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# “IRON WAR” AS “DAILY CARE” Sustainability and the Dialectic of Care in Dryden’s *Georgics*

Erin Drew

When Dryden published his translation of Virgil’s *Georgics* in 1697, he touched off an “astonishing vogue” for the georgic mode that lasted through much of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 299. Dwight L. Durling’s *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935) exhaustively documents the various appearances and transmutations of the georgic through eighteenth-century poetry, while John Chalker’s *The English Georgic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969) accounts for its persistent popularity by pointing out the various political and cultural similarities between Virgil’s original poem and late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century England. More recently, Karen O’Brien has tied the rise and decline of georgic as a popular literary genre in eighteenth-century Britain to its relationship to empire, especially as a mode of description of natural-economic activity that justifies and valorizes British imperial activities. See Karen O’Brien, “Imperial Georgic, 1660–1789,” in Gerald Maclean, Donna Landry and Joseph P. Ward, eds., *The Country and the City*

*Georgics* are often described as a didactic poem about agriculture that lays out instructions for producing sustenance (grain, fruit trees, cattle) from an alternately cooperative and combative landscape. While this is certainly an accurate description, it leaves out the intimacy and uncertainty threaded through human-nature interactions in the poem. The term “georgic” derives from the Greek *ge-ourgos* meaning “working with the earth,” and the georgic as mode of writing is rooted in the often-messy intersections between man and earth. “Georgic” conjures up images of hands plunging into the soil, ploughs turning fields; images of humans at once cooperating and struggling with nature as they work to eke out a living. In georgic poems, humans depend upon non-human nature—and more importantly, must *labor* on it—in order to guarantee survival. The emphasis on survival is crucial. The fact that human beings must work both with and against the earth to stay alive in the present implies that they must also maintain its well-being in order to ensure future survival. Thus despite their preoccupation with making nature productive, georgic poems almost always evince an ethos of conscientious care alongside their fundamental utilitarianism. Poor husbandry, especially thoughtless overuse or neglect, is a failure of responsibility, damaging the land and threatening future productivity. Long-term survival for both humans and non-humans requires restraint, foresight, labor and luck.

The fact that georgic poetry presents human and non-human lives as unavoidably entangled with one another has recently led several scholars to see the mode as a useful alternative to models of environmental writing that strain to keep nature and culture scrupulously separated. Ecocriticism as a field has, in David Fairer’s wry understatement, found it historically “difficult to gain a purchase on the eighteenth century that is anything other than negative.”<sup>2</sup> Decrying the “disenchantment” of nature supposedly perpetrated by the Enlightenment, many ecocritics have argued that eighteenth century writers’ tendency to celebrate nature’s productivity in response to human

*Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 160–79. Frans De Bruyn and Rachel Crawford, on the other hand, connect georgic’s popularity to the period’s fascination with agricultural science; Virgil’s poem, De Bruyn points out, was read as a practical treatise on farming well into the second half of the century. See Frans De Bruyn, “Reading Virgil’s *Georgics* as a Scientific Text: The Eighteenth-Century Debate between Jethro Tull and Stephen Switzer,” *ELH* 71, no. 3 (2004): 661–89 and “Eighteenth-Century Editions of Virgil’s *Georgics*: From Classical Poem to Agricultural Treatise,” *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 24 (2005): 149–63; and Rachel Crawford, “English Georgic and British Nationhood,” *ELH* 65, no. 1 (1998): 123–58.

<sup>2</sup> David Fairer, “Where fuming trees refresh the thirsty air’: The World of Eco-Georgic,” *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 40 (2011): 202.

activity signals an instrumentalist ethos, one that promoted the right of humans to unlimited, uninhibited use of all things non-human. In other words, for many ecocritics, *use* during the Enlightenment always implies *exploitation*.

To date, most ecocriticism by eighteenth-century scholars has addressed such arguments by claiming that eighteenth-century attitudes to nature are more fairly characterized as "contradictory" than instrumentalist or exploitative. Far from offering a reactionary riposte to ecocritical critiques of Enlightenment thought, nearly all of these studies concede that attitudes to nature in the period often are utilitarian and anthropocentric. But they are not *exclusively* so. Alongside utilitarianism and anthropocentrism, often in the very same text, a number of recent scholars find exhortations to steward nature and to respect its intrinsic worth.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Christopher Hitt identifies a "double gesture of both deference and mastery before nature" rather than a simplistically exploitative (or deferential) stance as "the characteristic feature of eighteenth-century nature writing."<sup>4</sup> Hitt's "double gesture" is important not only because he locates "deference" where those before saw only "mastery," but because by focusing on eighteenth-century writers' "paradoxical recognition that we both master and are mastered by the nonhuman world," Hitt scrutinizes the notion that historical texts can or should be slotted into contemporary ecological categories.<sup>5</sup> Eighteenth-century literature—particularly, perhaps, georgic poetry—constructs a relationship between mastery and deference that differs categorically from the immiscible split imagined by much post-Romantic literature and environmental thought.

The key difference lies in what Donna Landry has called georgic poetry's "ethos of a necessary, but not purely instrumental, *consumption* of nature," which she contrasts with the "unthinkingly pastoral" tendency of post-Romantic environmental thought.<sup>6</sup> The distinction Landry draws between "necessary" and "instrumental" consumption rests on the insight that however humans cultivate, manipulate or otherwise exploit nature's resources for their own benefit, they are always dependent upon nature. Indeed, as

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller review of eighteenth-century ecocritical scholarship, see Erin Drew and John Sitter, "Ecocriticism and Eighteenth-Century English Studies," *Literature Compass* 8/5 (2011): 227–39.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hitt, "Ecocriticism and the Long Eighteenth Century," *College Literature* 31, no.3 (2004): 132.

