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Abstract

As a genre, the eighteenth-century georgic poem seems to embody a compromise between the creative and the critical. Not only is it a conscious imitation of a specific literary text (Virgil's *Georgics*), but it grounds itself in the critical impulse: it offers judgments, gives advice, discriminates between right and wrong methods, and investigates questions of use and value. It has a duty to be both descriptive and didactic. In combining exact observation with specific recommendation, the georgic is conscious of the critical nature of its text. When John Dyer, in *The Fleece* (1757), offers advice on how to spot liver-rot in sheep, it is important that his facts are correct:

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That dire distemper, sometimes may the swain,
Tho' late, discern; when on the lifted lid,
Or visual orb, the turgid veins are pale,
The swelling liver then her putrid store
Begins to drink: ev'n yet thy skill exert,
Nor suffer weak despair to fold thy arms. (I, 266–71)

At this critical moment, as John Goodridge notes, the poet takes the role of veterinary surgeon, 'standing aside the animal to lift the eyelid; pointing to the pallor of the blood vessels, explaining how the disease swells the liver and advising the shepherd with the kind of confidence only doctors and vets can muster, not to panic' (Goodridge 147). *Ev'n yet thy skill exert* — some of the key words in georgic are *skill*, *art*, and *care*, and in this the poet has to set a practical example, taking care in his turn to find a tone and vocabulary that will do justice to the topic and simultaneously entertain and inform the reader. The emphasis is on responsible art rather than creativity. The poetry's inventiveness must not invalidate the information. When in his *Lives of the Poets* Dr Johnson came to discuss *Cyder* (1708), John Philips's poem on apple-growing, he handed over to someone who could speak with more authority than himself: 'It is grounded in truth', Johnson wrote, 'the precepts which it contains are exact and just.... This I was told by Miller, the great gardener and botanist, whose expression was, that "there were many books written on the same subject in prose, which do not contain so much truth as that poem"' (Hill I, 319). With the georgic, it seems, the best reviewer is the one who will dirty its pages.

But how can this kind of critical demand result in anything other than poetic compromise? The georgic poet is bound up with stubborn fact (what has been or

should be done, where, and how) in ways that a creative genius might find irksome. In assuming the additional role of botanist, farmer, geographer, economist, or doctor, the poet becomes inevitably ‘tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things’. This is Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry*, describing the ‘historian’, his anti-poet figure who is ‘captived to the truth of a foolish world’. ‘The poet’, Sidney pointedly adds, ‘delivers a golden’ (Sidney 107, 111, 100).

Trapped between the pragmatic critic and the idealist critic, the georgic poet seems forced to compromise between *praxis* and *poesis*. The situation is made worse by the fact that Virgil triumphed over these twin demands. During the eighteenth century Joseph Addison’s 1697 tribute to the original *Georgics* was forever being quoted: ‘[Virgil] delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur; he breaks the clods and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulness’ (Addison II, 9). It is Addison’s most famous critical pronouncement, yet even here there is a patronising smile. The poet may be stylish, but he is still performing a menial task. It is an unavoidably mock-heroic picture.

One poet who was keenly aware of the problem was James Grainger (?1725–66), author of *The Sugar-Cane* (1764), a four-book georgic on Caribbean sugar production. Grainger was a British army surgeon who travelled to the island of St Kitts in 1759, married, and settled there as a physician. In true Virgilian style the poem includes passages on the depredations and diseases that affect the crop — but with a related account of the illnesses of the slaves who tend and harvest it. In his preface, Grainger admits that as a poet and a doctor he has a divided responsibility, and he even proposes that two separate critical criteria should apply to his work:

In a West-India georgic, the mention of many indigenous remedies, as well as diseases, was unavoidable. The truth is, I have rather courted opportunities of this nature, than avoided them. Medicines of such amazing efficacy, as I have had occasion to make trials of in these islands, deserve to be universally known. And wherever, in the following poem, I recommend any such, I beg leave to be understood as a physician, and not as a poet. (Gilmore 90)

It is a remarkable pronouncement, and seems to mark out a faultline between Grainger’s creative and critical intentions. Given this statement, his poem offers itself as a test-case for asking if there is a fundamental divide running through the georgic, a split loyalty to two sets of readers. Is the georgic poet compromised by trying to play two roles, and failing in both? Grainger’s preface inclines us to expect the answer ‘yes’; but taking his *Sugar-Cane* as the focus, I want to argue that it was under pressure from these constraints that eighteenth-century georgic developed its own characteristic poetic language, and that to appreciate its qualities it is useful to keep the creative/critical distinction in mind. We need to think of them not as a binary, but as forming an intriguing mix of ingredients in a genre that values the principle of mixture itself. Throughout its history the

georgic poem plays with Addison's image of graceful dung-tossing, indeed such dirty elegance becomes georgic's badge of pride in its ability to mingle high and low.

