

Lecture 7: Intro to the Environmental Humanities, *Pastoral, conclusion & Georgic (ecocriticism)*

Virgil

From as early as Theocritus in the 3rd century BCE, poets and artists have imagined a perfect pastoral place (*locus amoenus*) as a way of drawing attention, as does Edward Burtynsky, to the fact that the contemporary state of the environment that they were inhabiting was anything but perfect.

Virgil, a Roman poet writing 200 years after Theocritus, took this project further as he considered how it is that we become aware of the environment as endangered in the first place, as well as the role of human action.

In his *Eclogue I*, Virgil explores the aforementioned notion that we are often not fully aware of our environment until it is lost. An example would again be the residents of Santa Barbara prior to the oil spill of 1969.

To understand how Virgil draws attention to the environment as endangered, it will be helpful to go through his *Eclogue I* on a line-by-line basis. (Incidentally, the word *eclogue* has nothing to do with “ecology,” but rather simply means “selections” in ancient Greek.)

Virgil *Eclogue I*

In the opening speech, the first of the two characters, Meliboeus, attempts to draw his friend Tityrus’s attention to the environment, with its “spreading beech . . . woodland Muse . . . sweet fields . . . [and] . . . woods,” now lost to him, as Meliboeus has been exiled from his farm (ll. 1-5, my translation).

Tityrus responds by drawing attention to the political situation (6-10), while remaining oblivious to Meliboeus’s attempt to foreground the environment.

Meliboeus continues by observing in some detail how something is wrong environmentally: “in the fields everywhere there is so much turmoil” (11-12).

Tityrus again ignores Meliboeus, and the fields, as he returns to a discussion of his patron, who is very likely Caesar Augustus, in Rome (19-25).

The key point here is that while Tityrus keeps returning to politics, Meliboeus is repeatedly directly referencing the environment, which Tityrus is ignoring. This striking and persistent opposition will continue throughout the *eclogue*.

Virgil Eclogue I

In terms of our previous discussion, because Meliboeus is losing his farm, he makes clear, from his opening speech onward, that he is now profoundly aware of its value, which, if he is anything like Tityrus, may have entirely escaped him prior to the news of his exile. In short, Meliboeus has developed what we would call an environmental consciousness.

It is important to note that Meliboeus does not develop this environmental consciousness because the environment is changing around him (as it did for Rachel Carson), but because he is changing scenes. By way of this approach, Virgil's Eclogue I provides a fascinating and enormously influential insight into how environmental consciousness emerges.

As the poem continues, Meliboeus politely but pointedly notes how Tityrus has neglected, in more ways than one, his own fields (36-39). In one of the most moving lines of the poem, Meliboeus suggests that "the very pines, Tityrus, / the very springs, the very orchards called out for you!" (38-39).

Thus, in a double sense Tityrus has not only ignored the maintenance of his fields, he is still ignoring the environment right before his eyes. In spite of all of Meliboeus's efforts, Tityrus is not becoming conscious of his environment.

In one last attempt to facilitate the environment appearing for Tityrus as it has for him (in the language of the poem, to allow Tityrus "to hear it calling out to him"), Meliboeus launches into two protracted concluding speeches, both of which provide descriptions of the surrounding environment.

In the first of these speeches, Meliboeus tries to draw Tityrus's attention to various features of his environment, including "familiar streams . . . bees feeding on willow blossoms" (51-54), and a variety of birds. Each of these descriptions, such as these specifically being "willow blossoms" and "turtledoves" (57) underscore that these are real (literal and not allegorical) local plants and animals.

In a striking collision of the literal and allegorical, throughout the eclogue Tityrus responds to Meliboeus's literal descriptions of the countryside, which Tityrus has been ignoring, by allegorically referencing the political situation, which Meliboeus has similarly been neglecting.

In other words, because his farm is now lost to him, Meliboeus has startlingly (even he is surprised) developed an acute awareness of it, an environmental

consciousness. Consequently, Meliboeus wishes to make Tityrus conscious of it as well, by repeatedly drawing attention to it.

Tityrus, on the other hand, offers the political causes for its loss. Thus, Meliboeus finds Tityrus neglectful of his duty to the land, while Tityrus repeatedly makes clear that Meliboeus has neglected his political obligations.

These efforts play out on two levels, literal and figurative, as Meliboeus draws attention to literal “willow blossoms” (54), while Tityrus speaks figuratively of Rome towering like a “cypress among wayfaring trees” (25).

Virgil Eclogue I

As Virgil makes clear with these competing viewpoints, to focus on the figurative, metaphorical aspect of pastoral does not even reveal half of the situation: it is not enough to explore Meliboeus’s literal descriptions; rather, it is necessary to understand how the political situation veiled in figurative language has profound, heart-wrenching consequences to the environment.

