

Turning, Flying The Rural Year

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Virgil promises a calendar of times and tasks. He will sing the pattern of the year's labour: 'beneath what star to turn | the soil, Maecenas, when to wed vines | to the elms'.¹ The *Georgics* is often referred to as a kind of almanac. 'It resembles a farmer's calendar of work', says Simon Schama; Raymond Williams calls it 'a prolonged and detailed description and celebration of the farmer's year'.² The poem emphasizes the proper alignment of agricultural process with the turning of the heavens and the weather; it acknowledges the skill and labour involved in timely husbandry; it heralds the bounty that comes when the journey through the year is wisely made. Virgil places his faith in the tools and techniques that allow the good farmer to counter aberrant forces (weeds, diseases, untimely weathers) and thus keep on a steady path.

Yet as Williams also observes, it has a 'complicated movement'. A reader trying to consult it for a list of tasks would be driven to giddiness by its leaps, its sudden doublings back, its folding and expanding of time. In this it establishes richly productive dynamics that will keep moving and changing through later writing about the rural year – between handbook-style usefulness and imaginative shaping, between the fixed elements of the natural cycle and all their variations, between the power of repetition and the appeal of unpredictability, originality, eccentric creativity. There is, too, another conversation deep in the make-up of Virgil's poem: between the collective identity of Roman farmers, who may all benefit from the same knowledge, whose feeling for cultivation comes largely from a shared culture, and on the other hand an idea of individual, subjective experience. This will become one of the most powerful elements of rural time as it is described and reshaped by English writers from William Cowper in his garden to Ford Madox Ford planting by the moon and Katherine Swift, stalled by high summer, hanging 'like a water beetle in the meniscus of time'.³

The stability–instability of the calendar in the *Georgics* is there in its defining verb 'vertere', which famously introduces the doubling of ploughman

and poet: the ploughman turning at the headland, the poet turning at the end of each line. The analogy suggests regularity in the poem – the kind of regularity you get when a plough is led by oxen moving heavily through clay and not likely to make quick detours. ‘Turn! Turn! Turn!’ sang the Byrds in the 1960s, Pete Seeger’s song marrying with superb concision Virgil’s poem of the land with the ‘time for every purpose’ passage of Ecclesiastes, partner texts through a great deal of georgic writing. Steer steadily, the time will come, they say, as the world turns and the seasons turn, and children turn to adults. Yet in the *Georgics* things can ‘turn’ unexpectedly into other things. Most astonishingly the solid innards of an ox can liquify and then send swarms of bees flying into the sky. The trudging beast of the plough has metamorphosed into something airborne. Releasing himself from calendar instruction into mythic story-telling, and from soil into air, Virgil asserts a degree of creative freedom that English georgic writers would not often claim for themselves. Yet much of the power of their work, like his, will lie in its fusion of rhythmically predictable and newly imagined turns in the wheel of the year.

It is not solely Virgil’s influence that has established calendars of agricultural work as a strong tradition in English culture and a powerful means of expressing ideas about time, change, effort and social order. A defined iconography of annual tasks was well established through Western Europe by the thirteenth century. The ‘labours of the months’ appeared consistently in the calendar pages of illuminated psalters and carved on church facades or fonts for all to see. The imagery proved remarkably enduring, so that when Edmund Spenser conceived his *Shepherd’s Calendar* in the 1570s he was well aware of drawing together distinct but intriguingly contiguous traditions: one Virgilian (the Virgil of both *Eclogues* and *Georgics*) and the other to be found among the anonymous pictures and personifications in popular almanacs, old prayerbooks and stained-glass windows. Two hundred and fifty years later, with both kinds of material thriving more than ever, John Clare published a *Shepherd’s Calendar* that was deeply responsive to the Virgilian georgic mode in eighteenth-century English poetry and was also, as Hugh Haughton and Adam Phillips put it, ‘a latter-day English book of hours and robust illuminated diary of the agricultural year’.⁴

The ‘labours of the months’ have not previously been discussed in relation to English georgic writing, but I want to begin by suggesting that they provide a fruitful context for thinking about the depiction of rural work in literature. I shall bear them in mind as helpful comparatives, if not direct influences, as I go on to explore some of the central dynamics in writing about the agricultural year. Focusing on texts with at least some element of calendrical form, I want to feel for the shapes writers find in the annual cycle, their approach to variation and unpredictability, their rendering of

despair, drudgery and satisfaction, and their sense of netting time in a reliable schedule – and watching it escape their grasp.

Labours

Open a psalter, or an illuminated book of hours, and you will find that a month-to-view calendar is proffered as essential equipment in organizing one's life of prayer. Holy feasts will be marked against the appropriate days, but the accompanying pictures will probably not show St Thomas or St Swithin. Instead they will show one of the established activities for this month and the sign of the zodiac. The effect will be a gathering together of prayer, the history of the church, the community of saints, the annual springing and withering of nature, the turning of the heavens, and – deeply woven into this pattern – the yearly narrative of work on the land.⁵

The pictures may appear in small medallions, as they do, say, in the mid-thirteenth-century Oscott Psalter made for use somewhere in the Midlands.⁶ The page for each month features an image of the appropriate zodiac symbol and a single figure performing a 'labour' or (for some months) not labouring at all but feasting or admiring the flowers. Two-faced January drinks from a horn; February stirs a cauldron and warms his feet; March takes a pruning knife to curling vines; April holds flowers and leaves; May is hunting with a hawk; June is weeding (and warm enough to take off a layer); July is mowing with a scythe; August harvests corn; September is stripped to drawers for the physical strain of threshing; October starts the autumn sowing; November kills a fattened pig; December makes wine (a woman's role: brewing and malting would remain women's labours for as long as they were done at home). The resulting drink will fill the horn-cup of future Januaries, so that the circle begins again.



March, June, July, August, September, October, November, December: details from 'The Oscott Psalter', English, 1265–70. Copyright The British Library Board, BL Add Ms 50000.

