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Georgic at Home in Nineteenth-Century Dialect Poetry

Sue Edney

Victorian literary dialect can be used for many things: cries for help, nostalgia, or comedy. My interest is in how it can be used to subversive didactic effect in order to point up the environmental linguistic connections that strengthen reciprocal relations between human and nonhuman, sentient, and other material beings in working lives. The georgic genre is best known in English writing as encompassing late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry on various forms of farm labour and land management, ownership, and empire-building, although with some recognition that the work itself is hard and subject to all kinds of problems. Georgic as a more subversive mode has shifted the field over the last two centuries to encompass materiality other than farming, often from the viewpoint of the workers and the workplaces of artisan, self-taught, or labouring-class writers, who were often unwilling to separate their creative expression from their everyday tasks. These writers experienced problems first hand; they also wrote about them in technical as well as poetic terms, being close to home in their relationship with labour. The specific language of work gave writing from labouring-class lives a perceived authenticity that could be drawn on in reformist prose — by the Gaskells, for example — but could also be used and recognized by the writers themselves to highlight known abuses within labour and the working environment, as well as celebrating the more raucous aspects of everyday life. Literary dialect offers a collective way of 'working from home', whether on a farm, down a mine, or at the weaving loom.

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The georgic genre in English is generally represented by a number of mainly seventeenth- and eighteenth-century long poems, influenced by renewed European interest in Virgil's *Georgics* among other early classical texts. These were increasingly directed at an audience looking for a hierarchical poetic model that emphasized an improved rural economy and national progress as a result. Human and nonhuman exploitation could be disguised by the harmonious descriptive details, the abundant produce, the beauty of fields and farms, 'stressing reconciliation, mutual adaptation and copious supply'.[1] However, georgic as a mode continued to develop a discursive, tangential set of approaches rather than a strict form, enabling wider and more egalitarian conversations about the place and purpose of labour in changing social circumstances. Eighteenth-century writers had remodelled and diversified georgic, utilizing the mythography in quite another context, as in John Gay's urban *Trivia* (1716), for example, or as a means of social protest, in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770). Later, William Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* (1821–22), with digressions on disadvantaged rural labour, offers a handbook for good household management in small spaces, sharply critical of what is now termed 'agribusiness'.

'In the modern world', as I have previously argued alongside Philipp Erchinger and Pippa Marland, the georgic mode has been 'widened to include the production and trade of goods more generally', but the underlying theme presented by classical and later texts remains: we are being taught 'that the struggle with recalcitrant matters and unforeseeable adversities is an inescapable part of human life'.[2] Georgic celebrates labour, and its environment, when labourers and landowners alike 'must learn to subsist in the midst of a material world that does not necessarily (or naturally) accord with their wishes and needs'.[3] Even so, Virgil appears to present relentless hard work as appealing with the aim of emphasizing the personal and communal value of production. Intricate details are important in order to 'validate the author's credentials as an expert', yet the lyrical storytelling themes of his *Georgics*, as Philip Thibodeau has argued, 'inform and enrich rural life'.[4] English georgic writing is often attached to particular places, such as Hagley Park in James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726–30), or the Suffolk of Robert Bloomfield's childhood on his uncle's farm in *The Farmer's Boy* (1800). Virgil's praise is for Italy itself, but he still wishes

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[1] Paddy Bullard, 'Introduction', in *A History of English Georgic Writing*, ed. by Paddy Bullard (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 1–38 (p. 16), doi:10.1017/9781009019507.

[2] Philipp Erchinger, Sue Edney, and Pippa Marland, 'Eco-Georgic: From Antiquity to the Anthropocene: An Introduction', *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, 12.2 (2021), pp. 1–17 (p. 1), doi:10.37536/ECOZONA.2021.12.2.4537.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

[4] Philip Thibodeau, 'Hesiod, Virgil and the Ambitions of Georgic', in *A History of English Georgic Writing*, ed. by Bullard, pp. 39–56 (p. 51).

to be remembered as the 'first, the very first' to bring his new kind of poetry back to the family home of Mantua as a prize-winner, even if he no longer lived there.[5] Georgic is also critical of establishment arrogance: Elaine Fantham notes how his poetry 'rejects outright the values of the Roman elite' in favour of a different quality of life for statesmen instead of 'political ambition and the greed that drives men'. Virgil's poetry was composed to entertain, 'not to instruct actual farmers but to give pleasure to his readers', yet its continuing appeal lies in the multilayered ambiguities of actual farm work, planting, ploughing, shepherding — completely familiar to any agricultural worker at any period.[6]

These latter elements, entertaining and instructive, with detailed technical description couched in lively stories, enrich the writing of Victorian and late eighteenth-century working-class writers, some of whom chose to write in local dialects. It is my argument here that the use of dialect in poetry for working practices, tools, and the different environments of labour can illustrate the extended influence of the georgic mode in areas as diverse as mining and weaving as well as agriculture. The poems demonstrate those aspects of georgic that are generally to be found in other examples of the genre: pride in the quality of labour, celebration of community, and the benefits of productivity, alongside arduous, debilitating toil. Joseph Addison had made it clear that Virgil's *Georgics* succeeded aesthetically because he did not use 'low phrases and terms of art, that are adapted to husbandry' without clothing them in 'the pleasantest dress', yet dialect reverses this maxim while creating a positive impact for 'terms of art' in labouring communities.[7] As Bridget Keegan has shown, debate began in the eighteenth century concerning the 'appropriateness of "terms of art" — the specific technical language used by practitioners of different occupations — to the realm of poetry, and in particular georgic or didactic poetry'.[8] Terms of art also 'carries a double meaning', as Keegan has pointed out: dialect itself provides a term of art (p. 130). In the context of home, in close and often celebratory entanglements of work and family, dialect has especial power to strengthen local engagement through terms of art.