Consequently, any discussion of pastoral literature that does not explore how the figurative impacts the literal is simply incomplete, as it is necessary to understand how human actions (which are broadly political in Eclogue I) impact the environment. It is not enough to know that the environment was endangered by human action, we also need to know how this happened--so that we can keep it from happening again.

Because Virgil’s Eclogue I explores how consciousness of the environment emerges, it will be enormously influential in the history of pastoral. Many critics have claimed that all subsequent pastoral is a response to this eclogue.

Pastoral (Conclusion)

Pastoral is a complex mode of writing and form of art that has undergone seemingly countless transformations in the past 3000 years. It can be very literal (and hence a form of nature writing), allegorical (often commenting on political or ecclesiastical matters), or some combination of the two.

When pastoral explores the intersection of literal nature writing and allegory, it may (as in Virgil’s Eclogue I) comment on how human actions can impact not just our relationship to the environment, but our very awareness of it.

Although Meliboeus changes scenes rather than having the scene change about him (which would have happened if his environment had become endangered),

Virgil nonetheless explored how environmental consciousness emerges in a way that will be influential on generations of poets after him.

By the time of the Renaissance, poets like Ben Jonson will adapt Virgil's approach to directly explore how we become conscious of the environment at the moment of its endangerment.

Georgic (overview)

Like pastoral, georgic can be a form of nature writing depicting life in the country. However, while pastoral generally depicts life in a locus amoenus characterized by otium (even if it is on the verge of being lost, as in Virgil's Eclogue I), georgic life is by contrast one of hard work and agriculture.

Consequently, the life depicted in georgic literature is in biblical terms postlapsarian, as human beings must actively work the land. (Recall that Adam learns in Genesis 3.17-19 that "cursed is the ground for thy sake...In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.")

Similarly, the life depicted in georgic literature is definitely not the Golden Age described by Hesiod and echoed by Ovid, but rather the Iron Age.

Consequently, whether appearing in literature or the visual arts, georgic landscapes will generally depict the land being worked by human beings. Perhaps not surprisingly then, the word "georgic," which derives from two Greek words *gia* (earth) and *ergon* (work), literally means to "work the earth."

Unlike pastoral landscapes, which are populated by shepherds leisurely standing with their sheep, georgic landscapes depict farmers working the land.

While these two landscapes may seem very similar from our modern perspective, they are actually quite different.

In fact, from an environmental perspective, pastoral and georgic are in many respects opposite.

Virgil's Georgics

Virgil's Georgics, which were written in 29 BCE shortly after his Eclogues, formally inaugurated georgic literature, though works such as Hesiod's Works and Days clearly influenced Virgil and subsequent georgic literature. (Keep in mind that Virgil was a Roman writer while Hesiod was Greek.)

As in the creation myths from the Bible, Hesiod, and Ovid, Virgil also imagines a perfect time when human beings lived at peace with the planet, which spontaneously provided for all human needs: "Earth yielded all, of herself, more freely, when none begged her for her gifts" (Reader 101).

Consequently, Virgil's *Georgics* is yet another text in our tradition that encourages us to believe that human beings once lived at peace with the earth.

Moreover, in Virgil's innovative account, this brought about equitable, nearly socialist, relations between human beings as well, as in this time "no tillers subdued the land. Even to mark the field or divide it was unlawful. Men made gain for the common store" (ibid), rather than for personal gain & profit.

In Virgil's *Georgics*, as in the Genesis account, "The great Father himself has willed that the path of husbandry should not be smooth, and he made [human] art awaken the fields" (Reader 101), rather than have the fields spontaneously bring forth on their own.

Consequently, "Toil conquered the world, unrelenting toil" (Reader 102). Clearly, the relationship that human beings have to the earth is here viewed as adversarial. Even the farmers' tools are seen as "the hardly rustics' weapons [arma], without which the crops could neither be sown nor raised" (Ibid).

A conspicuous difference between Virgil's *Eclogues* and his *Georgics* (which generally is echoed in the history of these two modes) is that the *Eclogues* offer no real advice on shepherdry, while the *Georgics* contain a variety of very practical suggestions regarding husbandry.

This fact underscores that Virgil imagined pastoral places as fanciful, while the actual georgic work of the countryside was seen as very real.

Because Virgil's four *Georgics* are in a sense farming manuals, they contain a great deal of very practical advice:

Books One (part of which we read) and Two are concerned with farm implements, such as plows, tillable crops of all sorts, and orchards. Book Three is related to animal husbandry, such as cattle. Book Four is about beekeeping.