Each series is idiosyncratic and expressive, but the point is that the pictures should be immediately recognizable, and should conjure a stable idea of the months. As a sequence of symbols, reprised by artists across Europe, they are almost as fixed as the zodiac signs, though with adjustments to accommodate the timing of tasks according to the climate in different regions. Ram, Crab, Centaur; pruning, hay-making, pannaging or slaughtering pigs. Though the pictures could be emblematically concise, there were also highly elaborate versions of them, as in the volume known as Queen Mary's Psalter. These scenes evolved into an artistic genre, reaching its height in northern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries where the figures moved out from stylized gilded backgrounds into the open air and closely observed orchards, wattle-fenced gardens and woods browning with the autumn. Depictions of Flemish villages and fields were exported across the continent. These were expensive books, owned by people who would not themselves be lifting a sickle or even directing operations on an estate. Occasionally the images are adapted to occupations of courtly or gentry life, but the core of the sequence remains farming. Rural work is a subject on which high- and low-born alike are asked to meditate. The 'labours' tradition is a kind of visual georgic, more ethical than practical in its teaching, instructing that human beings must strive on the earth in the well-ordered way that is their fate and duty in a fallen world. Like the classical georgics, this tradition is keenly concerned with relationships between art, practical work, and philosophical or spiritual reflection.

The 'labours' are among the great sequences of Christian imagery, like the Fall from Eden and the Passion, or indeed the Doom and the Sufferings of Hell: the pruners and threshers share parchment pages and church walls with these. Among theologically alert audiences, the figures seem to have been understood as allegories for the work of the liturgical year – the work of worship through the hours, the making of timely spiritual progress.⁷ This linking of spiritual and physical discipline was deeply embedded in monastic, and especially Cistercian, practices of manual work and worship. The 'labours' appeared regularly in calendars setting out the liturgical year for religious houses, and in the psalters intended to help lay readers emulate a version of regulated monastic life.

In this sense the calendar pictures were not secular at all, and yet to look up at a chancel arch and see a weeder appearing in recognizable clothes, bending in a way that is familiar to anyone who has weeded, is to see a representative of ordinary people moving among the sacred stories. No miracle is occurring; no-one is blessed or damned. They are all just getting on with their jobs for May or September. It is clear that artists, clerical

patrons and congregations took pleasure in the portrayal of this work, and in seeing earthly tasks in the sacred scheme. This conception of the 'labours' is no less spiritually powerful, and it is closely connected with scripture. 'To every thing there is a season', teaches Ecclesiastes: 'a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted' (or in the Latin bibles of pre-Reformation England, 'tempus plantandi et tempus evellendi quod plantatum est').⁸ The 'labours' make art of that timeliness, and that sense of each task contributing to the cycle of the whole. The first curse on Adam and Eve condemned them to a long struggle with vegetable life. 'Cursed is the ground for thy sake': 'Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field.'⁹ The figure of the 'weeder', tugging at thistles in the corn, appears in this context as a direct descendent of Adam, and an appropriate representative of all those of us whose task is not weeding but some other struggle or act of vigilance by which we might work our way to our hoped-for harvest.

This connection with the curses of the Old Testament, however, brings out something distinctive about the 'labours'. They are not pictures of suffering. As the historian Bridget Henisch observes, 'this is one of the few places in medieval art where serenity, not suffering, is the order of the day'.¹⁰ Serenity for the viewer and – so far as we can tell – in the attitude of the figures to their occupations. What we have here is not only an established sequence of activities and conventional places to represent them, but also an attitude to the idea of work itself, a leaning towards its rightness and satisfaction. In early modern and later accounts of seasonal work, this inherited iconography converges with interest in the classical georgics of Hesiod, Varro and particularly Virgil.

There is no evidence of 'labours' imagery being adapted in relation to Virgil, or vice versa, before the fifteenth century. From then on, with the rise of illustrated editions of *The Georgics*, it is hard to tell who is influencing whom. There has been very little acknowledgement of these overlaps. In an unpublished but very valuable thesis, Kristi Eastin identifies at least thirty illustrated versions from the fifteenth century, most with scenes showing the defining Virgilian 'labours' of ploughing and beekeeping, often several activities shown at once (not usual in the medieval sequences). She argues that the artists of the *Très Riches Heures* calendar pictures 'were inspired at least in part by this pictorial georgic tradition'.¹¹ Michael Liversidge has shown how ideas moved in the other direction too, with the new fame of the *Georgics* helping to shape the development of Dutch and Flemish rural landscape painting as it grew out from the medieval 'labours' into another genre of its own. Bruegel's

sequence *The Months* (1565) emerges from these converging patterns of thought, and stands as inexhaustible testament to what might happen at the crossroads.¹² ‘Serenity’, for one thing, tips into dramatized stories of struggle and effort in vividly realized landscapes and in palpable conditions of sultry midday heat or the dim light of early spring. The workers who prune trees and harvest the corn are individualized people, thinking or joking or concentrating on which branch to cut. Nature and men set traps for each other. There are cruel fates, but there is an overriding sense of ordered enterprise. The scenes have a scale and grandeur that suggests we are witnessing the work of the world. As we look, we feel at once the busyness and contemplative spaciousness of the pictures. In each, time is both held and moving, each season emblematically separate and yet turning, turning, with the wheel of the year.

Hundreds of Points

The ‘labours’ tradition depends on simplicity; the emblematic succession of figures insists on a knowable sequence. Yet each task is singled out from all the other tasks to be undertaken at roughly the same time. Many hundreds of distinct ‘occupations’ will be necessary each month on even a modest smallholding, and once one includes the work of different kinds of farmers (to Virgil’s wine-growers and stockmen we might add hop growers, orchardmen and silkworm breeders, all of whom received special attention from early georgic writers in English), great panoplies of possible subjects come into view along with calendrical correlations between them.¹³ In terms of both visual iconography and literary form, there is a challenge here: so much must be done at once. How is a writer to select points of focus and make them tell on each other?

