

## Reclaiming *The Land*, Restoring *The Garden*? Georgic in the Modernist Moment and Beyond<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

To scrutinize georgic's position between progress and tradition, this article will focus on the way those forces become legible in poems composed between the end of the First and Second World Wars. I will examine Vita Sackville-West's long georgics *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946) to argue that they indicate the scope of what is possible in the genre given the challenges of both modernity and modernism. Her poems demonstrate that, in seeking to navigate the changing material and cultural landscapes, the labour of maintaining an imaginative tradition can be both productive and problematic. The article will assess the way Sackville-West positions herself as a writer in relation to the figures of the agricultural labourer and gardener and to the classical tradition, as well as her claims about the language in which georgic can and should be written. Each poem will also be compared to the poetry and criticism of her modernist contemporary T.S. Eliot, with particular reference to *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* and his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Engaged in a struggle on both agricultural and cultural fronts, *The Land* and *The Garden* are prone to inconsistency and, even by their own standards, failure. But in these failures as well as their successes both poems are committed to finding a way of writing human engagement with the land and literature. As such, they can be instructively read in the present moment to prompt questions about the way we engage with land and language in the Anthropocene, negotiating between competing modes of writing and more broadly between natural and human agency.

**Keywords:** Sackville-West, tradition, labour, T.S. Eliot, modernism.

### Resumen

Para examinar la posición geórgica entre el progreso y la tradición, este artículo se centrará en cómo esas fuerzas se hacen legibles en poemas compuestos entre el final de la Primera y la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Examinaré los largos geórgicos de Vita Sackville-West, *The Land* (1926) y *The Garden* (1946) para argumentar su lugar en el género ante los desafíos, tanto de la modernidad como del modernismo. Sus poemas demuestran que, al navegar por un paisaje cambiante, tanto material como cultural, la labor de mantener una tradición imaginativa es a la vez productiva y problemática. El artículo evaluará cómo Sackville-West se posiciona como escritora en relación con las figuras del trabajador agrícola y el jardinero y con la tradición clásica, así como sus declaraciones sobre el lenguaje en el que el geórgico puede y debe escribirse. Cada poema se comparará también con la poesía y la crítica de su contemporáneo modernista T.S. Eliot, con especial referencia a *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets* y su ensayo "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Comprometidos en un doble frente, agrícola y cultural, *The Land* and *The Garden* tienden a la inconsistencia e, incluso para sus propios estándares, al fracaso. Pero tanto en estos fracasos como en sus éxitos, ambos poemas se comprometen a encontrar una forma de escribir el compromiso humano con la tierra y la literatura. Como tales, pueden leerse de manera instructiva en el momento presente para plantear preguntas sobre cómo nos relacionamos con la tierra y el lenguaje en el Antropoceno, negociando entre modos de escritura que compiten entre sí y, más ampliamente, entre la agencialidad natural y la humana.

**Palabras clave:** Sackville-West, tradición, trabajo, T.S. Eliot, modernismo.

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In advocating that ecocritics reconsider the genre of georgic, David Fairer refutes the view that “its fascination with mastering nature and exploiting the earth’s resources for human ends makes it appear at best an innocent trailer for the terrifying global depredations that concern us today” (203). A contrasting danger, though, is that a genre concentrating on agriculture is likely to be more backward- than forward-looking; as Raymond Williams puts it, “English attitudes to the country, and to ideas of rural life, [have] persisted with extraordinary power, so that even after the society was predominantly urban[,] its literature was [...] still predominantly rural” (2).

Because it attends to the detail of agricultural labour, however, georgic is poised between these two tendencies. At its best, the genre may even offer instructive, practical accommodations between human and natural agency, and could today enable us to imagine “the potential of alternative epistemologies to get out of the predicament of fatalistic dystopias often revolving around the Anthropocene debate,” which Maria Paula Diogo et al. find in the notion and practice of the garden (6).

Just as Virgil’s original *Georgics* were written in response to conflict, Vita Sackville-West composed her long poem *The Land* (1926) following the First World War, and *The Garden* (1946) during the Second. Her georgics seek a mode of writing that aligns with agriculture and horticulture, conscious of but often resistant to advances in technology and society, and to the avant-garde aesthetics of modernism as exemplified by T.S. Eliot. In this article, I will assess how Sackville-West situates her poems, both in the longer tradition of georgic and in relation to manual labour, as well as contrasting her mode of writing with that of Eliot. Insofar as her poems engage with global crisis, in the form of the World Wars, they can also serve as a test case for what the georgic might now do in the Anthropocene.

### **Back to *The Land***

The inclusion of labour in the rural imaginary is the characteristic quality of georgic, and in the opening lines of *The Land*, Sackville-West aims to establish a commonality between this labour and literary endeavour, writing of a “Classic monotony, that modes and wars / Leave undisturbed, unbettered” (3). She uses the artifice of iambic pentameter, albeit a rough one, to announce the artlessness of the poem, envisaging a continuous tradition that is to be honoured by dutiful adherence. More specifically, she aligns the traditions of agriculture and poetry with classical models: “Homer and Hesiod and Virgil knew / The ploughshare in its reasonable shape [...] never bettered though man’s cunning grew” (*Land* 89).