Some writers also recognize that the vernacular can offer a Virgilian critique of elite values and 'greed that drives men' which may be better appreciated by those who speak the same tongue than by those for whom 'maintenance of a linguistic hierarchy

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[5] Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. by Peter Fallon, intr. by Elaine Fantham (Oxford University Press, 2006), III. 10–11. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses in the main text.

[6] Elaine Fantham, 'Introduction', in Virgil, pp. xi–xxxiii (pp. xxvii, xviii).

[7] 'An Essay on Virgil's Georgics' (1693), in *The Works of the Right Honourable Joseph Addison*, ed. by Richard Hurd, new edn, 6 vols (Cadell and Davies, 1811), I, pp. 188–97 (p. 193).

[8] Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730–1837* (Palgrave, 2008), p. 125.

typically involves a pattern of *stigmatization* of dominated languages'.[9] The poems I have chosen exhibit their authors' skills and display their insights into community concerns while fulfilling their purpose: to entertain and confirm neighbourly reciprocity. Two poems discussed here, by Mary Leapor and John Clare, are in a more standard English, but their pragmatic and unromantic language expresses a place-based social relationship of working-class communities and undercuts the hierarchical system represented by establishment English.

By its nature as a local language, dialect is 'at home' and Samuel Laycock's 'Bowton's Yard' (1864) portrays what home can signify.[10] It is a real place, Bolton's Yard in Stalybridge, where Laycock is intent on creating a shared community identity, telling us he lives in the yard alongside other family members.[11] While nearly every household is in straitened circumstances, it is a lively place. There's a 'skoo', kept by his 'gronny' with 'only one or two' pupils, a pastry shop, barber, cobbler, washerwoman, and his uncle Tom is a musician (p. 3). There is no complaint, no rebuke to those who drink the profits of their beer shops, who are 'eawt o' wark', or owe the rent: local readers were only too familiar with similar yards all over the industrial north of England during the Cotton Famine years of the 1860s (p. 3).

Whatever available work there might be is documented without extraneous comment. Laycock 'speaks for the group' in this poem, as Brian Hollingworth notes: 'The virtues [dialect poetry] stresses are "homely"', intended to encourage and celebrate lives 'thrown into a new, menacing and unprecedented social situation.'[12] For many working families, as Laycock describes, the home was threatened if labour was withdrawn from it; often the home itself was still the place of work. In 1841 Samuel Bamford was still documenting village-based handloom weaving in South Lancashire, specialist hand-weaving reached its peak during the 1830s, as I have discussed elsewhere, even as agricultural unrest affected many rural areas, while rapid urban expansion was creating poor-quality dwellings for newly arrived machinists.[13] Laycock's family had moved from Yorkshire to Lancashire to find work among the

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[9] Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 'Linguistic Imperialism and the Consequences for Language Ecology', in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*, ed. by Alwin F. Fill and Hermine Penz (Routledge, 2018), pp. 121–34 (p. 123), emphasis in original, doi:10.4324/9781315687391.

[10] Samuel Laycock, 'Bowton's Yard', in *Warblin's Fro' an Owd Songster* (Clegg, 1894), pp. 3–5. Laycock himself did not live in the yard.

[11] Sue Edney, 'Printed Voices: Dialect and Diversity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Lancashire', in *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, ed. by Shelley Trower (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 59–86 (p. 70), doi:10.1057/9780230339774.

[12] Brian Hollingworth, 'Introduction', in *Songs of the People: Lancashire Dialect Poetry of the Industrial Revolution*, ed. by Brian Hollingworth (Manchester University Press, 1982), pp. 1–7 (p. 7).

[13] Samuel Bamford, *Walks in South Lancashire* (1844), ed. by John Spiers and Cecil Ballantine (Harvester, 1972); Edney, 'Printed Voices', p. 62.

power looms when he was 11, making their home in Stalybridge, and keeping 'home' in their dialect. He pokes gentle fun at Lancashire neighbours in one verse: 'At number eight — they're Yawshur folk [...] | Aw think aw ne'er seed nicer folk nor these i' o mi loife' (p. 4). It is an unsentimental poem — this is just how things are. As Hollingworth points out, 'wit [...] is a mark of dialect poetry — a wit which speaks well for the dignity of people who refuse to be put down by adverse circumstances' (p. 6).

There were some ambivalent and realistic versions of the working relationship between human, nonhuman, and labour written by some labouring-class writers during the eighteenth century, such as Mary Collier's *The Woman's Labour* (1739) and Robert Bloomfield's *The Farmer's Boy* (1800). Many writers began to gain a sense of the value of labour to a country in economic stress after the Napoleonic Wars. Industrial development, whether urban or rural, was often responsible for degrading workers' ways of living as Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy illustrated compellingly in novels such as *Mary Barton* (1848) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). But industrial development also provided income, in goods and trade, that funded invention, education, printing, railways — even bicycles — and some writers from what were considered, by themselves and others, lowly backgrounds became part of a new establishment, as printers, or mill and factory managers. Gateshead poet Thomas Wilson was one such writer, beginning as a child 'trapper' in the pits, and educating himself to become a quayside clerk and later a partner in a Gateshead engineering firm, Losh, Wilson and Bell (*Fig. 1*).[14]

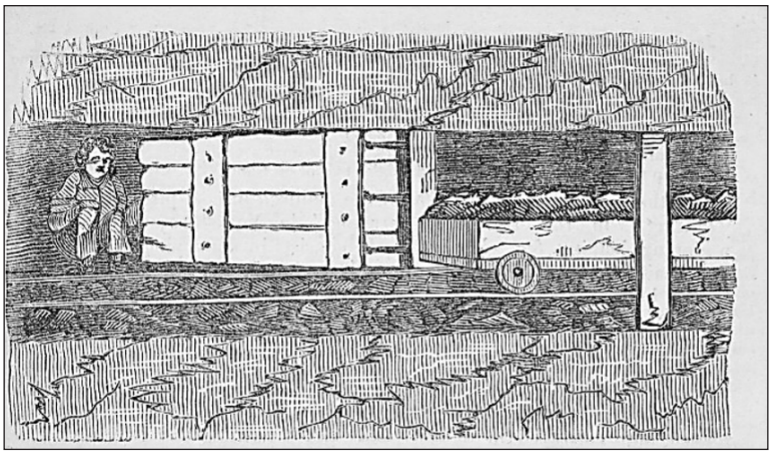

Fig. 1: Trapper by air door with coal cart, in *The Condition and Treatment of the Children Employed in the Mines and Collieries of the United Kingdom* (Strange, 1842). © Courtesy of the British Library Board. Shelf mark 1509/353.

