowns involved in the apiculture of his time. Thus, Virgil suggests marvel as a response to the manifold mysteries of beekeeping.

In *The Queen Must Die* (1985), William Longgood echoes and expands on Virgil's association between honey bees and marvel. In fact, Longgood focuses on the "commonplace biological miracle[s]" he routinely witnesses among his bees that nevertheless leave him with unanswered questions (19). As he explains, many of their characteristics and behaviors present "profound mysteries" to the human observer (15). For example, apiculturists understand the mechanics of swarming and can even take steps to prevent it, but the specifics continue to confound: "who decides to swarm and when? Who goes and who stays? How is the selection made? . . . Who is in charge of logistics? . . . Efforts to resolve some of the mystery surrounding swarming have brought more

questions than answers” (130). Similarly, though scientists have described the “biological timetable” of individual worker bees—how they progress from one task to another over the course of their lives—and how they can abandon or reverse the progression when necessary, much less is known about how the culture that informs these tasks is transferred from one generation to the next (Longgood 15, 86-87; Gould and Gould 29-40). As Longgood points out, the bees that prepare the hive for winter have never seen or experienced that season before. And, thinking more broadly, the worker assumes each of her different vocations “without training or prior knowledge” and, just as remarkable, she is the offspring of “parents who have never performed the chores expected of her, neither having the organs nor the requisite intelligence for what is required of their offspring” (89). Rather than attempt to imagine the long course of evolution which could have selected the genetic coding for such wide-ranging yet precise instincts, Longgood prefers to revel in his befuddlement. He stresses that we just do not know—that the mechanisms or intelligence at work are beyond our comprehension.

The unknowability that Longgood associates with honeybees helps excuse errant theories about their biology. Without any way to discern the truth, writers, including Virgil, have generated and circulated some interesting myths about honeybees. The Roman poet, we now know, got a lot wrong about honeybees. He insisted, for example, that bees could be generated from the decaying carcass of a bull, and provided careful instructions in the *Fourth Georgic* for how to carry out this marvel (281-310). In the same book he wrote about the marvels of their reproduction: “You will also marvel that this custom has found favour with bees, that they indulge not in conjugal embraces, nor idly unnerve their bodies in love, or bring forth young with travail, but of themselves gather their children in their mouths from leaves and sweet herbs” (IV. 206-08). Part of Virgil’s wonder, then, comes from the bees’ total devotion to labor. Wasting no time on romance and sex, Virgil imagines that the bees devote themselves entirely to their work.

The Georgics thus persistently couples marvel to biotic events and agents. As much as Virgil and his contemporaries knew about the techniques involved in horticulture and apiculture, the actual mechanisms by which a grafted tree grew or a hive prospered were shrouded in mystery. Indeed, the degree of uncertainty is made clear by the instructions and theories (ridiculous by today’s standards) Virgil provided about some aspects of beekeeping.

Even an incorrect theory, though, illustrates the stance toward working landscapes that Virgil modeled in *The Georgics*. A farm was a space for labor, certainly, but it was also layered in mysteries that astonished and rendered one passive. Even casual observers would be confronted by something unexpected or something that exceeded their knowledge and understanding. Encountering the unanticipated and the unexplained, for Virgil and for us, invites one of two responses. We can fall back on rationality and seek a theory that explains a mystery. We will also, as Virgil frequently reminds us, be affected by the surprise of the unknown. Catching us off guard, at the moment it arrives marvel slips past our rationality and stirs the soul. To marvel—at a swarm of bees or a grafted pear—carries us out of ourselves. We are perhaps never more fully occupying the present than in a moment of marvel. It is only in the aftermath of marvel that we contemplate the

history of events and agents that produced the moment we just occupied. Initially, we do not take the time to think: we are taken out of time and placed in the now and the right here.