Already, however, this presents a problem: it cannot suggest that the work of these classical poets was *itself* monotonous (with due deference to the experience of generations of schoolchildren), so it perhaps instead suggests that “monotony” is the way to continue the georgic tradition into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In declaring her own work to be a “mild continuous epic of the soil” (*Land* 3), Sackville-West collapses distinctions between her work and nature’s, between her own poem and the classics, and between present and antiquity, asserting a timeless continuity. But the phrase “epic of the soil” also conflates

the genres of Homer and Hesiod, of Virgil's *Aeneid* with his *Georgics*. By expanding the subject of agriculture into the scope of the epic, she tacitly overwrites the latter's common preoccupation with conflict.

Sackville-West is working from a tradition of thought that read "Virgil's path from pastoral [*Eclogues*] through didactic [*Georgics*] to epic [*Aeneid*]" as Denis Feeney puts it; in this analysis, the "*Georgics* become the middle term, bonded with the *Eclogues* as poetry of the country, and with the *Aeneid* as poetry [...] concern[ing] the order that humans strive to impose on the intransigency of their world". Sackville-West's own middle course in *The Land* recognizes the effort of rural life without explicitly acknowledging its historical context. What references there are to war are themselves put to work as metaphor, such as the "regiments" and "brigade[s]" of "battlemented" flowers (*Land* 46; author's italics). The poem is an attempt to plough on through and beyond the war. As with Virgil, "[w]e may infer [... the] belief that the farmer's existence is an embodiment of the idea of 'swords into ploughshares': in other words, the moral life is peaceful," in R.O.A.M. Lyne's words (*Georgics* xxvi). Like the original *Georgics*, *The Land*, "fell upon a time of war weariness and country-longing, combined with disturbing social changes" (282), Elizabeth W. Pomeroy points out; furthermore, Ian Blyth asserts that the "lack of modernity" in *The Land* "would have been a significant contributing factor to the poem's popularity at the time it was published" (19).

However, while Virgil's career was regarded as "a poetic instantiation of rhetorical theory's division of style into the low, middle and high" (Feeney), in her self-declared "mild epic" Sackville-West is consciously working against this trajectory. She conceives of her poetry not as an art but a craft, in the line with agricultural trades—the artisan's "plain particular poetry" that uses "language, smithied at the common fire" (*Land* 81). It is as though she is turning words from ploughshares: rather than elevate agriculture to an epic tone, she instead seeks an earthly level and a corresponding register.

In this much, she is working against a particular traditional conception of the genre expressed in Joseph Addison's late-17<sup>th</sup>-century "An Essay on Virgil's *Georgics*," which maintains that "[t]he precepts of husbandry are not to be delivered with the simplicity of a ploughman, but with the simplicity of a poet" (154); "much less ought the low phrases and terms of art that are adapted to husbandry, have any place in such a work as the *Georgic*, which is not to appear in the natural simplicity and nakedness of its subject, but in the pleasantest dress that poetry can bestow on it" (158). Instead, Sackville-West chooses to acknowledge the hardship of rural life, because she regards her own verse valuable insofar as it resembles that effort.

As if to affirm her acquaintance with the labour of farming, Sackville-West repeatedly stresses the work-like qualities of her verse: her "pedestrian measure gently plods," corresponding with the fieldsman who "Trudges with steady and unchanging gait" (*Land* 4); or, because "Nothing but toil shall serve" in the practice of farming, she will "sing / Without illusion" (*Land* 8). Consequently, moments of the poem that might be too poetic are subverted, as though literary style is itself suspect; for instance, the moment that "Some snatch of song [is] born" and a youth makes vows to his lover is put literally beyond

bounds, where “Only the moon shall look behind the hedge [... and] hear the whispered pledge,” (*Land* 72, 73).

For all her attention to agricultural labour, Sackville-West did not herself participate; indeed, “[m]uch of her agricultural information came from an encyclopaedia of farming given to her by her husband Harold Nicolson (for she possessed little knowledge of farming),” Pomeroy explains (277). In asserting the value of rural work, she is also setting herself a goal, to try to honour the rural labourer’s toil through her poetics. Her concern is with preserving and sustaining an earlier mode of writing to record conventional agricultural practices: the expression of traditional work *in* a traditional work.