Thomas Tusser, author of the most popular sixteenth-century farming poetry in English, emphasized the multitude of tasks to be incorporated in each month’s husbandry. His 1573 *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie* may not have offered a full four hundred new instructions to readers of his original *One Hundred Points* (1556), but his titles advertised amplitude and his rhymed tutorials proliferated because there was so much to advise upon. Readers compared Tusser with Virgil and Varro, and Tusser himself was conscious of the georgic tradition, but he also presented himself as defiantly removed from high literariness and courtly poetry.¹⁴ As a practising farmer (albeit with a dubious record of success), his interest was not in choosing a few symbolically expressive seasonal tasks to represent the year, but in the need to coordinate numerous activities going on at once. He

enumerates and details. He delights in lists – of tools, herbs for salad, herbs for strewing. Yet his concern is always, also, with concision and coherence. The ‘good husbandrie’ he promotes is tightly organized and thrifty, and his poetry aspires that way too. The prodigious to-do lists are given in tersely epigrammatic couplets, and the summings-up of each month’s labour play a virtuosic game of compression. He envisages the book as an orchard tree, well-pruned and offering plentiful fruit.¹⁵

March in the ‘labours’ is usually digging or pruning. March for Tusser, and for the independent smallholders he wanted to reach, is potentially giddy but you must keep your head. ‘White peason sowe, | scare hungry crow.’ Barley needs to be sown in the dry, then the field rolled, mown and raked. This is also a crucial time for hops: ‘March drie or wet | hop ground go set.’¹⁶ It is time for grafting fruit trees (except in East wind), and time to sow summer plants and vegetables in well-prepared tilth. None of these jobs can be forgotten once done, since the vulnerable new grafts and seedlings must be painstakingly guarded: ‘Things graffed or planted, the greatest and least, | defend against tempest, the bird, and the beast’.¹⁷ All this raising and protecting fits with the traditional calendar correspondences between the seasons and human ages, and Tusser affirms the connection: ‘The yeere I compare, as I find for a truth, | the Spring unto childhood, the Sommer to youth’.¹⁸ Yet his many ‘points’ make clear that in spring the farmer needs to do the complicated parenting rather than going off to play.

Part of the appeal to rural readers was that they recognized their multifarious work in Tusser’s book. Even the most small-scale gardener knows that, far from the single iconic tasks represented in psalters and emblem books, the year’s cultivation might be imagined more like an orrery, with multiple sequences of events on separate but related orbits. Working on a simple vegetable patch, you must hold in mind the relation between the different trajectories of the carrots and the beetroot, knowing which will crowd or shade the other, which will attract what pests when. Consider the operation of a mixed farm and you must be alert to more simultaneous timescales than many a modernist novel, remembering and anticipating the arcs of intersecting plots. Virgil treats distinct kinds of farming in turn, arable then viniculture then livestock; cattle and goat-herding are separated out, their special timetables honoured. Yet part of the pleasure in reading the poem is the work of overlaying these sections until one can feel all the calendars going on at once. Tusser favours the integration of tasks in almanac sequence, or at least the attempt, and his many revised editions brought systems of cross-reference advising the reader to calibrate the advice for woodland and ‘champion’ country as required.

Tusser's most distinctive step towards an integrated calendar was his inclusion of women's work. His *Hundreth Points of Good Huswiferie* appeared separately at first, but soon he was 'marrying' the two, printing the texts for men and women back-to-back as well as including (marked with pilcrows) seasonal kinds of housewifery in the main sequence of each month's husbandry. There is plenty of blaming the dairymaid ('If cheeses in dairie have Argusses eies | tell Cisley the fault in hir huswiferie lies') and many points addressed to the reading husband who will be keeping the wife in check.¹⁹ Still, it is rare for such attention to be paid to women's work, and worth noticing how Tusser's 'calendar of rural and domestic economy' presents the rhythm of the housewife's year.

He acknowledges that it is relentless:

Though husbandrie seemeth to bring in the gaines,
Yet huswiferie labours seeme equall in paines.
Some respite to husbands the weather may send,
But huswives affaires have never an end.²⁰

Whereas 'husbandrie' is arranged month by month, most 'huswiferie labours' cannot so easily and pleasingly be distributed that way because they go on and on. Instead we have headings such as Baking, Scouring, Brewing, Washing, Malting. There are entries for each day's regular work: Morning, Afternoon, Evening, Supper and then (in case you were thinking of bed) 'After Supper Matters'. All these domestic tasks should be carried out with a thrifty eye on future needs and repurposed leftovers. Resourceful management depends on consciousness of each task as part of the complex whole. You might be cooking, but think how you can help the cowherd and carter: 'Save droppings and skimmings, how ever ye doo, | for medicine for cattel, for cart and for shoo'.²¹

The idea of the year's work being punctuated by holiday feasts, the idea that periods of intense effort culminate in relief and relaxation thanks to a beautifully patterned calendrical cycle, simply does not hold up when the work in question is domestic. Tusser is unusual in observing this, though he is not too concerned. 'Forget not the feastes that belong to the plough', he instructs the housewife: Plough Monday, Sheep-Shearing and Harvest Home – 'For all this good feasting, yet art thou not loose, | till ploughman thou givest his harvest home goose'.²² Not only on high days but also twice every week the labouring man should feel free to demand his due: 'Good ploughmen looke weekly, of custome and right, | for roast meat on Sundaies and Thursdaies at night.' The great feasts of the year are not, of course, arranged to celebrate and

reward domestic work, which just carries on. Come November, Cisley is still in the dairy and trying to get the cheese right: 'From April beginning, til Andrew be past, | so long with good huswife, hir dairy doth last'.²³

Nearly two hundred years later, when Mary Collier ('Now a washer-woman, at Petersfield in Hampshire') responded to Stephen Duck's belittling of women's harvest work in his 1730 poem *The Thresher's Labour*, she stressed both the major contribution of women to seasonal agricultural tasks and their parallel lives of year-round domestic chores. She was saying, from experience and with exasperated fury in her voice, what Tusser had said: 'huswives' affaires have never an end'. She was calling the attention of georgic poets and readers to the other kinds of work that go on around the central narrative of sowing, scything, threshing, those biblically sanctioned, mythically satisfactory labours that had such a powerful hold on artists, writers and clerics. Women are there in the central narrative ('throwing, turning, making hay', reaping and gleaning in the cornfield with children in tow), but there is work when they get home after sunset, and work stretches out long after the harvest is brought in.²⁴ Collier describes the long winter days of domestic service – washing linens, scouring saucepans, brewing beer. Working in darkness before sunrise and piercing 'summer's day with candle-light', she describes lives cut off from the natural rhythms that variegate the year's husbandry, and work without shape, lacking culmination or pause.²⁵