<sup>5</sup> Hitt, "Ecocriticism," 126.

<sup>6</sup> Donna Landry, "Georgic Ecology," in Simon White, John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, eds., *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class, and the Romantic Canon* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), 255.



Fairer points out, eighteenth-century georgic poetry's frequent calls for restraint and responsibility reflect the mode's recognition that nature is fully other, autonomous from humans: "in Virgil and his eighteenth-century imitators natural forces have a way of getting back at you. Co-operation is a safer bet than human mastery."<sup>7</sup> The eighteenth-century georgic, Fairer explains, "tries to understand how an interdependent system can be *sustained* and properly *exploited* (and knows how the two go together)," namely, with care and responsibility.<sup>8</sup> Eighteenth century georgic poems characteristically call for restrained, sustainable use of nature as a practical necessity. The georgic ethos, Landry declares, is one with which "we shall need to come to terms once more if we are to negotiate a more realistic—or ecologically sustainable . . . relation to the natural world."<sup>9</sup>

That environmental criticism of the eighteenth-century georgic recurs so often to the language of sustainability is no coincidence. The georgic and the modern concept of environmental sustainability not only share similar concerns—chief among them, the question of how best to secure the survival of human beings and the planet against environmental deterioration that threatens future generations—but have also been subject to similar critiques. Like the georgic, the managerialism at the heart of the sustainability movement has been criticized for its anthropocentrism and instrumentalism. In response, some environmentalists have attempted to rehabilitate the idea of sustainability by purging it of its roots in science, claiming that a complete break from the Enlightenment modes of knowledge and the human mastery that science both presupposes and promotes is necessary to solve the crisis. Yet as Gillen D'Arcy Wood points out, "ecocritics can no longer afford to preach the evils of the Enlightenment" when "progressive thinkers operating, however loosely, within the institutional framework of that Enlightenment . . . are striving to produce the necessary intellectual resources and policy infrastructure for the sustainability revolution."<sup>10</sup> The pursuit of sustainability requires environmentalists

<sup>7</sup> Fairer, "Eco-Georgic," 205.

<sup>8</sup> Fairer, "Eco-Georgic," 212, Fairer's emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> Landry, "Georgic Ecology," 255.

<sup>10</sup> Gillen D'Arcy Wood, "What Is Sustainability Studies?" *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 9. For the argument for a sustainability without science, see Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, "Introduction: Taking Ignorance Seriously," in Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson, eds., *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 1–17. For a more detailed history of debate over the term and definition of "sustainability" in environmental discourse, see Daniel J. Philippon, "Sustainability and the Humanities: An Extensive Pleasure," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 166–68.

to find ways to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable philosophies and demands: the search for scientific solutions with humble acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge; the control and curtailment of the species and processes that threaten the survival of the biosphere with respect for the autonomy and fundamental worth of all creatures. Much like the georgic, sustainability seeks to forge a caring relationship between humans and the environment where a destructive one has dominated, and to find a way to hold these seemingly opposite potentialities in balance for the future benefit of all.

To that end, while Landry's and Fairer's emphasis on the role of human care in georgic is salutary, it is important to keep in mind that the language of conflict is just as prominent in georgic poetry as the language of cooperation. This is particularly true for Dryden's widely influential translation of Virgil's *Georgics*, in which passages that depict humans as responsible for tending to nature's needs and desires alternate with passages that depict humans at war with nature, struggling against it, or even attempting to repress or subjugate its unruly impulses. Cooperation might indeed be the best bet when nature gets back at you, as Fairer notes, but in Virgil's *Georgic* human responses to nature's resistance are adversarial as often as they are cooperative. The successful farmer follows the "Genius of the Soil" (I.80) and "Commands / Th'unwilling Soil, and tames the stubborn Lands" (I.143–44).<sup>11</sup> The poem's undeniable emphasis on restraint and cooperation certainly mitigates its combative, mastering language, but it does not erase it. Both sides of the contradiction are still firmly in play.

So how can remembering that conflict and care are equally representative of the *Georgics*' depiction of the human-nature relationship help bring together the two sides of the deference-mastery contradiction? The answer lies in the *Georgics*' characteristic indeterminacy and dialectical structure. As Juan Christian Pellicer has observed, "For a majority of critics, Virgil is the quintessential poet of split perspectives," and his *Georgics* the quintessential poem.<sup>12</sup> Gary B. Miles, Christine Perkell, and Alexander Dalzell have demonstrated that the poem's dialectical organization and place in the middle register of classical poetry enable it to mediate stylistic, philosophical, and

<sup>11</sup> All quotations from Dryden's *Georgics* are from *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 5, *The Works of Virgil in English*, 1697, eds. William Frost and Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and will be cited parenthetically by book and line number. Citations from all other translations of Virgil's *Georgics* will be in footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> Juan Christian Pellicer, "Reception, Wit, and the Unity of Virgil's *Georgics*," *Symbolae Osloenses: Norwegian Journal of Greek and Latin Studies* 82 (2007): 97.

political extremes.<sup>13</sup> What's more, William Batstone argues that the *Georgics*' ambivalence and manifold contradictory positions gather the "discrepancies and harmonies of our presence in the world into word and thought. . . . [The poem] provides a place where conflicting realities coexist and inhabit each other."<sup>14</sup> From an ecocritical perspective, the *Georgics*' habit of juxtaposing contradictory ideas in ways that bring to light their underlying connections makes it possible to see how mastery and deference can and indeed must co-exist. Conflict and care work dialectically toward the same goal in the poem: that of the continued future survival and health of humans and non-humans alike. The fact that humans are dependent on nature means that they must take care of it in order to guarantee survival not just for the moment, but for the future. But the fact that nature acts according to its own dictates, often in opposition to the efforts of human agriculture, means that working to preserve the land for future survival (human or otherwise) also places human labor in conflict with nature.

