

“[F]earful Hard Work”: The Possibilities and Pitfalls of a Victorian Eco-Georgic

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Abstract

As a form of literature that engages with the lived realities of farming life, the Georgic offers an insight into the close working relationship that is possible between humans and nature, a relationship that may in turn be described as ecological in its concern with adaptation and sustainability. This essay focuses on three examples of a Victorian Georgic literature that highlight both the possibilities and pitfalls of making this association: Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), which illustrates life at Talbothays Dairy, and later, on a marginal sheep/corn farm on the uplands at Flintcomb-Ash; Richard Jefferies's *Amaryllis at the Fair* (1887), which depicts a struggling Wiltshire smallholding; and Hubert Crackanthorpe's short story, "Anthony Garstin's Courtship" (1896), which focuses on Garstin's life in a hill farming community. All three narratives were set during a period when innovations in "high farming" effected a shift away from self-sufficient and potentially sustainable forms of farming to a modern, mechanized, and systematically exploitative approach to the land; the forms of farming these texts describe are, by contrast, survivals of an earlier period. As these narratives illustrate, more traditional alternatives to high farming nevertheless involved back-breaking and often poorly paid work. Moreover, and while these farms were passed over in the move to high farming, they were still exposed to the vagaries of a now globalised market, and the periodic depressions that were a result: whatever ecological balance these alternative forms of farming embodied, it was threatened by these socio-economic pressures. Nevertheless, these narratives offer an insight into what an eco-Georgic might mean, as a form of writing properly attentive to the challenges of reconciling human and nonhuman needs, and accommodating both within a global, capitalist framework. These works are, furthermore, alert to the difficulty of how best to (re)present those challenges; each marks a shift away from conventional realism and towards new literary modes better able to confront the idealising, pastoral expectations of an urban readership. As such, these works emerge as prototypical forms of a modern, self-reflexive form of (eco-)Georgic mindful of the practical difficulties of sustainable living, and flexible enough to find innovative ways of representing them.

Keywords: Hardy, Jefferies, Crackanthorpe, high farming, sustainable.

Resumen

Como forma de literatura comprometida con las realidades vividas en la agricultura, el geórgico ofrece un entendimiento de la cercana relación de trabajo que es posible entre humanos y naturaleza, una relación que puede describirse posteriormente como ecológica en cuanto a su preocupación por la adaptación y la sostenibilidad. Este ensayo se centra en tres ejemplos de la literatura geórgica victoriana que destacan tanto las posibilidades como las dificultades de llevar a cabo dicha asociación: *Tess, la de los d'Urberville* (1891) de Thomas Hardy, que ilustra la vida en Talbothays Dairy y, después en una granja marginal de ovejas y maíz en las tierras altas en Flintcomb-Ash; *Amaryllis at the Fair* de Richard Jefferies (1887), que describe una parcela de Wiltshire en apuros; y el relato corto de Hubert Crackanthorpe "Anthony Garstin's Courtship" (1896), que habla de la vida de Garstin en una comunidad agricultora en una colina. Las tres narrativas se desarrollan en un periodo en el que las innovaciones por una agricultura más eficiente resultaron en pasar de una agricultura autosuficiente y potencialmente sostenible, a un enfoque hacia la tierra moderno, mecanizado y sistemáticamente explotador. Los métodos de agricultura que describen estos textos son, en contraste, supervivientes de un periodo anterior. Tal y como ilustran estas obras, las alternativas más tradicionales en agricultura conllevaban, sin embargo, un trabajo más agotador y a menudo mal pagado. Además, y mientras que estas granjas adoptaban métodos más modernos, aún

estaban expuestas a los antojos de un mercado ya globalizado, y a las depresiones periódicas que de él resultaban: cualquier equilibrio ecológico que estas formas de agricultura encarnaran se veía amenazado por estas presiones socioeconómicas. No obstante, estas narraciones ofrecen un conocimiento de lo que podría significar el eco-georgico como una forma de escribir adecuadamente atenta a los desafíos de reconciliar las necesidades humanas y las no humanas, y de acomodar ambas dentro de un marco global capitalista. Además, estas obras alertan sobre la dificultad de cómo (re)presentar esos desafíos mejor: cada una marca un cambio al alejarse del realismo convencional hacia nuevos modos literarios mejores a la hora de afrontar las expectativas pastorales idealizadas de unos lectores urbanos. Como tales, estos textos surgen como formas prototípicas de un tipo de (eco-) georgico moderno y autorreflexivo que es consciente de las dificultades prácticas de la vida sostenible, y lo suficientemente flexible para encontrar maneras innovadoras de representarla.

Palabras clave: Hardy, Jefferies, Crackanthorpe, agricultura eficiente, sostenible.

According to David Fairer, the Georgic embodies a “mutual respect between man and nature” (202), rooted in the lived reality of farming life, a respect that points to the possibility of an *eco-Georgic*. Might the Georgic, a literary genre that focuses on agricultural life and labour, help us understand how best “to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility” (Garrard 117)? Unlike other literary modes, such as the “time-suspended pastoral” (205), Fairer argues that “[i]t is Georgic that really struggles with nature, recognises diversity, tries to understand how an interdependent system can be *sustained* and properly *exploited* (and knows how the two go together)” (212; emphasis in original). In other words, Georgic literature recognises that human beings must learn from nature to get the best from nature. Cultivation involves care; it requires respect (Fairer 202) and it implies responsibility (205); as such, Fairer claims, the Georgic has “something to contribute” (214) to “any truly committed ecology” (215).

