

## Editorial Creative Writing and Arts

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

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I was born in the Italian Alps but currently live in a rather remote county in the northeastern region of the USA known as New England. When I walk through forests here, their apparent state of abandonment surprises me, as they appear to have been left to themselves, untended by human labor. Yet, this territory has a long history of human intervention on the environment: for instance, indigenous communities used to periodically burn parts of the forest, especially those near water, to manage their growth. More dramatically, those northern Europeans who, famously and likely falsely, landed on Plymouth Rock in 1620 initiated the westward invasion of America that brought, along with the genocide of indigenous people, those radical changes in the land so movingly recounted by William Cronon (Cronon). The new settler-colonial communities imported a different practice of dwelling that sought to forcefully transform the land into an agro-pastoral utopia, with very few trees and large pastures (cfr. Wessels). Yet, most of New England today resembles neither the pre-colonial landscape nor the colonial one, as forests have reclaimed most of the land and only scattered signs remind us that these lands were once tended by communities of humans. The forest floor of contemporary forests is thus often left in a state of disarray, with a clutter of fallen trees and branches that does not allow for rapid regrowth. This condition cannot but confound those who, like myself, come from agro-pastoral cultures and are accustomed to view and interact with forests in terms of intergenerational obligation: if the forest floor is not tended and new trees do not have an ideal growing ground, how will the next generation of humans be able to benefit from the land?

This question about responsibility toward future generations and their “right” to benefit from trees prompts an inquiry into the potential ecological value of different human interventions into seemingly abandoned landscapes and interlocks with the theme of this issue of *Ecozon@* devoted to *Eco-Georgic: From Antiquity to the Anthropocene*. Even though my confoundment came from encountering the combination of historical violence, human labor, and environmental growth that characterizes the American northeastern landscape, the concern about the relationship between the nonhuman world and human efforts to master it is not only geographically ubiquitous (at least within European societies), but also as ancient as at least Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, the farmer’s almanac written around 700 BC. As the guest editors of this issue of our

journal remind us, though, it is in Virgil's *Georgics* that the anxiety over human activities of cultivation and construction as repeatedly threatened to be overrun or swept away by the life of the more-than-human world finds its classic culmination and the beginning of a literary mode. Interestingly, Virgil is also often considered one of the classic fathers of the mode that is allegedly antithetical to the georgic, i.e. the pastoral (with the *Eclogues*): while the former regards nature in terms of necessary labor, the latter usually describes human/nonhuman relationships in a state of harmonious idleness. Yet, both modes – in their classic form as well in their historic revivals—can be also read as the two-fold reaction toward a change in the material (economic, technological, political) relationships between a certain community and its surrounding environment, a change that inevitably concerns the future of this relationship, who is the position of mastering it, and what such mastery would entail. From this perspective, the georgic can indeed be part of an “usufructuary ethos” that, as Erin Drew pointed out in his recent eponymous volume, provides “a framework for determining the best uses of the nonhuman world, not in terms of what sort of use was most productive, but in terms of what sort of use would best fulfill the user’s responsibilities to others, both human and nonhuman, in the present and future” (Drew 2-3). It is thus somehow unsurprising that the georgic has been recently described by scholars as an alternative not to the pastoral and its reincarnations, but to anthropocentrism. According to Christopher Loar, the georgic mode does not, in fact, reflect an ideology of human mastery over the nonhuman world, but focuses instead “its attention on the way that humans collaborate with nonhuman materials. In the process, it assembles a social world that includes both human and nonhuman actors” (Loar 242).

Most of the contributions in the Art and Creative Writing section of this issue of *Ecozon@* engage with a similar understanding of the georgic mode. For instance, the cover image belongs to a series of paintings entitled *Postpastoral*, by Patti Trimble. Trimble, a poet and visual artist based in California and Italy, tackles the merging and intersections of human-made and natural worlds through works in which the boundaries between the organic and the artificial are somehow blurred or overlapped. For example, in the cover image, what appears to be a tablecloth with a neatly symmetric and vegetable-themed ornamental design is superimposed on a desert landscape in which no order appears to be recognizable. Similarly, in the painting entitled “Postpastoral #4,” the tension between the pastoral sense of harmony and the more georgic labor over the land is exemplified by the contrast between the white lace figure and the green background: while the former is a common example of human craftsmanship and order, the latter looks like a wild entanglement of vegetable life. Yet, the holes in the lace allow the green to come forward and give life to the otherwise aseptic lace, as if environmental energy and human mastery intersect, creating a jewel-like image, an ecological diplopia in which the two realms become one.