The Sugar-Cane has recently returned to prominence through John Gilmore's edition and study of the poem, and Thomas Krise's inclusion of it in his *Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies, 1657-1777*, a volume that elicited an uneasy review by Derek Walcott ('A Frowsty Fragrance'). Walcott raises the issue of the problematic relationship between the western European literary tradition and the colonial West Indies, one that is centred on language and history. For Walcott, the material in the anthology, of which *The Sugar-Cane* forms a substantial part, represents an unwanted legacy of documents. A dead history has been retrieved to stand in for a lost spirit. In place of the smells, sounds and rhythms of the cane-fields, captured in Walcott's hauntingly lyrical prose, there is a lifeless, imported archival language: 'Not one of these pieces can claim to be art', he writes, 'but they are certainly history, and if they are virtually worthless as art, as literature, our instinct to preserve them simply because they exist is the wrong instinct' (61). This is not the heritage a contemporary West Indian poet like Walcott needs:

With Misnian arsenic, deleterious bane,
Pound up the ripe cassada's well-rasp'd root,
And form in pellets; these profusely spread
Round the Cane-groves, where skulk the vermin-breed:
They, greedy, and unweeting of the bait,
Crowd to the inviting cates, and swift devour
Their palatable Death; for soon they seek
The neighbouring spring; and drink, and swell, and die. (II, 83-90)

Grainger's advice on rat-control would seem more appropriate in booklet form. Walcott's review quotes the passage for its curiosity value only to shoulder it aside with the briefest comment about 'all those bloated carcasses of "the vermin-breed," meaning heaps of dead rats' (60). On a first reading the lines may appear embarrassingly bad, but they are artful ones, and their art is of the kind that knows when not to talk about 'heaps of dead rats'. Visualisation is not the purpose here, and the things that 'skulk' amongst the cane are very much alive. This art knows where vermin breed, and that 'breed' has an unsettling activity, unlike the more endearing and familial 'brood'. The planter is given specific details of materials, tools and processes: the best imported German arsenic (from Meissen) mixes with the staple local food; the root of the ripe cassava is thoroughly scraped and shaved with a rasp before pounding. Poison runs through the passage, and the poet understands how it works deceptively in the tricks and trickles of language: the tautology 'deleterious bane' is a suspicious concoction of Greek and Germanic. We register the temptation of the banquet 'profusely spread' with 'inviting cates' ('delicacies'), and we sense its quickening allure as the vermin

‘sculk’, then ‘crowd’, then ‘swift devour’. It is important that the bait is ‘palatable’, but the word ‘food’ is properly withheld (this is luxury, not necessity); instead ‘palatable Death’ makes an exquisite oxymoron. From that moment ‘the neighbouring spring’ lets nature take its course, and the final three stages are efficiently dispatched: ‘and drink, and swell, and die’. It is a poisonous passage, and it reveals its tricks. The end product may be ‘heaps of dead rats’, but it is the process that interests Grainger. This is the kind of poetry that has work to do, and everything must justify its presence. Each word in those eight lines has a specific function. There is no room for luxury, for poetic delicacies that don’t contribute.

The passage is in this sense economic, even thrifty, and there is a critical decorum in the way the poem repeatedly observes its own criteria of good management. But alongside this constraining element there is a more creative impulse at work in Grainger’s fascination with the idea of mixture — how different elements or ingredients can be made to work together effectively. This is of obvious interest to an experimentally-minded physician, but it is also a concern of the eighteenth-century georgic, which on the Virgilian model celebrates appropriate mixing and adding. Two of its characteristic images are engrafting and manuring, both of them organic processes that bring new growth out of the old. ‘In plants, in beasts, in man’s imperial race’, Grainger writes, ‘An alien mixture meliorates the breed’ (I, 458–59). He seems to enjoy the idea that the ‘alien’ can bring improved strength and vigour. He also relishes his power to remind the ‘imperial race’ that it is subject to the processes of nature. He continues: ‘Hence Canes, that sickened dwarfish on the plain, / Will shoot with giant-vigour on the hill’ (I, 460–61). Everything has potential for growth, given the right conditions, just as it is bound to decay if it cannot adapt to its surroundings. ‘Britain, remember this important truth’, he adds in a pointed parenthesis (I, 464).

