

## Eco-Georgic: From Antiquity to the Anthropocene An Introduction

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### Towards Care: Georgic Ecology

Georgic literature, which reaches back to Hesiod's *Works and Days* (700 BC) and Virgil's *Georgics* (29 BC) and has remained influential ever since, used to be specifically about farm labour and husbandry, about growing crops and keeping animals. In the modern world, its focus widened to include the production and trade of goods more generally. But, whatever its specific theme, throughout its long and varied history, georgic writing has always been concerned with a question that continues to be at the heart of our human existence: How should we work to cultivate a fertile and sustainable relationship with our physical and social environment? How, in other words, are we supposed to live well? All the answers that georgic writing, whether it is meant to be didactic or not, gives to this question are typically premised on the assumption that the struggle with recalcitrant matters and unforeseeable adversities is an inescapable part of human life. Rather than offering fictions of a golden world, as its concomitant genre, pastoral is often said to do, georgic responds to an experience of living in what the eighteenth-century poet James Thomson, in *The Seasons* (1730), called "iron times" (10, l.274). These are times, as he specifies, when "Nature disturbed / Is deemed, vindictive, to have changed her course", being no longer perceived as peaceful and fecund but as tumultuous and unpredictable (11, ll. 307-8). As the ambiguity in Thomson's line-break suggests, the disturbance of nature mentioned here is as much a condition of the physical world as it is a product of human thought or feeling: of a "distempered mind", as the speaker says a little earlier, that "Has lost that concord of harmonious powers / Which forms the soul of happiness" (10, ll.275-7).

The "iron times" with which the georgic has always engaged, then, are characterised by "a crisis of nature" that, as David Fairer puts it in a seminal article on

georgic ecology, is “a symptom of a more fundamental crisis of humanity” (“Where Fuming” 201). In georgic literature, more specifically, the human way of being tends to run into difficulties because it is both part of and different from the natural world. Simultaneously dependent on and abstracted from the earthly ground of their existence, human beings, the georgic suggests, constantly have to make decisions about which life they prefer to lead (Plessner 287). They must learn to subsist in the midst of a material world that does not necessarily (or naturally) accord with their wishes and needs. One key concern of georgic writing, therefore, is the experience of living in an environment that is not, as William Wordsworth imagines it, “exquisitely [...] fitted to the mind” (198, ll.1009-11). Rather, the georgic world is always potentially in excess of, or out of tune with, people’s work of making it habitable and fruitful.

This georgic imbalance of human labour and its surrounding medium entails an ecology, according to which forms of disequilibrium and inadequacy are an unavoidable part of all our efforts to make ourselves at home in the earthly world. In a georgic landscape, inhabitants are continually challenged to adjust their behaviour to changes in the weather, the soil, or other circumstantial affairs. In Virgil’s *Georgics*, for example, human activities of cultivation and construction are repeatedly threatened with being overrun or swept away by the very elements and forces, such as storms or pests, through and with which they exist. This is “the way it is”, as Virgil’s speaker emphasises in a famous passage:

world forces all things to the bad, to founder and to fall,  
just as a paddler in his cot struggling to make headway up a  
river,  
if he lets up a minute, will find himself  
rushed headlong back between the banks. (1:299-303, Fallon)

To sustain our existence, this comparison suggests, we humans have to work as much with nature as we are compelled to emancipate ourselves from it. We can use its powers and resources only if we know how to direct and cooperate with them.

Deeply interested in this art or skill of adapting natural resources to human purposes, georgic writing may easily be dismissed as being complicit in anthropocentric ideologies of cultural advancement that rely on the (often ruthless) mastery and exploitation of the earth. No doubt, it is likely that the resurgence of georgic in modern literature owed something to such ideologies. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries georgic superseded the “youthful innocence” of pastoral, gaining prevalence as “a grown-up poetry for an age that was becoming busier and wealthier, and a nation that was concerned with how to handle progress” (Fairer, “Georgic” 466; Fowler 84). But although many georgic texts certainly participated in the consolidation of a global market for consumer goods, they often emphasise that we humans will improve (in all senses of the term) our relationship with the natural world only if we learn how to take care of and attend to its various local peculiarities, too. In John Dyer’s *The Fleece*, for example, a georgic poem about sheep farming and wool industry, the speaker advises the “gentle shepherd”, who faces the task of looking after a newly born lamb, that his “care” should

be “lenient” and tender (25, ll.410-12). “O guard his meek sweet innocence from all / Th’ innum’rous ills, that rush around his life”, he cries emphatically:

Mark the quick kite, with beak and talons prone  
Circling the skies to snatch him from the plain;  
Observe the lurking crows; beware the brake,  
There the sly fox the careless minute waits;  
Nor trust thy neighbour’s dog, nor earth, nor sky:  
Thy bosom to a thousand cares divide. (26, ll.418-25)

In the environment of the georgic every detail must be watched and cared about because nothing, not even earth or sky, can be trusted to conform to our expectations and desires. In such an environment, the mutual correspondence between humans and the material world that sustains them cannot be taken for granted. Instead, that correspondence must be actively and persistently, often laboriously created and maintained: by following or resisting the currents of physical power, or by tending to certain vegetables or animals while warding off (or even combating) others.