As Fairer also observes, there is a long tradition of Georgic writing, reaching back to Hesiod and Virgil—and in particular, to Virgil’s *Georgics*, his “great poem of husbandry and cultivation” (Fairer 202)—and extending into the eighteenth-century verse whose ecocritical re-evaluation is Fairer’s focus. In the looser sense of writing about agricultural life, the Georgic tradition was no less a part of nineteenth-century literature, at a time when the Victorians had created a system of “high farming” that was (according to James Winter) both productive *and* sustainable (16): while industry inflicted “horrific injuries” on the land, argues Winter (17), high farming developed a “dynamic balance” with it (18). Indeed, Colin Duncan contends that this form of farming was “perhaps the most ecologically benign among all the highly productive farming systems the world has seen” (54). In turn, high farming was celebrated in poems such as Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Northern Farmer, New Style” (1896), and in the novels of R. S. Surtees, such as *Hillingdon Hall* (1844) (Perry, “Prospect and Retrospect” 157–158), pointing to the possibility that their work might form the basis of a Victorian eco-Georgic.

If we look more closely, however, it is clear that high farming was by no means as sustainable and benign as Winter and Duncan suggest. High farming is usually associated with a so-called “Golden Age” of British agriculture dating from about 1840 to 1880; it marked the transition to a highly-capitalized and intensive form of farming that was, as

Tom Williamson points out, “high-input, high-output” (139). Whereas the “improved” farming of the previous century was “essentially self-sufficient” (Williamson 139), high farming required access to distant markets for the materials (such as artificial fertilizers) on which it depended (Fussell 87). High farming was, like contemporaneous developments across Europe, “land saving and labour saving” (Van Zanden 230); it used a range of innovations such as a subsoil ploughing and better drainage (Fussell 83–85) to reclaim land and improve productivity, and new and improved forms of tools, such as cultivators, rollers, and harrows (Fussell 91), to reduce its dependency on the rural workforce. Increasingly, it also resorted to mechanisation.

Consequently, high farming required high levels of investment and borrowing (Perry, “Prospect and Retrospect” 156, 160). By extension, it also required a “transition to thoroughgoing capitalism” (157), which “implied a complete reversal of [...] traditional attitudes towards land” (Moore 550). These improvements notwithstanding, however, high farming was still relatively labour-intensive (Perry, “Prospect and Retrospect” 160), and while the situation amongst the labour force was slowly improving, the age of high farming was also one of “undoubted poverty” among farm-workers (165). Moreover, high farming did not stand apart from industry. The arrival of the railway underpinned its success, since it opened up new regional and national markets (Schwartz 231) while allowing the import of products like the new fertilizers. Those fertilizers were themselves dependent on industry and industrial innovations such as the steamship: for example, superphosphate required manufacture, while guano was sourced from South America (Fussell 87). In addition, while earlier, interlocking and self-supporting forms of mixed farming constituted “a closed circuit”—and “this was its whole beauty and symmetry”—high farming marked a shift to an open one, itself akin (argues F. M. L. Thompson) to a “manufacturing industry” (64).

Finally, high farming was part of a “globalisation of agricultural commodities” (Schwartz 234) and a much larger change in the “spatial relations of production and consumption” (236). This would have crucial consequences for British high farmers later in the century. Railways made high farming profitable, but it was the railways that, a few decades later, helped open up the American and Canadian prairies, leading to “dramatic price declines” (Schwartz 229) and engendering a European wide agricultural depression (230). In Britain, that depression was further sharpened by the capital-intensive nature of high farming; as P. J. Perry notes, much of the capital that had been invested in agriculture was written off “before it had paid for itself” (“Financial Foundations” 365).

As this brief discussion underlines, high farming was analogous to, interlinked with, and might even be described as an extension of industrial capitalism and a scientific modernity (Wilkinson 139). While Duncan therefore describes it as “at least one example of modern agriculture successfully embedded in nature” (Duncan 55), high farming in fact marked a decisive shift away “from a less profit oriented outlook” to a much more systematically exploitative and instrumentalized approach to the land (Perry, “Prospect and Retrospect” 157). There was nothing in and of itself ecologically sensitive or environmentally mindful about the process. For example, Winter argues that high farming “tended to preserve many of the hedgerows inherited from the past” (16); in fact, land

reclamation often involved “grubbing out” hedgerows (Perry “Prospect and Retrospect” 164), substituting plantations for woods (165), and bringing areas of peat bog (untouched for millennia) under cultivation. “The totality of such activities transformed the landscape of rural England” (Perry “Prospect and Retrospect” 165), but not necessarily in a way that signalled an early appreciation of what we now think of as “the environment.”

However, high farming did not entirely supplant earlier forms of farming, as writers such as Thomas Hardy, Richard Jefferies, and Hubert Crackanthorpe recorded. The aim of this essay is, therefore, to explore their work and, from it, construct an alternate Victorian Georgic focusing on the forgotten or orphaned approaches to the land they described and on their own problematic relationship to the moment of high farming—and its aftermath. Might their work form the basis of an eco-Georgic? In the first section of this essay, I examine Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), a novel set in the midst of an agricultural depression, which highlights the “fearful hard work” (289–90) that Victorian women experienced labouring in the fields. In the essay’s second section, I turn to Richard Jefferies’s *Amaryllis at the Fair* (1887), which is by contrast set during the mid-Victorian “Golden Age.” *Amaryllis* focuses on the relatively privileged life of a small farm-owner: here, in the character of Iden, Jefferies’s expresses his conviction that “the keystone of English country life [is] a master whose heart is in the land” (*Amateur Poacher* 141). Iden is deeply familiar with and invested in his farm, and profoundly mindful of the human and nonhuman life entangled with it, suggesting an environmentally sustainable way of life at odds with high farming; yet Iden is also in debt, and “wore the raggedest coat ever seen on a respectable back” (*Amaryllis* 4). As Jefferies underlines, even the most attentive relationship to the land is no safeguard against the depredations of a corrosive capitalism.

