Georgic Disenchantment in American Poetry

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1. Some Versions of Georgic

Is the georgic a poetic discourse whose presence can be felt in American poetry? And if so, how might we trace its contours, weigh its concerns as a genre whose central representational subject and aesthetic trope—labor—is at perhaps the furthest remove from the expressivist sensibilities that have tended to dominate Americanist poetry criticism?[1] Over the past decade, critics such as William Dowling, Larry Kutchen, and Juan Christian Pellicer have offered one answer to these questions, tracing a trajectory of georgic verse that emerges in the late colonial period and draws to a halt by the mid-nineteenth century. These critics have discovered in Joel Barlow's 1787 *Vision of Columbus*, Timothy Dwight's 1794 *Greenfield Hill*, and lesser-known works by Jacob Taylor, Philip Freneau, Richard Lewis, George Ogilvie, and David Humphreys a significant transatlantic inheritance centered on a didactic poetics of agrarian labor as a nation-building occupation.[2] Their readings of the American georgic highlight its celebrations

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[1] Perhaps the most well-known study of American poetry, Roy Harvey Pearce's *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1961), charts a continuous expressivist tradition in American poetry stretching from Anne Bradstreet to Walt Whitman to Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Pearce's text, as Max Cavitch (2007, 13) points out, was until recently "the comprehensive standard" of American poetic history. The historicist turn and the canonization of avant-garde movements of twentieth-century poetry have begun over the past twenty years to decenter the critical hegemony Virginia Jackson (2005) has dubbed "lyric reading." Indeed, one of the most notable phenomena in recent Americanist studies of poetry is an attention to genre as revelatory of, in Cavitch's (2007, 19) terms, "the processes of change that texts undergo historically" and thus as a framework through which to investigate the relay between individual texts and larger "categorizing institutions." This essay participates in this reframing effort, examining the georgic's continuing cultural presence as it arises in a series of poetic texts rarely if ever claimed as "georgics."

[2] See Dowling 1990; Kutchen 2000; Pellicer 2007. In a different vein, Timothy Sweet's *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (2002) is the first book-

Genre, Vol. 46, No. 1 Spring 2013
DOI 10.1215/00166928-1907400 © 2013 by University of Oklahoma

of the early Republic's projects: subduing wilderness, expanding territory, and creating settled forms of agricultural life that produce a durable nation-state. As Kutchen (2000, 115) writes, "There could be no genre more suited than georgic to the predominant early national ideology that viewed the interdependence between agriculture and virtue as the best means for achieving national unity and stability." Viewing the young Republic as uniquely able to fulfill the now-lost promise of European civilization through the sacred work of agricultural labor, these early American georgics invoke a vision of "civic humanism" combined with "Puritan millenarianism" (Dowling 1990, 68), according to these critics.

Emphasizing how the genre naturalizes imperial-nationalist ideology through portraits of virtuous cultivation, this body of criticism follows the well-known ideology critiques of the British georgic by critics such as John Barrell (1983) and Alan Liu (1989). Liu (18–19) famously deems the georgic the "supreme mediational form by which to bury history in nature, epic in pastoral." This reading stresses the repressions and evasions discoverable in eighteenth-century georgics, pointing to the ways the georgic's tropes of rural production mask social division in images of fruitful cultivation and give voice, in Karen O'Brien's (1996, 162) phrase, to "the elation of empire." In the American context, Connecticut writers, such as Dwight and Humphreys, according to Dowling (1990, 87), portray the American Republic as the fulfillment of "Augustan values"—"a society preserved in virtue by piety and toil, the Virgilian vision returned from exile in the lowly vale of everyday life on Connecticut lowlands"—that becomes, unlike English society, a "permanent or self-perpetuating state of affairs." Indeed, such georgics represent a retreat, Dowling (88) argues, from the "roar of history," exemplifying "the dream of a world outside history and ideology, a society not subject to the revolutions of historical change." In contrast to the corruptions and decay of European culture, they stake a claim for the exceptional possibility of America as a "timeless world of georgic peace," a peace wherein "modernity itself" is "little more than a receding memory" (89).