We have already mentioned that this necessity to be vigilant and attentive implies an ecology of the human that calculates with the incalculable and contingent as inherent to the way we lead our lives. We can now add that the georgic also suggests a concomitant anthropology: a conception of the human as a kind of being that can exist in or focus on a single place only by potentially thinking, as Dyer’s shepherd, of multiple others at the same time. In this view, human beings are, at every moment of their lives, divided “to a thousand” possible “cares” or concerns, lacking a natural centre or ground. Hence the constant pressure to weigh options and make choices, each of which could be made otherwise. It is the art or skill of making such choices, with which the georgic has traditionally been concerned: the practical knowledge of when, where and how to sow which grains, how to prevent sheep from catching diseases, or to remove a twig from one tree and engraft it upon another.

Being an eminently practical genre, georgic does not, therefore, typically represent or invoke Nature as an ideal of wholeness, equivalent, as in much Romantic literature, to a quasi-divine agency or spirit, “something far more deeply interfused” that, to quote Wordsworth again, “rolls through all things”, including the human mind (“Lines” 196, ll.97-103). In georgic writing, nature rather features as a “mixed economy” (Fairer, “Where Fuming” 205), a gathering of multiple, changeable forces, materials, species, and types of growth, each of which exerts different demands on the farmer or worker. Unlike a pastoral idyll, moreover, nature, in such writing, does not primarily function as a source of comfort and healing, or a place of sentimental longing representative of what a person or society feels to be lacking or lost. Instead, georgic nature exists as a series of useful tasks, a field of practical experience and trial, in which established wisdom remains subject to being corrected or modified in response to disruptive incidents or unforeseen events. Knowledge, in this field, is provisional and tentative, a matter of incremental steps, unable to supply final answers or guiding visions of a future world.

But are such final answers or guiding visions not exactly what we now need in order to come to grips with an environmental crisis that is becoming increasingly urgent? Or why else should readers want to turn to the ancient genre of the georgic today? As

Richard Kerridge has pointed out, the idea of a single “revelatory, unifying and saving” insight, may certainly seem attractive in the face of a massive, convoluted problem such as global warming, in which physical, geographical, economic, political, and cultural issues are inextricably tangled up with each other (5). But to implement practically this sort of insight in people’s day-to-day lives would require a jump of scale that, as Timothy Clark and Bruno Latour have shown, is impossible to conceive. No one can save the planet by buying an energy-saving washing machine (Clark, Latour). Kerridge therefore suggests that a more promising and realistic way to approach the contemporary climate crisis is to deal with and think about it not in terms of a global revolution but in terms of locally exercised “care” (5). According to the OED, “care” encompasses feelings of concern or interest as well as acts of nurture, protection, or attention. The more people care about something, the more likely they are to care for, or take care of it too.

The georgic is relevant today, we want to suggest, because it shows us that such local care for and about the earth can take various, often contradictory forms. Being about “intervening in nature” rather than “about admiring nature”, as Laura Sayre points out, the georgic is deeply aware of the compromises and mistakes that are an inevitable part of all such intervention (195). Therefore, the genre constantly emphasises the necessity of being mindful and circumspect. A shepherd, as the example from Dyer’s *The Fleece* suggests, cares as much about the lamb he seeks to rear as he cares about the fox that he hopes to keep at bay. Indeed, the shepherd or farmer with his multiple daily concerns is perhaps not the worst model for a way of caring that is not, in Kerridge’s words, limited to particular social and psychological spheres, but “spreads throughout our working lives, home lives, recreational lives and political lives, making a difference” (6). Those who, in one way or another, care about the animate and inanimate world that sustains their lives, one may hope, will sooner or later behave differently towards that world too, even if their thinking has not been converted radically or absolutely. Having established prudent action and practical care as central components of a georgic ecology, we can now take a more detailed look at the most influential foundational text of the georgic tradition: Virgil’s *Georgics*. A final section of this introduction will then show how recent writers have taken up the georgic tradition in the context of the Anthropocene.

### **Virgil’s *Georgics***

It might be asked why Virgil’s *Georgics* offer any kind of a model for sustainable engagement with land, given that the period and the circumstances in which they were written are some 2000 years distanced from our own. Virgil’s patron, Gaius Maecenas was an advisor to Emperor Octavian, later Augustus, and a powerful influence at court and in the working lives of Rome’s artists; he commissioned the *Georgics* on behalf of Octavian in 37 BCE, completed eight years later. This renders the poem a political as well as an artistic gift for the emperor. Virgil’s own province, Mantua had its lands redistributed among war veterans, like so many estates in Northern Italy, after Mark Antony’s victory over Julius Caesar’s enemies at Philippi. Octavian faced resistance for what was, in effect, a way of keeping military leaders quiet during a transition period from civil war to relative