While these books can, and certainly have historically been read allegorically, they are also meant to be read literally, as they very specifically explain how to make implements like plows (see the account in the Reader on page 103), as well as how to raise plants, animals, and bees.

In this sense, Virgil's *Georgics* are not unique, as other Roman writers, such as Marcus Terentius Varro, produced husbandry manuals.

Varro "On Agriculture"

Varro was a contemporary of Virgil. *On Agriculture*, which was written around 36 BCE, in fact influenced Virgil in the writing of the *Georgics*.

Varro, incidentally, was not the first Latin writer to take up the subject of agriculture. In fact, the oldest surviving work of connected Latin prose (the first Latin "book"), written by Marcus Porcius Cato circa 160 BCE, was also entitled *On Agriculture* (*De Agri Cultura*).

Both Cato and Varro simply take for granted that we live no longer live in a Golden Age. Because they would likely agree with Virgil's sentiment that "Toil conquered the world, unrelenting toil" (Reader 102), they both set out a very detailed and complete plan of agricultural conquest.

Not only are Cato and Varro intent on conquering the earth, both of their projects are built upon the use of slave labor. Cato in particular provides detailed suggestions on when to cut back on food rations to slaves, as well as the proper age to sell slaves who have outlived their usefulness.

Varro "On Agriculture"

Cato and Varro imagine plants, animals, and the earth as not unlike slaves. While this type of thinking is not new with Roman writers (we saw the beginning of it in the *Myth of Gilgamesh*), Cato and Varro systematically lay out a detailed plan to bring this about in the most efficient way possible.

In the process, Cato and Varro work out the details for what are in many respects the first factory farms. As is clear from the passage that we read from Varro, what chiefly matters here is efficient production and marketing-- in the example that we read, of birds raised for food. In short, these farms are run for one purpose, and one purpose alone, profit.

As with modern factories, for Varro the key to efficiency is economy of scale. For example, Varro steps well outside of the province of small family farms with dedicated buildings, *peristeron*, carefully designed to house as many as five thousand pigeons (Reader 110). In short, Varro outlines large, well financed factory farms made possible through the exploitation of slave labor.

Varro's attitude toward non-human animals is especially striking. For example, in a passage from *On Agriculture* that we did not read, Varro notes that birds should be

killed in a special building, a sequestrium, because if they realize that they will soon be killed, they become depressed and do not eat.

Consequently, in Varro there is clearly an awareness that birds are sentient and feeling, yet he unflinchingly ignores this fact as he relentlessly pursues profit, in this case by concealing their imminent deaths to fatten them up.

Parallels here to 20th-century death camps for human beings are obvious. While the comparison to human beings of course breaks down quickly, the underlying mindset, namely, the ability to disassociate oneself from the feelings of others, is disturbingly similar, if not indeed a variation of the same.

Given that Varro realizes that pigeons are sentient and feeling, his further efforts to secure maximum profit from them is particularly striking, as birds “left in the nest, with legs broken...fatten more quickly than others” (112).

In Varro we see the profoundly disturbing consequences of various forms of thinking that we have already encountered this term:

1) If there is no prohibition against the exploitation of other forms of life, as there was in the Myth of Gilgamesh in the form of Humbaba who protected the Cedar Forest, then its mass exploitation becomes possible.

2) If we imagine ourselves fundamentally different than other life on the planet, which separate creation narratives for human beings and animals arguably encourage us to do (as obviously does the belief that we have complete dominion over all animals), then it opens up the possibility that we are permitted to do with their lives as we please.

3) If this physical realm is largely insignificant, and with it soulless beings (as animals are imagined) that have no place in the metaphysical realm, then our treatment of the earth and its non-human life risks becoming inconsequential.

Virgil's Georgics & Varro On Agriculture (conclusion)

It hardly seems surprising that Varro's *On Agriculture* and Virgil's *Georgics* appeared in the same decade, as both writers repeatedly underscored that our relationship to the planet (and its non-human life) is essentially adversarial. In Virgil's *Georgics*, as well as the Genesis account, this was decreed by God.

This adversarial relationship to the earth is at the heart of the georgic ethic that Virgil propounded. To Varro, it was justification for the large-scale exploitation of the earth's plants and animals solely for profit. While the underlying approach was pioneered by Cato, Varro took it to a new level.

Interestingly, although Virgil explored the dynamic by which individuals (like Meliboeus) gain an environmental consciousness, this did not cause him to recast the tradition that he inherited from Hesiod and others, which proposed that our relationship to the planet is essentially adversarial. Consequently, Virgil's notion of environmental consciousness is very different than ours.