### **The Tradition of Labour and the Labour of Tradition**

In a 2011 lecture on *The Land*, Molly Hite maintains that the book “carries on a Victorian tradition of competent, readable and vaguely patriotic poems.” So even while Sackville-West does not seek to poeticize the experience of the rural worker as Addison prescribes, she still sought continuity with poetry of a previous generation. That continuity is conscious: Pomeroy observes that *The Land* “was written partly in reply to [T.S.] Eliot’s *The Waste Land*” of 1922 (281), and Sackville-West herself remarks in a 1928 article on “The Formidable Mr. Eliot” that “[w]hen this poem first appeared [...] I admit that I was completely baffled by it. [...] I said ‘If this is modern poetry, then give me the old.’” (589).

The contrast between the poets’ respective visions is clear in Sackville-West’s choice of title, which disposes of “waste” to favour the productive and patriotic associations of what thereby remains. Further allusions to Eliot’s poem throughout *The Land* suggest the relationship she conceives between the two works: when she invokes the “Makers of land, one of the nameless line / That fenced, and tilled, and overcame the waste” (*Land* 23), she not only refers to the effort that agriculture requires but hints that the same effort is needed to overcome Eliot’s vision. Even the fritillaries “staining the waste / With foreign colour” (*Land* 49) may be a glance at Eliot’s poem and its range of quotations from outside the Western European canon.

Sackville-West thus works against Eliot’s vision of post-war cultural collapse, instead seeking to draw strength from a tradition imagined as unbroken and unfragmented, a “nameless line”. In casting the English farmer as “Rome’s inheritor” (*Land* 106), she also seeks continued value in exemplars from antiquity; whereas Eliot’s classical allusions in *The Waste Land* to the Sibyl (*Poems* 53) or the rapist Tereus (63) are of a grimmer kind. In particular, Sackville-West’s determination to work the land—and indeed make the land work—after a period of conflict are reminiscent of Fairer’s account of Virgil: “[a]t the opening of the *Georgics* the ‘exhausted land’ [...] and ‘consumed earth’ [...] are recovering from years of neglect and the depredations of a bitter Civil War. The encouragement of new life, however small, is a georgic priority” (211).

Sackville-West’s privileging of effort—“I have refused / The easier uses of made poetry” (*Land* 4)—does nevertheless bring her into surprising proximity with Eliot in one

respect. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), Eliot maintains that tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour”; neither can it consist “in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes” (*Prose* 38). That is, a poet must devote effort to understanding the tradition, and cannot assume a ready continuity from past into present. Although *The Land* does make such an assumption, choosing to instead to match literary effort with that of the agricultural labourer, Sackville-West is still sympathetic to Eliot’s understanding of tradition. In her article on him, she writes that:

many people seem to hold a theory that poets today strive to repudiate and destroy what is called tradition; this is not quite true[. ...] They strive on the contrary to enrich the poetic tradition, by adding something to it—something which is of today, something which shall reflect our own very difficult and experimental age. (628)

Her engagement with Eliot acknowledges the rationale for his practice, even though she does not share his bleak outlook. If, reflexively, these remarks also apply to *The Land*, then she has to imagine her poem “strive[s] [...] to enrich the poetic tradition” in a different way.

The distinction is clear in the two poets’ uses of Virgil, who is central to both of their literary traditions. Even if Sackville-West “knew no Latin”, she did read the *Georgics* “in translation [when] she was halfway through *The Land*”, her son Nigel Nicolson explains (*Garden* n.p.). Meanwhile In “What is a Classic?”, a 1944 address to the Virgil Society, Eliot insists that the definition of a classic “cannot be one which excludes Virgil,” and, more significantly, “it needed that particular poet, and a lifetime of labour on the part of that poet, to make the classic out of his material” (*Prose* 115–16). Eliot thus implicitly subscribes to the view that the *Georgics* are part of Virgil’s labour toward the epic *Aeneid*; whereas *The Land*, as I have noted, hybridizes the genres in “the mild continuous epic of the soil” (3). For Sackville-West, agricultural and artistic labour are alike ongoing processes, rather than culminating in a final achievement, and tradition is not “modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art,” as it is for Eliot (*Prose* 38). In her view, progress is only admissible if in the “nameless line” of agricultural practice.

This continuity of tradition into the present necessarily means that it acquires “something which is of today”. So Sackville-West observes a yeoman farmer “By urgency and competition driven” to use a tractor where horses “were wont to serve” (*Land* 24). As Blyth points out, “some of the changes to the rural world portrayed in *The Land* were only just starting to take effect at the time Sackville-West was writing her poem. Tractors, for instance, were introduced during the First World War, but did not enter into widespread use until a decade or so later” (27–28). But—perhaps because of the association between war and technological development— Sackville-West only reluctantly admits the tractor into the poem, being largely resistant to change on a scale that could disrupt the continuity of practice she envisages.

The poem similarly repudiates the value of book-learning in favour of practical understanding:

nature still defeats  
The frowsty science of the cloistered men,  
Their theory, their conceits;



The faith within [the farmer] still derides the pen,  
Experience his text-book. (24–25)

Given her reliance on an agricultural encyclopaedia in composing the poem, it is perhaps a little disingenuous of Sackville-West to disavow the “frowsty science of the cloistered men” and claim “[e]xperience” as a “text-book”. But it also speaks to the ground she wants to make up between her literary practice and the work of the farmer, finding terms of art that respect the agricultural tradition rather than seeking to aestheticize it.