I conclude the essay with a reading of “Anthony Garstin’s Courtship” (1896), a neglected short story by Hubert Crackanthorpe (1870–1896). Here, Crackanthorpe uses naturalist techniques to achieve a singularly brutal and emphatic reading of the Georgic in which he probes the psychological impact of the situation sketched in Jefferies’s novel: what happens to a hill-farming family when its very existence is and always has been economically and socially marginal? Even if this form of farming is “sustainable,” what is the human cost of its maintenance?

As I argue, the work of these three Victorian writers deepens our understanding of the Georgic—and problematizes its reconstruction as an eco-Georgic—in three main ways. Firstly, it reminds us of the harsh and complex realities of farming life for those who were engaged in it. At the same time, and secondly, it casts the contention that any form of farming is inherently ecological or environmentally-minded into doubt: the very arduousness of farming life underlines the reasons why the farming community was already seeking to industrialize its processes, collapsing the arguably illusory “balance” on which its sustainability depended. Thirdly, the work of these writers subverts any reading of the Georgic as itself a simplification or idealisation of farming life. To the contrary, their work challenged the expectations of a largely urban readership, a challenge that was embodied in the form that work took; as I argue, it reflects the recognition that the conventional realist mode was too obviously focused on more

privileged, middle-class characters and too little interested in the complex, constitutive, and perhaps even deterministic entanglements of people and place. One response entailed a shift toward naturalism, a literary mode that deliberately engaged with difficult and controversial subject-matter, and that approach can be felt in both Hardy’s depiction of Tess’s fate at the hands of “the President of the Immortals” (*Tess* 397), and in Crackanthorpe’s fin-de-siècle short story. Another, quite different response lay in the kind of literary impressionism on which Jefferies drew, eschewing “the pedestrian progress” of the conventional plot (Keith 139) for a series of vignettes that give the reader real insight into the continuities of farming life, and Iden’s predicament.

As I conclude, the willingness of these authors to depict the drawbacks and difficulties as well as the pleasures and possibilities of a farming life has important consequences for an understanding of the eco-Georgic and its potential, not as the literary idealisation of an existence which is self-evidently sustainable and ecologically benign, but as a literary mode which responds to and wrestles with the problematic process of remaking the non-human world to serve fundamental human needs. Only with that reality in mind can an eco-Georgic can make a meaningful contribution to the question of how best to live upon this earth.

Hardy, Tess, and Hard Labour

The work of Thomas Hardy has always been associated with his depiction of rural Wessex, loosely centred on Dorset, and of lives lived in close connection to the land. Here, I focus on *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and on three moments when the novel’s eponymous central figure is shown in a Georgic context.

The first of these is at “green, sunny, romantic” Talbothays Dairy (*Tess* 286), where, Tess forms a contented and integral part of “Dairyman Crick’s household of maids and men” (128). Small but prosperous and apparently self-contained, Talbothays Dairy has been overlooked in the move to high farming, which focused on wheat (for bread) and livestock (for the new urban markets in meat) (Hoppen 14). Nonetheless, Talbothay’s prosperity depends in part on the same transport infrastructure that made high farming possible and (at first) prosperous. As Robert Schwartz shows, Dorset was astonishingly well served by railways (239–40)—a function of the intense and often inefficient competition between private companies (236)—and “proximate rail transport favoured [...] dairy farming” (241). Thus, Crick can take advantage of the expanding urban market for milk, as Tess sees for herself when she helps Angel deliver milk to a railway station (186), bewildered by the thought that it will be drunk by Londoners the very next morning (187; see also Martell 77–78, 85–86). Moreover, and since milk production could not be supplanted by foreign competition, Crick’s dairy has survived the agricultural depression of the later Victorian period, when the novel is set. Protected by that prosperity, there is a sense of “communal ownership” at Talbothays (Ebbatson 135), and while the work is (as the Georgic insists) often hard, Tess is happy, and happily lost in what she does. As the narrator carefully explains, most milkers “dug their foreheads into the cows”; “a few—mainly the younger ones—rested their heads sideways” (150).

This was Tess Durbeyfield’s habit, her temple pressing the milcher’s flank, her eyes fixed on the far end of the meadow with the gaze of one lost in meditation [...] Nothing in the picture moved but Old Pretty’s tail and Tess’s pink hands, the latter so gently as to be a rhythmic pulsation only, as if they were obeying a reflex stimulus, like a beating heart. (150)

Here at Talbothays, Tess falls in love with Angel Clare. In this novel, however, Hardy pursues the naturalist impulse he discussed in “Candour in English Fiction” (1890), with its demand that “the position of man and woman in nature [...] be taken up and treated frankly” (133). Angel and Tess marry, but separate almost immediately, a disaster precipitated by the revelation of Tess’s earlier, unwanted relationship with Alec (*Tess* 225). Tess feels she cannot return to Talbothays, where she “had never in her recent life been so happy” (129), and eventually finds a winter’s work on the exposed chalk uplands around Flintcomb-Ash (281). It is part of Hardy’s purpose to emphasise that Wessex is not one, but several “intrinsically different” landforms (102), each of which is worked in a different way; the “stubborn soil” (282) around Flintcomb-Ash is particularly demanding, and fit (Marian insists) only for corn and turnip-like swedes, the latter used as animal fodder. It is, in marked contrast to Talbothays, “a starve-acre place” (284), cut off from the infrastructure that enables Crick’s dairy to thrive and, in the midst of a depression, survive; for farms such as Flintcomb, the effects of depression were felt much more severely (Schwartz 242–3).