The reading that follows will examine the dialectically interlocked depictions of care and conflict in Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics* in order to demonstrate, first, that those two seemingly opposite impulses spring from the poem's underlying assumption that human beings are subject to nature's laws, rather than the other way around. Second, I will show that the dialectic of care and combat is motivated by the *Georgics*' fundamental preoccupation with the problem of guaranteeing the future stability of human and natural life. In its depiction of a dialectical interconnection between mastery and deference that enables the future well-being of all living things, Dryden's

<sup>13</sup> For a tour-de-force discussion of *Georgics*' dialectical structure, especially in its treatment of *amor* in *Georgics* III, see G. B. Miles, "'Georgics' 3.209–294: 'Amor' and Civilization," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 8 (1975): 177–97, and *Virgil's Georgics: A New Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Christine Perkell investigates the textual ambiguities of the poem and their contribution to its power and significance in *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). Alexander Dalzell's chapter on *Georgics* in *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) focuses on the problem of generic and tonal contradictions in Virgil's poem, concluding that they reflect the ancient Augustans' "tendency to rethink the limits of genre" and Virgil's particular affinity for accommodating uncertainty and ambiguity in his work (128). Dalzell also includes a brief discussion of the persistence of the debate over generic mixing into the eighteenth century, taking as his example the famous kerfuffle surrounding James Grainger's risible rats in his 1764 georgic *The Sugar-Cane* (117–19).

<sup>14</sup> William Batstone, "Virgilian Didaxis: Value and Meaning in the *Georgics*," Charles Martindale, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 128.

*Georgics* offer not only an example of an eighteenth-century ethic of sustainable engagement with the environment, but also a potentially productive model for thinking through the challenges of contemporary sustainability.

\* "DAILY CARE" AND "IRON WAR": CARE AND CONFLICT IN  
DRYDEN'S *GEORGIC* \*

Midway through the first book of his translation of the *Georgics*, Dryden offers a piece of counsel that links care and conflict together:

So that unless the Land with daily *Care*  
Is exercis'd, and with an *Iron War*,  
Of Rakes and Harrows, the proud Foes expell'd,  
And Birds with clamours frighted from the Field;  
Unless the Boughs are lopp'd that shade the Plain,  
And Heav'n invok'd with Vows for fruitful Rain,  
On other Crops you may with envy look,  
And shake for Food the long abandon'd Oak.  
(I.231–38; my emphasis)

Connected by sound and sense, the rhyme in the first couplet reinforces the syntactical parallel ("*with* daily *Care*" "*with* an *Iron War*") that the lines draw between two seemingly quite different activities: exercising (the soil) with care versus expelling (weeds and pests) with war. At first glance the repetition of violent nouns and verbs like "war," "Foes," "expell'd" or "lopp'd" seems to overshadow the presence of "care," giving the impression that the poem endorses a combative stance towards the land. Yet a more careful reading of the passage's nuances reveals a complex picture of the struggle between human labor and natural forces. As is often the case in Dryden, the noun phrase "Iron War" refers not to a war humans have declared against nature, but rather to the implements of battle—the "Rakes and Harrows"—wielded against the "proud Foes" of the farmer's crop. Furthermore, using the "Iron War" against organisms like brambles, darnel and birds actually enacts the "daily *Care*" called for in the prior line. Expelling pest species is one activity among the many that constitute responsible care for the crops that will eventually sustain humans and other animals, no different from other agricultural tasks such as rotating crops to rest the soil (I.106–17) or fertilizing it with manure, ash, or

controlled burning (I.122–36). Thus the “war” is an aspect of care, one which must be exercised *with* care, in the sense of concern, attention and caution. Far from calling for out-and-out aggression against nature as enemy, then, the passage above advises farmers to respond to threats to their crops with measured, focused, and carefully directed actions.

Although in substance the same as Virgil’s original, Dryden’s translation of this passage alters the lines in a way that simultaneously places extra emphasis on the distinction between care and combat and reinforces their interdependence. Compare Dryden’s rendition to a literal English translation: “Therefore, unless your hoe is ever ready to assail the weeds, your voice ready to terrify the birds, your knife to check the shade over the darkened land, and your prayers to invoke the rain, in vain, poor man, you will gaze on your neighbour’s large store of grain, and you will be shaking oaks in the woods to assuage your hunger.”<sup>15</sup> Dryden’s translation follows Virgil’s original in its juxtaposition of pest eradication with expressions of concern for the health of the crops and a sense of human dependence upon nature for survival. Yet by rendering “*nisi et adsiduis herbam insectabere rastris*” as “unless the Land with daily Care / Is exercis’d, and with an Iron War,” Dryden changes “*adsiduis*” from an adjective (ever-ready) modifying a specific implement (the hoe) to the noun phrase “daily Care,” which applies to the entire concept of exercising the land. The change makes the concern that is implicit in the ever-readiness of the hoe both explicit and applicable to everything the farmer does. Dryden’s version implies that the farmer must apply his unremitting solicitude and attention to a host of tasks *including* attacking weeds. Combined with his choice of the periphrastic “Iron War” for “*rastris*” (literally “hoe” or “mattock”), Dryden’s translation of “*adsiduis*” as “daily Care” makes the original passage’s underlying preoccupation with the interrelatedness of care and combat overt. By doing so, Dryden emphasizes the distinct presence of both sides of the contradiction while tying them together even more tightly through the couplet.