[14] Scott McEathron, headnote to 'Thomas Wilson', in *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets, 1800–1900*, ed. by John Goodridge and others, 3 vols (Pickering and Chatto, 2006), I: *1800–1830*, ed. by Scott McEathron, p. 257, doi:10.4324/9780429350207.

When Wilson published his poem 'The Pitman's Pay' in an 1843 collection of verse, he took care to gloss nearly every word, written as it is in a fairly dense Newcastle dialect, and he did not reduce any of the dialect for later publication. Wilson's account concerns colliery conditions of his childhood, and the three parts first appeared in *Mitchell's Magazine* for the years 1826, 1828, and 1830. The first and third depict romantic interests and married life in the neighbourhood: it is the second part I consider here, which gives a vivid technical portrait of what it meant to be a miner, beginning in the late eighteenth century when Wilson himself was a child-worker in the pit, moving into the nineteenth. At all times, he locates work firmly within family life.

Wilson also wrote an extensive preface, detailing his reasons for writing the piece and extolling the modern improvements to mining, without which the nation could not go forward: 'the coal trade has not only been the means of producing a highly useful and hardy race of seamen, for the protection and defence of our native land, but of conveying cheerfulness and comfort to millions.'[15] For Wilson, machines made the miner's life easier, including metal plates and rails and the use of gunpowder to bring down the coal, along with Sunday school education, this to the extent that 'the pitman's character has undergone considerable amelioration': mining families no longer waste their free time, and all their cottages and their persons are 'neat', 'very civil and very orderly' (pp. vii, viii). This 'amelioration' represents benefits at a wider level, national as well as personal — good order and an industrious outlook were general qualities extolled by social reformers; improved technical know-how and skill are examples of georgic progress, along the lines of Virgil's instructions on grafting or cultivating vines in order to improve fruit.

Wilson's preface, in fact, is a model of georgic virtuous labour: much hard work and great rewards, for individuals and humankind in general. Boys grow into men learning the rules, the tricks, and the terms of art. That Wilson's field was made of coal and not grass or wheat is the only difference — except that he celebrates the labour in dialect. Wilson is writing during a time of major and bitter coalfield strikes, the longest being in 1844, just after he published his poetry collection, in spite of his expressed belief that no modern miner would dream of going on strike. The ability of Sunday schools to help mining families gain their amelioration was partial; the 1842 Children's Employment Commission 'nodded recognition of their efforts in easy spelling and reading [...] but blamed them for putting "no ideas into their minds"'.[16] Wilson had

[15] Thomas Wilson, 'Preface', in Wilson, *The Pitman's Pay, and Other Poems* (Douglas, 1843), pp. v–xv (p. v).

[16] Robert Colls, '"Oh Happy English Children!": Coal, Class and Education in the North-East', *Past & Present*, 73.1 (1976), pp. 75–99 (p. 88), doi:10.1093/past/73.1.75.

experienced conditions in the mines when he began as a trapper in the 1780s that were appalling, with men, women, and children crushed, deformed, malnourished, burnt, and drowned, not to mention lung diseases and the myriad fevers that could be survived only by the fittest.

We might wonder why Wilson, no longer a collier but a respected manufacturer, should want to revisit such ordeals. However, he is not only documenting pain but praising improvement alongside the acquisition of knowledge. Skill learned the hard way was considered of benefit because it was sealed into memory, for good or ill, and the ability to learn a skill was transferable even if the work itself gave out. Conditions for children had not improved by the time the Commission began its work, and, as David Gillan has shown, 'during the discussions about protective legislation, some owners stated that their mines would have to close if young children were excluded.'[17] In this thesis Gillan adds that there was resistance from pit families themselves to reducing children's labour, believing that anyone working in the pit had to acquire what they called 'pit-sense':

> He learned what the creaks and groans in the roof and props meant, he learned when to stay and when to run, he learned how to travel smoothly and quickly along the low roadways, he learned the trick of squatting on his haunches to relax ['ceawer deawn']. [...] The earlier a boy was introduced to the pit, the earlier he could begin. (p. 12)

So, the little trapper sets off eagerly to his first day at work:

'Aw put the bait-poke on at eight	[food bag]
Wi' sark and hoggers, like maw brothers;	[shirt and leggings]
Maw faither thinkin' aw meet steit	[might as well]
Ha'e day about alang wi' others.'[18]	[have a day]

Occupational learning was not to be found in manuals; it was handed down and painfully applied over time. Wilson is describing a developmental community bond as great or greater than family — you depended on your work partner, your 'marra' (the same term as applied to their wives) for safety underground. Miners and their families were considered isolated in their occupations by necessity of where and how they

[17] David J. Gillan, 'The Effect of Industrial Legislation on the Social and Educational Condition of Children Employed in Coal Mines between 1840 and 1876 with Special Reference to County Durham' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Durham, 1967), p. 6 <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/9803> [accessed 7 February 2025].