This drives the farm’s use of cheap labour, often hired on a short-term basis. “Women’s labour,” Hardy wrote in his article on “The Dorsetshire Labourer” (1883), “fills the place of a man at half the wages” (186): their cheapness, as the narrator insists in *Tess*, makes their labour profitable (284)—no matter how hard the work. Swede-hacking in “desolate drab” fields (285), Tess and her fellow field-women “slaved in the morning frosts and afternoon rains” (287). “It was so high a situation,” observes the narrator, “that the rains had no occasion to fall, but raced along horizontally upon the yelling wind, sticking to them like glass splinters till they were wet through. Tess had not known till now what was really meant by that” (286). As the narrator adds, such work “demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valour” (286). The work is no less arduous when, later in the season, heavy snow forces the women inside to carry on with reed-drawing, whereby reeds are prepared for thatching; it is “fearful hard work—worse than swede-hacking” (289–90).

As it becomes clear, what these tasks have in common is that they are all given to women. As Hardy also points out in “The Dorsetshire Labourer” (1883), women were considered better suited to them because tasks such as these required less strength, more thought, or greater dexterity (186–87). As Tess’s experience underlines, the reality is somewhat different. When Tess is unable to finish the reed-drawing work allotted to her, Izz and Marian help out, but first Tess and then Izz break down (*Tess* 293): “Marian alone, thanks to her bottle of liquor and her stoutness of build, stood the strain upon the back and arms without suffering” (293). The work is, in other words, brutally hard, and so hard that Marian is not alone in her recourse to alcohol as a source of temporary solace.

Tess's unrelenting master at the farm, Groby, has his own reasons for being entirely unsympathetic towards her. The farm's financial difficulties are, nevertheless, very real, which drives its unrelenting exploitation of cheap "female field-labour" (*Tess* 284). Not only were farms like this one passed by in the "Golden Age," and therefore unable to secure investment and hence generate improvement, but they were caught up in the depression that followed, their predicament made still more acute because many of the farmers were themselves tenants, whose income was in part lost to rent. For Tess, Izz, and Marian, argues Roger Ebbatson, the effect is that "exchange-value dominates," and they are reduced to and regarded as assets, valuable only to the extent that they are capable of producing so much labour in a day (135).¹

Two points follow. The first relates to Fairer's contention that the Georgic embodies a "mutual respect between man and nature" (202), a respect that flows from a hard-working and intimate relationship with the land, with "its reading of the signs, its temporal responsibility" (212). In the working world that Hardy describes, however, that "mutual respect" and sense of "temporal responsibility" has been supplanted by the much simpler imperative to get by and where possible turn a profit: consequently, the narrator notes, "the tenant-farmers [are] the natural enemies of tree, bush, and brake [underbrush]" (*Tess* 281), all of which interfere with the opening out of the landscape into larger fields that might maximise yield. Hardy's description of Flintcomb-Ash as "the remains of a village" (281) further emphasises what this marginal way of life entails; it is a village "uncared for either by itself or by its lord" (285). The second, related point is that a life of hard work struggling with "a recalcitrant, fallen nature" (Fairer 205) sets its own agenda for a farmer like Groby: how best to minimise the labour it entails, and reduce costs. Machinery is the obvious answer, and come March, Tess encounters a daunting manifestation of it in the form of a steam-threshing machine (*Tess* 324–25).

Once again, argued Hardy in "The Dorsetshire Labourer," it was women who were co-opted to work with and feed this kind of machine (187); once again, the reason (notes the narrator in *Tess*) is "probably economical" (327); and once again, it is Tess who finds herself given this most unpleasant of tasks, driven to keep up with "the red tyrant that the women had come to serve" (325). "It was the ceaselessness of the work which tried her so severely," notes the narrator (326); "for Tess there was no respite" (327). As Hardy observed in "The Dorsetshire Labourer," "[n]ot a woman in the county but hates the threshing machine. The dust, the din, the sustained exertion demanded to keep up with the steam tyrant, are distasteful to all women" (187).

For the farmer, however, the advantages were obvious: a long and protracted process could be accomplished more cheaply and speedily. Arguably, the appearance of machinery such as this constituted a decisive moment for Victorian agriculture, when "the logic of renewal [was] overwritten by an industrial logic of expansion" (Martell 73), shattering the ecological balance of earlier, self-contained forms of farming; and here, at least, Flintcomb-Ash has participated in that wider shift towards a more efficient use of

¹ In one respect, at least, the farm might have been fortunate; depression was later deepened where high farming had taken a hold, because high farming meant high rents (Perry, "An Agricultural Journalist" 130).

the land. But the general point is that the very nature of farming—as a working encounter with a self-willed, non-human reality—predisposes it to seek labour-saving efficiencies. As Timothy Morton argues, the intrusion of the steam-threshing machine into Tess's world (3–5) does not mark some decisive break between ecologically sound and unsound forms of farming, threatening, as Ronald D. Morrison contends, "the ongoing imbrication of humans into their environment" (209); it is simply the continuation of what Morton describes as a twelve-thousand-year old agro-logistical system of exploitation "that seems so real we call it Nature" (5).