To work both with and against a natural world that is autonomous and indifferent to human desire defines what it means to be human in the *Georgics*. The poem offers two origin stories that elucidate how humans transitioned from the effortless plenty of the Golden Age to a world defined by violent

<sup>15</sup> Virgil, “Georgics,” in *Virgil I: Eclogues Georgics Aeneid I–VI*, Loeb Classical Library 63, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (1935; revised by G. P. Goold, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 109. The translation is of Virgil, I.155–59: “*quod nisi et adsiduis herbam insectabere rastris / et sonitu terrebis aves et ruris opaci / falce premes umbras votisque vocaveris imbrem, / heu magnum alterius frustra spectabis acervum / concussaue famem in silvis solabere quercu.*”

struggle for survival. During the Golden Age, the second story recounts, rivers flowed with wine, and people gleaned sustenance in the form of "liquid Gold" from "Oaken leaves" (I.200) without fighting either nature or fellow humans: "No Fences parted Fields, nor Marks nor Bounds / Distinguish'd Acres of litigious Grounds: / But all was common, and the fruitful Earth / Was free to give her unexacted Birth" (I.193–96). The Golden Age world was peaceful, communal, and spontaneously generous; in this age, human desire is undifferentiated from the natural world's desire to fulfill it. This period of perfect amity draws to a close when Jove wills "that Mortal Men, inur'd to toil, / Shou'd exercise, with pains, the grudging Soil" in order to whet "Humane Industry by Care" (I.185–86, 89). Jove imposes on humans the necessity of labor not, crucially, by direct fiat, but rather by instantiating an entirely new relationships between humans and nature, one in which the recalcitrance of the natural world necessitates human ingenuity. Because a host of plants and animals and even the soil itself now operate entirely on their own agendas, often inimical to human needs, "care" for and "exercising" of the newly "grudging Soil" (words directly repeated, significantly, in the lines discussed above) are suddenly required for survival. The "Iron War"—the need to combat nature while also caring for it—is an inescapable part of the post-Golden Age world because non-human life forms do not cater to humanity's desires. Human life is premised on the intractable, inescapable fact that non-human life is irreducibly non-human. Cycles of conflict and compromise are the inevitable result.

The other origin myth in *Georgics* further establishes that humans are subject to the primal authority of nature even as they must struggle with nature to survive. This story follows the Greek myth of Deucalion. Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha are the only two humans to survive after Zeus floods the earth in a fit of rage. Together, they repopulate the planet by ripping stones from the earth and throwing them over their shoulders, where they turn instantly into humans upon touching the ground. In the *Georgics*, this story appears immediately after the poet admonishes his reader to pay attention to the "Culture suiting to the sev'ral Kinds / Of Seeds and Plants; and what will thrive and rise, / And what the Genius of the Soil denies" (I.78–80). In fact, Virgil invokes the Deucalion myth in order to explain why humans cannot force the land to conform to their preferences:

This is the Orig'nal Contract: these the Laws  
Impos'd by Nature, and by Nature's Cause,  
On sundry Places, when Deucalion hurl'd

His Mother's Entrails on the desert World:  
 Whence Men, a hard laborious Kind, were born.  
 Then borrow part of Winter for thy Corn;  
 And early with thy Team the Gleebe in Furrows turn: . . . (I.91–97)

According to this passage, humans must tailor their labor to the needs of the land as a contractual obligation they owe to both nature and God.<sup>16</sup> What's more, in Dryden's version, this contract was "Impos'd . . . / On sundry Places *when* Deucalion hurl'd / His Mother's Entrails," that is, at the very moment that humans were being reborn. The post-flood world was therefore forged by human labor in cooperation with natural forces, which simultaneously regenerated human life through violence against nature (hurling his "Mother's Entrails") and set limitations to human violence by granting priority to the needs of the non-human landscape. Humans are required not only to labor but to labor in accordance with the preferences and parameters of nature itself. Human beings, the "hard laborious Kind," are defined as a species by their origin in this moment of violence and subjection, obliged to defer to the "Genius of the Soil" even as they "plow across the furrow'd Grounds, / And on the Back of Earth inflict new Wounds" (I.141–42). What might seem from some perspectives to be a contradictory oscillation between celebrating human domination and deference to an autonomous non-human world is in fact a fundamental aspect of the way the poem defines humanity. To be human means having to inhabit both parts of the contradiction at once.

A look at some examples of the relationships between humans and animals will elucidate the ways *Georgics* constructs conflict and care as two sides of a single coin, as well as the way Dryden's translation uses personification to emphasize that both cooperation and antagonism in human-animal relationships originate in the universal struggle for survival. The introduction of agricultural labor at end of the Golden Age created conflict, forcing human farmers to battle with animals like the "glutton Geese, and the *Strymonian* Crane," which "with foreign Troops, invade the tender Grain" (I.179–80). Yet for all the strife occasioned by the birds' scavenging—strife Dryden heightened by inserting a military metaphor absent from Virgil's original—*Georgics* sympathizes with the hunger and anxiety that prompts animal raids on human

<sup>16</sup> Dryden departs slightly from Virgil in this respect; the original makes no mention of God ("Nature's Cause"), imputing these laws to nature alone: "From the first, Nature laid these laws and covenants on certain lands. . . ." (Fairclough 102). Trans. Virg. I.60–61: "*continuo has leges aeternaque foedera certis / imposuit natura locis.*"

stores.<sup>17</sup> Dryden even invites the reader to identify with the very pests who feed themselves by invading the threshing-house:

