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Aristocracy and Agriculture:
How Vergil's *Georgics* Inspired a Wave of Agrarianism and Imperialism

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When agriculture arose, and humans moved towards sedentary existence, it was a turning point in human history, and gave rise to societies larger than the world had ever seen, it is mankind's greatest achievement. Through a deeper understanding of the ways the rain and the seasons work, man was able to harness nature and shape it into a tool powerful enough start civilizations. In *Georgics* by Vergil, agriculture is given its credit, held up as a shining example of human achievement and goodness. Through his vivid descriptions of the nature of farming, Vergil is able to explore contrasting themes--urban and rural, civilization and wilderness, life and death--while also laying forth a poetic classic that is renowned not only for its themes but for its prose. One of its most profound translations, by John Dryden in 1697¹, led to its deep influence on the wealthy of British society in the 18th century, making an impression on the literature of that century, as well as the politics. *Georgics*, by holding agriculture as its central subject, allowed agriculture to be discussed and seen as virtuous in the upper classes of later societies. The introduction of the *Georgics*, notably in Britain during the 18th century, helped shift the idea that agriculture was unenlightened labor and introduced the field of agrarian science and literature.

Vergil was born in 70 B.C.E., during a time of political turmoil for Rome as the republic was losing its power in the face of a fracturing ruling class. His hometown was in the countryside of Italy, and he was raised in a farming community. Though he was distant from the political chaos, he felt its effects later in life². Vergil had much regard for the community he was raised in, and in his poems, especially *Georgics*, he referenced both the land and the people who tended cultivated it. His parents were wealthy enough to provide for an education, and Vergil received schooling in both Milan and Rome. He lived through the assassination of Caesar, and the ensuing years of civil war, during which he developed contempt for violence and unrest. *Georgics* was written between 37 B.C.E. and 30 B.C.E., just as the civil wars were ending, and his theme of agriculture can be seen as a rejection of war and the flight to urban centers that some rural peasants took³. The life of simplicity, hard work, and optimism portrayed in *Georgics* lay in sharp contrast to the disorder of the period in which Vergil was writing. By the time *Georgics* was published, in 29 B.C.E., Octavian had taken sole power and established the Roman Empire, and Vergil fully embraced Octavian and the stability he provided in his writings⁴.

During Vergil's lifetime, poets were members of the elite and educated upper class, and in "poetry and in the visual arts references to contemporary issues were not uncommon"⁵. Poets were well aware of politics, as they were regularly invited to readings with members of the Senate, and their work inspired by the tumultuous events of the period. Vergil's audience for his poetry was to the class which he became a part of: wealthy, literate, and powerful. The literacy in the Roman Empire during the first century B.C.E. was around 10%, and "in general, only the members of the elite could read, and that for most other people the usual way of receiving information was through oral channels"⁶, so the creation of written poetry was almost certainly intended for that elite. The distribution of books was expensive, and so books circulated within a small group of people, and poetry specifically was limited to private readings among the educated elite. Though *Georgics* is heavily influenced by politics, it is by no means a piece of propaganda, as its distribution was limited to an elite that was unlikely to have their opinions transformed by poetry.

In *Georgics*, Vergil clearly supports Octavian, mostly for the tranquility he promised to bring to the countryside. The first book speaks of the rise of agriculture, while paying homage to many agricultural gods. As he references these gods, Vergil writes "And you, O Caesar, although we know not yet/ What place among the councils of the gods/ Will be your place"⁷. Assuming the future actions of Octavian would place him on the same level as Vergil placed gods shows the unrelenting faith Vergil had in Octavian. During the second book, which covers the techniques of farming, along with man's relationship with nature, Vergil juxtaposes the city and the countryside to show how civil war has ravaged the country, and he sees the unrest beginning in the decaying morality of the city. He describes the peaceful countryside with the farmer who "works the soil with his curved plow;/ This is the work he does, and it sustains/ His country, and his family"⁸. The country is portrayed as the ideal, and agriculture as the backbone and basis of society, a truth in the agrarian world of ancient Rome. In contrast, the city is the home of "one who brings down ruin on a city/ And all its wretched households, in his desire/ To drink from an ornate cup"⁹. The city is painted as corrupt, and greedy. This is a nod to the brief period of armed conflict following the death of Julius Caesar and call to return to stability. The fourth book, however, is where Vergil most heavily references the political situation of his period. The book

describes the civilization and structure of bees. In great detail, Vergil describes a fight between two king bees, which refers to the struggle between Octavian and the general Antony for power, and in the end the larger bee wins, such as it should be according to nature¹⁰. Though not a political poem, *Georgics* portrays Vergil's hope for stability and tranquility in the countryside under the leadership of Octavian.