Virgil offered no model for treating this different kind of rural year. In the very beautiful winter evening scene of his *Georgics* (and it is a 'scene', held still in the current of the book's ongoing instructions and turning stars), the labouring man is at last indoors after the year's action in the open air. For a moment the curtain is lifted on indoor work. The woman is there, and she has been there all along:

One man before the late flame of a winter lamp
lingers wakeful, and with his axe's edge tapers torchpoles
while, consoling her long toil with song,
his wife with shrill shuttle zips across the warp
or at the hearth reduces grape's sweet juices,
skimming off the pot's rolling current with a frond.²⁶

Weaving and skimming, she serves here as the background tune to the farmer's winter tasks. For the man to come indoors is to work alongside women. It is as if Virgil, like the farmer, is suddenly aware of her, so that she becomes the foreground and for a moment we seem to watch and listen to her with brief wonder at the patient song of her 'longum laborem'.

Pauses, Pivots, Culminations

Both men and women labour on. Voluntarily, or without much choice in the matter, they keep at it, answering Hesiod's summative instruction to 'work': 'work upon work'.²⁷ Georgic writers, feeling for the shapes and rhythms of these working years, are deeply interested in the kind of narrative that the annual 'rotation' makes. Their material is cyclical, while literary works are necessarily linear in the sense of one phrase following the next. The resulting relationship between circle and line is at the heart of the art form. The georgic writer must decide where the story begins and ends. Is the cycle really a tragic arc, soaring to a zenith, tipping over and irremediably declining? A. E. Housman, among the most melancholy of georgic poets, understands the year as 'beautiful and death-struck', bearing a mortal wound as it treads at a walking pace through the seasons.²⁸ For others the year is a comedy of renewal, an ascent to a culminating moment, or a series of chapters with equal worth and weight.

Joseph Addison expressed his impatience with Hesiod's chronological treatment of tasks in *Works and Days*: 'too grave and simple', he thinks; 'it takes off from the surprize and variety of the Poem, and makes the whole look but like a modern Almanack in Verse'.²⁹ Virgil's departure from the timetable impressed him much more. Virgil makes us feel the beat of turning time while emphasizing contiguities that are conceptual and emotional, rather than calendrical. When his poem intensifies into passages of pulsing concentration it is not generally in relation to harvest-home or grape-pressing but things not marked on an almanac, things suddenly perceived: a vision of civil war, or a perception of the animal kingdom's united sexual power. British georgic writers have learned from both models. The seasonal sequence exerts a powerful hold; its gravity and simplicity are part of its meaning. Writers have also insisted on the year's infinite 'surprise and variety'.

'There's no beginning to the farmer's year', Vita Sackville-West observes in her 1926 poem *The Land*, cutting off the corner as she turns from her winter section to spring, not wanting to impose divisions that have no place in nature or in work.³⁰ Yet human beings make sense of time by inventing beginnings, or starting over, or turning the page. Hesiod's first emphatic instruction about timing is to reap when the Pleiades rise before the sun and to begin ploughing when they set; an arc through autumn and winter, from reaping to first ploughing forms in the mind in parallel with the arc of the stars in the sky.³¹ He then sets out in earnest with the ploughing, though first you must have made your

plough and have your oxen ready. After ploughing: woodcutting, pruning, reaping, threshing, summer sailing.

Virgil looks to the melting of Alpine snow for his cue to begin. 'In new spring, when from snowy peaks the run-off flows': this is the time to hitch the oxen and break open the earth.³² It is a vividly localized gesture of time-keeping. We look up from field to distant mountains as if looking across a whole landscape view, and we imagine people throughout the region looking likewise. For Virgil's English admirers, 'vere novo' must therefore be the start, and James Thomson in *The Seasons* makes a mobile, delicate drama of the give-and-take between winter and spring over marshes and hills. 'As yet the trembling year is unconfirmed', he writes; it is late April before warm airs 'unbind' the frosty earth and the 'impatient husband-man' can plough.³³

Thomas Tusser begins in August, after the wheat harvest, in the first version of his *Points of Husbandrie*; in later editions he revised that to September. Because land was customarily leased annually from Michaelmas, farmers arrived on new plots (or renewed their commitment to the same place) in the autumn.³⁴ The harvest was packed or stored like the furniture, and the ground awaited. Tusser's first lines in 'Septembers Abstract' are perhaps the best of the book: 'Now enter John, | old fermer is gone.' Here's the new man, starting out, looking around. It all begins here, according to contract. As we all know from the rhythm of school years, which still reflect that ancient legal pattern determined by harvests, the chill in the air becomes associated with first days, sharp pencils, assessing the situation.

Yet it is Januarius who has the doorkey to unlock the new year, and he who has the threshold gift of retrospect and foresight. Centuries of classical and Christian culture have accustomed us to the trajectory of a year that begins in deep winter – sometimes at the solstice, sometimes at Christmas, most often with the end of Christmastide and return to work (which was near the end of January in the Middle Ages and later moved up to the beginning of the month and Plough Monday). Discussing the 'Menologium', an eleventh-century calendar poem, Carolynne Larrington observes that 'the church's year virtually suppresses the seasonal cycle, beginning with the birth of Christ in December'.³⁵ The sense of birth in that dead-seeming winter still-point has irresistible potency. Yet there is not even a snowdrop and it is far too early to plough or prune.