stability under Augustus, and Virgil's discomfort with the resulting land grab underlies his writing, in the *Eclogues* as well as the *Georgics*. There are nagging questions at the heart of each book: is it possible to manage nature, an active, living, fluctuating thing? Are the results of unrelenting effort worthwhile, when poverty and disease are as likely outcomes as "the best of olives spilling from the mills" (2: 519, Fallon)? And the difference between cultivating land that is owned and land that is worked by others creates further questions, about appropriation, for example, and alienation from participating in the benefits of working with and alongside the nonhuman—who is permitted to 'enjoy' the land; who benefits from its gifts? Yet between Virgil's paeans to Octavian—whom he reveres not just as an arbiter of his own destiny but someone who can manipulate the world's fortunes—and grim tales of plague, extreme weather, war and human recklessness we find stories of kinship and reciprocity that redeem human and nonhuman misery. Italian landscapes from centuries past are recreated together with their vines, olive groves, sheep and oxen, horses, dogs, trees and herbs. Although we now know that neither Virgil nor any of the courtiers in the emperor's favour did any planting, ploughing, shearing or milking themselves, we are charmed by Virgil's eloquence and his vivid depictions of rural life into suspending disbelief. We believe we can plant vines just like he did, his instructions are so persuasive. Like Virgil, or at least the farmer he impersonates, we want the best food and comfort for sheep and goats—"spread armfuls of straw and ferns beneath them / so neither chills nor colds afflict your tender care" (3: 297-8, Fallon); we appreciate his concern for the welfare of the flocks and herds. This makes the ensuing shock of disease, the collapse of prized plough-oxen all the more distressing.

All the work he did, all he contributed—and to what end?  
What came of it,  
his turning of the heavy acres? His like was never once in thrall  
to wines  
transported from Campania, nor did they ever do  
damage to themselves by indulgence, feast after feast. (3: 525-8, Fallon)

While the reader is encouraged to assume that virtuous labour is its own reward in georgic writing, Virgil is consistent in recognising that hard work is relentless for the worker, who "cleaves the earth with his crooked plough. Such is the labour / of his life ... / All go and no let up" (2: 498, 513-16, Fallon).

From the ending of Book 3, with its prescient doom of seas filled with dead fish, rivers run dry, air polluted and "rank contagion" (3: 566) stalking those left alive, Virgil moves to the redemption of disorder through a mythic organisation of decay and new life in the form of bees. The bees have a political symbolism: they are suggestive of an ideal republic, a communal society, determined that all shall work for the queen (or king as it was originally thought), in order that all shall benefit. But there is a magic to this description, living power conjured out of slaughter; farmer Aristaeus finally appeasing the curse of poet Orpheus through strange alchemical sacrifice. And bees have thereby "sopped a draught divine" (4: 220); the offspring of sacrifice, they cannot die: "to him all things return in time, dissolved / and reabsorbed; there is no place for death—instead they soar, / still alive—to take their rightful place among the stars" (4: 225-7, Fallon).

Their apparent self-sacrifice takes on a religious quality, useful to later versions of English georgic in which the Christian model is attached to the virtue of labour. “For the *Georgics* is situated firmly in the world of work by necessity”, writes Kimberly Johnson, “as a consequence of the earth’s fall from the idyllic age of the reign of Saturn to the demands of the reign of Jupiter” (xviii). Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, one of Virgil’s bases for his own work, claims the iron age as a punishment for human stupidity and hubris: “I wish / I had nothing to do with this fifth generation, / Wish I had died before or been born after / ... Not a day goes by / A man doesn’t have some kind of trouble” (lines 201-06). Hesiod’s persistent grumbling, however, removes his “work” from the virtuous struggle exhorted by Virgil’s *Georgics*. Virgil associates the “iron” directly with war and its implements, before Jupiter took over from his father, Saturn, and removed humankind from its easy ways, when the land gave up its fruits spontaneously; “the earth herself, /unbidden, was lavish in all she produced” (1: 127-8, Fallon).

In the days before a Cretan king held sway, times  
when sacrilegious races fed on sacrificial oxen,  
that was the life enjoyed on earth by splendid Saturn,  
when they were yet to hear the flare of battle trumpets  
and the battering out of swords upon an anvil. (2: 536-40, Fallon)

Iron has its uses, though, and Virgil has Jupiter making human life one of constant hard labour in order to test human ingenuity; not as a result of sin, however committed, but “to sharpen wits of men and so prevent his own domain being buried / in bone idleness” (1: 124-5, Fallon). Virgil uses the connections between swords and ploughshares to demonstrate his ambivalent and sometimes contradictory assessment of the damage violence does.