Conclusion: Marvel as Negative Hubris

Although I have treated epic and biotic triggers for marvel separately above, they can coalesce. In fact, on the Ohio farm of Louis Bromfield—a Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist who spent the final decade of his life developing a program of restorative agriculture¹¹—the remnants of an epic past created a horticultural curiosity. As Bromfield explains in the four works of nonfiction he published after World War II about his return to farming, much of the land he purchased was in a sorry state. Decades of careless agriculture had eroded much of the topsoil and exhausted most of what did remain. In *Out of the Earth* (1948), Bromfield describes his observations of one particular field that “looked yellow and miserable . . . except in irregularly placed large circular areas resembling gigantic polka dots” (100). Puzzled by these islands of “rich and rank . . . dark green” growth in an otherwise poor field, Bromfield searches for an explanation. “By the end of the summer, after much reflection,” he says,

I hit upon the reason for the handsome, healthy green polka dots. At some time, certainly generations earlier, perhaps a century, when the forest had been cleared away, the brush and logs had been piled and burned, and where this had occurred there had been created great residues of potash . . . so great that they showed up generations later in a field where otherwise the potash had been used up[.] (101)

Bromfield’s marvel prompts him to reconstruct a timeline linking the pioneers’ epic work clearing the “wilderness” to his own era. His careful observation of his land lead him to notice, and puzzle over, the “green polka dots.” Contemplating them further, he imagined the history of human succession on the land. His marvel transported him back through the era of exhaustive agriculture and deposited him at the moment when pioneers cleared and burned the forests.

Whether epic or biotic or some combination—gigantic bones or germination, cannonballs or swarming honeybees, or burn-pile shaped green polka dots of lush growth—what all these triggers for marvel have in common is the response: an altered state of mind valued by generations of American nature writers. Virgil’s farmer becomes “awake” in the sense that Thoreau had in mind in *Walden*. Already “awake enough for physical labor,” the plowman becomes further roused into, if not “a poetic or divine life,” then at least “effective intellectual exertion” (Thoreau 134). Similarly shaken out of themselves, William Longgood and others who have watched bees swarm “uncenter [their] minds from [themselves]”; they escape from their own anthropocentrism and

¹¹ For an introduction to Bromfield, begin with Beeman’s and Pritchard’s chapter in *A Green and Permanent Land*.

perceive a world not ruled by “Lord Man,” but one in which they are “plain member and citizen” of a vast and ancient biotic network.¹²

The experience of georgic marvel, then, functions as a kind of negative hubris that undermines anthropocentrism by reminding us of the past and by calling our attention to other actors and agents. As Louis Bromfield contemplated the plants in his field and the pioneers who cleared, piled, and burned the forests that preceded his farm, he recognized his place within a succession on the land. He understood—along with others who experience marvel—that his own role is part of a far broader context and situated at the end of a long history.

In its challenge to our self-centeredness, georgic marvel parallels the sublime, but relates to a different land use category and represents a distinct response. First, two of its best known theorists—Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—describe the experience of the sublime as an altered state of mind.¹³ Burke, in his 1757 *Enquiry*, says that the sublime experience occurs when “the mind is hurried out of itself” (57). According to Philip Shaw, Kant points to a similar mental failure occurring when the sublime frustrates or shuts down “our ability to discern boundaries or spatial or temporal limitations” (78). Kant’s emphasis of an “*unboundedness*” that overwhelms the mind and Burke’s description of a mind that has abandoned itself sound, to me, like different ways of describing the altered states of mind outlined by Thoreau, Muir, Jeffers, and Leopold. And it may be that the sublime, as described by Burke, Kant, and others, found its way to these American writers. The sublime was, after all, integral to the nineteenth-century “Nature Writing” of the British Romantics and the Transcendentalists and has, consequently, continued to inform writing about the nonhuman world.