[18] Thomas Wilson, 'The Pitman's Pay', in *The Pitman's Pay*, pp. 1–64 (p. 23).

worked. A public education system that was unconnected to occupational education (or its language) had an even more isolating effect. As David Vincent explains, every apprentice was 'expected to be taught the "Art and Mystery" of his trade. [...] The unenclosed quality of the artisan's knowledge was a cause of both humility and pride'; every day might require fresh skill and new words.[19] 'By "mystery" was meant a corpus of knowledge which could not be codified, which was the property of the trade' — not for public consumption (pp. 107–08). Therefore, how Wilson writes about this *should not* be easily accessible. However, Wilson's pride in his pit village community is defined by the dialect and the glossary combined: if you want to know, he implies, you have to do some work. Writing about Virgil's 'interpretive instability' in the *Georgics*, Kimberly Johnson notes that 'it is our appointed labour, as readers, to work toward comprehension'.[20] Georgic writing requires georgic reading.

Further, Rod Hermeston notes the linguistic specificity of pitmen and 'keelmen', the Tyneside men in the fishing fleet. Other artisanal Tyneside ballads emphasize this: 'Pitmen and keelmen as sub-local groups are set apart.'[21] This exclusivity would have added to Wilson's pride in the 'mystery' of pit language; the 'satirical' songs performed about them in clubs and halls might even have given colliers 'pleasure in resistance [...] towards externally shaped discourses of what came to be termed "respectability"', although Wilson goes to some lengths to assure his readers of the pit families' acquired respectability through industry and improvement.[22] There is a dynamic relationship of language to group, as George Steiner discusses: 'language organizes experience', and vice versa; 'languages generate different social modes, different social modes further divide languages.'[23] Place-based pit families are likely to use additionally intricate local terms as a result of being *work*place based. The only comment Wilson makes in his preface on the dialect is that 'technical' terms are necessary in order to understand the means of production, and that if his general audience finds them uninteresting, the miners 'at least will acknowledge my details to be pretty accurate' (p. x).

However keen the little trapper-lad is to start work, he soon learns what it means to continue: trapping (tending the ventilation shafts) is one thing; 'putting' — getting the

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[19] David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 107.

[20] Kimberly Johnson, 'Introduction', in Virgil, *The Georgics: A Poem of the Land*, trans. and ed. by Kimberly Johnson (Penguin, 2010), pp. xi–xxii (pp. xxi–xxii).

[21] Rod Hermeston, 'Language, Differentiation and Convergence: The Shifting Ideologies of Tyneside Dialect Song in the Nineteenth Century', in *Dialect and Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Jane Hodson (Routledge, 2017), pp. 127–45 (p. 137).

[22] Ibid., p. 138.

[23] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 91.

coal to the surface — is another: 'all pullin', hawlin', pushin', drivin''.[24] Wilson notes that when he was in the mine, the 'plates' over which the 'trams' ran onto and off the rails were often of pine, which split; the rails themselves were wood, which warped and cracked:

> 'Aw mind a tram byeth waik and slaw,
> Just streen'd te rags te keep her gannin'
> Frae hingin'-on till howdy-maw, [start of day to the last corf — the 'howdy-maw']
> Ye hardly knew if gawn or stannin'.' (p. 29)

Wilson has good reason to praise the metal rails and plates, the use of 'pouther', gunpowder, rather than 'mell-an-wedge' work to bring down a section of the coal face. He is also well aware of the fires and floods that continued to affect the pits — possibly more likely with a less-than-skilful use of explosives. All disaster 'Myeks widows o' wor canny wives', but flood is terrifying for the pitman: 'And left frae help and hope shut in, | Te pine and parish in despair!' (p. 34). No other language can catch the terms of art or the boisterous behaviours of men and women at labour or in play with such affection, humour, and honesty, but the truth of labour is painful in the 1840s, as it was in the 1780s and in Virgil's day. Wilson's dialect tale is less positive than the preface before it: it is as though truth cannot hide in the pitman's language, where standard English glosses over the pain rather than increasing understanding.

There is also an underlying nostalgia, not for a golden age, rather an understanding that alongside the georgic ideal of 'improvement' comes an awareness of dislocation in more than a physical sense. Recreating his childhood in a mining community in the language he and his neighbours knew best gives Wilson an opportunity to entertain and commiserate while pointing to a future that might be better for individuals, but unsettling for the group. Wilson comments on the ability of 'steam' to run everything, which would result in them having 'nowt else te de' except maintain the engines. He adds 'aw's often flay'd te deed [scared to death] | They'll myek us eat and sleep by steam!' (p. 35).

Poetic memory can enclose pleasure, enabling a constant revisiting by the poet or their audience, dipping into solace. Pastoral retreat provides this comfort; it represents a top-down 'idealisation of stability', as Terry Gifford considers.[25] Georgic, on the other hand, often moves horizontally and faces several ways: the land is beautiful, restorative as well as productive, but work is unending, or worker and land suffer alike;

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[24] Wilson, p. 29.

[25] Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2nd edn, New Critical Idiom (Routledge, 2020), p. 20, doi:10.4324/9781315647920.

the shepherd cares for his lambs, but knows they will be killed. Instability is a georgic characteristic in a genre that purports to deal with the realities of labour, as work is always directed *towards* stability while never achieving it. Stability can also signify sterility: no decay, no seasonal change results in no life. Virgil illustrates the need to seize the day in work and leisure in Book II:

> A countryman cleaves the earth with his crooked plough. Such is the labour
> of his life. So he sustains his native land and those who follow
> in his footsteps, so he supports a team of oxen and keeps cattle in good order.
> All go and no let up — so that the seasons team with fruit,
> fields fill up with bullocks, and big arms of barley stand in stooks [...]
> The countryman observes his holidays by taking ease out in the fields
> with friends around a fire, garlands adorning goblets
> from which they'll drink to you, Bacchus, as he arranges contests and competitions.
> (II. 513–17, 527–29)

Virgil disturbs the pastoral idyll of bucolic poetry throughout the four books of the *Georgics* — you can, indeed, enjoy your days off, but only because you have a store full of grain, and animals in the fields: labour and leisure are companions. John Clare was especially skilled at turning around this trope in his poetry, seen most obviously in *The Village Minstrel* (1821). While *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) is more typical of the georgic style, in that it records in minute and cyclical detail every aspect of working village life, *The Village Minstrel* collection provides the full range of Clare's relationship with his poetic ambition as well as his labouring life.