Her position seems all the more conservative in the light of another of her articles from 1928. Introducing her series on “Poetry of Today”, Sackville-West writes:

within the last twenty or thirty years [...] machinery and science, ceasing to be the preoccupation of a comparatively few specialists, have become an absolutely dominating and unescapable influence in the lives of all. And it is impossible that poetry, and the thought of poets, and the general shape of their mind, should have remained unaffected by so extraordinary a change taking place over nearly the whole face of the globe, and in the mind of thinking man. (290)

The contrast between the views expressed in this article and those in *The Land*, which insists on remaining “unaffected” by these developments, may be due to the two years’ difference between them; or it may be that while Sackville-West could reconcile herself intellectually to scientific change, she could not accommodate it to her poetics. Likewise, she understands that “modern poetry is difficult because it is highly experimental” (“Today” 289), but elected not to undertake such experiment in *The Land*. Indeed, in implicitly rejecting Eliot’s modernist aesthetics, her work emphasizes a different kind of difficulty—that of the “monotony” (*Land* 3) of accompanying her in her account of working the land.

In places, it requires sustained effort on the part of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader to plough on with what Hite calls a “banal” poem: even allowing for Sackville-West’s own disclaimers, she is given to archaisms, inversions and digressions, as for example when she recapitulates a shepherd’s “unpublished vow” about his vocation, including a parenthesis inside what is already a digression (*Land* 65). The difficulty lies not so much with the digression itself—Fairer allows the georgic’s capacity for “attention [being] paid, sometimes digressively, to what seems trivial or inconsequential” (205)—but in the strain of trying to identify with the worker, in this case a shepherd, when his thought is “Unknown to its maker” and “only known / To [...] God” (*Land* 65). In her attempts to integrate her omniscient position with that of the shepherd, she is in fact revealing the distance between them.

Her attempt to make such connections poetically is again usefully contrasted with her criticism. In her article on Eliot, she writes: “life is becoming more and more complicated; our knowledge is increasing, and our problems are increasing with our knowledge; poetry, trying to keep pace, resorts inevitably to methods which many people consider illegitimate” (628). But she writes that Eliot’s employment of such methods, “is intentional [...] is deliberate”, and “[e]verything became clear” to her when she read one of the closing lines of *The Waste Land*: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins”

(“Formidable” 589, *Poems* 71). Because “[e]verything is tottering”, Eliot is making “a desperate last attempt to shore it up” as “a man loaded with the weight and richness of culture; loving it, hating it; trying to throw it off, trying to break it down into fresh patterns; trying to dissolve something in order to re-create” (“Formidable” 589).

Rather than attempt such experimentation to meet the modern world in *The Land*, however, Sackville-West relies on the georgic tradition’s “mixed character” (Fairer 205) to supply the connections between the different elements of her poem, with mixed results. Whether by design or not, she reminds us of the effort involved to sustain agricultural enterprise, and in turn, sustain human society. If it means that the poetry of the land can be hard work, then reading it now is suggestive of the effort through which we must put ourselves if we want to sustain the planet.

### The Avant-Garden?

“[A]cknowledging that human activities have altered the most basic life processes at a planetary level necessarily entails that conservancy and environmentalism must radically change their methods and objectives,” write Diogo et al. (4), proposing that the garden, “as a crossover platform between nature, science and technology” (6), offers a means of envisaging such radical change. By the same token, Sackville-West’s *The Garden* (1946) can offer a corresponding opportunity to imagine what Nicolson calls “the alternating conflict and collaboration between [hu]man[ity] and nature” (n.p.), even if that opportunity is one the poet is sometimes reluctant or unable to exploit.

Diogo et al. see “the potential of alternative epistemologies to get out of the predicament of fatalistic dystopias often revolving around the Anthropocene debate” (6). *The Garden* certainly eschews what we might call the “fatalistic dystopia” of *The Waste Land*, and like *The Land* seeks a practical means of engagement with nature and the landscape as a way of addressing the complexity of the contemporary. As Diogo et al. put it, “an environmental ethics that has gardening as its central metaphor and model allows for an open and frank discussion regarding the aim and methods of environmental interventions” (3).

*The Garden*’s interventions are cultural as well as environmental, being concerned not only with how to garden but how to *write* the garden, horticulture serving as both the vehicle and tenor of metaphor. The poem follows *The Land* in that Sackville-West concentrates there as much on the practice of georgic as on farming; but whereas that poem seeks a “pedestrian measure” (4) common to field and page, literature and horticulture in *The Garden* correspond insofar as Sackville-West is preoccupied by her skill in both—or rather, her lack of skill.