For sundry Foes the Rural Realm surround:  
The Field-Mouse builds her Garner under ground,  
For gather'd Grain the blind laborious Mole,  
In winding Mazes works her hidden Hole.  
In hollow Caverns Vermine make abode,  
The hissing Serpent, and the swelling Toad:  
The Corn-devouring Weezel here abides,  
And the wise Ant her wintry Store provides. (I.264–71)

Though the animals in this passage are introduced as "sundry Foes" to the "Rural Realm," Margaret Doody notes that we "recognize that they are doing what is in their nature and in their own interest, and momentarily we share their point of view."<sup>18</sup> We share their point of view because Dryden frames their actions and motivations in human terms: the mouse loads her granary exactly as her human counterpart does, albeit with pilfered food. The animals' anxious efforts to ensure survival are analogous to the farmer's.

Dryden's translation accentuates the parallels between humans and animals more emphatically than Virgil did, emphasizing the way that their mutual preoccupation with ensuring individual well-being prompts interspecies conflict. The "blind laborious Mole" evokes the "hard laborious Kind," human beings, suggesting that moles and humans are alike in working tirelessly for survival, though their work may often be at cross purposes. More strikingly, Dryden alters Virgil's claim that ants steal grain out of fear of a "deserted old age" to attribute to the insect the power of foresight.<sup>19</sup> The "wise Ant" steals from the threshing-house in order to make provision for a coming season of want, just as the wise farmer constructs a strong threshing house to safeguard his winter store from thieves like mice, moles, and ants. All of these animals compromise human beings' attempts to provide for themselves,

<sup>17</sup> Compare Fairclough: "Nor yet . . . does the rascally goose do no mischief, or the Strymonian cranes" (107, trans. Virg. I.119–20). Karen O'Brien notes that a greater emphasis on military images is a feature of Dryden's translation, along with his inflation of the poem's national and imperial rhetoric to reflect Britain's growing self-identification as a global power ("Imperial Georgic," 162 n.6 and 164–65).

<sup>18</sup> Margaret Anne Doody, *The Daring Muse: Augustan Poetry Reconsidered* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 111.

<sup>19</sup> Fairclough, 111; trans. Virgil I.185–86.



but by describing their actions in terms of human habits and needs, Dryden prompts the reader to combine fellow-feeling for the pests' hunger and anxiety with the frustration and disgust they might normally provoke. Just like humans and animals, sympathy and antipathy must uncomfortably coexist.

The uncomfortable coexistence enforced by Dryden's personification is further emphasized by the rhymes in the last two couplets of the passage:

In hollow Caverns Vermine make *abode*,  
The hissing Serpent, and the swelling *Toad*:  
The Corn-devouring Weezel here *abides*,  
And the wise Ant her wintry Store *provides*.

These lines focus on especially unpleasant creatures: vermin, snakes, toads, and in the last two lines, insects. (The “weezel” of the third line refers to a weevil, a small beetle that burrows into granaries and destroys crops.) And yet despite the relative ickiness of the subject—or, at least, the relatively unsympathetic creatures involved—Dryden's rhymes drive home the parallels between these non-human and human creatures. We have already covered the “wise” ant and the “store” she provides against winter. What I am interested in here is the repetition of “abode” and “abides” as the key words connected to vermin. An “abode” is a home or a dwelling-place, and to “abide” is to dwell or to stay in that home. By repeating the word, Dryden offsets the repellent aspects of these creatures (their “hissing” and “swelling”) with the more sympathetic notion that they are, like the farmer, simply building a home. Indeed, rhyming the cozy-sounding “abode” with “toad” mitigates some of the creature's amphibian sliminess. Thus, the rhyming words of Dryden's couplets subtly reinforce the poem's entanglement of human and non-human even when that entanglement is not so strongly evident in the literal meaning of the lines.

Furthermore, in the seventeenth century, the verb “abide” itself encapsulated both sides of the care/conflict coin. While abide did mean to live or to dwell—especially when used in relation to animals—it also meant to *lie in wait*, and even “to await defiantly; to encounter, withstand; or to face, *esp. in combat*.”<sup>20</sup> While the vermin, serpents, toads, and weevils are making a cozy home, they are also making themselves adversaries of human beings. The very act of home-making is a salvo in the never-ending skirmish between humans

<sup>20</sup> “abide, v.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2014, <http://oed.com>; my emphasis.

and non-humans. Yet their act of war against humans mirrors the acts of war humans perpetrate against pest organisms throughout the *Georgics*, often described by Dryden in explicitly military terms. The creatures' attempts at home-making are destructive to humans' in the same way that human beings' home-making is inimical to the livelihoods of many species of animals and plants. Dryden's personifications as well as his couplets thus make sympathy and antipathy utterly inextricable from one another.

The dialectical movement between care and conflict is not limited to human relationships with pests; it extends to domesticated animals as well. Book II, for instance, depicts cattle first as dangerous pests, then as valued family members. Dryden urges farmers to build hedges to "Exclude th'incroaching Cattle" from the fields (II.512),

For not December's Frost that burns the Boughs,  
Nor Dog-days parching Heat that splits the Rocks,  
Are half so harmful as the greedy Flocks:  
Their venom'd Bite, and Scars indented on the Stocks.  
For this the Malefactor Goat was laid  
On *Bacchus* Altar, and his forfeit paid. (II.519–24)

In this passage, Dryden describes cows and goats as menaces to young crops, with poisoned teeth capable of inflicting permanent damage. They are mindlessly appetitive, their greed driving them to despoil the fields if they are not completely kept out. What's more, they receive punishment for their crimes both human and divine: the "Malefactor Goat" pays for his depredations by being ritually sacrificed to Bacchus. Cows and goats are in direct and violent conflict with humans at this stage of the growing season.