This also has important implications for our understanding of the Georgic, and the ecological uses to which it might be put. "[G]eorgic's concern with harnessing nature to human use" (Fairer 204) is also, almost by definition, a concern with finding new, more efficient, and easier ways to exploit the soil. "Georgic's interest in new industrial processes and machinery," Fairer acknowledges, "would seem to render futile any attempt to locate ecological principles in georgic writing" (203–4). Yet this may, in fact, be the value of the Georgic: as the Georgic mode emphasises, humans need to eat, and Georgic literature is important precisely because it does not avoid that reality. Perhaps we should not therefore regard the Georgic as the literary expression of a mode of being that is inherently sustainable, but as an expression of an embodied existence, and everything that it entails, including the inevitable and problematic process of remaking the non-human world without compromising the needs of future generations. New machinery might well make it easier to farm; but it need not mark the end of a relationship predicated on the desire to establish and maintain a dynamic but enduring balance between humans and nature.

Such a relationship depends, nevertheless, on its maintenance over time: it requires lived experience as well as (if not more than) technological expertise. As Hardy's story underlines, there was another threat to an "intimate and kindly relation with the land" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 181), a threat encapsulated in the perambulations of Tess, Marian, and Izz, all sometime members of Crick's household: the increasingly "nomadic habit of the labourer" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 181), which was itself a function of economic uncertainty (174). "[I]t must be remembered [wrote Hardy] that melancholy among the rural poor arises primarily from a sense of incertitude and precariousness of their position" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 174). "In the Wessex of the major novels," observes Jeremy Hooker, "long-settled communities are disintegrating and the protagonists [like Tess and her family] are migrants;" "in Hardy's Wessex, history drives out myth" (Hooker 109). This shift towards a more mobile workforce and more precarious terms of employment eroded the relationship between labourers and the land they worked, as "the character of natural guardian" was sunk "in that of hireling" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 181): "they have lost touch [wrote Hardy] with their environment" (182).

There were gains, nevertheless, as Hardy was at pains to point out: often, mobility enabled labourers to earn more, while "widening the range of their ideas" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 181). To Hardy, this opening out of horizons itself constituted a form of progress, an antidote to parochialism and provinciality, and sometimes a "remedy" to "the

evils of oppression and poverty” (182) that Tess herself experiences so graphically. (It is her family’s poverty which, at the novel’s outset, drives the young Tess to seek out the affluent Alec, with fateful, and ultimately fatal consequences for both.)

What Hardy’s bleak and naturalistic Georgic underlines, therefore, are the human costs of a close relationship to the land, costs that, in a modern and enlightened age (“Dorsetshire Labourer” 181), problematize the idea of “long local participancy” (182), and by extension, the adaptive, reflexive, and above all sustainable relationship to the land that an eco-Georgic implies. But as Hardy’s description of Tess’s experiences also underlines, the main reason why such a relationship was fragile at best and at worst increasingly untenable lay in the conditions created by capitalism itself. Money is the root of the problem, as Richard Jefferies was also, and perhaps particularly aware. While Jefferies’s final novel, *Amaryllis at the Fair*, acknowledges the inevitability of capitalism’s intrusion into a settled relationship with the land, however, it also casts that relationship in ways that are themselves decidedly more positive. Here, we can see more fully a working out of the Georgic as a creative engagement with farming life, a working out that embodies a sense of that life as constructive and productive and not solely as arduous or oppressive.

Jefferies, Iden, and the Life of the Small Farm

The work of Richard Jefferies overlaps with Hardy’s; the two writers were contemporaries, met briefly, and were similarly concerned with labouring life (Keith 140–41). Although scholarly interest in Jefferies has tended to focus on his nature writing, ecocritical attention is now being paid to other aspects of his journalism, such as his writings about agricultural labour and rural life. As Morrison reminds us, the word “ecology” (first coined in 1866) derives its meaning from the Greek terms for the study of the home or household, and Jefferies’s non-fiction also explores the fate of the farming homestead (205) against the broader questions of British agriculture’s sustainability (217). Yet Jefferies’ novels remain more or less neglected, although they too offer an important insight into the nature of Victorian farming, the question of its sustainability, and of (eco-)Georgic’s relationship to it; they too embody a sense of “ecology as the study of the homestead” (Morrison 205), and in so doing, they anticipate a modern, eco-Georgic (216). Here, I explore *Amaryllis at the Fair*, the culmination of Jefferies’s attempts to reconcile “rural reality and literary art” (Keith 138).

Jefferies’s solution to that representational challenge is suggested by Amaryllis’ own name, which Jefferies took from Virgil’s *Eclogues*. In the *Eclogues*, Virgil extends and deepens the pastoral, bucolic poetry of his Greek predecessor Theocritus by introducing a new note of transformation, upheaval, and even “catastrophic loss” to the depiction of rural life (Davis ix). In this way, the *Eclogues* give witness to both continuity and change, vividly realised through a series of ten scenes or vignettes. So, in *Amaryllis*, Jefferies combines two narrative threads, and sets them against a background of rural and seasonal continuity. On the one hand, there is the story of Amaryllis herself, Virgil’s shepherdess in the *Eclogues*, who is shown growing into womanhood and falling in love. On the other,

there is the story of Iden, the most recent (and perhaps the last) in a long line of small farmers at the fictional Coombe Oak, a figure who, beset by debt, cannot (or will not) accommodate the changes that modern society demands of him. Both stories take their place within a narrative structure that constantly emphasises the rituals and routines of farming life, its pleasures, its difficulties, its challenges, captured through scenes and in conversations that echo Virgil’s ten eclogues.