Clare's intimate understanding of what it was to have little leisure feeds into his writing, attempting to recreate the pleasure he perceived in childhood in what he considered an unenclosed world. His life was far from solitary: 'Privacy costs money', write Simon Kövesi and Erin Lafford, pointing out that Clare was 'immensely clubbable and performative'.[26] He played the fiddle, noting down music from performances he heard as best he could, as well as collecting versions of popular ballads.[27] Lubin in 'The Village Minstrel' also collects songs and stories with which to enliven labour's leisure, many of which revolve around the seasonal activities, fairs, and holidays of the agricultural calendar. These reflect customary rights which Stephen Duck in *The Thresher's Labour* (1730) and, later, Robert Bloomfield in *The Farmer's Boy*

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[26] Simon Kövesi and Erin Lafford, 'Introduction', in *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies*, ed. by Simon Kövesi and Erin Lafford (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 1–16 (pp. 5, 4), doi:10.1007/978-3-030-43374-1.

[27] See George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (Sinclair Browne, 1983).

(1800) recognized were vanishing. Bloomfield writes of the fields as 'prisons', and asks (taking some risk in 1800), if this is so, then 'where is Liberty?'.[28] E. P. Thompson points to John Clare as a poet who understood 'customs' in all their forms. Viewed in this light, Thomas Wilson also used his local language and personal knowledge to illustrate the value of mining to the economy, the pride it aroused as well as the pain it caused in individuals and communities. Clare's language values connection, of place to person and human to nonhuman. His 'local idiom' is a reflection of '*plebian* speech' — that of the common — itself 'the sign of a certain kind of customary consciousness'.[29] Workers knew their labour's value and attempted to assert what rights they had in common and on commons. Thompson discusses the 'stubborn resistance' of land workers and their families, who could disrupt parliamentary enclosure with sustained aggravation, from 'mobbing surveyors' to outright arson, fence-breaking, and the destruction of records (p. 120). Clare was able to articulate what all labourers understood: 'There is an economy in which exchanges of services and favours remain significant, of which local features [...] are reminders.'[30] Local features include the vernacular language which can enact customary practices.

Poems, songs, and stories could be disseminated in working communities as printing became cheaper and easier, enabling readers to remember and respond to songs and games that made brief leisure a feature of labour. Thompson implies that one of the products of labour may, in fact, be leisure:

> A community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between 'work' and 'life'. Social intercourse and labour are intermingled — the working day lengthens or contracts according to the task — and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and 'passing the time of day'. (p. 358)

In 'The Village Minstrel' Clare turns labour into an interruption of the day's true purpose as, in Theresa Adams's words, 'a carnivalesque revision of georgic themes and attitudes',[31] in which Lubin, Clare's shy alter ego, acts as a roving reporter on every event: 'Much has he laugh'd each rude, rude act to see'.[32]

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[28] Robert Bloomfield, 'Autumn', in *The Farmer's Boy*, in *Selected Poems: Robert Bloomfield*, ed. by John Goodridge and John Lucas, rev and enlarged edn (Nottingham Trent, 2007), pp. 21–61 (pp. 42–51) (ll. 223, 226) <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/1100196/Robert-Bloomfield-Selected-Poems-eBook.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2025].

[29] E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (Penguin, 1993), pp. 181–82.

[30] Ibid., p. 181.

[31] Theresa Adams, 'Representing Rural Leisure: John Clare and the Politics of Popular Culture', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47.3 (2008), pp. 371–92 (p. 380) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25602154> [accessed 8 February 2025].

[32] John Clare, 'The Village Minstrel', in Clare, *The Village Minstrel and Other Poems*, 2 vols (Taylor and Hessey, 1821), I, pp. 1–64 (p. 28).

The ‘reversal’ of focus, as Adams notes, from labour to leisure in this poem is not quite what it seems, however, as every villager appears to have something to say about the work (p. 379). Lubin, like Clare, is ‘Bred in a village full of strife and noise’,

> Old senseless gossips, and blackguarding boys,
> Ploughmen and threshers; whose discourses led
> To nothing more than labour’s rude employs,
> ’Bout work being slack, and rise and fall of bread,
> And who were like to die, and who were like to wed. (p. 17)

While sensitive Lubin, almost Clare’s self-parody, appears to despise his fellow labourers for their shallowness, he cannot avoid them, or the main topics of conversation. There are the women keeping the fowls:

> How in the roost the thief had knav’d his way,
> And made their market-profits all a prey. (p. 18)

The Sunday churchgoer is no different:

> […] soon as service ends, he ’gins again
> ’Bout signs in weather, late or forward spring,
> Of prospects good or bad in growing grain. (p. 18)

Their minds are on their work and its outcomes; there is a marked labour-to-leisure balance here, in keeping with Thompson’s point that, in many rural communities where craft, house, and fieldwork had once occupied the whole community, ‘pastime’ had a much more concrete meaning — ‘passing the time of day’. In paid employment the situation was different. The worker’s time was owned by their employer, and time was calculated as value. In ‘The Pitman’s Pay’ Thomas Wilson notes how those ‘that sleep on beds o’ doon, | An’ niver Jack the Caller dreeden’ had no comprehension of how industry regulated every minute of labour (p. 33). Wilson is depicting a mining community of his childhood and leading his readers into appreciating ‘improvements’ by the 1830s; for many rural workers, improvements *reduced* their standards of living. The commons were sustainable for those who lived and worked by them, just not for landowners. In ‘Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters’, written in 1818 and unpublished in his lifetime, John Clare notes that the ‘greens and pastures […] | […] proffited before’ they were ploughed up,[33] and William Barnes goes into some detail regarding

[33] ‘The Lamentations of Round-Oak Waters’, in *Early Poems of John Clare*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 1989), I, pp. 228–34 (ll. 191–92).

how common land could benefit the cottager, with a cow and some geese that 'run out among the emmet hills',

> An' then when we da pluck em, we da get
> Zome veathers var to zell, an' quills;
> An' in the winter we da vat 'em well
> An' car 'em to the market var to zell.[34]

Then there's 'vuzz an' briars' to cut, and dried cow dung to bag up for burning; all these bringing in a few pennies to add to the farming families' income but, more importantly (and more alarmingly for nervous governments), establishing their independence. They have choices in their lives that Virgil's slaves did not, small though they are.