Tracing out etymology reveals another connection between the marvel described by georgic writers and the experience of the sublime. The OED provides *astonishment* as a synonym for *marvel*, and in the former word’s description of a person being transformed into a stone, we approach the feeling of being frozen in place—“a momentary inhibition of the vital forces”—that Kant labeled a first stage of an experience of the sublime (98). Reading further into the OED definition of *marvel*, we encounter the words *bewilder* and *terrify*. Burke insisted on the centrality of terror to the sublime; he argued that the “source of the sublime” is “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (36). Burke goes on to say, however, that the

¹² I quote from Robinson Jeffers’s “Carmel Point”, l. 13; John Muir’s *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* (69 and 75), and Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic” (204). Muir, writing in 1867, repeatedly derides human arrogance and insists that humankind should not “value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation” and, therefore, should view other life forms as our “earth-born companions and our fellow mortals” (78-79). Jeffers echoes this sentiment throughout his poetry. He concludes “Carmel Point,” for example, by insisting that “We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident / As the rock and ocean that we are made from” (ll. 14-15). Finally, Aldo Leopold delivered his best known articulation of humankind’s connectedness with the rest of life in “The Land Ethic,” but elsewhere in *A Sand County Almanac* he makes a similar point: “men are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution” (109).

¹³ Rather than enumerating the subtle distinctions between Burke’s and Kant’s theories of the sublime, my goal is to highlight the basic tenets upon which they agree. Those interested in a more detailed discussion of Burke’s and Kant’s formulations—as well as the work of their predecessors and successors—should consult Shaw’s *The Sublime*.

sublime can also include delight, so long as “danger or pain” maintain “certain distances” and do not, therefore, “press too nearly” (36-37)—an idea Kant echoes when he calls the “feeling of the sublime” a “negative pleasure” because the mind is alternately “attracted by the object” but also “always repelled” (98). Together, Burke and Kant formulate the sublime experience as a state of being frozen between fear and attraction, awe and terror.

The role of terror marks some of the schisms between the sublime, Jane Bennett’s idea of “enchantment,” and georgic marvel—central to the first, involved in the second, virtually nonexistent in the third. Bennett situates “enchantment” as related to the sublime. She writes that “[f]ear . . . also plays a role in enchantment” (5). However, that role must be very minimal given that enchantment is “a state of interactive fascination, not fall-to-your-knees awe.” Thus, “enchantment” sits between the terrifying impact of a sublime experience and an encounter with georgic marvel. Returning one last time to the farmer in Book I of *The Georgics*, note that fear is completely extraneous from the scene. He is surprised, certainly, and maybe even experiencing “cognitive dissonance,” but he is neither threatened nor in danger. The date of publication for Virgil’s *Georgics* also indicates that his work represents either a predecessor to Burke and Kant, or a separate inheritance. The other examples of georgic marvel I discuss make even clearer the absence of sheer terror. Georgic marvel, then, generally involves intrigue and curiosity rather than fear. Furthermore, any common ground is largely metaphorical since the places we associate with the sublime and the georgic mode tend to be distinct. The highest altitudes of the Alps are not a georgic landscape, and even scholarship on the “Swamp sublime” places us off the farm.¹⁴

The value of georgic marvel adheres, finally, in the places where it most readily manifests: those working landscapes that we do not typically associate with the sublime, and with which twenty-first century Americans struggle to relate. Due in part to theories of the sublime and the centuries of literature it inspired, more and more of us have been coached and coerced towards delighting in wild, rugged, and pristine landscapes. In 2016, nearly 331 million recreation visits to parks supervised by the National Parks Service set a new record.¹⁵ There are, however, a whole suite of landscapes—some of them terrifying—in which we do not delight and that we prefer not to visit (the factory farms and fields of monocultures that produce the bulk of our calories, pine plantations in the Southeast, mountaintop removal sites in West Virginia), as well as places we do not regard as places (the interstate highways that carry us to National Parks, for example). These agribusiness sites, managed forests, mines, and roadways are, however, among the places where we need to invest more of our attention, according to a small cadre of ecocritics and environmental historians.¹⁶ If we deplete and degrade the places we use, National Parks and Wilderness Areas will not remain protected for long.

The “ordinary” landscapes of our lives are also sites that have attracted attention from practitioners of affect theory. Writing in 2011, Lauren Berlant describes the

¹⁴ See Monique Allewaert’s 2008 article.