Georgics, for all its political messaging, is at its core about agriculture. Though a didactic poem, its primary purpose was not to teach, but to immerse and engage the reader. Most of the audience were landowners, and had the potential to be a farmer, though rarely would an elite perform manual labor. Through *Georgics*, Vergil paints the profession of farming as honest and good. He writes "O greatly fortunate farmers, if only they knew/ How lucky they are! Far from the battlefield,/ Earth bring forth from herself in ample justice/ The simple means of life, simply enjoyed"¹¹. Vergil heavily praises farmers and the act of farming, and by doing so subverted the common mode of thought that manual labor was undignified. Throughout the second book Vergil issues imperatives to the reader, pushing them to perform labor and portraying farming as noble and prestigious. He shows living in the country the same way, because as people moved to the cities, "the Romans, like many urbanized societies, regarded the [country] as a cultural backwater"¹². Vergil suggest that there is pride in living away from the politics of the city and in performing manual labor which was looked down upon. By write of the pride in living an agrarian life in the country, even as a member of the elite, Vergil sparked a change over ten centuries later.

In the late 17th century in Britain, there was rapid increase in agricultural production, due to improvements in farming technique and increased labor. Known as the Agricultural Revolution, the period of increasing production lasted nearly two centuries, from the late 17th century to the late 19th century. Crop rotation, the enclosure movement,, and selective breeding were the three major changes that drove up land productivity. During the same time as these rapid increases in productivity, the first Poet Laureate of England, John Dryden published a translation of the *Georgics* in 1697. The *Georgics* had first been published by Abraham Fleming in 1589 with the goal of being used to teach students how to use both English and Latin, and as such it was a simpler translation, aimed at being understood not being fully faithful to the

original text¹³. Dryden's translation aimed to encapsulate everything the original did, and the increased public interest in agriculture, along with the translation coming from a well regarded poet, made this translation of *Georgics* immensely popular, especially among the upper-class of British society¹⁴. The *Georgics* also gained popularity because they showed the tie between the land and the politics of land.

Dryden's translation paid special mind to the pre-existing English values surrounding farming, and so was able to make the ideals portrayed in the *Georgics* cohesive with those of traditional English farming. In Dryden's translation, he highlights the importance of tradition, paying special mind to Virgil's writing on the cyclical nature of the seasons and farming. Dryden took the idea of repetition within farming, and made a more literal translation to staying in one's place and cultivating the same plot of land was honorable. This worked well in England, where tradition was heavily emphasized, and Common Law (law derived from custom rather than statutes) dictated much of the culture.

The new enclosure laws allowed the British aristocracy to own much land, while tenants farmed it. It is similar to the Rome of Vergil's time. The wealthy landowners oversaw the farming, but did not partake in the labor. Though they did not till the earth, the aristocrats claimed its fruit. Labor was seen as work of the lower class. The introduction of *Georgics* into society did not make labor a prestigious job, however it did allow for a less urban focus (the countryside was seen as simple and boring) and the topic of agriculture became regarded as a more serious topic, worthy of attention from the upper-class.

The social status of the *Georgics* is seen in the public debate between the wealthy and well regarded nurseryman Stephen Switzer and the gentleman farmer Jethro Tull, regarding the fundamental purpose of *Georgics*. The argument launched them into one of the first debates over agricultural science, a field that was still developing during the Agricultural Revolution, and not recognized as such during the time of their debate. Switzer saw Vergil as a "writer of serious scientific and technical pretensions"¹⁵. He thought that the instructions laid out in the *Georgics* had scientific merit and could be applied in the much cooler 18th century Britain. Tull, on the other side, questioned the accuracy of Vergil's instructions, as he was an advocate of a different system of agriculture, based off of radical methods he had learned from viticulture in France.

Tull's arguments against the outdated methods espoused in the *Georgics* diminished Vergil's status as a farmer, but he retained his reputation as a poet. Their argument shows the extent to which *Georgics* was part of the intellectual and cultural vogue at the time.

The *Georgics* had a profound impact on poetry, and other modes of writing, during the 18th and 19th century. Namely, it brought into popularity the use of a didactic style and a descriptive style. The influence of the *Georgics* can be felt most strongly in *The Fleece* by John Dyer (1757), which uses a didactic style to tell the audience how to shear a sheep, and in *The Seasons* by James Thomson (1730), whose depictions of the four seasons had a resemblance to the lush imagery of Vergil¹⁶. The poem also allowed for a link between poetry and the science of agriculture, giving rise to a new level of treatises on farming, husbandry, and irrigation.

During the late 17th century, at the same time that the *Georgics* was growing in popularity in England, the British were expanding their empire in America. Early imperialist thought based its justification for colonization on many of the ideas found in the *Georgics*. The *Georgics* was about man's relationship with the land, yet unlike pastoral forms of writing which highlight the idyllic character of the environment, a georgic holds labor as its central subject. In *Georgics*, Vergil writes that Jupiter "Who first established the art of cultivation/ Sharpening with their cares the skills of men,/ Forbidding the world he rules to slumber in ease."¹⁷ It is clear that labor is highly valued in *Georgics*, and it is labor that makes the land fruitful. As such, those who labor upon the land have an intrinsic right to it, as they are making the land useful. This imperial stance towards nature translated into England's imperial stance towards America.