There is a persistent and long-held link between war and agriculture, in the language, the imagery and in the facts of slash-and-burn tactics by armies over centuries. And farming itself can be brutal in the exercise of might over natural right. Virgil has no qualms in taking over land already cleared of undisturbed woodland, wrecking “the ancient habitats of birds”; he justifies the destruction by showing how productive the ground has become for human food: “but those once straggly acres blossom now behind your team” (2: 209-11, Fallon). Grafting, layering and training wild trees, for vines or for fruit, requires control, so that they “toe the line” (2: 52, Fallon). Of course, Virgil is not the man behind the plough or carrying the pruning knife; slaves do the work under the watchful eyes of stewards; men, women and children who must also toe the line. Even here, the imagery is military—vines “aligned and at the ready” (2: 281, Fallon)—but he drifts off into the consequences of battle: “the clash of conflict still not started, / though the god of war roams edgily, in and out among battalions” (2: 282-3).

His poem is a “work of art” as Johnson points out, a poetic reiteration of many other literary ventures; its agricultural information is partial at best and fairly unreliable when compared to some of its prose models such as Varro’s *Res Rusticae* and Aratus’ *Phaenomena*. Yet, in fact, it is an intricate web of instruction and lyric, which contains a supreme art that conceals and reveals the work; one of confusion surrounding human and nonhuman entanglement, how hard it is to survive, whether a bird, tree or herdsman. “By bringing together elements that would seem to be in opposition”, explains Johnson, “the

*Georgics* emphasizes variegation and experimentation ... promoting ambiguity and uncertainty in place of didactic conviction” (xv). In refusing to come down on one side or the other, however, Virgil has left an interpretative conundrum for future generations.

However legible the land becomes to its workers, scurrying like ants on its disinterested surface, the environment will always have a trick up its sleeve. A careless spark can become a wildfire and destroy everything in its path: “its rowdy roar as it chases sideways on and up, / lording it over every branch” (2: 306-7, Fallon). For Virgil, the threat of destruction by the gods was of less concern than actual destruction by troops, looting and raping as they trampled the farms. It was not a circumstance he could get out of his head, even if he had been fortunate to avoid the worst, and his knowledge of fortune’s fickle nature kept him facing both ways. Richard Thomas notes the sense of loss of Virgil’s own pastoral world of the earlier *Eclogues*, sharpening the difference between what could be and what actually is taking place in the stressful environment Virgil finds himself depicting. In *Georgics* book 3, line 326 “and dew on tender grass is sweetest for the flock” is taken from *Eclogue* 8 (15, Lee), and is inserted into an idyllic section on ensuring the sheep have fresh forage and cool water from early morning until sunset.

This evocation is to have a far from superficial significance a little later in the book, when the heat associated with the pastoral existence becomes excessive and turns into the parched setting of the snake and of plague, as the pastoral world, no longer a functioning world for Virgil, meets its destruction. (Thomas 234)

Virgil’s interpretation of his sources results in distortions, falsifications and augmentations that have created the “myth” of georgic farming; this is how you grow vines, tend sheep and so on. Many of the instructions as written are patently misleading. Yet, there is another kind of message that we now receive from the *Georgics*, uncannily close to the anxiety we feel as “nature” seems to retaliate at humankind’s presumptive and wanton disregard of environmental reciprocity. If we take some of Virgil’s “instructions” for grafting, for example, derived from Varro, the trees Virgil describes are ridiculous: plane trees producing apples, mountain ash trees pears and elms acorns (2: 70-2, Fallon)—he knew this was not possible; agriculture had a more scientific basis in Virgil’s Italy than his myths allow for. Virgil’s sources, including Varro, were mostly sound if prosaic in more ways than one. That is partially the point—this is a work of art—but it is also a way of drawing attention to what is monstrous in the supposed “natural” world, a world that can no longer be trusted to produce what labour intends it to do. Moreover, that labour is itself distorted, as the examples of extreme grafting in the *Georgics* demonstrate: humans can do this; they think little of disturbing the natural order. There had always been a suspicion about grafting, one that Andrew Marvell knew was familiar to his more Puritan seventeenth-century audience, whatever his own views on the period’s gardening crazes:

No plant now knew the stock from which it came;  
He grafts upon the wild the tame,  
That the uncertain and adult’rate fruit  
Might put the palate in dispute. (“The Mower against Gardens” 23-6)

However, there is another side to these anomalous trees, one more closely aligned with the divine and industrious bees: that of celebration of what human skill can do when working in cooperation with nonhuman entities. In Virgil's Rome, there was an aversion to and a fascination for the monstrous, as there is in any period, yet grafting demonstrated exactly what Jupiter had commanded, as far as Virgil could tell, for "it was he who first, through human skill, broke open land, at pains / to sharpen wits of men" (1: 123-4, Fallon). "Virgil seems to have been the first author to portray grafters exploring the limits of possibility, rather than applying inherited knowledge in tried and tested ways", writes Dunstan Lowe, "to graft is to explore, but it had always been an everyday miracle, like any other form of planting" (469).