By the end of Book II, however, the relationship between humans and their cattle shifts from conflict back to care. As it turns out, the fight against cattle to protect the young shoots of grain ultimately sustains both humans and non-human household members alike. Dryden's idealized farmer "With crooked Ploughs the fertile Fallows tills; / And the round Year with daily Labour fills / / His Wife, and tender Children to sustain, / And *gratefully* to feed his dumb *deserving* Train" (II.739–40, 743–44, my emphasis). In the final line, the farmer shares his harvest with his flocks, explicitly acknowledging his debt to them for having a crop to share at all. His earlier efforts to fend off the cattle were in part meant to protect their future welfare, since, as Book III reveals, the farmer's springtime parsimoniousness enables him later to "minister the browze, with bounteous hand: / And open let Stacks all Winter stand"

(III.498–99). The ideal farmer is grateful to his “dumb . . . Train,” who earn their share by virtue of their cooperation with humans in the process of producing the harvest. *Georgics* does not reduce the cattle to mere instruments of human labor, nor deny their autonomy as non-human beings. These are, after all, some of the very same creatures whose individual appetites threatened the crop’s very existence not long ago. Instead, the shifting relationships between the farmer and his livestock in Book II exemplify the way *Georgics* combines antagonist and helpmeet in domesticated creatures. Of course, the nearly complete diffusion of conflict at the end of Book II is in part an effect of the book’s intense—and at least partly ironic—re-pastoralization of the Roman countryside in response to the violence and hypocrisy of the post-Civil War metropolis. The text posits this idyllic moment as the momentary return of a new Golden Age, a brief *détente* before returning to the struggle for survival, as the *Georgics* always does.

\* THE THIRD GEORGIC: THE DIALECTIC OF LOVE AND  
DESTRUCTION \*

Book II’s juxtaposition of the two contradictory yet interlocked guises of domestic cattle, first as pest and then as dependent, begins to show how Dryden yokes conflict and care together in his depiction of human relationships to animals. These themes culminate in Book III. Juan Christian Pellicer’s observation that the relationship between poetry and farm work “nearly collapses under the strain of Virgil’s close juxtaposition” in Book III is equally applicable to the distinctions between care and conflict, love and war, and human and animal, which progressively break down over the course of the poem.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the third *Georgic*, G. B. Miles observes, is at once Virgil’s greatest tribute to human mastery over natural forces and his most profound exploration of the fact that humans too are subject to its relentless creative energy, which the poem identifies with the figure of lust. Lust is anarchic and all-penetrating; it binds humans to non-humans and creation to destruction in ways that defy attempts to control or define it. As Miles explains, the “grace and fecundity of carefully disciplined animals are juxtaposed to the violent behavior which animal lust stimulates in them. The contrast reveals that the potential for destruction is unavoidable precisely because it has its origins in

<sup>21</sup> Pellicer, “Reception,” 96.

the same elemental vitality which is necessary for creation."<sup>22</sup> That is to say, attempting to control or care for nature breeds conflict with its "elemental vitality." As this section will demonstrate, the common passions experienced by living beings human and animal alike constitutes the energy that drives the Book III's dialectical swings between care and conflict, a dialectic that, moreover, underlies the *Georgics*' understanding of the very nature of the relationship between humans and the non-human world.

With its focus on breeding and training domesticated animals, Book III in many places seems to depict a natural world thoroughly controlled by humans. But that semblance of control quickly destabilizes as Book III progresses. Humans, non-humans, care, and conflict are interdependent in Book III, as they were in Book II, but the implications of that interdependence undermine any attempts to keep the categories clearly organized or demarcated. The poem's conflation of love's simultaneously creative and destructive power demonstrates this dynamic most clearly, suggesting further that love and war are not only connected, but driven by the very same passions. One especially good example of this is the story of the two bulls who both desire the same "beauteous Heifer." The bulls' rivalry over the love of the heifer results in a battle. Afterward, the loser runs away, but his uncontrolled passion leads him to return to challenge the winner again, transmuting a one-time skirmish into an ongoing cycle of conflict: "Nor when the War is over, is it Peace; / Nor will the vanquish'd Bull his Claim release" (III.345-46). Love generates not only new cattle (the fight is over who gets to impregnate the heifer), but new and ongoing battles as well. Furthermore, human attempts to rein in the destructive aspects of animal lust backfire in waves of misdirected violence: "the furious Mare, / Barr'd from the Male, is frantic with despair. / / Their Masters mangl'd Members they devour; / Of Love defrauded in their longing Hour" (III.419-20, 424-25). Prevented from satisfying their lust, the mares' unvented energy turns against their human handlers, breaking their limbs. That Dryden suggestively calls limbs "Members" drives home the fact that love and violence transform the world around them to conform to their power: passion transforms everything into an object both of love and of destruction.

The masters' spectacular failure to control the mares' passion results from the fact that, as the poem suggests a few lines earlier, humans are subject to the power of love exactly the same way animals are. The notion that humans are impervious to and therefore able to control the natural forces is specious:

<sup>22</sup> Miles, "Civilization and 'Amor,'" 177.