Barnes could make skilful use of the vigorous sounds of Dorset dialect that emphasize the distress felt by his speakers. In his 'Eclogues', which are more georgic than their pastoral forebears, Barnes writes as an observer, a commentator rather than an active participant in the fluctuating circumstances leading to loss of commons and loss of labour, unlike John Clare. The Dorset eclogues provide a unique record of agrarian change from the perspective of a man who knew both sides of impoverished rural life: his father had been a farm labourer; his uncle had suffered the loss of his small farm. Barnes had been able to avoid the consequences of rural deterioration through his abilities as a writer and teacher, running successful schools in Mere and Dorchester.[35] Yet his position as schoolmaster, and later rector at Came, gave him the best opportunity to see the effects of decline in the families he served. And service was his mission: he intended his poetry to serve his community as a lexicon of hope, a record of what was possible in local culture, a sensory depository, visual and aural, of 'homely' folk, especially for a wider community becoming gradually dislocated into urban anonymity.

One of Barnes's eclogues concerns the new threshing machines coming into Dorset farms, and subject to intermittent riots that included machine breaking and rick burning. 'Two Farms in Oone' contains the greatest dialect georgic understatement of any poem, including Hesiod's wry truculence and Virgil's anxious concern: 'times be badish var the poor'.[36] However, it also, possibly unwittingly, points up the paradox of georgic labour. In this poem, Barnes's personae, Thomas and Robert, discuss the reduction of farmsteads through amalgamation, thus reducing the numbers of

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[34] 'Eclogue: The Common A-Took In', in *The Complete Poems of William Barnes*, ed. by T. L. Burton and K. K. Ruthven, 2 vols (Oxford University Press, 2013–18), I (2013), pp. 120–22 (ll. 40–44), doi:10.1093/actrade/9780199567522.book.1.

[35] See Alan Chedzoy, *The People's Poet: William Barnes of Dorset* (History Press, 2010).

[36] Barnes, 'Eclogue: Two Farms in Oone', in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Burton and Ruthven, I, pp. 122–24 (l. 53).

farmhands. More alarming was reduction through mechanization, although these Dorset workers were at the end of a slow line of increased reliance on machines that had spread from Scotland over some fifty years:

> Why here wer voorteen men, zome years agoo
> A-kept a-drashèn hafe the winter droo.
> An' now, oon's drashels be'n't a bit o' good.
> Tha got machines to drashy wi', plague tiake 'em:
> An' he that vust vound out the woy to miake 'em:
> I'd drash his busy zides var'n, if I cood. (ll. 45–50)

The force of repeated plosives, consonants, and sibilants illustrate the hissing, grinding fury of a man who knows his job is on the line, and although Barnes never recommended direct action, his sympathy with the foundered families is obvious. It can be made more manifest, more audible in dialect, and Barnes can use a 'homely' mask to project his and the community's distress without attracting any personal censure as a new member of Dorset's rising middle class. 'Drash' is repeated with force and in different syntactical forms in four lines out of the above six, and takes on the character of an expletive, already sounding, in fact, more physically aggressive than 'thresh'. Yet, the paradox is never explored — threshing was the most hated of farm work, the only work to continue when other farm labours might have some respite — surely mechanization represented progress for farming, as it did for mining? In the 1960s George Ewart Evans quoted a Suffolk farmworker who 'had no two thoughts about it: "Threshing was real, downright slavery."'[37] However, for Dorset farmworkers, already some of the worst paid English labourers, even the 'slavery' of threshing was better than the workhouse.

Barnes regularly incorporates celebratory farm work into his poetry, especially in his early poems: the 1844 edition itself divided in georgic fashion into the four seasons. Under 'Fall', he addresses the strenuous, yet satisfying task of bringing in the grain in 'A-Halèn Carn':

> The hosses, wi' the het an' luoad,
> Did froth, an' zwang vrom zide to zide,
> A-gwâin along the dousty road,
> That I miade sure tha wou'd a-died.

[37] George Ewart Evans, *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* (Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 96.

An' wi' my collar al undone,
An' neck a-burnen wi' the zun,
I got, wi' work an' doust, an' het,
So dry at laste, I cooden spet,
A-halèn carn.[38]

Like Clare, Barnes weaves leisure into labour, and the fun and games are similarly boisterous and potentially painful. The farm boy begs some apples from his uncle's orchard to sooth his thirst, but Poll, 'a sassy wench',

Toss'd auver hedge some grabs var fun [crab apples]
I squail'd her, though; an' miade her run. [threw stones at her] (ll. 22–24)

Barnes is particularly clear in his poems about what tools and skills are necessary for a rural worker — in haymaking, for example, tedding, pitching, forming 'wiales' or ridges, and 'pooks' (haycocks). He comments on rural skills in the *Dorset County Chronicle*: 'A London apprentice should not laugh at a rustic because he cannot dance a quadrille [...] since he of the town knows nothing of crops, cattle and the correctives of soil.'[39]

Celebration of labouring skills also feature prominently with Lancashire and Yorkshire weaving poets, who take a similarly active interest in the people who exhibit them. Ben Brierley, in 'The Weaver of Wellbrook' (1863), mimics the loom's rhythm in his repeated chorus:

Wi' mi pickers an' pins,
An' mi wellers to th' shins;
Mi linderins, shuttle and yealdhook; —
Mi treddles an' sticks,
Mi weight ropes an' bricks; —
What a life! — said the wayver o' Wellbrook.[40]

[38] 'A-Halèn Carn', in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Burton and Ruthven, I, pp. 99–100 (ll. 10–18).

