

## FIVE ASPECTS OF GEORGIC: CRUCIAL VIRGILIAN PASSAGES “ENGLISHED”

### Work Ethic V 1.121-146 “labor omnia vicit”

Th’ eternal sire, immutably decreed,  
That tillage should with toil alone succeed,  
With cares he rous’d,\* and sharpen’d human hearts,  
Bright’ning the rust of indolence by arts.  
Ere Jove had reign’d, no swains subdu’d the ground,  
Unknown was property, unjust the mound;  
At will they rov’d; and earth spontaneous bore,  
Unask’d, and uncompell’d a bounteous store . . .  
*[Jove ended Golden Age, put venom in viper, etc]*

.....  
That studious want might useful arts contrive;  
From planted furrows fruitful corn derive

.....  
Then all those arts that polish life succeed;  
What cannot ceaseless toil, and pressing need!

\*This account of the providential usefulness of some seeming evils, is not only beautifully poetical, but strictly philosophical. Want is the origin of arts: Infirmities and weaknesses are the cause and cement of human society. If man were perfect and self-sufficient all the efforts of industry would be useless. A dead calm would reign over all species.

‘Wants, frailties, passions, closer still ally

‘The common int’rest, and endear the tye;

Says the great moral poet in his *Essay on Man*. And this doctrine is strongly illustrated throughout that whole system

--J. Warton, 1753 [C18 “improvement” lens]



### “Spread the Dung about with an air of gracefulness”

But sweet Vicissitudes of Rest and Toyl  
Make easy Labour, and renew the Soil.  
Yet sprinkle sordid Ashes all around,  
And load with fat’nin Dung thy fallow Ground.  
Thus change of Seeds for meager Soils is best;  
And Earth manur’d, not idle, though at rest.

--Dryden, 1697 [*also: Poet’s & Ploughman’s Cares*]

### Contentment V 2. [also Hor. Ep. 2, *Beatus ille*]

Happy the Man, I grant, thrice happy he  
Who can through gross effect their causes see:  
Whose courage from the deeps of knowledge springs,  
Nor vainly fears inevitable things;  
But does his walk of virtue calmly go,  
Through all th’allarms of Death and Hell below.  
Happy! But next such Conquerors, happy they,  
Whose humble Life lies not in fortune’s way.

.....  
*[contrast with strife—military, legal, maritime, etc]*

Mean while the prudent Husbandman is found,  
In mutual duties striving with the ground,  
And half the year he care of that does take,  
That half the year grateful return does make.  
Each fertil moneth does some new gifts present,  
And with new work his industry content.

--Cowley, 1656, essay “Of Agriculture”

[mixed verse and prose, classical & modern]

### “Cultivated with his daily care” V 4.

With his own hand, the Guardian of the Bees,  
For Slips of Pines, may search the Mountain Trees:  
And with wild Thyme and Sav’ry, plant the Plain,  
‘Till his hard horny Fingers ake with Pain:  
And deck with fruitful Trees the Fields around,  
And with refreshing Waters drench the Ground.

--Dryden, 1697

### Poetic Fame, Imperial Glory V.4.559-566

Thus have I sung the nature of the bee  
While Caesar towering to divinity,  
The frighted Indians with his thunder awed,  
And claimed their homage and commenced a god.  
I flourished all the while in arts of peace,  
Retired and sheltered in inglorious ease;  
I who before the songs of shepherds made,  
When gay and young my rural lays I played,  
And set my Tityrus beneath his shade.

--Addison, 1694 [Virgil’s “signature”]

- “A Georgic therefore is some part of the science of husbandry put into a pleasing dress and set off with all the embellishments of poetry . . . [Virgil] has raised the natural rudeness and simplicity of his subject, with such a significancy of expression, such a pomp of verse . . . He delivers the meanest of his precepts with a kind of grandeur; he breaks and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulness”—Addison, 1697
- “Like pastoral, georgic is primarily a mode rather than a genre. It is an informing spirit, an attitude toward life, and a set of themes and images rather than anything so definite as, say, a four-book, didactic poem of two thousand lines on the subject of agriculture . . . georgic is more than simply a literary genre or mode, for it entails a way of living and seeing as well as of writing . . . As an initial working definition, however, we may say that georgic is a mode that stresses the value of intensive and persistent labor against hardships and difficulties; that it differs from pastoral because it emphasizes work instead of ease; that it differs from epic because it emphasizes planting and building instead of killing and destruction; and that it is preeminently the mode suited to the establishment of civilization and the founding of nations . . . to be truly georgic, a poem should come face to face with the realistic details of farming life, see them for what they are, yet accept and glorify them.” --Anthony Low, 1985, *Georgic Revolution*
- “Boldness, freedom, variety—these Augustan qualities are the essential qualities of Virgil’s poem. The *Georgics* is the Virgilian work that breaks boundaries, defies genre. Virgil here created, as not in his pastorals or his epic, a new and singular kind of poetry . . . The poem includes epic moments and lyric passages as well as the most minute technical descriptions of common things . . . All is under the control of the poet, of the “ego” present in the poem; there is no constraint of genre as such for there is no precedent in genre. But Virgil has created a voice which expresses *humanitas*, and humanity is always present, human beings at work and play; the whole poem celebrates what human beings create. The puzzling qualities of our human life with Nature—which demands so much that is not “natural”—are fully expressed . . . The *Georgics* can be satiric without having to remain so and can be moving at moments without having to dwell on pathos. The self-sustaining poem, making a genre as it proceeds, answers to no rules save those the poet makes. The whole is perfectly constructed, just for this once alone, out of a medley. The Augustans valued it for its variety, its inexhaustible richness.”—Margaret Doody, 1985, *The Daring Muse*
- “curious, quirky blend of prosaic subject matter and self-consciously opulent diction and figuration”—Kevis Goodman, 2004
- “Hailed as the ‘best poem of the best poet’ (Dryden), the *Georgics* is a work unlike any other, one whose very generic affiliation causes puzzlement. [didactic...or/and?] The larger message of the poem is typically believed to concern, in one way or another, ‘the life of man in this world’ . . . According to the optimists, the *Georgics* celebrates the dignity of labour and of agricultural life, as well as the endeavors of Octavian, which might lead to a new Golden Age in Italy. By contrast, in the view of the pessimists . . . Virgil draws attention to the harsh realities of life in the Iron age, the futility of human toil, and the problems and uncertainties surrounding the rise of Octavian. [Or] the poem exhibits a stance of profound ambiguity: the *Georgics* shows both the positive and negative aspects of existence and thus reflects the complexities of the real world”—Katharina Volk, 2008
- Like all English readers of the *Georgics*, Thomson is touched by Virgil’s appealing myth of the innocence, felicity, vigour, patriotism, and piety of the husbandman’s life, and, like all English imitators of the *Georgics*, he offers his own version of the canonical *O fortunatos* passage.—James Sambrook, 1981, preface to the Clarendon Ed. of Thomson’s *The Seasons*.