One virtue of such readings lies in the relative tidiness of their narrative of the

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length treatment of the georgic in American literature. His book centers on the georgic as a prose genre, focusing on the writings of Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur, Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, George Perkins Marsh, and others and reading the georgic as a form of environmental writing intimately tied to early American agrarian-economic discourses and land ethics. By contrast, this essay insists on the georgic as a poetic genre centrally preoccupied by the possibilities and difficulties of representing labor in poetic form.

georgic's rise and decline. The ideological thrust of the georgic—its descriptions of agricultural cultivation as a figure for national character and improvement—increasingly confronted larger cultural and economic shifts that led to the genre's extinction as a viable form. In late eighteenth-century Britain, enclosures, urbanization, and the rise of agrarian and industrial capitalism heralded the degeneration of a verse form invested in husbandry of the land as a sign of prosperity and imperial renewal. A similar shift in America by the early nineteenth century from a society largely structured around agrarianism to a highly differentiated national economy rendered the unifying Republican ideal of poetry such as Barlow and Dwight's obsolete. The divisive presence of slavery in particular became increasingly difficult to reconcile with georgic encomiums to national unity.[3] This narrative of georgic dominance and disintegration nicely fits with Franco Moretti's (2005, 17) observation that "a genre exhausts its potentialities—and the time comes to give its competitors a chance—when its inner form is no longer capable of representing the most significant aspects of contemporary reality." Their ideology of form unable to grapple with the changes wrought by historical and aesthetic shifts, British and early American georgics became, as Dowling (1990, xvi) puts it, "at a stroke, virtually unreadable," now-forgotten signs of a "lost world of silent assumptions." Such a narrative would explain why the georgic is so rarely mentioned in treatments of American poetics: it simply no longer exists, having been superseded by forms more attuned to modern realities, such as the lyric. And indeed, if the lyric has come to signify a peculiarly modern poetic genre associated with the rise of commodity capital, the specialization of literary labor, and the formation of the liberal subject, this georgic inheritance appears decidedly archaic.

And yet this trajectory highlights particular dimensions of georgic poetry to the exclusion of others—an exclusion that makes other features of the genre, and thus other possible legacies of the georgic in an American context, difficult to recognize. As various scholars of romanticism, most notably Kevis Goodman (2004) and Kurt Heinzelman (1991), argue, we gain insight into the continuing significance of the georgic for later poets by considering other preoccupations characteristic of the form.[4] These scholars share an impatience with the persistent critical emphasis on the genre's enchantments, its complicity with rhetorics of nation and imperial expansion, and they insist that such readings miss the disenchantment central to georgic poetry from Virgil's *Georgics* (2005) forward. In georgic portrayals of labor, human self-determination, and history, these scholars discern a decidedly more ambivalent, even pessimistic cultural vision. As Heinzelman (1991, 187) claims, "Virgilian georgic is a story of largely unrelieved degeneracy," as the *agricola* attempts to counteract a recalcitrant nature and to control an uncertain future through difficult daily endeavor. "The way should not be easy," Virgil (2005, 1.122, 1.145) cautions in the *Georgics*, as he lays out the best techniques for cultivating soil, planting trees, and tending cattle, stressing both the arduous nature of toil (what he calls "*labor improbus*," [unrelenting toil]) and its sometimes fruitless outcome. Goodman (2004, 113) similarly points to Virgil's extensive punning on "*labor* and *lapsus* (from the verb meaning to slide or fall away), so that labor is always called forth to redress a lapse and just as often occasions it," as key to the genre's conception of labor. The husbandman labors in a fallen world ruled by contingency and turmoil. If labor in the Virgilian imagination and its georgic inheritors is the essential expression of what Karl Marx (1988, 76) calls our "species-character," it is also difficult and often unsuccessful.

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[3] O'Brien (1996, 173) argues that "local economic and cultural conditions [in the North American colonies] strained the georgic mode to the limits of its flexibility, and laid bare the processes of economic exploitation occluded in British georgic. In particular, the fact of slavery in the Southern states and the West Indies could not be digested by georgic poetry. Few, if any, poets were willing to defend slavery, and some argued for abolition, but its very presence broke the association between productive labor and civic virtue central to the tradition of imperial georgic."