So there emerges a pattern of seasonal georgics starting ahead of time, preparing, waiting, protecting. John Clare opens *The Shepherd's Calendar* by hurrying us indoors: 'Withering and keen the winter comes | While

comfort flies to close shut rooms.’³⁶ Wonderfully, in two lines, we feel both the weather and the shelter, though not everyone is at the tavern like the ‘labours of the months’ January figures. The thresher goes out in darkness. The foddering boy goes ‘shuffling thro’ the sinking snows | blowing his fingers as he goes’. He is at once a winter figure from a calendar picture and a particular living boy on the path between rimy hedges, towards a known field.³⁷

Vita Sackville-West was always moved by winter imagery and makes the most of starting in stillness. Her farmer is imagined with emblematic clarity, sitting at the kitchen table under lamplight, planning. This is Virgil’s ‘breather’, though like Clare she includes the ‘desultory’ outdoor tasks quietly and firmly undertaken.³⁸ She visualizes (and hears and smells) the dung-cart’s ‘reasty load’, the horses standing by with ‘nostrils smoking on the air’, the ‘wedge-shaped hale of roots’ to be portioned out into the feeding troughs.³⁹ There can be no turning of one’s back. Katherine Swift in *The Morville Hours* (2008), an intricately plotted account of her Shropshire garden calibrated to the labours of the months and the monastic hours, starts with customary precision. It is a moment before the striking of midnight on New Year’s Eve. ‘Listen.’ The chapter is called ‘Vigils’ – the hour of waiting and watching.⁴⁰ As if adjusting our eyes to darkness, we learn to look at the place when it has least on show. Before digging begins, there is time for thought, preparation, historical reading.

In the classical and medieval system of correspondences between the ages of man and the times of the year, June and July are associated with man being at the height of his powers and summer is at the top of the wheel of time.⁴¹ In the calendar illustrations, people are mowing the hay and tending the corn; the world is green and burgeoning, and perhaps there is time to sit under a hedge enjoying the sun. For the most part, this tallies with modern ideas about summer. Yet the high point has long brought mixed feelings. ‘All country dwellers know the small despair | Of the year’s summit’, writes Sackville-West. There can be no sinking into melancholy: ‘the yeoman now | Has little time for vain regrets’.⁴² A little past the summit come the dog days, classically dreaded for their heat, now more dreaded in England for the likelihood of rain when holiday weather is most yearned for. For gardeners, the July gap can be lowering. Skill can plug the vacancies, but the season’s underlying character is tiredness and uncertainty. Katherine Swift writes of losing her nerve and losing her way in high summer. The roses brown, galega capsizes, ox-eye daisies collapse: ‘We teeter daily on the brink of disaster, the garden and I – horticulturally, aesthetically, financially, physically, emotionally.’⁴³ Her lostness, and sense

of loss, lead her to recollections of John Clare losing his bearings in an altered countryside, and the modern tearing up of hedges, the forgetting of the land's stories.

So where does the culmination of the year's story come? Sackville-West's winter beginning allows her to turn full circle and end in late autumn with the gathering of Kent's most prized crops: apples and hops. John Philips in his 1708 georgic *Cyder* had dramatized a similarly fruitful climax of the productive year in Herefordshire (which he elects as representative of Britain, Cyder-Land). He elevates orchards and their resulting cider to match the status accorded by Virgil to Italian vineyards and their wine. 'Thrice happy time, | Best portion of the various year', the autumn orchard is an Eden of ambrosial fruits. Yet 'Inclement winter dwells | Contiguous', like a threatening neighbour who may at any moment appear. 'Now, now's the time' – to pick, to prepare the presses.⁴⁴ This laden moment holds within it knowledge of all the work and uncertainty that has made it: the pruning, grafting, thinning, the fight against droughts and diseases, the anxious watching for nature's delicate coordination of blossom with the warmth that will bring bees flying to the pollen.

William Cowper in *The Task* revised the pattern of the georgic year to reflect his own life as a small-scale gardener, indoor writer, walking thinker. Since the 'task' to which Cowper responds is a call to 'sing the sofa', and since the whole poem is an apologia for rural retirement, *The Task* is in some respects an anti-georgic, in others a mock-georgic.⁴⁵ Yet most of all it is genuinely georgic, steadfast and unsatirical in its feeling for repetition, for long attachment to a well-studied patch, and for an understanding of life in which work is the bulwark that humans keep building against chaos. Cowper is profoundly sympathetic to Virgil's emphasis on hard-won order. He sings 'th'employs of rural life | Reiterated as the wheel of time | Runs round, still ending and beginning still'.⁴⁶

His central labour is that of writing, and his time of intensity and fruitfulness is winter – so much so that three books of *The Task*, the latter half of the poem, are devoted to it, following a single winter day so that time seems to slow and each moment is distinct. Cowper welcomes the grand old man Winter, 'ruler of th' inverted year'. His delighted injunction to 'wheel the sofa round' picks up the image of the running wheel of time. Yet his imaginative work is sustained by the physical tasks of the gardening year. Virgil left gardening to a dashing occupatio, imagining what he would include, briefly mooting the cucumber as a plumply tempting subject. Cowper takes him up on the suggestion: 'To raise the prickly and green-coated gourd ... is an art | That toiling ages have but just matured, | And at this moment

unassay'd in song'.⁴⁷ The cucumber gets an inset georgic of its own, a miniature *Task*, in keeping with the giant effort the fruit demands.

The cucumber imposes a calendar. In November 'the task begins' with the manure pile and placing of the hot frame. As when building a house, one must consider siting and materials. Then be patient: 'Thrice must the voluble and restless earth | Spin round upon her axle 'ere the warmth | Slow gathering in the midst, through the square mass | Diffused, attain the surface.'⁴⁸ It is like Virgil's enigmatic instruction to let the ploughed earth feel sun and frost twice before sowing; Cowper is as solicitous of his hot frame as Virgil of Roman fields. Both ask us to visualize the movement of the cosmos, and our own small field or frame within it. 'Slow gathering' has in it an echo of the mist 'fast gathering at the heels' of the homebound worker proleptically envisaged at the close of *Paradise Lost*. Now here, in the fallen world, a fog is rising at man's will, controlled by modern skill, filling the hot frame which becomes a microcosm under human care. Once the seed is placed, there ensues 'the ticklish balance of suspense' in steering safely to the fruiting of the plant.