In *The Sugar-Cane* Grainger’s mixtures are a continual reminder that nothing exists in a perfect self-sufficiency. The eco-system of a georgic poem is a dynamic one in which adding, adapting, and mixing all play an important role, and imported skills respect local conditions. As a genre it exploits traditional wisdom, but combines it with a degree of practical curiosity. At such moments experience must make room for experiment — ‘Trials must decide’, Grainger concludes over one knotty point (I, 246). Both the raw materials of nature and the processes of art can benefit from new combinations and fresh directions. The soil in which the sugar-cane flourishes most is a mixed one (‘the dark deep mould, / With clay or gravel mix’d’ [I, 127–28]), but human skill can also ‘tutor’ other soils by artful experiment:

Say, shall the experienc’d Muse that art recite?
 How sand will fertilize stiff barren clay?
 How clay unites the light, the porous mould,

Sport of each breeze? And how the torpid nymph
 Of the rank pool, so noisome to the smell,
 May be solicited, by wily ways,
 To draw her humid train, and, prattling, run
 Down the reviving slopes? (I, 141–48)

Once again Grainger's poetry is working under a self-imposed critical pressure (his 'experienc'd Muse' functions less as inspiration than as an advisory editor). This is where the interest of the passage lies. It is about struggling with difficult materials and making them workable. To release the stiffness of the clay is as important as getting the sand to cohere, and an appropriate mixture will unlock their potential. This move into fresh activity is enacted in the final sentence with the draining of the stagnant pool. We are given a glimpse of a miniature Ovidian metamorphosis, one that is appropriately coy and playful while remaining within the responsibilities the passage has set for itself. The phrase 'run down the reviving slopes' is effectively animated without losing its literal truth. In these eight lines Grainger's poetic language of earth, air, and water, is consciously operating in terms of constraint and potential. It is acting out its acknowledgment of the persistent georgic theme of organising its resources effectively.

As with all georgics, such organisation is both the subject of the poem, and its responsibility. The genre shuns hierarchical models, and values things for their usefulness, whether it is Christopher Smart in *The Hop-Garden* (1752) advising on how to look after the hop-poles during the winter (their supporting role is vital), or Virgil himself discussing what tools are appropriate for different tasks — and when to use your fingernails (II, 365–66). The critical emphasis is on practical application. Nothing is too low or grubby for use. It is one of the refreshing aspects of georgic that dung can be called dung, and a spade a spade (Smart, in fact, carefully distinguishes the tasks suited to the spade and the shovel). These poets were not linguistically squeamish, and Addison's embarrassment in 1697 at low vocabulary proved less a warning than a challenge to the poets (he was also wide of the mark: dung was 'dung' for Virgil too — or rather *fimus* was *fimus*). For James Grainger, good husbandry means getting to know the character of the local soils, and what type of manure will improve them: 'Record the different composts' (I, 151), he urges the planters. He calls on them to get their hands dirty and build up the fertility of their soil. His own poem sets the pattern, and Grainger is refreshingly clear about the fact that he is not writing *Paradise Lost*: 'Of composts shall the Muse descend to sing, / Nor soil her heavenly plumes?' (I, 218–19) he asks with a wry smile, inviting the reader to recall that in Milton's epic the Fall introduces the decay into Paradise (IX 893). In the organic world of *The Sugar-Cane* even sordid decay can be profitably incorporated:

Then, Planter, wouldst thou double thine estate;
 Never, ah never, be asham'd to tread

Thy dung-heaps, where the refuse of thy mills,
 With all the ashes, all thy coppers yield,
 With weeds, mould, dung, and stale, a compost form,
 Of force to fertilize the poorest soil. (I, 222–27)

Georgic language of this kind is deliberately unpromising, as if it is resisting any superficial poetic appeal. ‘With weeds, mould, dung, and stale, a compost form.’ If this is onomatopoeia, then its heavy monosyllabic tread emphasises the compactness of the mixture and its unprepossessing jumbled qualities. The poetry seems to be acting out how rejected materials can be turned to use. The emphasis is thus on reclamation rather than creativity; but in georgic the two things are not mutually exclusive. In georgic things are grown, shaped, or constructed, and the creativity comes from understanding how materials can be exploited. At every moment of a georgic poem we are given to know that a mere ‘creative’ impulse is not enough: things do not get made like that. The ‘creation’ of sugar depends on a complex organisation of materials and processes (which includes spreading dung and killing rats). It does not come into being without time, thought, and effort. The world of achieved beauty, of the ripening cane hissing on the mountain-side, and the mingled salty sweetness of the air, is a contingent one, the retail end of tough business, poetry’s shop-window. The georgic has an investment in the production-line, and with this agenda it works to guide, advise, and exemplify. In this way its creative elements are bound into a critical impulse.