In the dedication, she announces that she will “scrawl down / Rubbish of verses fit for fire, / Gardener, poet, on [a] single pyre” (*Garden* 9). At such an early stage of the poem this may only signify the formal deference of a poet to her dedicatee rather than actual inferiority; yet her two identities are linked recurrently in the poem, as for example when she declares: “I, poor poet, I / Am likewise a poor practised gardener” (29). The insistence

on the point is so mannered that it scarcely seems confessional, and given the renown Sackville-West was acquiring as a gardener would seem to be begging the compliment.<sup>2</sup>

However, her increased self-consciousness could be explained by the change of mode that the transition from land to garden necessitates. The later poem concerns a much smaller space than the land as a whole, while the labour it involves is more aesthetic than arable: indeed, she opens the poem proper by describing gardening as “agriculture’s little brother,” calling for “the pretty treble” rather than “Notes of the bass” (13). This modal distinction is one Virgil observes when he comments in the *Georgics* that he formerly “dallied with pastoral verse” (128, my emphasis) in the *Eclogues*. In the move from *The Land* to *The Garden* Sackville-West was effectively working in the other direction, from labour to leisure—that is, reversing the traditionally conceived trajectory of the poet’s career from low style to high, and this may account for her heightened concern about the poem’s worth. When it does not share in the productive labour of farming then the literary may be a compromise in itself, about which Sackville-West actively expresses suspicion; for instance, she reflects that seed “catalogues misled us, as a poem / Misleads us” (*Garden* 33).

When gardening flips from being the subject of the poem to the terms in which its writing is conceived, Sackville-West effectively offers a modest manifesto for her poetics:

Weave the poor poet all his ablest words  
Into a poacher’s snare, a springle set,  
Making a mesh of pretty nouns his string  
With knots of adjective and epithet[.] (67)

The lines run the risk of being trite—those “pretty nouns” chiming with the “pretty treble” that is the poem’s clef—and excessive “adjective *and* epithet” (my emphasis).

As Pomeroy remarks, Sackville-West “does not hesitate to gild a lily” (281), perhaps in concession to Addison’s pronouncement that georgics represent “the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress, and set off with all the beauties and embellishments of poetry” (155). However, two lines later the “finch of beauty struggles through the net” (*Land* 67). Is this another admission of failure on the poet’s part—or a suggestion that, for the fleeting duration of that struggle, such beauty is caught? It is also possible to read the passage as a tacit acknowledgement that the “pretty” nouns, adjectives and epithets constitute a kind of poetry that will fail to achieve its objectives—a recognition of the limits of her poetics, compared to the experiments she allowed in her 1928 articles as being necessary to the modern age.

Once the poetic is imagined as the horticultural, though, what had been a tension between literature and labour—can verse be as productive as farming or gardening?—becomes entangled with nature in the process of artistic creation, given that the gardener and environment are together collaborating, and on occasion competing, to bring the plot to life. *The Garden* returns to this quandary throughout, assaying the value of poetry against natural agency. The closing section, “Autumn”, for instance, contains the image of

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<sup>2</sup> *The Garden* was written at Sackville-West’s estate at Sissinghurst, where, as Rebecca Nagel points out, the poet “enjoyed sharing her garden with visitors and advertised her pleasure in a note originally written for the *New Statesman and Nation*” (22)—among many other horticultural writings.



spiderwebs as “Somnambulistic poems, fine and light [...] that never might a poet write” (*Garden* 129–30). This puts the truly creative, the truly aesthetic, beyond what is possible for the poet; or perhaps at least the poet Sackville-West thinks herself to be.

The image follows a nocturnal encounter with a frog, who, the narrator reflects, “had his right to’s life as I to mine; / I had my right to my descriptive line” (129). This assertion of her vocation is uncharacteristic in *The Garden*; however, Sackville-West only stakes a claim for the “descriptive line” of which she makes plentiful use, rather than for a “fine and light” composition of the kind the spider produces, much as she put the “lyric liar” of the moon beyond the bounds of *The Land* (73). Like the earlier poem, *The Garden* makes working the soil congruent with poetry, but does not, or cannot always, abide by the analogy, as though in recognition that the plain, working language at which she laboured to write of agriculture is not what horticulture demands.

Fairer reflects on the “the compromised, and compromising, georgic, whose interest in mixture, alteration, contingency, and various kinds of trial-and-error, hinders it from the big vision, the saving answer” (209), and *The Garden* is successful on these terms where it works with rather than against nature and embraces the possibilities of compromise and improvisation, rather than striving, as she tried in *The Land*, to make a poem “uniform and agreeable in all its parts” as Addison requires (157). This is not the place for “craftsmen [...] who] have held / Reality down fluttering to a bench [...] And out of need made inadvertent art” (*Land* 81).