The paradox of violence in these poems of celebration is designed as an encouragement to appreciation for the farmer's labour, "all go and no let up" (2: 498, 513-16, Fallon), and is in contrast with the actual aggression of war, even when martial imagery is employed. "In the same passages in which we find the language of burdening and wounding," notes Lowe, "there are often descriptions of sweetening and mellowing, as well as non-violent personification imagery such as teaching, adoption, and *hospitium*" (473). Kimberly Johnson's translation emphasises the motherly aspect of Virgil's discussion of vines, showing how valuable it is to consider different interpretations of the original. Thus it is that the young vines "learn to climb, to scoff at winds, / to course to the elm-tops limb by limb" like so many small children (2: 360-1, Johnson). Present-day literary criticism has shied away from perceived anthropomorphic and zoomorphic equivalents that allow the nonhuman to say something to humankind that is only what humans want to say anyway. Virgil would not have been troubled by these scruples, and in his context we should recognise the benefits of his extended metaphors that carry meaning way beyond the thing itself. When we see these vine-youngsters in their field of reference—of birth, of "their mother-soil ... so powerfully runs habit in the tender stems" (2: 268-72, Johnson)—then we feel the shock of their curbing more acutely.

Later, when they've thrived, circling the elms  
with lusty bine, *then* clip their tresses, *then* dock their arms  
(earlier, and they'll shrink from the knife), then last install  
an iron command and curb the streaming branches. (2: 367-70, Johnson; emphasis in original)

Georgic is not "anti-pastoral" in its insistence that life is hard and then we die—it is sympathetic to the humans, animals and plants that endure and enjoy their tough lives. This is important, as stewardship can be misunderstood as command and control, when perseverance is the only way through. The *Georgics* celebrate human skill, not just control, dominance or oppression, terms that have often been laid at their didactic door. Working the land requires technique not force, persuasion not coercion. Every turn of Virgil's *versus*, his ploughed line, leads round to this truth. There is much that is violent, brutal and disruptive in these ancient poems; there is also passion, love, sorrow and a desperate longing for a harmonious world.

So we return to the main theme of georgic as a mode or genre—hard work: hard to write, hard to interpret, whose theme is one of miracles of achievement amid constant



setbacks. In the Anthropocene, the concept of “labour” has become considerably more freighted with ideology, yet modern farmers in industrial societies still emphasise the combined benefits of hard work and immersion in the living landscape with all its nonhuman and human inhabitants. Surely now is the time for assessing how this poetic triumph supports our current realities, through literature certainly, but also through a pragmatic yet determined resistance to despair in the face of supreme environmental challenges.

### **New Georgic / Anthropocene Georgic**

It is a moot point, however, as to whether this pragmatic resistance can still be articulated through the language of agriculture. The georgic has been reworked over the centuries in order to speak to the different challenges of each era, and sometimes, following in Virgil’s footsteps, it has been specifically oriented towards agrarian matters, as the essays included in this special issue demonstrate. British literature of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, was full of farms and farmers. Raymond Williams notes how even as the population became increasingly urbanised, the ideas enshrined in rural and agriculturally-themed literature concerning how to live well persisted, such that “there [was] almost an inverse proportion ... between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas” (356). At this time, the language of farming still possessed its didactic authority as a language for life. However, the progressive intensification of agriculture post-World War II dented its credentials as a source of didacticism almost beyond repair.

The onset of the Anthropocene, of course, renews with great urgency the question, with which we began our Introduction, of how we are supposed to live well in relation to our environment. In recent decades the world of farming might have seemed the last place one would search for an answer. The industrialised agriculture that arose in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still persists in the mega-farms and factory farms of our age is for many an image of exactly how not to live well. This perhaps explains why ecocriticism has been a little slow to take up the challenge laid down by Fairer in 2011 to investigate the possibility of an “eco-georgic” mode, the whole notion of georgic tainted by its association with destructive anthropogenic practices including those of industrialised agriculture. However, there are now signs of a georgic renaissance in the environmental humanities, heralded by a flurry of recent georgic-related activity.

One element of this renewed interest in the georgic is the growing number of books emanating from the agricultural world itself, which are suggesting new possibilities for the georgic mode. As yet, these works have predominantly taken the form of memoirs, and, in the UK, include the bestsellers *Wilding* by Isabella Tree and James Rebanks’ *English Pastoral* (which, notwithstanding Rebanks’ choice of title, is a profoundly georgic work). Both books model new approaches to agricultural stewardship (see also Terry Gifford’s essay in this special issue) that involve a growing orientation towards nature itself, combining traditional agrarian wisdom with a new awareness of species decline, and actively adopting practices that encourage renewed biodiversity. Tree’s book recounts

the decision she and her husband took to retreat from what she calls “in-hand farming” (40), having realised that their intensive mixed farm was not financially viable. Instead they focused on rewilding their land through replacing their dairy herd and crops with (almost) free-roaming ungulates such as pigs, deer, ponies and cattle—animals whose foraging encourages the growth of habitat-rich thorny scrub—and as a result have seen an extraordinary resurgence of wildlife. Rebanks’ book details elements of regenerative farming (though he himself rarely uses that term) such as “re-wiggling” a beck [small stream] on his land and widening and restoring hedgerows, and he professes his commitment to becoming “a good steward of this land” (213) in specifically environmental terms. This recalibrated relationship with the land has been identified as a “new georgic” in contemporary farm-themed writing, in which “farming can be understood as involving not only the production of food but the production of nature itself” (Marland 3). In other words, the kind of georgic “care” discussed earlier in this Introduction, which relates to efforts to protect the well-being of crops and domestic animals, is here simultaneously extended to the natural world and its wild creatures.