Cowper does not need to grow this cucumber; nothing and nobody depends upon it. Yet nor are these occupations entirely trivial. They require Cowper to follow timetables other than his own. With these efforts of steady attentiveness, he fights off or wrestles down the disorder he perceived in the world and the madness from which he suffered – no less so than Virgil advocating the use of sickle instead of sword against the wars of his time.

Lucky Days

Hesiod devotes the final section of his *Works and Days* to a list of dates on which tasks should and should not be done. He teaches that days matter; works and days must be choreographed for agricultural success. For instance, 'avoid the 13th of the standing moon for beginning sowing; but it is the best day for bedding in vines'.⁴⁹ The schedule is extensive, and liable to stop the farmer from doing a task at just the moment when season, weather and preparation are all aligned. Hesiod attributes the character of days to Zeus, who has ordained their usefulness. It is often suggested that Virgil includes guidance on propitious dates according to the Roman calendar as a kind of tribute to his forebear, and is not himself so convinced of their influence.⁵⁰ Still, he keeps the faith, if faith it is: 'Distinct days with distinct phases the Moon herself | has consecrated auspicious for work.'⁵¹ 'Felicitis operam': auspicious, or happy, or lucky for work. The

calendar of luck was determined not only by the moon's phases, but also by anniversaries of divine triumphs and disasters: 'Avoid | the fifth: then Earth spawned forth pale Orcus | and the Furies'.⁵² Virgil understands it as part of the farmer's proud art to negotiate between the preordained framework of dates and the ever-changing weather. If the fifth is unlucky, but you have a field ready to harvest and signs of coming rain, you must be wise enough to choose.

The Christian calendars used in medieval England still marked two unlucky days each month (known as 'Egyptian days' or *dies mal*), though the church never quite condoned these pagan relics. As for luck, best choose your saint. Religious anniversaries accrued around them much varied thinking about their felicity, or otherwise. Belief in the luck of particular days for certain tasks was suppressed after the Reformation, but superstitions, more or less attached to logical factors of season and sequence, continued to thrive in rural communities.

All of which gives a complex charge to notions of auspicious timing in English georgic. John Aubrey did a characteristically clear-headed bit of disentangling, and pointed out that the same dates kept being used in relation to calendars working on different principles, the numbers having floated free from any former connection with moon or zodiac: 'Thus may divers be mistaken who superstitiously observe certain times'.⁵³ He and other members of the Royal Society 'Georgical Committee' would honour Virgil by recording modern agricultural knowledge, not by enshrining antiquarian folklore. There is no talk of dates in the enlightened georgics of Philips or Thomson or Cowper.

However, 'I have always had luck when gardening' reports Ford Madox Ford in his part-fictionalized memoir *It Was the Nightingale* (signed and dedicated 'on the feast of St Eulogius, 1933'): 'I imagine it is because I observe the rules of the game of gardening life.' Ford affirms his adherence to rituals of timing: 'I always seed while the moon is waxing; I never begin a planting on a Friday or a 13th, but always on a 9th, an 18th, or a 27th. I attach superstitious reverence to certain favourite plants or beds. If there is a wishing-well in the neighbourhood I fetch a bottleful of it to start my first watering of the spring.'⁵⁴

Ford is the most georgically inclined of the great modernists, preoccupied with the moral good of frugality and manual work, nurturing all his life an ideal image of himself as smallholder and author. He is, partly, the Gringoire of *No Enemy* (1929) who proposes 'to save the world by intensive kitchen gardening and exquisite but economical cookery' and is ever on the verge of writing a manual on the keeping of goats.⁵⁵ He is, partly,

Marie-Léonie in *Last Post* (1928), running her cottage estate in England as only the French know how. Ford's accounts of his husbandry come in tones of pride, amused self-satire and woundedness at being overlooked as an agriculturalist, the inventor no less of a new method for sowing corn. Ezra Pound was sceptical about his friend's rural life, but glad of expert guidance on matters of vine nomenclature and oxen in *The Cantos*. 'Dear Hesiod', he wrote from Paris in March 1922 when Ford sent georgically oriented notes on his manuscript, 'Thanks orfully'.⁵⁶

Ford's mind echoed with freighted dates. He would rig things to fit them, misremembering moments of literary inspiration to line them up with the Feast of St Catherine.⁵⁷ He would let them haunt him year on year, as 4 August tolls fatefully through *The Good Soldier*. Like masons' marks, or the lesser-known rules in Debrett's, the days for husbandry are the code of a profession and community. Ford displays his badge of honour as a countryman. Sowing on the 18th, he is expressing his kinship with those who have planted and watered over the centuries, watching the moon for a spring blessing on a new crop.

There are local variations in the calendar code, but many aspects continue to be observed in rural communities across Europe. When the Sussex sheep farmer Chris Stewart moved to southern Spain and bought a farm stretching over terraced hillsides and down into a remote valley of the Alpujarra, long-time residents of the area noted his loose adherence to the proper times:

'What's that you're sowing?'
 'Broad beans.'
 'They'll be no good.'
 'Why not, for heavens' sake?'
 'Wrong phase of the moon.'⁵⁸

Driving over Lemons, Stewart's account of starting the farm and learning the particularities of the region – social, topographical, agricultural – was a bestseller in Britain. Part of what has appealed so much to readers (apart from the dandling of plump lemons in northern minds, and the oil flowing after the olive harvest) is Stewart's voice as both expert and novice. This is a kind of georgic writing in which didacticism, studentship and anthropological watching take equal parts. In the matter of preordained timings, he sets out the Alpujarran custom and his failure to comply:

All rural occupations in the Alpujarras have their allotted day, with the odd adjustment to accommodate the waxing and waning of the moon or the falling of a Friday. Thus the year always starts with the sowing of

garlic on the 1st of January; then you prune your vines on the 24th or 25th depending on where you live. Most tasks are governed by the saint's day, as are many meteorological and cosmic phenomena such as the disappearance on St John's Day of the clouds of horseflies that plague the village of Fregenite.⁵⁹

Stewart agrees that 'the system is perfectly logical' – in the sense that the filigree of association between the day, the saint and the task helps everyone remember what to do next and brings a deal of certainty to a complicated timetable. This is the kind of logic that characterized almanacs in England for centuries and survives, much diminished, in a few axioms. Yet for the Alpujarran farmers the 'system' is about much more than handy aide-memoires and it is deployed in a way that has nothing to do with logic. Josefina from the village raises an eyebrow at the incomer:

'You should prune vines on the 25th'.