¹⁵ The National Park Service website indicates that 330,971,689 recreation visits were made in 2016. See <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/visitation-numbers.htm>.

¹⁶ See the article by Hess, and the essays by White and by Cronon.

“ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories” (10). Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson—who cite Berlant in the introduction to their collection of essays on affect—refer to the common places where we live and work as a “landscape of relations” that provides fertile ground for affect: such places foster “the intersection between ordinary life and extraordinary encounters and exchanges with the world around us” (10).

In large swaths of the United States, private woodlands are the kind of ordinary landscapes where extraordinary encounters can occur. I grew up in a rural county where forested acres outnumbered cleared. One of my first jobs was as a logger’s apprentice. During this time, my “exchanges with the world” were sometimes quite literal. I would drip sweat onto the earth; pine resin would coat my skin and splinters and briars would pierce it. In short, the work was dependably dirty, difficult, and dangerous. It was also occasionally marvelous. Forests are full of wonders and, fortunately for me, my teacher was a logger who thought more about what he could leave in the forest than what he could remove. The trees we felled and skidded and sold were primarily those senescing toward death. One such tree illustrated the “convergence of many histories” described by Berlant. The tree, a white oak more than 150 years old, forked into multiple trunks about thirty feet above the ground. Even after the tree had been felled, it was difficult to tell just where the trunk divided. My aim was to cut the tree just below the forks, but my first attempt revealed twin sets of concentric growth rings. Between the two forks, I saw something unexpected, and it took me several moments to determine what I was seeing. Over the course of the tree’s life, its forks had created a kind of pocket between them. Apparently a squirrel or a succession of squirrels had hoarded acorns in the pocket. Over time, leaves and some of the acorns had rotted into dark, nearly black humus. Other acorns, perhaps of a more recent vintage, were still intact. When the chain of my saw had cut through this cache, it created a vivid kaleidoscope of transected acorns held in place by the humus. I marveled at the sight. Thinking that this wonder would make a one-of-a-kind table, I began another cut in the trunk—this one many inches from the first one. When the tip of my saw neared the rocky ground, I saw sparks fly. I swore, assuming that I had dulled and perhaps ruined my chain. After finishing the cut, I turned off the saw and inspected the chain. Here was another marvel: the chain was not dulled. How could this be? My teacher had a theory. “Could be a bullet,” he said. Rolling the section of log out for a better view, we spotted a bright metallic shine revealing that my chain had cut through a bullet along its long axis. Wonder of wonders! We spent minutes discussing the odds. Had I made the cut a quarter of an inch in either direction, I would have missed the bullet. If the tree had not grown as it did and collected the acorns, I would have never made the cut. The bullet’s size indicated that someone fired it from a high-caliber rifle; how did that bullet lodge thirty feet up in a tree? That bullet and the story of its discovery symbolize the way that working landscapes are “landscapes of relations.” The interplay of tree and soil, squirrel and tree, hunter and woods, logger and forest all tangled together to produce affect.

Embracing the idea of georgic marvel could revise the terms of our personal relationships with private woodlands as well as lawns and backyards, but also has the potential to yield much larger change. What if we began actively seeking marvel at home?

Georgic marvel, like Bennett's "enchantment," is "a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies" (4). Pursuing outdoor re-creation within walking distance from the places we live would elevate the esteem of gardening, horticulture, and forest management. Thinking about our home ground (however we define it) in georgic terms would enrich our lives. We would see the land around homes as more than "the grounds" and more than accents that add "curb appeal": any patch of earth could become a space for physical labor that could generate exercise and food. Occasionally encountering marvel would transform that physical labor from "drudgery" into a potential pathway to intellectual invigoration, enlightenment, and joy.