When British colonizers came to America, indigenous cultivation, such as slash and burn, was largely ignored. This meant that the idea of land belonging to those who labor upon it was applicable, and was a large part of justification for the colonization of America. John Winthrop, a settler during the 17th century and a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote "the Natives in New England they inclose noe land neither have any settled habitation nor any tame cattle to improve the land by, & soe have noe other but a naturall right to those countries Soe as if wee leave them sufficient for their use wee may lawfully take the rest,"¹⁸. The idea that labor gave meaning to the land and ownership to the laborer was a fundamental justification for the British settlers to take the land of indigenous Americans. Though the popularity of John

Dryden's publication of the *Georgics* helped spread this idea--as well as held launch a revival of the georgic mode--it did not found the idea, rather expounded upon and lent credibility to an idea already rooted in British culture.

The influence of *Georgics* on the people exploring the frontier lasted through the 19th century. The relaunching of the georgic mode in England had made available a wealth of information for farmer on the frontier and "georgic traditions were foundational to the agricultural practices of British prairie settlers and to the practices of cattle ranchers from the United States"¹⁹. In this sense, Vergil's *Georgics* was being used in a very similar way to its use in England, where it was seen as a scientific manual (as opposed to poetry), providing actual guidance on farming techniques.

The influence of the *Georgics* was more direct, according to some, as the text was immensely popular through the 19th century. "According to translator Wilkinson ([56]), Vergil's 'Georgics was present in every educated man's mind' in Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was mandatory reading in American colleges"²⁰. The dissemination of this text meant a popular view that man's role was to control nature, was to dominate it.

As evidenced in the journals of the Sheppards, a poor settler family from the late 1800s, this thought persisted and trickled down to the less educated and wealthy. These early settlers to the Northwest saw their role in settling an area (bringing the natural American wilderness to a neatly maintained state similar to the English countryside) as civilizing the new area. They "transformed the land from its indigenous state as open and unfenced territory into privately owned parcels clustered around hubs of agricultural communities"²¹.

The *Georgics* not only gave basis for imperialism in America, but it also inspired a wave of georgic work in America. Though written contemporaneously to British georgics, American georgics are much more focused on the relationship between the economy and the environment. Many prominent American poets have written such poems, and among the most well known are Robert Frost and Henry David Thoreau. America was seen as a land of inexhaustible resource, so much of the writing was about expansion and growth. However, even with the seemingly inexhaustible source of resources, some saw the American wilderness, the frontier, as capable of running up against the limits of its ecosystem.

Henry David Thoreau was unconcerned about these ecological limits. He was much more inspired by the idea of the American West, and in his essay walking writes "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world"²². In order to see America as a place of opportunity, he needs to imagine the West as limitless. However, the idea of the West as an unexplored wilderness was contrary to the reality of it being the home to many Native American tribes. Here, Thoreau used the same logic as early colonizer, writing that "the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural,"²³. He holds two opposing ideas, one as wilderness being the ideal state of nature, and the other that human labor is the natural way of the world.

Robert Frost, was more romantic in his view of labor, as he thought it not just the economic basis of America, but the moral foundation as well. He was "arguably the most directly influenced by georgic poetry, particularly Virgil's *Georgics*, and its most sustained interlocutor, as he inquires into the ways this genre is and is not adaptable in his historical present."²⁴. Though updating the methods and tools of farming, Frost remains close to Vergil's message of the morality of farming. He was less concerned with the political realities of Vergil's *Georgics*, but rather the truth found in dedicating one's life to the rhythm of the seasons and cultivating the land. He suggests, in the legacy of Vergilian georgic, "that there is material knowledge to be gained from submitting to the physicality of work"²⁵. He moves away from the message of domination over nature that other writers had infused into their georgics, instead making his poems an ode to farming. American georgics helped shape America's identity as a nation of exploration and agriculture, and was a significant literary movement.

The *Georgics* by Vergil has had long lasting influence in the two millennium since it was written. During the 17th century in England it helped transform agriculture into a pastime of the aristocracy, which in turn fueled the Agricultural Revolution and the later Industrial Revolution. It changed the nature of poetry in England as well, not only inspiring poems about agrarian topics, but also bringing didactic and descriptive styles into popularity. The same literary movement happened in America, creating a unique genre known as American Georgics. The popularity of *Georgics*, at the same time as the exploration of America, fed into pre-existing

British ideas about the purpose of land and labor, and as such provided justification for the colonization of America. The influences of the *Georgics* can even be seen into the modern era, with the a profusion of agricultural writing that has deep ties larger moral themes. Though *Georgics* was often Vergil's most overlooked poem, it has left a lasting imprint on the social and literary development of agriculture.

Endnotes

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3. Weeda. *Vergil's Political Commentary*. 46.
4. *Ibid.*, 49.
5. *Ibid.*, 50.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. Vergil. *Georgics*. Translated by Peter Fallon and Elaine Fantham, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006. 5.
8. Vergil. *Georgics*. 86.
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11. Vergil. *Georgics*. 83.
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