'I know but I'm only four days late. That's not too bad is it?'

'We always prune ours on the 25th, rain or shine; that way we don't get any pests or diseases.'

'You mean you don't have to use any sprays or chemicals?'

'Are you mad? We blast them with every fungicide we can lay our hands on.'⁶⁰

For Josefina, and for Ford in Sussex, the art and the rightness of farming lies in precise compliance with immemorial laws. Vita Sackville-West is a firm representative of the opposite persuasion: for her the art lies in independent judgement and responsiveness to the moment. 'Therefore let no man say "Peas shall be sown | This month or that; now shall the harrow go".' She will not pin tasks to a month, let alone a day: 'Tis farmer, not the date, that calls the time. | Better dry August hay than wet in June'. Hers is the determinedly rational view that has been dominant in British georgic writing. Saints' days offer no special aura for the sower: 'Such arbitrary dates and rules are vain; | Not thus the year's arithmetic is planned'.⁶¹ Part of the farmer's central skill is to be 'sharp on the minute when the minute's come', weighing each year's unfolding circumstances day by day. Accordingly, Sackville-West's poem takes its energy from the interplay of set structures and continual variation that makes no two farming years alike.

Spring to Spring

When Sackville-West reaches Michaelmas, Tusser's starting point, she reflects on this autumnal threshold. Strikingly, she perceives it as a twin to January:

Now retrospect and prospect have their equal share,
 For autumn like the Janus of the year
 Holds spring to spring in double-handed keeping.⁶²

The farmer looks back at the successes and shortcomings of the recent harvest and plans for winter crops. It is not a still-point: 'no respite comes'. One must immediately begin again, 'and bring new life to earth'. Imagining the arms that hold two springs together, and the similarities that connect Michaelmas with New Year, Sackville-West makes firm spokes crossing time's wheel.

The expression of kinship between times, the binding of opposite seasons, the articulation of future harvests that wait curled tight within buds: these are special arts of georgic writing. These are the means by which the year is shown to turn, not merely pass, and these are tools that help us get our bearings. Hesiod's repeated technique is to coil the future inside his instructions. Plough and sow in the right way, and 'the ears may nod towards the earth with thickness ... and you may banish the cobwebs from the storage jars'.⁶³ It is a method of motivation – envisaging the future reward from the very moment of starting out. Virgil is less concerned to play the goading coach, and more interested in the poetry of juxtaposition. The bees, for instance, swarm in spring more densely than hail, or acorns raining down 'from the shaken oak'.⁶⁴ Spring swarm, winter hail, autumn acorns (the knocking down of acorns to feed pigs brought to the woods for pannage would become one of the key 'labours' for November in medieval cycles). Virgil has packed the seasons tight together like the bees, so that for a moment the year seems to hang before us in a humming ball of energy.

Cowper does not need motivation but steady hope, the balancing of opposites and affirmation of the goodness in his chosen domestic way of life. In the 'Winter Evening' section of *The Task*, like the winter evening passage of Virgil's *Georgics*, a woman is at work: 'here the needle plies its busy task'.⁶⁵ A flower is unfolding in the embroidery. Cowper binds this task to summer, as if stretching a thread from the winter solstice across the circle to midsummer. The winter flower blooms indoors, in memory and anticipation of the summer garden.

Cowper attends in late winter to fruit trees espaliered on the garden wall. Applying his own moral creed to pruning, he cuts away large showy branches in favour of 'neighb'ring twigs | Less ostentatious, and yet studied thick | With hopeful gems'.⁶⁶ The year's growth and fruit is all contained there in those shiny tight-furled buds. The interrelatedness of each task and season appeals to Cowper deeply, and his marking of this coherence is weighed against the urban activities which seem to him fragmentary, leading nowhere. The espaliers, by contrast, hold the promise of next

autumn in their bare winter twigs. The subject of staking attracts him too. The practice of supporting plants with stakes unites new growth to old poles, the beginnings and ends of vegetable life and of the year:

Few self-supported flow'rs endure the wind
Uninjur'd, but expect th' upholding aid
Of the smooth-shaven prop, and, neatly tied,
Are wedded thus, like beauty to old age,
For int'rest sake, the living to the dead.⁶⁷

Symbolically it has a beautiful concision. He borrows the theme from Virgil, who advertises it in the first lines of his poem ('when to wed vines to elms'). Cowper weds his new work to the strong support of Virgil's precedent.

'Meanwhile it flies, time flies, irretrievably'.⁶⁸ The year is thickly wrought with tasks, associations, instructions, memories and hopes; it is gem-studded, staked, embroidered, held in place. Yet time slips away and is airborne, flying flying.

Notes

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- 1 *Georgics* (Johnson), p. 5 (*Georgics*, I. 1–3).
- 2 R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973; London: Vintage, 2016), p. 25; S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana, 1996), p. 528.
- 3 K. Swift, *The Morville Hours* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 207.
- 4 H. Haughton and A. Phillips, 'Introduction', *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 1–28, at p. 5.
- 5 See B. A. Henisch, *The Medieval Calendar Year* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1999). A comprehensive record of labours sequences is to be found in Colum Hourihane, ed., *Time in the Medieval World: Occupations of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac in the Index of Christian Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
- 6 Oscott Psalter, c.1265–70, British Library Add. Ms 5000.
- 7 Writing about the painted labours at Salisbury Cathedral, M. M. Reeve gives theological contexts for this allegorical significance in *Thirteenth-Century Wall Painting of Salisbury Cathedral* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), pp. 99–100. Thanks to Jessica Fay for seeing the connection with monastic work, and the significance of it.
- 8 Ecclesiastes 3: 1–2.
- 9 Genesis 3: 17–18.