Tree and Rebanks both self-consciously examine the place of their writing in the georgic tradition, referencing Virgil and seeing the *Georgics* as both a work of art and as a text inextricably connected with the practicalities of agriculture. Rebanks takes as his epigraph a passage from the *Georgics* that speaks very eloquently to his own relationship with the land he farms:

But before our iron carves an unknown plain, let our  
study be to learn its winds and fickle sky, the local  
tricks, the temper of the land, what each zone yields,  
what each refuses. (Johnson’s translation, qtd. in Rebanks 7)

The age in which we now live requires more than ever this need for “study” that involves interpreting the signs that the land offers rather than simply trying to impose human will upon it. Such a framing positions the land itself as having didactic powers, and indeed much of Rebanks narrative concerns the various forms of learning (about both farming and life) that he experiences in the context of his farm. He also sees himself and his family as connected with the world Virgil described: “I read the Roman philosopher poet Virgil and realised that my people belonged to an ancient farming tradition” (33).

An inevitable part of this reassertion of georgic themes has been an acknowledgement by the farmer-writers themselves of the environmental damage farming has wrought since its intensification in Europe post-World War 2 (although as Adrian Tait points out in his essay in this volume, radical changes in farming methods were already underway in the Victorian period). There was no chance for the farmers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to dig up, metaphorically speaking, the spears and helmets of past wars as Virgil’s farmers did; these weapons had already been repurposed into the arsenal of farming itself, to appalling effect on the landscape and its biodiversity. As Rebanks explains: “Over thirty or so years, the poet Virgil’s farming tools for waging ‘war’ evolved from being the battlefield equivalent of spears and swords to something more comparable to tanks, jet fighters and chemic and nuclear weapon systems” (158). In Rebanks’ view, this intensification of agricultural weaponry has the dubious distinction of having sparked

the environmentalist movement, the use of DDT [Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane] and its effects in particular giving impetus to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which Rebanks cites as a major influence on his own thinking (91).

In practical terms farming (and by extension, interactions with the environment in our new age of iron) is still in some respects a battle. Rebanks writes of the difficulty of working with nature, remembering fields of newly sprung barley devastated by wild rabbits. He notes that Virgil's farming philosophy "was that we had to take things from nature by using our wisdom and our tools, because the alternative was defeat and starvation" (33). The martial language remains, but in the context of an understanding of the implication of intensive farming in massive environmental damage, and it is counterbalanced by an evident love of the "wild things" (148) that co-inhabit the farm. This is a feeling that Rebanks shares with his friend and mentor, American farmer-poet Wendell Berry, whose radically environmental agrarian practices can be seen as anticipating and inspiring the "new georgic" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see also Andrew Andermatt's essay in this volume).

Tree also references Virgil, evoking his famous image of the bees emerging from a carcass. As she encounters the rapidly expanding biodiversity on her farm in the wake of rewilding she comments:

To us, unattuned, as yet, to the explosive reactions of nature, it seemed this fluttering, flopping, hopping, buzzing phenomenon was coming from nowhere – like Virgil's bees from the belly of a rotting ox. But the truth was perhaps even more miraculous. Somehow, nature had found us, homing in on our tiny patch of land from unseen distances, the moment these few acres had become hospitable again. (44)

Here, as for Virgil, the bees and their unlikely appearance from a dead ox symbolise new life arising from death. But in Tree's case, the bees are specifically a metaphor for *ecological* renewal in the face of species loss. The episode hints at the way in which allusions to Virgil's *Georgics* are being subtly woven into the language and symbolism of contemporary literary works addressing agrarian matters. It also gestures towards the hopefulness with which these new georgic texts are imbued: the idea that, offered care and hospitality, nature will find us again.

What emerges from these texts is a self-reflexive georgic that is learning to deal with the vital production of food for a growing global population while at the same time farming with, and for, nature to the largest possible degree. The authors recognise their participation in a tradition that stretches back to classical antiquity, but they also situate themselves in the midst of a specific crisis to which farming itself has contributed. This new understanding of georgic is comparable with recent accounts of the flexibility of the pastoral. For example, Deborah Lilley's "new pastoral" "provides a framework within which to explore the themes of economic, environmental, and cultural change, and the burgeoning awareness of ecological damage" (8). But, of course, the new georgic additionally involves direct, hands-on involvement in attempts to mitigate environmental damage. As such, its narratives offer the possibility that the language of farming may yet be restored to the language of life. In a recent interview, Patrick Laurie, farmer and author of *Native* expresses his hope for this kind of restoration when he says:

The physical act of farming feeds a certain mindset and approach to life which is often founded on patience, steadiness and a fair measure of grit. [...] I'm starting to think about how it might be possible to express something useful through a distinctively rural blend of language, tone and character. (n.p.)