Amaryllis is set during the time of Jefferies’s own childhood—that “Golden Age” of relative agricultural prosperity—and closely modelled on his own experience growing up on a “struggling smallholding” (Williams 193) at Coate Farm in Wiltshire, a dairy farm where his father owned the freehold (Drew 182). For Jefferies’s family, these were lean years. Evolving farming practices favoured larger farms, not family owned small ones (Williamson 17); Coate Farm stretched to “about forty acres, all of it grass, feeding about eight cows” (Thomas 35), and by the time Jefferies wrote his novel, his father had been forced to sell up the land his family had worked for generations (Keith 16–17). (Ironically, and as we have seen in the case of Hardy’s depiction of Talbothays, dairy farmers fared comparatively well during the later depression; see also Perry “An Agricultural Journalist” 128.) As the novel suggests, small farmers such as Iden were being supplanted by proprietors without a living interest in the land, figures who were better suited to business, and better able to make the land pay. Iden, by contrast, is “hopelessly impractical” (Keith 140) in matters of finance—and “[t]here are no wolves like those debt sends against a house” (*Amaryllis* 156).

Work Iden therefore must; but work is in the nature of the Georgic. As Fairer argues, the Georgic reflects both the dynamism and the “stubborn materiality” (206) of the “ever-changing” world (209), and the ceaseless labour demanded by “a struggle with the entropic principle” (204). “Hard labour conquered all,” Virgil insists in the *Georgics*, “and poverty’s oppression in harsh times” (Book I, ll. 145–46). “Always at work,” thinks *Amaryllis* as she watches Iden, “and he could talk so cleverly, too, and knew everything” (*Amaryllis* 10). Like the citizen-farmer in the *Georgics*, Iden embodies “[i]ngenuity, effort, vigilance, experience, respect, and above all *care* in husbandry (Virgil’s *curas*)” (Fairer 205). “In truth Iden built for all time, and not for the little circumstance of the hour” (*Amaryllis* 257). Thus, when he has new gate made, it is “meant to last for years, rain and shine, to endure any amount of usage” (257). This “was at once his strength and his folly,” the narrator declares; “he made too much of little things” (257). Yet this attentiveness is very much the point. Within the “non-hierarchical, practical, functioning system” that the Georgic valorises, “attention is paid, sometimes digressively, to what seems trivial or inconsequential” (Fairer 205). Iden is himself minutely attentive to the life around him. He is in turn rewarded by the plenitude that (as Virgil put it in the *Georgics*) the “Earth unprompted, supreme in justice, pours out” (Book II, l. 459). “Flowers, and trees, and grass, seemed to spring up wherever Iden set down his foot: fruit and flowers fell from the air down upon him” (*Amaryllis* 190). “It was his genius to make things grow—like sunshine and shower; a sort of Pan, a half-god of leaves and boughs, and reeds and streams, a sort of Nature in human shape, moving about and sowing Plenty and Beauty” (190). So “[i]n summer time,” notes the narrator, the farmstead “was a glory to see: a place

for a poet, a spot for a painter, loved and resorted to by every bird of the air. Of a bare old farmhouse he had made a beautiful home" (163). It is, as Jefferies elsewhere wrote, the "epitome of human economy" ("Future of Farming" 687). "And all this," the narrator later adds, "had dropped out of the pocket of Iden's ragged old coat" (*Amaryllis* 201).

Iden is, observed Edward Thomas, "a part of the creative power of the world, at one with earth and wind and sea" (277), a figure who embodies the reciprocal respect which Virgil celebrates in Book II of the *Georgics* and Fairer identifies as a defining feature of the form: Iden has made his peace with a stubborn natural world (Fairer 205), and accustomed himself to the struggle its cultivation entails; he has learnt how best to realise "a rich livelihood from her soil" (Virgil, *Georgics* Book II, l. 460); and he does so in a way that respects and sustains the equally rich diversity of nonhuman life that congregates at Coombe Oak. But as the frustrated *Amaryllis* recognises, the very act of cultivating the soil with such comprehensive care fatally compromises the family's ability to make the farm pay. Even as Iden carries on a tradition that extends ten generations back into the past, an imperious world is demanding that he make modern, commercial sense of it. As Jefferies wrote in "The Future of Farming," farms were "no longer entirely self-supporting"; it was necessary to "make a 'profit'"; "to keep account books, a thing never done before" (688). "[T]he farm," he wrote, "must become a business" ("Future of Farming" 688). For Iden, the problem is compounded by the small scale of his holding: "only those who have lived in the country," notes the narrator, "could fully comprehend the hopelessness of working a small farm" (*Amaryllis* 177). Perhaps the future did indeed lie in large estates that were better able to weather economic variations and more effectively exploit the land, as Jefferies elsewhere conceded (Keith 27, 137). In this sense, *Amaryllis at the Fair* is a frank acknowledgement that a way of life such as Iden's is doomed.

Here, readers might also have detected a parallel with Virgil's *Georgics*, with its celebration of the smallholder, bulwark of the republic, a figure who was nevertheless disappearing from the Roman landscape as great estates (frequently worked by slaves) took over. Yet Jefferies himself is not prepared to allow his own, modern world its triumph over Iden. *Amaryllis at the Fair* concludes with an "Interlude in Heaven" (*Amaryllis* 260). *Amaryllis* is allowed to love (no matter how hopelessly) the infirm Amadis, and Iden is allowed to hold on to his farm for a little longer, in spite of "the procession of creditors" (169) gathering at his door. Behind Jefferies's decision to defer the apparently inevitable outcomes of his two narrative threads lies a refusal to allow a cash-nexus to be substituted for the intrinsic value of the relationships (both human and non-human) that criss-cross the farm.