Jane Bennett argues that "it is too hard to love a disenchanting world" (12). Part of the value of enchantment—or wonder or marvel—is that it provides "a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life" (5). Bennett argues that such moments of joy can "propel ethics" (4). For her, the formula is simple: "presumptive generosity, as well as the will to social justice, are sustained by periodic bouts of being enamored with existence" (12). Georgic marvel, like enchantment, invites one to revel in living and, if Bennett is correct, also helps to cultivate ethics. Marveling in even the mundane patches of earth helps us recognize that every place has an ecology and a history as well as ethical standing. Exactly what that would mean for the most extreme working landscapes is hard to say. Factory farms and mountain-top-removal sites that are too terrifying to be sublime also seem designed to stifle marvel. But for the places situated between protected wilderness and National Parks on the one hand and the most blasted and desecrated working landscapes on the other, georgic marvel offers one path towards an affective relationship with the nonhuman world. Working the earth creates encounters, including marvelous ones that help us love the world.

Submission received 8 January 2021

Revised version accepted 7 September 2021

Works Cited

- Allewaert, Monique. 2008. "Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone." *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 2, pp. 340-57.
- Altherr, Thomas L. 1990. "'The Country We Have Married': Wendell Berry and the Georgic Tradition of Agriculture." *Southern Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 105-15.
- Beeman, Randal S. and James A. Pritchard. *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century*. University of Kansas Press, 2001.
- Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Berberich, Christine, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson. "Introduction: Affective Landscapes." *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art, and Everyday Life: Memory, Place, and the Senses*, edited by Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 1-17.
- Bladow, Kyle and Jennifer Ladino. *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018.
- Berlant, Laruen. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

- Bromfield, Louis. *Out of the Earth*. Harper, 1948.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited by Adam Phillips. 1757. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Cannavo, Peter F. *The Working Landscape: Founding, Preservation, and the Politics of Place*. The MIT Press, 2007.
- Conlogue, William. *Here and There: Reading Pennsylvania's Working Landscapes*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013.
- Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, Norton. 1996, pp. 69-90.
- Goodman, Kevis. *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Gould, James L. and Carol Grant Gould. *The Honey Bee*. Scientific American Library, 1988.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Gregory J. Seigworth. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Hess, Scott. "Imagining an Everyday Nature." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2010, pp. 85-112.
- Jeffers, Robinson. *The Wild God of the World: An Anthology of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Albert Gelpi, Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by Walter S. Pluhar. 1790. Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Liu, Alan. *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*. Stanford University Press, 1989.
- Longgood, William. *The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men*. Norton, 1985.
- Low, Anthony. *The Georgic Revolution*. Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Mannon, Ethan. "Georgic Environmentalism in *North of Boston*: An Ethic for Economic Landscapes." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2016, pp. 344-69.
- Marshall, Ian. *Story Line: Exploring the Literature of the Appalachian Trail*. University Press of Virginia, 1998.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Muir, John. *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*. 1916. Sierra Club Books, 1991.
- O'Brien, Karen. "Imperial Georgic, 1660-1789." *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*, edited by Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry, and Joseph Ward, Cambridge University Press. 1996, pp. 160-79.
- Paludan, Phillip. *Victims: A True Story of the Civil War*. The University of Tennessee Press, 1981.
- Rash, Ron. *The World Made Straight*. Henry Holt and Company, 2006.
- Ray, Janisse. *Drifting into Darien: A Personal and Natural History of the Altamaha River*. The University of Georgia Press, 2011.
- Shaw, Philip. *The Sublime*. Routledge, 2006.

- Slovic, Scott. *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. University of Nevada Press, 2008.
- Svenson, Peter. *Battlefield: Farming a Civil War Battleground*. Faber and Faber, 1992.
- Tallmadge, John. "Toward a Natural History of Reading." *ISLE* 7, vol. 1, 2000, pp. 33-45.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Civil Disobedience*. 1854. Penguin, 1983.
- Virgil. *Eclogues, Georgic. Aeneid I–VI*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Rev. G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- White, Richard. "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work For a Living?': Work and Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, Norton, 1996, pp. 171-85.
- Williams, John Alexander. *Appalachia: A History*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.