For Laurie, then, the very challenges of farming in our time can give rise to qualities that, articulated in a literary medium, can contribute models of resilience and even wisdom in the face of the environmental challenges with which we are now faced. His words hint that the georgic mode expressed through the language of farming might once again legitimately take up its didactic role, and offer, as Laurie hopes for his own writing, some assistance when it comes to the broader question of how we are supposed to live well.

## Contributing Articles

Nation-building was an underlying theme of Virgil's *Georgics* and was more overtly employed in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English versions. Georgic as a mode did not die out at the end of the eighteenth century, rather it became transformed and entangled in a much wider range of technical and literary texts and practices, influenced by Virgil's original. Even the notional inclusion of nation-building, or at least nation-commiserating seeped into early twentieth-century texts such as Vita Sackville West's *The Land*, written after WW1, and *The Garden* in WW2. The problem of feeding a battered nation, and of giving the hard-pressed and weary British reader something to cheer them (that might also give them a spur to growing their own plants) was at the heart of much national newspaper and journal output. Matthew Griffiths, in his contribution to this collection, considers how successful Sackville-West was in her georgic labours, in comparison with what might be called the anti-pastoral of T. S. Eliot. Both authors wrote in the aftermath of destruction, as did Virgil; their reactions might have been in line with those of the majority of artists and writers attempting some assessment of their rapidly overturned, re-built and then newly destroyed towns and landscapes, yet their poetic response was very different. In *The Land*, Sackville-West seems to struggle with Virgil's discursive form so that her own, supremely English byways only serve to emphasise how distant she is from land workers and their labours. Yet Griffiths argues that this is more of a strategy than a mistake: "her work emphasizes a different kind of difficulty" from Eliot's modernist compression and fragmentation, "that of the 'monotony' (*Land* 3) of accompanying her in her account of working the land". "Whether by design or not," notes Griffiths, "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". Griffiths finds her determination to create a positive aesthetic of working the land is more successful in *The Garden*, where her "descriptive line" is used to uncover the detail of horticultural delight. By contrast, Eliot is parsimonious in description, yet the intellectual effort required to read his landscape is considerable. "Both Sackville-West and Eliot are responding, in their different modes, to the way modernity encroaches on the imaginative spaces of land and garden" writes Griffiths; both

poets offer debates on the need to negotiate with land and labour in redeeming anthropogenic environmental damage.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English georgic was much more focused on the multiple benefits to society brought by methodical and “scientific” agriculture; in the nineteenth century, the benefits of Victorian “high farming” were equally urgent after a sustained period of famine and agricultural unrest in the early nineteenth century. Adrian Tait argues in his essay that the capitalisation of farming during the mid to late Victorian period might have had its origins in improvement, yet often resulted in extreme exploitation of land and worker alike in order to make a profit out of poor yields. Thomas Hardy, conscious of the poverty of Dorset land and labour, is aware of how economic squeezes impacted women’s lives especially harshly in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Machines were one answer to human and economic harm, for labourer and farmer alike; the threshing-machine among them “constituted a decisive moment for Victorian agriculture”; even while they were “shattering the ecological balance of earlier, self-contained forms of farming” (Tait). Yet there were other literary models, as Tait discusses, such as Richard Jefferies’ more elegiac depiction of farming in *Amaryllis at the Fair*: “Iden has made his peace with a stubborn natural world ... and accustomed himself to the struggle its cultivation entails” (Tait). He has the magical qualities exhibited by Virgil’s elderly gardener whose plants seem oblivious of seasons and weathers, flourishing at his every touch. This idyll does not pay, however, and Jefferies acknowledges the inevitable demise of smallholdings such as these. Tait considers the possibility that 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”. The other side of small farming is that seen in Hubert Crackanthorpe’s short story of hill farming, “Anthony Garstin’s courtship”, in which isolation and immobility can result from a refusal to adapt; to external economic pressures and to the emotional costs of perpetual struggle as a result.

At the extreme end of this aspect of small farming is Cynan Jones’s portrayal of Welsh farming in the twenty-first century: there seems to be little change through the centuries to this moment, where myths and monsters are as prevalent in Welsh ponds and woods as they were in Virgil’s Italy. In Angelo Monaco’s essay, he discusses the dark side of Virgil’s *Georgics* in Book 3—disease, drought, the loss of prized animals—as well as the close relationship between not only human and nonhuman, but more-than-human Others who may or may not be influencing the lives and labours of Jones’s characters. Monaco also argues that the landscape and its beings are active agents in the agricultural story; places and animals have personalities unrelated to their supposed purpose as subordinates in the georgic imperative. They are cared for; they have memories, even dreams, they are part of the land worker’s emotional as well as practical life, as is the plough-ox in Book 3, dropping dead in the field. “Jones’ works can be approached from a georgic perspective that reminds readers of who they are and of their enmeshment with the world”, writes Monaco, a much bigger field than the little worlds in Mantua, Kent, Dorset and Wales.