For instance, “The gardener half artist must depend / On that slight chance, that touch beyond control / Which all his paper planning will transcend” (*Garden* 17)—lines that both enact and resist the principle they express through a constructive, if likely unintended, ambiguity over which subject takes the verb “will transcend.” If the “touch beyond control” transcends “the planning” then the effect is emergent rather than programmatic, a co-creation of garden and gardener, precisely because the seed catalogue can mislead. This reading does depend, however, on the contrived separation of subject and verb by object to achieve the “~end” rhyme, when the syntax might more prosaically read “that touch beyond control will transcend all paper planning.”

We *could* therefore understand that the planning itself “will transcend” what is otherwise beyond control, a reading that in turn has alternative implications: to give it a positive inflection, we may read the skill of the artist as incorporating what is emergent into an overall vision; yet, negatively, it could mean that the “paper planning” puts pay to any floral spontaneity. As we have seen from *The Land*, the integration of material into a comprehensive aesthetic vision is not always possible in georgic, while the imposition of total order conjures the “fascination with mastering nature” that Fairer says provokes suspicion of the genre.

The fact that the site of the garden is so fertile with potentially contradictory readings makes *The Garden* a productive means of thinking through the mutual responsiveness of the human and the natural in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Serenella Iovino advises that “thinking the garden and the Anthropocene *through* one another does not mean equating them with one another [...] despite all its contradictions, the garden also discloses unexpected resources” (20; emphasis in original). In fact, it is these

contradictions that *make* the garden so valuable. Diogo et al. remark that, in our historic moment, “the choice is not whether to intervene or not, but to be able to distinguish different degrees, methods and objectives of intervention, just as gardeners do [... . G]ardens foster a ‘give-and-take’ and adaptable approach” (3).

The constant labour of managing such give-and-take means that poetry and gardening for Sackville-West again align in the credo that “difficult art must difficult skill conceal” (*Garden* 55). At cursory glance, this recalls the commonplace that skill can make certain accomplishments, particularly those in the arts, look easier than they actually are; but what Sackville-West in fact declares is that one kind of difficulty is concealed by another. In this context, we may think how the deliberate difficulties she faces in writing traditional georgic conceal *but simultaneously express* the difficulty of manual labour.

In the preliminary, pre-seasonal section of the poem, this is formally encoded in the verse. In its five-line stanzas, the ABAAB rhyme scheme reflects a sustained effort of control:

The Morning Glory climbs towards the sun  
As we by nature [are] sadly born to strive  
And our unending race of search to run,  
Forever started, never to be won,  
—And might be disappointed to arrive. (*Garden* 18)

The double A rhyme before the second B enacts the extra work both poet and reader need to put in to “resolve[...] The broken pattern of the universe” (*Garden* 17), while the lines themselves affirm the notion of continuous rather than culminating labour I have identified in *The Land*. But this is also a “difficult art” because it is hard to get right—a probably unintended meaning that, like the struggle between planning and transcendence, plays out in Sackville-West’s responsiveness to chance and difficulty.

Her difficulty lies in gauging how much effort is needed. When her “descriptive line” seeks to be exhaustive, it closes down opportunities for compromise and improvisation. For instance, in a Wordsworthian moment Sackville-West bids her poet/gardener “live, / Instead of speaking; leave his desk,” but fails to heed her own advice, staying at her desk to enumerate the detail of “books, [...] foolscap, and the blue-black ink” (67). The effort of communicating these images expresses no actual effort on the part of the gardener. Crucially, Sackville-West’s tendency for digression is a danger to which Virgil is alert. At a point where he runs the risk of self-indulgence, he admonishes himself: “But time is on the move still, time that will not return / While we go cruising around this subject whose lore delights us” (*Georgics* 98); indeed, Addison exhorts that the georgic “avoids all manner of digressions” (158).

Sackville-West’s “swarming detail has a cumulative effect,” Nicolson remarks (*Garden* n.p.), and her descriptive line is more effective when used to narrow attention toward natural detail that may otherwise be lost, “Daring to find a world in a lost world, / A little world, a little perfect world” that she recounts in “modest lines, almost demure” (*Garden* 14). This is modesty with purpose rather than an affectation, allowing the narrator to concentrate, for instance, on a wasp, from whom she “sought / The rosy

rondure of the moonlit peach” (101)—lines that also observe the georgic’s “commitment to the minuter readjustments and qualifications that allow life to continue” (Fairer 207).

By directing her focus so precisely, the poet is also, paradoxically, sensitive to the war taking place around the garden. The ecocritic Timothy Clark writes of “derangement of scales” prompted by environmental crisis that “collaps[e] the trivial and catastrophic into each other” (136), in their insistent and counterintuitive connection of the global and local; in the site of the garden, Sackville-West is attentive to similar disruptions caused by the Second World War. Searchlights direct attention away from the garden, for example, and though Sackville-West “Expected sound, to match so grave a scale,” the spectacle is “mute” (*Garden* 96). The discrepancy between scales points again to effort out of proportion to effect. Still more affectingly, the same effect is employed to elegize a bird destroyed in an air-raid: “*It took a ton of iron to kill this lark, / This weightless freeman of the day*” (92, author’s italics). She exercises a tendency Feeney identifies in Virgil, the way “perspective can shift from one level of scale to another”. Rather than striving to maintain a common vision as she did in *The Land* and have it disrupted by the advent of, say, a tractor, *The Garden* acknowledges such disruption in identifying the uncanny quality of military technology. As poem and plot, the garden is what Feeney calls “a variegated project”, its size and design allowing it to provide the sense of scale and effort against which the war can be seen.