[39] Barnes, in a note to 'Eclogue: The Best Man in the Vield', first published in the *Dorset County Chronicle*, 1834, in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Burton and Ruthven, I, p. 348.

[40] Ben Brierley, 'The Weaver of Wellbrook', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, p. 19. 'Linderlins' were 'ropes put round the beams when the fabric is nearly finished'; a 'yealdhook' is a 'hook for the wires which keep the warp threads separated' (p. 131).

These are tools used by the handloom weaver — working from home, where he has his 'quiet heawse nook' with his wife and children, for him the ideal working family life (p. 19). Brierley, a Manchester printer and originally from a weaving community, was better known for his prose, yet here his memory of the patterns and terms of art of weaving give real weight to the verse. John Trafford Clegg, another weaving printer, celebrates the weaving shed itself in 'A Weighver's Song' (1890) that emphasizes the pride of producing good cloth in all seasons:

> Clattherin loom an' whirlin wheel,
> Flyin' shuttle an' steady reed —
> This is wark to make a mon feel
> There's wur jobs nor weighvin i' time o' need.[41]

Brian Hollingworth adds that 'this lively poem captures more fully than any other an aspect of work in the mills which is not so often emphasized — the enjoyment and the sense of mastery which it sometimes gave' (p. 144). Clegg is willing to dismiss the lung-infesting cotton dust as all part of the mix:

> Tidy skips runnin o'er wi weft,
> Snowy cloth windin on to th' byem —
> Take a good sniff o' th' flyon drift
> It's clay an' dust, an' we're nobbut th' same. (p. 90)

Sadly, Clegg died from tuberculosis aged only 37, and it is tempting to wonder if the sheds were more aggravating than he allowed.

It would be short-sighted to ignore the amounts of dialect poetry that were angry, disaffected, and protesting from poverty-blighted workers at all levels during this period, especially during the 1860s Cotton Famine caused by a mixture of a glut in the market and the American Civil War blockade. Moreover, the need to produce ever more and poorer quality cloth for reduced wages was dismaying weaving communities — no one was immune to ill fortune and hard labour, as Hesiod and Virgil had pointed out. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod, who rarely allows any brightness in the worker's day, says there should be time to 'give your men a break and unhitch your team';[42] Joseph Ramsbottom urges 'Jenny' to 'lyev thi loom':

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[41] John Trafford Clegg, 'A Weighver's Song', in *Songs of the People*, ed. by Hollingworth, pp. 90–91 (p. 90).

[42] Hesiod, 'Works and Days', in *Works and Days, Theogony*, trans. by Stanley Lombardo, intr. by Robert Lamberton (Hackett, 1993), pp. 23–60 (l. 673).

Fling thi clogs an brat aside; [apron]
Let thi treddles rest to-day;
Tee thi napkin o'er thi yead;
Don thi shoon an' come away.[43]

Jenny is not given a voice in 'Coaxin'', and there is almost no dialect poetry written by women that directly addresses working terms of art. Most work-related poetry by women speaks to loss of income, home conditions, or poverty and sickness of children, and not to the technicalities of trades. Indeed, Susan Zlotnick has commented on the extreme 'conservatism' of dialect writing: 'it is a class-based literature that consistently denies working women their class identity by refusing to recognize them as laborers', she argues.[44] There are many working-class women writers, and some of them write in dialect, but not to the same themes as men. In fact, writing about labour at all was difficult, because so much of their daily work was ignored by the men around them, as Mary Collier had noted in *The Woman's Labour* (1739): 'when we Home are come, | Alas! we find our Work but just begun'.[45] Ellen Johnston's 'Factory Girl' is an exception in terms of commending the mill if it continues to give her security, even while she was determined to write her way to a better life. In her 'Lines' addressed to 'James Dorward, Power-loom Foreman' at Chapelside Works, Dundee, she praises the support she received there in Scots dialect — but it is not about the work itself.[46] Women were more likely to use their dialects to applaud the men or to complain about their abuse from men, often as a result of drunkenness. Laundry is a common work-subject for women writers; men carefully avoid washing days but expect constant clean linen — and food, as Jessie Russell says, in her gentle Scots:

What has she tae dae?
She maun hae the hoose in order
And his supper tae.[47]

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[43] Joseph Ramsbottom, 'Coaxin'', *Country Words: A North of England Magazine of Literature, Science and Art*, 17 November 1866, p. 25.

[44] Susan Zlotnick, '"A thousand times I'd be a factory girl": Dialect, Domesticity, and Working-Class Women's Poetry in Victorian Britain', *Victorian Studies*, 35.1 (1991), pp. 7–27 (p. 8) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3827762> [accessed 8 February 2025].

[45] Mary Collier, 'The Woman's Labour', in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by David Fairer and Christine Gerrard, 2nd edn (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 268–73 (ll. 105–06).

[46] Ellen Johnston, 'Lines', in *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets 1800–1900*, ed. by Goodridge and others, III: *1860–1900*, ed. by John Goodridge, pp. 114–15.

[47] Jessie Russell, 'Washing Day', in *Nineteenth-Century English Labouring-Class Poets 1800–1900*, ed. by Goodridge and others, III, pp. 298–99 (ll. 18–20).