Thus every Creature, and of every Kind,  
 The secret Joys of sweet Coition find:  
 Not only Man's Imperial Race; but they  
 That wing the liquid Air; or swim the Sea,  
 Or haunt the Desert, rush into the flame:  
 For Love is Lord of all; and is in all the same. (III.375–80)

The description of man as the "Imperial Race" is clearly ironic here. *Love* is the "Lord of all," and it is certainly as much the lord of humans as of animals, as the interpolated story of Hero and Leander demonstrates. Like the mares that tear through thickets and ford rivers in pursuit of love, and the lioness that "Scours over the Plain; regardless of her young: / Demanding Rites of Love" (III.382–83), Leander is "Transfixt" by "Love's unerring Dart" (III.403–4). As a result, he plunges headlong into the water in pursuit of Hero and promptly drowns. Miles rightly argues that this episode emphasizes the urgent need for control in the face of anarchic natural forces. But he also notes that it does so in a way that paradoxically destabilizes the distinction between humans and non-humans, since the "story of Hero and Leander shows unequivocally that the problems both of control and of self-control apply to people as well as to animals."<sup>23</sup> That is to say, juxtaposing human and non-human experiences of the creative and destructive powers of love removes the barriers between the seemingly stable categories that organized the natural world. Love and war, creativity and destruction, humans and non-humans are no longer distinguishable, nor can ideas like control, care, and mastery any longer be attributed simplistically to humans. Humans are no different from any other creature in the natural world, insofar as they at once subject and are subjected to the needs, impulses, and actions of other beings.

Book III's expression of the underlying commonality between humans and non-humans is especially powerful because nature imposes that knowledge on humans without their consent. Human beings do not choose to embrace their commonalities with animals; they do not offer up a gesture of deference to nature's power as if it were an option they could just as easily decline. Instead, the natural world changes, as it is wont to do in the *Georgics*, in a way that forces humans to acknowledge that they are as much controlled by natural forces as any other organism. Such changes recur throughout the *Georgics*. Indeed, whenever humans seem to be gaining a comfortable feeling of control over their environment, or care seems to be a more definitive

<sup>23</sup> Miles, "Civilization and 'Amor,'" 186.

solution to dealing with the world than conflict (or vice versa), something is sure to come along to upset their complacency. As William Batstone observes, "from the broadest perspective the overall movement of the poem" is one of "shifting centres":

the outcomes of man's labour result alternately in failure (war), success (harvest), failure (destructive passion) and success (the restoration of the hive). . . . It is not that one view is more right than the other . . . rather the poem's movement and organization allows us to explore the particular implications of our contact with particular things and then, as our material object shifts, to find a different centre.<sup>24</sup>

The shifts Batstone identifies occur not just between books of the *Georgics*, but within them as well. The collapsing distinctions among humans, animals, love, and destruction, follow directly on the heels of triumphant praise of a thoroughly-broken horse's productively controlled energy: "Thus o're th' *Elean* Plains, thy well-breath'd Horse / Impels the flying Carr, and wins the Course: / Or, bred to *Belgian* Waggon, leads the Way; / Untir'd at night, and cheerful all the Day" (III.315–18). The fact that the human master's directions completely subsume the horse's emotions and impulses would seem to endorse the ascendancy of human mastery. True to the *Georgics*' "shifting centres," however, the poem quickly undermines such a comfortable sense of human mastery: shortly after that passage, the masters' limbs are broken when they try to protect their love-crazed mares from hurting themselves in the throes of animal lust. Yet *Georgics* does not endorse the idea that either control or care are entirely futile any more than it endorses the idea that they are entirely effective. Hence, the passage describing the destructiveness of human and non-human passion is itself followed by praise for shepherds' sympathetic and peaceful approach to tending to their flocks of sheep and goats. And so on. *Georgics* never settles on a single attitude towards nature, either mastery or deference. Instead, it swings dialectically back and forth between them, depictions of conflict and control giving way to acknowledgments of the need for care and deference to successfully survive in concert with the non-human world.

<sup>24</sup> Batstone, "Virgilian Didaxis," 141.

\* *GEORGICS* AND SUSTAINABILITY: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE \*

To understand what drives the dialectical structure of the *Georgics* as a whole, we must return to the origin stories of Book I, and their articulation of a natural order in which humans like all other creatures are subject to “Nature’s Laws” and to the whims of “Nature’s Cause,” whether the force of passion or the vagaries of the weather. That fact explains how responsible agriculture can require “Iron War” as well as “Daily Care,” but it drives the larger-scale shifts between stances of mastery and deference in the poem as well. Book III may be the *Georgics*’ greatest paean to human control, as Miles and Batstone contend (and usefully complicate), but it ends on an image of complete human helplessness in the face of an overwhelming natural force, the plague: “The Learned Leaches in despair depart: / And shake their Heads, desponding of their Art,” while “slow creeping Evil eats his way, / Consumes the parching Limbs; and makes the Life his prey” (III.818–19, 844–45). All the methods of control exerted over animals through the third book have failed to prevent or contain the menace, as have attempts to combat it through medicine. Nature mocks human efforts with unstoppable death. On the other hand, reminders of nature’s power can inspire humans to practice cooperation with the non-human world. The terrifying and destructive storms in Book I prompt Virgil to recommend close, rigorous attention to natural signs that foretell the coming of bad weather, arguing that birds, cattle and even the moon and stars have information that humans must carefully ascertain and heed. In both cases, the plague and the storms remind the reader of nature’s ineffable power and otherness. The fact that the situations in Books I and III motivate opposite responses—deferring to its greater wisdom versus battling for control—reveals that both sides of the deference/mastery contradiction originate in human beings’ perpetual struggle to survive in the constantly shifting natural environment.