As Fairer emphasises, "Georgic never underplays" the difficulties of the farming life, the responsibilities it imposes, or the qualities it demands of those who undertake it (205). In the same way that the Georgic emphasises the challenges of farming itself, so an eco-Georgic necessarily highlights the difficulties (perhaps even the impossibility) of situating and sustaining such a way of life in a modern, industrialised world, driven by capitalist economies. Thus, and while Jefferies's depiction of Iden and his working life corresponds to the kind of Georgic that Fairer describes, it also illustrates the impossibility of ever separating out that life from the capitalist forces with which it is

caught up. “Anthony Garstin’s Courtship” takes up these themes, but transposes them from Jefferies’s Wiltshire to the Cumberland (today Cumbria) of Crackanthorpe’s own family home, where the difficulties of making a farm pay and the true costs of such an existence are still more acute.

Crackanthorpe, Garstin, and (Human) Nature

Collected posthumously in Crackanthorpe’s *Last Studies* (1897), “Anthony Garstin’s Courtship” shares a focus on the lived realities of farming life with *Tess* and *Amaryllis*; like *Tess*, it embodies “a realist-naturalist literature of ‘disagreeable details’” (Greenslade 8); like *Amaryllis*, it brings to bear a proto-modernist literary impressionism; more so than either, it offers a singularly acute understanding of (human) nature. These features of the story come together in a compelling dissection of a hill-farmer’s unlikely and ultimately self-deceiving pursuit of love. However, the story is equally important for its insistence on the difficulties of raising sheep in a remote fell, the customs and beliefs of those who live there, and their own, inextricable entanglement in a wider network of socio-economic relations: hill-farming may have been passed by in the race to develop high farming, but it is nevertheless a part of an increasingly networked, globalised system of agriculture. Moreover, there is nothing necessarily environmentally mindful about this form of farming, which tends to denude hillsides, and produce a kind of pastoral monoculture; memorably, one British environmentalist has described the result as “sheepwrecked” (Monbiot 158).

As Crackanthorpe’s story underlines, hill-farming is physically demanding work, made still harder by the upland environment, but that work must nevertheless be made to pay; yet “of late years the price of stock had been steadily falling; and the hay harvests had drifted from bad to worse” (Crackanthorpe 280–81). The story opens with a description of Garstin gathering sheep on the fell-top, a prose-poem that captures his lonely isolation in the midst of a “great, grey, desolate [and] treeless country” (272); the only other “sign of life” is a “streak of white smoke from a toiling train [...] creeping silently across the distance” (272), ominous symbol of a modern world and its own intrusive demands. Like the land itself, Garstin is “spare and angular” (272), and weathered by long days and nights on the hilltops (272). His widowed mother, owner of the farm, is no less “hard and taciturn” (272): “[h]er face was gaunt and sallow; deep wrinkles accentuated the hardness of her features” (273).

Mother and son are, the narrative explains, the most recent representatives of a long line of hill-farmers: “generation after generation had tramped the grey stretch of upland” (279–80), “a race of few words, ‘keeping themselves to themselves,’ as the phrase goes; beholden to no man, filled with a dogged, churlish pride” (280). Pride is in their nature: it is that pride which has sustained Garstin through adversity, including the loss of his own father, who “died one night upon the fell-top, he and his shepherd, engulfed in the great snowstorm of 1849” (280). It is pride that sustained his mother, who, when her brother mishandled the farm’s finances, took over its management, and “cleared off every penny” of debt “within six weeks” (280). It is pride which, in turn, will be the architect of

their own downfall. Nearing middle-age, Garstin contrives a marriage to the young and beautiful Rosa Blencarn, who, pregnant out of wedlock by a man she now detests, is forced to accept Garstin’s proposal. “[G]rimly exultant” at his success in securing Rosa’s hand, and aglow with “stolid pride” (289), the deluded Garstin pictures a future in which he will spoil his young wife with luxuries and hill-farming itself will flourish (292). He then perjures himself before his mother (293–94), who in “a bitterly ironic denouement” (Ettorre 53), tells him bluntly that, “from this day forward, [...] ye’re na son o’ mine” (Crackanthorpe 294), and disinherits him.

Garstin’s mother is convinced that God Himself—the same God whose hand Garstin sees at work in helping him contrive his marriage—will punish him for what he has done. She assumes, nonetheless, that Rosa will be grateful for the marriage, and content with it. Like her son, she does not see the more likely outcome: that the marriage will never be a success. “[T]oughened by long habit of a bleak, unruly climate” (283), Garstin seems so perfectly suited to the lived realities of hill-farming that it is almost as if he has evolved with it. But the reality is also that this same solitary and unrelenting way of life makes him a poor choice for Rosa, just as her own relatively privileged, outgoing, and sociable upbringing in the city has made her supremely ill-suited to be the wife of a hill-farmer; “the marriage between Anthony and Rosa is,” Ettorre observes, “simply a bargain, a convenient choice in the face of the censorious attitudes and narrow horizons of a rural community” (54).

As Crackanthorpe’s story highlights, a life of lived intimacy with the land can come at a cost, a cost which is still more apparent if we compare the Garstins to Iden, who combines more educated and enlightened attitudes with his own intimate understanding of the land and its workings. That difference is signalled by speech itself: Garstin and his mother share a dialect form of speech, but seem trapped within it. Iden can and does shift in and out of dialect (*Amaryllis* 7)—as does Tess (*Tess* 21)—signifying that opening out of horizons to which Hardy referred in “The Dorsetshire Labourer.” The Garstins are, by contrast, trapped within the horizon imposed on them by their long imbrication in the valley, a horizon emphatically embodied in the fell-side that, like “a monstrous, mysterious curtain” (Crackanthorpe 273), overshadows the farm; in this “stolidly immobile” community (277), life carries on as it has always done.