A keen generic awareness is part of its critical self-consciousness. Georgic poetry deliberately seeks out the odd and the awkward, because one of its themes is the recalcitrance of the material world. Nature provides the raw materials, and its energies are there to be harnessed; but it is just as capable of retarding human endeavour as of forwarding it. Individual labour and skill must never flag in a world where ‘everything by nature’s law / Tends to the worse, slips ever backward, backward’ (Virgil, *Georgics*, I, 199–200). The physical dynamics of the georgic work against a universal tendency to dispersal, decay, and loss. The original founding text of georgic, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (8th c BC), is premised on the bleakness of an age of iron, in which everything has to be worked for: ‘Countless troubles roam among men: full of ills is the earth, and full the sea. Sickesses visit men by day, and others by night, uninvited, bringing ill to mortals’ (*Works and Days* ll. 102–104).

It is in this context of georgic’s fallen world that Grainger gives a full account in Book IV of the workforce of slaves. For a twenty-first-century reader it is the most uncomfortable aspect of the poem; but it is so because Grainger is interested in them, and values them. Had he ignored them, generalised about them, or sentimentalised them, the reader could be less uneasy. In *The Sugar-Cane* they do not function as picturesque atmosphere, because, as we have seen, the poem has little time for atmosphere. In the context of this essay on the critical constraints with which the georgic creatively works, the slaves play a significant and thought-

provoking role. The poem, as much as the estate, has an investment in them. It would be simplistic to single out those passages where Grainger expresses his liberal sentiments (his plea for abolition, his insistence on the slaves' full humanity, and so forth), though these need to be mentioned. What is most striking about his text, however, is the degree to which the slaves are subject to the same critical eye that registers everything else in its sights. In various ways they function in the poem as a crop, and the effect of this is not to dehumanise them, but to acknowledge their needs and their specific propensities. Grainger applies as much critical rigour to the 'blacks' as he does to the other important materials of his poem. As a vital part of its economy, they are given detailed attention and are a topic for advice and specific recommendations. The African slaves are differentiated by their various tribal sources; they are assessed for their particular qualities and aptitudes; thought is given as to how they should be worked, and how they should be cared for. Like the cane, they need appropriate nourishment and conditions in which they can remain healthy. As a doctor, Grainger is especially concerned to advise on the slaves' illnesses:

Say, shall the muse the various ill's recount,
Which Negroe-nations feel? Shall she describe
The worm that subtly winds into their flesh,
All as they bathe them in their native streams?
There, with fell increment, it soon attains
A direful length of harm. Yet, if due skill,
And proper circumspection are employed,
It may be won its volumes to wind round
A leaden cylinder: But, O, beware,
No rashness practise; else 'twill surely snap. (IV, 244–53)

Here is another careful job for Grainger's 'experienc'd Muse'. As we have seen elsewhere, Grainger appreciates working to an agenda, and here the keynotes are set by subtlety, 'skill', and 'circumspection'. The Guinea-worm, as Gilmore's helpful note (296–97) explains, grows up to three feet in length and needs patient handling: 'winding a very little of it at a time around a thin stick or similar object, remains the only treatment; complete removal of the worm can take weeks or months'. Grainger's worm is an evil as insinuating as Milton's serpent, and the vocabulary ('fell', 'direful') acknowledges this. The poet resists the word 'grow' as being too easy and natural, and chooses instead to make the idea an impersonal and invasive one: 'fell increment' and 'attains a direful length' allow the inhuman enemy to establish itself. Once its subtle winding-in is done, Grainger can skilfully negotiate his benign winding-out. After that, his last warning 'snap' is all the more effective. In this kind of poetry there is no easy appeal to 'Nature', whether as celebrating a harmonious universal system or reaching for pleasing pastoral images. *The Sugar-Cane* is definitely not a 'pastoral of the sugar estate' (Walcott 57) with its implication of sepia-toned innocence, but a working georgic

that is committed to that genre's practical concerns. As a georgic poet rather than a pastoralist, Grainger works his own language hard and deliberately (ease would be out of place here), and he binds its creative potential into a critical activity.

Grainger's *Sugar-Cane* deserves to have an honourable place as an early achievement of Caribbean literature, and it does so because it is a responsible poem with a genuine artistic conscience. It is not visionary or lyrical, nor is it concerned to evoke the spirit of its place and time. Instead, like Sidney's historian, it ties itself to embodied experience, to 'the particular truth of things'. It is this grim, recalcitrant, archival history that Derek Walcott would wish to excise from the record, and Grainger's 'negligible' document with it. For Walcott, 'History has no reality until it turns to fiction' (60); but alongside the modern poet's 'clear dream of the present' there ought to lurk somewhere Dr Grainger's difficult georgic history. *The Sugar-Cane* is indeed 'without the oceanic rustle, smell, and freshness of real fields' (60), but Grainger would not have scorned 'a frowsty fragrance', a phrase that catches exactly the creative-critical mixture of the georgic. In fact, he would probably have used it himself, adding a footnote reference to John Philips's observation that: 'the Pæstan Rose unfolds / Her Bud, more lovely, near the fetid Leek' (*Cyder*, 1, 254–55).

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