This is because the work advocated in both *The Land* and *The Garden* succeeds or fails at the scale of the human, struggling with the natural on its own terms, the give-and-take advocated by Diogo et al. Gardening is conceived of as a means to “keep civility” (*Garden* 15),

with the state of war [to]  
Aptly contrast, a miniature endeavour  
To hold the graces and the courtesies  
Against a horrid wilderness. (14)

Nevertheless the images in which decorum is defended throughout *The Garden* are themselves martial—more so than the *battlemented* flowers of *The Land*—and Sackville-West declares that “the gardener in little way / Maintain[s] the bastion of his opposition” against war (*Garden* 15). Perhaps this is not as telling as the collision of worlds that we witness with, say, Septimus Smith’s death in *Mrs Dalloway*; but Rebecca Nagel observes that the poem could have been

about a fantasy garden with endless space and time and willing labo[u]r. Instead, she writes about hard work and cheap dreams in catalogues. The garden is not an escape from World War II as it first appears, but a translation of the war’s energy into the timeless setting of every garden: endless effort and failure with the odd unpredictable and temporary victory. (27)

In drawing on military language, Sackville-West juxtaposes the scales of war and garden, making the experience of conflict legible in relation to an enclosed space. So long as *The Garden* is georgic, it exhibits what Fairer calls the genre’s “fascination with resistant and indecorous, even obstinately unpoetic, elements” (205). The poem more successfully

accommodates them than does *The Land* by not trying to imagine a seamless continuity between them.

### “The land and not the waste land”

In 1926 *The Land* made some sideswipes at its near namesake *The Waste Land*, but by the time she composed *The Garden* in the 1940s Sackville-West explicitly took up arms against Eliot’s poem. Clearly remaining troubled by its bleakness, she quotes the first four lines of “The Burial of the Dead” at the start of “Spring” (*Garden* 63):

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. (*Poems* 55)

She then mounts a sustained rebuttal to its vision; or at least what she understands that vision to be. She declares:

Would that my pen like a blue bayonet  
Might skewer all such cats’-meat of defeat;  
No buttoned foil, but killing blade in hand.  
The land and not the waste land celebrate,  
The rich and hopeful land, the solvent land,  
Not some poor desert strewn with nibbled bones,  
A land of death, sterility, and stones. (*Garden* 63)

Alexandra Harris maintains that Sackville West’s “poetic weaponry looks vulnerable when compared with Eliot’s” (244); we might for instance contrast his direct, declarative syntax with Sackville-West’s inversions, restatements and subordinate clauses. Moreover, in conflating the germinations at the start of *The Waste Land* with the “land of death” at its end, she misses that Eliot’s true object of horror here is the irrepressible return of life during spring. It is the fact, if not the sentiment, of “The rich and hopeful land” that gives Eliot’s own verse momentum—his first three lines all end in enjambling participles that dramatize natural renewal, “breeding,” “mixing,” “stirring” (*Poems* 55, *Garden* 63), driving the reader forward—whereas Sackville-West’s lines circle around themselves as though trying to arrest this life force. In resisting Eliot’s vision, she also works against the principle of continuity that informed *The Land*.

Her poetry becomes stronger when it seeks accommodation with Eliot’s technique, if not his outlook, as it likewise does when she recognizes the mutual agency of gardener and garden. It is telling, for instance, that her argument is advanced more clearly by a loosening of metrics, as though allowing herself the experimentation she affords to the “Poetry of Today”, as well as by adopting some of Eliot’s themes and cadences. When for instance she writes “We know that the ultimate vex is the same for all: / The discrepancy / Between the vision and the reality” (63), we might as easily append “Falls the Shadow,” to think of Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* (*Poems* 83–84), as recall suspect seed catalogues. Similarly, the lines “There is nothing to add but the fact we had the vision, / And this was a grace in itself, the decision / We took between hope and despond” (*Garden* 63) echo the

“hundred indecisions, / And [...] a hundred visions and revisions” of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (*Poems* 6).

Beyond this, the poems share more ground than Sackville-West’s combative tone would suggest, so her earlier claim that “difficult art must difficult skill conceal” (*Garden* 55) might also read as an endorsement of the kind of “difficult art” that Eliot’s modernism presented and with which she engaged in her criticism. *The Garden* and *The Waste Land* both note, for instance, that snow does not so much smother as mother the emergence of life come spring—Sackville-West’s farmer “knows that underground his plants are safe / Since snow is warm not cold; and thinks with relish / Of little Alpines in accustomed cot” (*Garden* 50), which echoes both the mountainous setting and the “forgetful snow” that “kept us warm” in *The Waste Land* (*Poems* 55).