Crackanthorpe’s grimly persuasive short story underlines the problem to which Greg Garrard draws attention in his own discussion of the Georgic: that a stultifying, even inescapable “social conservatism” (Garrard 122) may be the result of the kind of intimate involvement between people and place that the Georgic describes. Yet even the remotest communities cannot abstract themselves from the socio-economic shifts to which Rosa’s education and the distant glimpse of a steam train both testify. Even as this little community turns inward, scorning returning natives like Rosa for their “airs an’ graces” (Crackanthorpe 281), it remains connected to the wider world. Garstin may believe that “the succession of bad seasons, the slow ruination of the farmers throughout the country, were but punishment meted out [by God] for the accumulated wickedness of the world” (285), but the workings of the market are as much a factor here as they are in *Amaryllis*

and in *Tess*. In the worlds of all three stories, "a capitalist rural order" is in place, and good times and bad are alike "filtered through this dominant system" (Williams 188).

Conclusion: Towards a Victorian Eco-Georgic

Georgic literature is concerned with "adaptation and co-ordination," Fairer argues (205); it recognises that "natural needs and human ones are interdependent" (210); and it insists that "human beings can 'learn from' nature in the very act of 'imposing on' it" (208). As such, he maintains, the Georgic encodes an inherently ecological awareness: "the underlying georgic premise that we are living in nature's context, not vice versa," embodies an "ecological commitment" (Fairer 209), that points to the practical possibility of creating a sustainable existence.

But as Fairer also acknowledges, the Georgic's concern with the lived particularity of daily life complicates any tendency to idealise the life it describes: it makes the Georgic self-aware and self-critical, minded to find new ways to express itself that better record or reflect the problematic realities of dwelling. "It is this complexity that georgic negotiates" (Fairer 209). This is no less true of the instances of Victorian Georgic discussed in this essay. Each reflects the diversity of the Victorian farming scene, and the survival of older, alternative forms of farming into the era of high farming (Perry "Prospect and Retrospect" 159). Yet even these survivals were affected by the developments that made high farming possible, not least the development of transport infrastructure that opened up British agriculture more fully to a global market. Sometimes, those developments were fortuitous; Talbothays Dairy benefits from the railways; the farm at Flintcomb-Ash can at least call on a steam-threshing machine to speed up an otherwise protracted process. Often, however, the advent of high farming created new difficulties, even for those farms which did not participate directly in the move toward it. In the highly capitalised climate created by high farming, Combe Oak is too small to survive, even as a dairy, and even in a "Golden Age" of agricultural prosperity; farming at Flintcomb-Ash has simply been made more marginal both because it is less profitable (sheep/corn rather than wheat/ cattle) and geographically distinct from the infrastructure that might have opened it to new markets and made it attractive to investors; Garstin's hill farm is even more isolated and marginal, yet itself exposed to fluctuations in a market now increasingly driven by foreign competition. For these farms, survivals of an earlier era, competition becomes the common problem, as British agriculture came under pressure from "the agricultures of other self-consciously modern (or modernizing) societies" that were (still) more tractable for capitalism (Duncan 55).

As these narratives also underline, the alternatives to high farming were not necessarily more ecologically mindful. On the credit side, we might point to the pastoral plenitude of Talbothays, or Iden's proto-ecological investment in a deep future that meets human and nonhuman needs; on the debit side, Flintcomb-Ash is shaped by the need to secure some kind of profit at any cost to hedgerow or woodland, while Garstin's sheep have stripped the valley and ecologically impoverished the uplands. Furthermore, and whether sustainable or otherwise, each of these forms of farming entails a life of

dauntingly hard work. “Look at the arm of a woman labouring in the field,” wrote Jefferies in “One of the New Voters”; “it tells of continual strain” (244). The reality of rural life, he added, “is labour” (“One of the New Voters” 244), and this too was a reason why an increasingly mobile labour-force abandoned a rural life entirely, and why, in turn, farmers everywhere sought out new forms of innovation and mechanisation to save on labour.

As these fictional depictions of farming life underline, Victorian writers were mindful of the myriad difficulties that beset the farming community of their time, as well as the more positive possibilities that a farming life might involve. As their work highlights, farming communities were often exploitative, and themselves exploited by larger, capitalist forces that prioritized “economic expansion over ecological renewal” (Martell 87); in their engagement with what Garrard calls “the uneven terrain of real work” (145), these narratives challenge any idealised notion that a life of (hard) labour in the fields is necessarily desirable or enlightening, or that contemporary “English agronomic customs” (Duncan 54) were of themselves “ecological” (in the sense of sustainable). Furthermore, these narratives constitute a dynamic and evolving literary response to the representational challenge of their subject matter: all three writers enact a shift in literary mode away from realism as they seek a more effective means of capturing the difficult realities of an agricultural existence, in turn challenging and taxing their readers. But as such, their work also points to the possibility—and the possible benefits—of an eco-Georgic, as a mode of thinking and writing whose concern with the specific, actual, and particular operates as a productive, deconstructive challenge to unhelpful idealisations and abstractions. As Fairer himself contends, the Georgic’s interest in compromise and contingency “hinders it from the big vision, the saving answer” (209); with this in mind, it is possible to glimpse more positive possibilities at work within these texts, texts that with their hard-headed reading of rural life point to a more effective and responsible realisation of what ecological awareness must mean.

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