Zlotnick notes how 'dialect literature reconceived housework not only as "not work," but as one of woman's [...] natural functions, like breathing and childbearing' (p. 13). Virgil's poem has just one winter section in which the woman is recognized as part of the team, matching many rural weavers in England before mechanization, when they might have a vegetable plot, a pig, and a cow, Cobbett's ideal cottager:

> There's a certain sort of man who by winter firelight
> stays up all night edging iron implements.
> And all the while, with soothing songs lightening the load of her routine,
> his helpmeet runs across her loom her rattling reed,
> and in the hearth a flame reduces the sweet-scented must,
> its bubbles simmering in a pot she skims with brush-strokes of broad leaves.
> (I. 290–96)

The absence of women's voices using dialect terms of art tells us as much about the status of work as it does of women — men's labour was always worth more than women's, certainly in a georgic context. Although some working-class women writers took on their male counterparts, as did Mary Collier, in direct assertions of their skill and lack of recognition, this was mostly achieved in standard English. However, working-class women's ability to interrogate georgic, even without Hesiod and Virgil, is not in doubt. Mary Leapor's 'Crumble-Hall' (1751), published posthumously, details the wasted opportunities of fading English country homes from the maid's viewpoint, leading her audience through the dilapidated house.[48] Though not in dialect, it resists some of the expectations of establishment English poetics in the early 1700s, subverting their structures and neoclassical tropes in a witty and robust English. Leapor had been a kitchen maid before returning home to Brackley in Northamptonshire to care for her father, Philip Leapor, who was a nurseryman and gardener, so Mary had good knowledge of exterior as well as interior changes to country estates. Leapor's humorous condemnation of fashions attached to the greed and incompetence of many landowners exposes the shabby decay of both the estate and the labourers' standards, now they can no longer rely on their work being valued, nor their customary rights respected. Leapor is satirizing the early eighteenth-century trend for redesigning georgic landscapes into an often uncomfortable mix of pastoral bowers and bleak 'parks'. 'The important thing was to show the English countryside to advantage', writes Roger Turner of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, but, in reality, creating a giant pleasure ground 'shut off the landowner from the activity of

[48] Mary Leapor, 'Crumble-Hall', in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Fairer and Gerrard, pp. 322–26.

the larger community and masked the exploitation of the land and labor', as Jeannie Dalporto writes in her discussion of 'Crumble-Hall'.[49] The poem is structurally and thematically dizzying, climbing onto the roof in order to survey the productive fields, then plunging down into the kitchen to witness a parody of classical romance, as Ursula the cook bemoans Roger, her partner, snoring his working time away after consuming too much of the dinner prepared for their master.

The poem's curious structure mirrors the topsy-turvy world of a house where there is little respect for hierarchy or stewardship any longer. For the inhabitants of Crumble-Hall, that supreme georgic virtue of reciprocity has slipped away with 'improvement'. The most telling detail, and one in which the terms of art are deployed by a poet who understood the worth of her work and that of her community, is found in a disused room, a store of farm tools:

> Old shoes, and Sheep-ticks bred in Stacks of Wool;
> Grey *Dobbin*'s gears, and Drenching-Horns enow;
> Wheel-spokes — the Irons of a tatter'd Plough. (ll. 99–101)

These should be in the fields, not discarded. A 'tatter'd Plough' symbolizes the broken relationship between labour and landowner, and between human and nonhuman — even wool has lost its value, allowed to become a breeding ground for ticks, at a period when the wool trade was a major part of Britain's economy.

Leapor's list of abandoned tools are metonymic terms of art that stand in for agricultural labour and georgic stewardship devalued, written at the start of a vibrant period for the georgic genre and a grim one for many rural and urban labourers, increasingly constrained by complex environmental and legal bounds. In many ways, though, as these poets demonstrate, getting their voices heard, represented in print, and recognized by at least some who understood the background to labouring lives became somewhat easier with better access to writing skills alongside new tools of printing and communication. 'Language is part of the cultural capital of individuals and societies', writes Alwin Fill, 'but language is also an economic factor of extremely high significance.'[50] Economic factors drove poetic as well as hands-on labour. Because 'languages serve to identify speakers' and some 'homely' writers were becoming part of local and national establishments (Ben Brierley became

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[49] Roger Turner, *Capability Brown and the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape*, 2nd edn (Phillimore, 1999), p. 19; Jeannie Dalporto, 'Landscape, Labor, and the Ideology of Improvement in Mary Leapor's "Crumble-Hall"', *Eighteenth Century*, 42.3 (2001), pp. 228–44 (p. 232) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41467881> [accessed 8 February 2025].

[50] Alwin F. Fill, 'The Economy of Language Ecology: Economic Aspects of Minority Languages', in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*, ed. by Fill and Penz, pp. 56–72 (p. 56).

a Manchester councillor), so regional idioms and dialect were represented more in established literary circles — Tennyson began writing his Lincolnshire dialect poems at the peak of the Cotton Famine poets' popularity in the early 1860s.[51] On the other hand, economic need, the benefits of printing and communication, and inflexible elementary education led to the decline of dialect writing. Standard English was, as Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas have argued, 'the language of progress, modernity and national unity', the georgic imperative; although, as I have elsewhere noted, for many 'self-taught' writers 'local *and* standard languages helped to create his or her sense of identity'.[52]

The *Georgics* describe working relationships, crafts, tools, and environments, Virgil's lyricism combining fantastic tales, horror, enthusiasm, and detailed information to generate a world view that continues to inspire readers. It is a paradox, composed by one of Rome's elite, about relentless, earth-grubbing labour. In the poems examined here, dialect fuses georgic abundance with pragmatic knowledge, linking work and home because it was the intimate language of connection between domestic security and labour. Some of the best-known dialect writers moved away from their working origins, whether farm labouring, weaving, or coal mining, yet they rarely moved far from their language 'home'.

[51] Ibid., p. 58.

[52] Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, p. 123; Edney, 'Printed Voices', p. 75, emphasis in original.