While Sackville-West was still grappling with *The Waste Land* in composing *The Garden*, Eliot had gone some way since 1922 to accommodate the land and modernity in the form of his *Four Quartets*, a sequence which moves into *The Land*’s rural imaginary and cultivates a kind of garden there. As Harris puts it, “[m]odernism had declared its allegiance to the waste land, not to the herbaceous border, and to confirm this Eliot began *The Waste Land* with a nightmare inversion of gardening [. ...] By the mid-1930s, however, [he] himself was returning to more verdant territory” (227). She writes that Eliot “did so ambivalently at first, tentatively imagining in ‘Burnt Norton’ [...] a version of Eden [. ...] A great inheritance of garden and nature poetry is gathered and revised in this strange patch of bare concrete” (227).

If *The Land* refers tacitly and *The Garden* explicitly to *The Waste Land*, Eliot may in turn be alluding to Sackville-West in parts of the *Quartets*. Her “fieldsman” who “Trudges with steady and unchanging gait / Being born to clays” (*Land* 4) may find an analogue in the figures of “East Coker” with their “heavy feet in clumsy shoes, / Earth feet, loam feet” (*Poems* 186). Eliot’s attention to the seasons also yields such observations as the “Midwinter spring” that opens “Little Gidding” (*Poems* 201), which bears comparison with Sackville-West’s “spurious spring” (*Garden* 51) or her description of *Viburnum fragrans* “in roseate surprise / That in December hints at apple-blossom” (42).

In his references to “The time of the seasons” and “the time of milking and the time of harvest” (*Poems* 186), Eliot also gestures toward the seasonal advice to farmer and gardener offered by *The Land* and *The Garden*; but, as in his critical writings, his true labour is directed toward the practice and philosophy of writing. The remark in “Burnt Norton” that “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden” (*Poems* 183–84) could easily be applied to Sackville-West’s more effortful passages. Eliot’s is also a poem that reminds itself “That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in worn-out poetical fashion” (187), exhibiting a lighter touch with its self-reflection than the more laboured, artificial poses Sackville-West is apt to strike.

In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot is conscious, as in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” of what has to change to ensure continuity between past and present. His suggestion in “Little Gidding” that “history is a pattern / Of timeless moments” (*Poems* 208) articulates an understanding of time closer to that implicit to *The Land*, while in proposing that “last



year's words belong to last year's language" (204), he gainsays Sackville-West's less reflective attempts to plough the same furrow as the georgic of the past.

Nonetheless, Sackville-West can in *The Garden* anticipate "Some poet [...] Breaking untrammelled, from convention free, / [to] Speak the large language that we still deserve" (54), echoing her more sympathetic engagement with "The Formidable Mr. Eliot". Her poem is indeed more successful when engaging directly with his poetics than when hothousing *The Land's* tendency toward the conservative.

### Georgics as Anthropocene Aesthetics

Both Sackville-West and Eliot are responding, in their different modes, to the way modernity encroaches on the imaginative spaces of land and garden. As georgics, *The Land* and especially *The Garden* exemplify "the mixed character" that Fairer sees in the genre (205), using the practical language of agriculture and horticulture to engage with the world rather than in the intellectual endeavour Eliot pursues.

The labour that Sackville-West records, and which she incidentally requires of the reader, can be redeemed provided we don't indulge ourselves in a "pleasing moment" that is "unduly / Prolonged" (*Garden* 76). We need to meet the forces of nature with a proportionate, measured response; which will seem effortful, but as Diogo et al. advise, "[i]f there is no wild nature to which to return, the only option is to move forward and aim for a 'Good Anthropocene'," deploying a "renewed and pragmatic environmentalism" with a view to making nature into a practical, rather than Edenic, garden (5). The failures that the poet recognizes and those she doesn't are alike salutary, because after each she resumes her labour: "Fail if you must [...] But gloriously fail: the dream, the brag, / No prudent prose, but lyric rhetoric" (*Garden* 111) offer a reflection on the poem. They are a joyous and fearless imperative to work and carry on working through failure—as we now find ourselves having to do.

Sackville-West's acknowledgement in *The Garden* of the need to do what Clark advises in response to derangement of scales, to "think on several scales at once" (136), means that her poem remains open to reading the Anthropocene, its complexities and contradictions. Like war in *The Garden*, "the Anthropocene as an 'aesthetic event' [...] sharpens and desensitizes our sensorium all at once. It enables us to see more, feel more, perceive more, and makes us blind and insensitive at the same time" (Iovino 17). As such, it is a site in which the tensions between human and natural agency, labour and leisure, conviction and compromise, failure and success, can be read and re-read—and the more so when those tensions are expressed rather than suppressed.

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