As we have variously seen, georgic is as much about the harmful effects of crisis and war as it is about the slow, gradual, often difficult process of rebuilding and reforming what has been damaged or destroyed. As Jessica Bundschuh argues in her contribution to this issue, moments of devastation and disruption are therefore not extraneous to the georgic spirit. Rather, such moments motivate the farmer to engage in the peaceable, though also frequently combative, work of cultivation in the first place. Working from that premise, Bundschuh's article investigates, in a series of close readings, how Irish poets from Derek Mahon through Paul Muldoon to Padraig Regan use the theme of growing mushrooms to reflect on the ground and fertility of their poetic labour as well as to engage with the troubled history of Ireland. Although Virgil does not specifically mention the cultivation of mushrooms in the *Georgics*, his text resonates with a concern that, as Bundschuh shows, can be traced through all the Irish poems that she examines: the capacity of mushrooms to transform waste into nutritious matter, and to engender networks of connections out of difference and division.

Like Bundschuh, Andrew Andermatt's article also engages with the peacemaking aspect of the georgic, though in an American context. Reading Wendell Berry's "Mad Farmer" poems against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, Andermatt argues that the ambiguously 'mad' persona through whom Berry, himself a farmer, speaks in those poems represents a peculiar way of caring for the environment. More specifically, Andermatt demonstrates that the Mad Farmer poems, read in conjunction with some of Berry's expository works, suggest a variety of revolutionary environmentalism that must be distinguished from other kinds of ecological practice current at the same time. In Berry's writing, as in Virgil's *Georgics*, the farmer emerges as a figure of peaceful reformation and restorative change.

Typically, this farmer, in both Berry's and Virgil's work, appears as male. Caroline Dauphin's article, by contrast, explores how Suzanne Verdier and Anna Letitia Barbauld, two Romantic-era poets from Britain and France, respond to the georgic tradition in specifically female, even feminist ways. Concentrating mainly on the suggestive theme of sericulture, the breeding of silkworms, Dauphin compares Verdier's French *Géorgiques du Midi* (*Georgics of Southern France*) with Barbauld's English language poem "The Caterpillar". Both authors, as Dauphin's historically informed readings show, use the georgic mode to further, in subtle ways, the cause of female emancipation and empowerment. Weaving threads of connection between Britain and France, moreover, the writings of Verdier and Barbauld underscore yet again the close relation between agriculture, poetry, and the work of making peace.

The special issue draws to a close with two essays that signal the future-facing dimensions of georgic. Ethan Mannon argues the case for a concept of "georgic marvel", while Terry Gifford, in an expansive survey of agrarian literature in Britain and Ireland, reveals the extent of the contemporary georgic resurgence. Mannon draws on affect theory and affective ecocriticism to explore human emotional response to places of work (or indeed, to working in those places). His understanding of "georgic marvel" brings together ideas of enchantment and wonder that arise in the context of georgic labour, especially from the experience of "1) uncovering human-made relics, often associated

with an epic past, and 2) observing biotic events". The former, Mannon argues, can result in deeper feelings of emplacement in a landscape, while the latter brings home to us the everyday miracle of the growth and fruiting of plants in an agrarian setting. Mannon develops his discussion through a narrative scholarship approach, recounting his own experience of both sources of marvel: uncovering a "tooth from a sickle-bar mower" in his Pennsylvania backyard—a relic of its former role as agricultural land—and experiencing the challenges and joys of his own attempt to grow sweet potatoes. He concludes that "working the earth creates encounters, including marvelous ones that help us love the world".

Gifford too, advocates for the ability of georgic activity and literature to enchant, and like Mannon, outlines the potential of the georgic for fostering an enworlded sense of "a radical mutual agency that has a continuity with past knowledge". His analysis of a range of primary texts gives a helpful sense of the kinds of themes with which georgic writing in the Anthropocene is grappling. Both fictional and non-fictional forms reflect the hard work, sorrows and rewards of life on the land. Having said this, Gifford also shows how novels such as Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* (2018) bring to light the danger of an idealising georgic nostalgia, and its vulnerability to becoming enmeshed with reactionary politics, as it did in the time Harrison's story is set. However, in Gifford's view, georgic at its best, particularly in creative non-fiction writing, has a self-reflexivity and an ability to bring out the georgic qualities of attentiveness and sensitivity to the nonhuman. He particularly highlights the ecological potential of what he calls "future-oriented georgic", such as that of the aforementioned Tree and Rebanks.

In this *Ecozon@* special issue we have taken up Fairer's suggestion of an eco-georgic in order to explore its possibilities—as a mode of careful, sometimes arduous, writing and reading, and, more broadly, as an attitude informing the effort to live more sustainably on our beleaguered planet. The essays featured here show georgic being deployed and refashioned in a number of valuable ways: it can help us to better understand our enmeshment with the world; it warns us to anticipate difficulty and disruption; and it encourages our resolve to work towards different forms of restoration. These essays and the literary texts they investigate participate in a georgic literary ecology that runs from classical antiquity to the present, but they also point tentatively towards a way forward through the social, economic, political and, above all, environmental challenges of life in the iron times of the Anthropocene.

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