The poem that opens the second contribution, “Mowing” by Matthew Griffiths, tackles the issue of human labor and the environment from a perspective of a daily activity that is considered less artistic than lace making and yet belongs more to our contemporary imaginary. Here, the technological and the bellicose collide in the image of the mowers who, nonetheless, are meant to shape the urban landscape according to our

dreams of harmonic city-dwellings, where the grass exists but it is perfectly manicured. Griffiths, a poet and literary critic who is also the author of a volume on *The New Poetics of Climate Change*, engages with such a georgic tension between who manages the land and who benefits from it in other poems anthologized in this section of *Ecozon@*. For instance, in “Common,” the poet deals with what he calls “the difficulty of / common land,” and readers are invited to pay attention to the political, social, and environment features of agricultural practices in a contemporary world drastically altered by climate change.

The next contribution comes from Katharina Maria Kalinowski, a Marie-Curie fellow at the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities in Cologne and at the University of Kent, where she is pursuing a PhD in English Philology and Creative Writing. In her experimental poetry, the industrial and technological matter of our everyday life and labor (tags, roads, chemicals, WiFi) represents the reality of humanity in the Anthropocene and interacts with a language at the playful edge of symbolic saturation. The outcome is a series of poems that depicts an original but scattered sense of dwelling encompassing human and nonhuman actants, a material world—or rather, “a giant landing strip floating on water,” as she writes in “Home is where the WiFi connects automatically”—that is at once alien and intimate, ordinary and full of wonders. Through linguistic labor, Kalinowski thus produces an original eco-georgic poetry that does not oppose our urban and industrial environment but works through it, perhaps cultivating such polluted land for the growth of future *flowers of evil*.

With the next contributor, the poet Jack Thacker, we instead encounter some of the common topoi of the georgic tradition, what we would expect to find in rural context: barns, cattle, farmers. Thacker was brought up on a farm in the West Midlands of England and he has been the writer in residence at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading. It is thus unsurprising that his work engages often with the ancient relationship between poetry and agriculture. Yet, the poems anthologized here are neither the celebration of human mastery, nor a naïve and nostalgic depiction of “the good old days.” Instead, they portray the labor of farming, the physical work that pins humans and nonhumans to their land, to their life, and to their function. Through these poems, writing itself becomes a material kind of labor: not the abstract work of someone ecologically detached, but a proper handling—as Thacker’s 2018 debut poetic collection titles—of the material world, an artisanal effort without illusion about the future and death, but that does not rush, choosing instead to “work at the pace of hands.”

The two final contributions to this section of *Ecozon@* are not directly tied to the main theme of the issue, but they nonetheless add two fresh perspectives to the question of literature, labor, and the natural world encoded in the georgic mode. The first one is a few excerpts from “Seeds,” a long poetry sequence that, as stated by the poet, “thinks about forms of resistance, survival, and emergence in the context of the sixth mass extinction.” The author, Kim Trainor, is a faculty at Douglas College, where she teaches classes on poetry, ecopoetics, climate justice, science fiction, and world literature. As a writer, she published two volumes of poetry, the last of which is entitled *Ledi* (Book Hug). As Trainor writes in her introductory statement, the two “seeds” anthologized here function as blueprints, “whether simple human-made tool or complex organism driven by

its DNA to adapt to and respond to our current existential threat, each showing a different way of being in the world.” The last contribution is instead three poems by Rowan Kilduff, a mountain-runner, writer, activist, photographer, and musician who currently lives in the Czech Republic. Working within the tradition of American eco-poetry but intersecting it with Eastern religiosity, Kilduff’s poems bring a spiritual dimension to our encounter with the nonhuman world as well as a call to be “wildly awake” to that encounter, somehow embracing it with an affirmative “yes.”

### Works Cited

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