- 10 Henisch, *Medieval Calendar*, p. 10.
- 11 K. A. Eastin, 'Virgil and the Visual Imagination: Illustrative Programs from Antiquity to John Ogilby', unpublished PhD thesis, Brown University (2009), p. 65.
- 12 M. Liversidge, 'Virgil in Art', *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. C. Martindale (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 91–103, at p. 100.
- 13 For different kinds of farming in English georgics, see e.g., T. Moffet's *The Silkwormes* (1599), J. Philips' celebration of fruit-growing in *Cyder* (1708), and C. Smart's 'The Hop-Garden' (1752). Silkworms reappeared in English literature with *The Silkworm: A Poem* (1750), S. Pulletin's translation of *De bombycum cura et usu* by M. H. Vida (1527).
- 14 See S. Oldenburg, 'Thomas Tusser and the Poetics of the Plow', *English Literary Renaissance*, 49 (2019), 273–303.
- 15 Dedictory poem 'To the Right Honorable Lord Thomas Paget', in T. Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, ed. G. Grigson (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 6.
- 16 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'Marches Abstract', pp. 86–7.
- 17 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'Marches Husbandrie', p. 95.
- 18 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'A Description of Time and the Yeaere', p. 59.
- 19 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'A Lesson for Dairie Maid Cisley', p. 101.
- 20 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'The Preface to the boke of Huswiferie', p. 157.
- 21 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'After Noone Workes', p. 172.
- 22 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'The Ploughman's Feasting Daies', pp. 177, 178.
- 23 Tusser, *Husbandry*, 'Aprils Husbandrie', p. 99.
- 24 M. Collier, *The Woman's Labour: An Epistle to Mr Stephen Duck* (1739), p. 8.
- 25 Collier, *Labour*, p. 14.
- 26 *Georgics* (Johnson), pp. 21, 23 (*Georgics*, I. 291–6).
- 27 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. M. L. West (Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 48.
- 28 A. E. Housman, 'In My Own Shire, If I Was Sad', in *Works*, ed. M. Irwin (London: Wordsworth, 2005), p. 56.
- 29 J. Addison, 'An Essay on the Georgics', in Virgil, *Georgics* (Dryden), p. 150.
- 30 V. Sackville-West, *The Land* (London: Heinemann, 1926), p. 25.
- 31 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, p. 48: 'When the Pleiades born of Atlas rise before the sun, begin the reaping; the ploughing, when they set'.
- 32 *Georgics* (Johnson), p. 60 (*Georgics*, I. 43).
- 33 J. Thomson, *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 4 ('Spring', lines 18, 33).
- 34 A. McRae notes the significance of Tusser's altered starting point and its relation to tenant farming and 'improvement': *God Speed the Plough* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 147. I have discussed Michaelmas moving in 'Moving House', *Lives of Houses*, ed. K. Kennedy and H. Lee (Princeton University Press, 2020).
- 35 C. Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense: Gnomie Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English Wisdom Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 167.

- 36 J. Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1 ('January', lines 1–2).
- 37 Clare, *Calendar*, p. 2 ('January', lines 39–40).
- 38 *Georgics* (Johnson), p. 23 (*Georgics*, I. 299). Virgil has 'hiems ignava colono'.
- 39 Sackville-West, *Land*, p. 18.
- 40 Swift, *Morville*, p. 17.
- 41 On the extent and implication of this tradition, see M. Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 67–100.
- 42 Sackville-West, *Land*, p. 55.
- 43 Swift, *Morville*, pp. 207–8.
- 44 J. Philips, *Cyder: A Poem: In Two Books* (1708), p. 53.
- 45 W. Cowper, *The Task* (Book 1, line 1), in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. J. D. Baird and C. Ryskamp, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1995), vol. II, p. 117. All subsequent quotations from this edition.
- 46 Cowper, *Task*, p. 178 (Book 3, lines 625–7), echoing *Georgics*, II. 401–2: 'redit agricolis labor actus in orbem, atque in se sua per vestigial voluitur annus'.
- 47 *Georgics*, IV. 122; Cowper, *Task*, p. 174 (Book 3, lines 446, 451).
- 48 Cowper, *Task*, p. 175 (Book 3, lines 490–3). Smart's allusion to the same lines in *The Hop-Garden* sounds (like most of the poem) unproductively affected: 'When twice bright Phoebus' vivifying ray', 'The Hop-Garden: A Georgic', in C. Smart, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1752), p. 115. Cowper, while obviously enjoying the literary game, also catches the real physicality of the microcosm he describes.
- 49 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, p. 60.
- 50 On Virgil's lip-service to an outdated calendar, see e.g., L. P. Wilkinson, *The Georgics of Virgil* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 57–8: 'It is clear that [Virgil] attached no importance to [the calendar of auspicious days] except as a reminder of Hesiod'.
- 51 *Georgics* I. 275–6.
- 52 *Georgics* I. 284.
- 53 J. Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, quoted in B. Blackburn and L. Holford-Strevens, *The Oxford Companion to the Year* (Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 595.
- 54 F. M. Ford, *It Was the Nightingale* (London: Heinemann, 1934), p. III.
- 55 F. M. Ford, *No Enemy: A Tale of Reconstruction* (1929), ed. P. Skinner (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 8.
- 56 E. Pound to F. M. Ford, 21 March 1922, *Pound/Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship*, ed. B. Lindberg-Seyersted (London: Faber, 1982), p. 65. Thanks to Max Saunders for this reference.
- 57 Ford, *Nightingale*, p. 174.
- 58 C. Stewart, *Driving over Lemons* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), p. 75.
- 59 Stewart, *Lemons*, p. 75.
- 60 Stewart, *Lemons*, p. 76.
- 61 Sackville-West, *Land*, p. 56.
- 62 Sackville-West, *Land*, p. 77.

- 63 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, p. 49.
- 64 *Georgics* (Johnson), p. 123 (*Georgics*, IV. 77).
- 65 Cowper, *Task*, p. 190 (Book 4, line 150).
- 66 Cowper, *Task*, p. 173 (Book 3, lines 419–21).
- 67 Cowper, *Task*, p. 179 (Book 3, lines 656–61, alluding to *Georgics* II. 358).
- 68 *Georgics* (Johnson), p. 95 (*Georgics*, III. 284).