Of course, humanity’s struggles for survival also tie them to non-human creatures, as the juxtapositions with and personifications of animals throughout the *Georgics* show. The close parallel Dryden draws between the mouse’s “Garner” and the ant’s “wintry Store” on one hand, and humans’ own stockpiles of food on the other, points to a final, all-important theme binding the poem’s dialectical swings together: All humans’ and non-humans’ struggles with the environment and each other, all of the conflict and cooperation, are future-oriented. In other words, they all stem from the overarching need to guarantee future survival, both

of the individual and of his or her posterity. His farm's and family's future welfare is, after all, the source of the farmer's conflict with his encroaching cattle in Book II, as well as the object of his care at the end of that book. Likewise, humans endure the strife of trying to contain animals' passions as they train them for the plow in Book III because without that struggle—and all the conflict and care it entails—they could not produce food to support humans and cattle alike. Maintaining a steady population of animals for the plow itself requires extensive forward planning and work: "Yearly thy Herds in vigour will impair; / Recruit and mend 'em with thy Yearly care: / Still propagate, for still they fall away, / 'Tis prudence to prevent th' entire decay" (III.112–15). Entropy is a powerful force in *Georgics*; only constant labor and foresight ensure that the future will resemble the present rather than "degen'rate still to worse" (I.288–89), as the natural world constantly threatens to do.

Thus the *Georgics* continually counsel the reader to ensure her future well-being and that of the land and animals on which she relies. When it comes to figuring out how to sustain the lives and health of the beings upon whom the farmer depends, there is no time like the present. Times of bad weather offer particularly good opportunities to assess and prepare for future needs before they become present problems. In Book II, Dryden recommends, "Ev'n in the lowest Months, when Storms have shed / From Vines the hairy Honours of their Head; / Not then the drudging Hind his Labour ends; / But to the coming Year his Care extends" (II.558–51). The prudent farmer, *Georgics* argues, considers how what he does now will affect his future fortunes. The "coming Year" is a pressing concern in the present one, since constant thought and labor in the present moment are necessary to stave off the threat of decay and chaos in the months to come. Though control of nature's processes is never guaranteed, failure—and with it death—is a sure bet if one eye is not kept on the future. Most importantly, the troubling fact that the world "degen'rates still to worse" applies as much to non-humans as humans. Every living creature, as the mouse and the ant showed, is united by its common struggle to survive.

Indeed, the *Georgics* envision the "present as the future's past," in Kevis Goodman's eloquent phrase.<sup>25</sup> The poem constantly tries to assess possible courses of action from the perspective of their potential outcomes, seeing the choices of the present moment as opportunities to secure through planning

<sup>25</sup> Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Meditation of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.



and labor survival in an uncertain future. The most famous example of the notion of the present as the future's past comes at the end of Book I, when Virgil imagines the detritus of the civil wars being uncovered by future generations of farmers:

Then, after length of Time, the lab'ring Swains,  
 Who turn the Turfs of those unhappy Plains,  
 Shall rusty Piles from the plough'd Furrows take,  
 And over empty helmets pass the Rake:  
 Amaz'd at Antick Titles on the Stones,  
 And mighty Relicks of Gygantic Bones. (I.662–67)

Dryden describes the present reappearing as a specter of the future's violent and unproductive past. The "Relicks" disrupt the swains' attempts to get on with the work of farming, hinting at the way the past continues to shape the future, for better or worse. The wars may be over, but they still alter the ways that people in the present interact with the land. The lines that follow drive home the connection between the choice to neglect the future and the deterioration of the world in the present: "The peaceful Peasant to the Wars is prest; / The Fields lye fallow in inglorious Rest. / The Plain no Pasture to the Flock affords, / And crooked Scythes are streightened into Swords" (I.681–84). These lines clearly lament the effects of war while the war is going on. But the prior lines describing the "mighty Relicks" of war turning up again in the future suggest that impoverishing the world now will have repercussions for future generations, who will reap the consequences. The fact that the fields "lye fallow" and plains are empty during war means that the struggle to recover and thrive in the postwar world will be that much more difficult, survival that much more uncertain. And since human and non-human well-being is so utterly intertwined in the *Georgics*, the consequences of the human decision to go to war affect the welfare of non-humans as well.

The laws "Nature, and Nature's Cause" set out in Deucalion's time require humans to recognize their interdependence with the natural world, and to respect the needs of non-humans even as they struggle with them for survival. Ignoring the future implications of present actions flouts that obligation, violating the terms governing humankind's relationship with nature. Seeing the present as the future's past, then, is more than a practical tool. It is a moral and ethical imperative. That imperative drives the *Georgics*' characteristic dialectic of mastery and deference. Care and conflict are each necessary, at different times, due to human beings' ambivalent relationship with a

world of non-human creatures whose needs and motivations they share, but with whom they often are at odds. Thus in its exploration of the interconnections among deference and mastery, human and non-human, past and future, Dryden's *Georgics* not only articulates a vision of what it means for humans to live sustainably in a threatening and threatened world, but explores the conflicts and compromises that inevitably haunt any attempt to balance the competing needs of disparate species and communities. At its heart, it offers a model for reconciling those disparate claims that makes it possible to see how use and care, so often taken to be contradictory in environmentalism, can be parts of a single, coherent, and strikingly nature-sensitive worldview, restoring to the eighteenth-century georgic the complexity some ecocritical accounts have denied it. Yet perhaps even more important, given the parallels between twenty-first-century discourses of sustainability and the georgic ethos, paying closer attention to our environmental past can provide us with a new perspective on what are, as it turns out, a surprisingly traditional set of approaches to engaging with the natural world.