This emphasis on labor's hardship in turn suggests a darker view of historical progress embedded in even the most optimistic georgics. For Goodman (2004, 3–4), the georgic *versus*—the farmer's furrows and the poet's lines—uncover a sense of historical "presentness" in and through their very attempts to "bury" history, a "presentness" she discerns in the "*unpleasurable* feeling," the "sensory discomfort" and "affective dissonance" evoked in the mediating processes of William Cowper's, James Thomson's, and William Wordsworth's georgics. These georgics provide forms of sensory intensification that, she argues, disclose precisely the unsettling "roar of history" that Dowling (1990, 11–12) suggests is inaudible in georgic writing. Thus for Goodman and Heinzelman, the georgic's close observations of the material particulars and inevitable difficulties of labor, combined with the genre's self-conscious attentiveness to the various forms of information and knowledge it conveys, tend to outmaneuver any ideologically unified position. This more dialectical understanding of the georgic might provide a means by which to grasp its continuing literary influence, an influence that these scholars begin to chart in the romantic oeuvre.

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[4] Other critics interested in georgic inheritances, particularly in the romantic poets, include Barrell (1999) and Clifford Siskin (1999).

This essay extends these critics' work by locating a version of georgic in American poetry that derives from these Virgilian tendencies but that is substantially reformulated under the historical conditions of capitalist modernization. The disenchanted character of georgic poetry—its attention to the difficulty of labor and the sensory discomforts of mediation—takes on new significance, I argue, with the rise of new forms of agrarian and industrial capitalism that render portrayals of settled agricultural work increasingly fraught. These shifts mark the emergence of a georgic strain specifically responsive to these social and economic upheavals. This version of georgic, discoverable in the work of canonical poets, such as Walt Whitman and Robert Frost, grapples with the division and alienation of labor and the increasingly abstract logics that determine its social value. Such georgics narrate the change from an agrarian mode of production organized around "task-orientation," as E. P. Thompson (1967, 60) describes it, to one guided by impersonal circuits of commodity exchange and managed productivity. Thus if the georgic, throughout its long history, might be read as a disenchanted genre in its view of agrarian labor as fragile and suffused with difficulty, those georgics written in the shadow of capitalist development are disenchanted in their reflections on the novel hardships of labor under capital.

I turn here to georgics by Whitman, "A Song for Occupations" ([1855–81] 2002a), and Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" ([1936] 1995a). Less proletarian or labor poems than complex chronicles of the contradictory investments of labor, these disenchanted georgics continue to represent human work, in Marx's (1981, 998) terms, as "the eternal natural condition of human life," even as they acknowledge the ways capitalist modes of production alter its social value. They track these constitutive contradictions by way of didactic evaluations of labor's vexed value placed alongside rhythmically and sensually rich descriptions of labor in action. This uneasy blend of the didactic and the descriptive illustrates the paradox of labor under capitalism—at once concrete and abstract, lived experience and exploited resource—without offering a satisfactory resolution. Indeed, these poems instead reveal the impediments of representing labor or adequately accounting for its value. At the same time, these poems contemplate poetry's capacity to offset labor's social debasement, overtly dramatizing the possibilities and limitations of the poetic redress they aim to achieve.

2. Whitman's Occupations

In the opening lines of "A Song for Occupations," Whitman declares that the georgic task of his poem is to inquire more deeply into "occupations," to seek out their particular modes of embodied experience, and to discover therein an essential principle of human life—the "eternal meanings." He writes:

> A song for occupations!
> In the labor of engines and trades and the labor of the fields I find
> the developments,
> And find the eternal meanings.
> (ll. 1–3)

Signs of georgic disenchantment emerge in these first lines, where Whitman distinguishes labor's "developments" from its "eternal meanings," pointing toward the novel forms of work emergent in industrializing America. Whitman registers historical transition in this distinction, where new meanings and possibilities ("engines and trades") appear alongside labor's older, familiar forms ("the labor of the fields"). These lines anticipate what will prove the central representational challenge of the poem: to preserve the creative potential of labor power as an ahistorical, innate capacity while at the same time recording its actual manifestations and its troubling devaluation in the present. To many critics, what appears as a desire to reconcile these new and older forms into a celebratory "song" appears woefully naive, an "idealized image of an undivided society," as David Simpson (1990, 182) charges. Whitman undoubtedly neglects to detail the gritty realities of competition among workers and the sordid conditions of urban work. He refuses, that is, one kind of georgic disenchantment: the Virgilian idea of labor's everyday difficulties as mapped onto a historical context of intensifying division of labor and competition for wages. The poem instead relentlessly gestures toward the life-giving, ceaseless potential of human labor. But Whitman's dual aim—to affirm this intrinsic potential while calling into view the ways this potential is presently devalued—is, I argue, more self-reflexively disenchanted than critics such as Simpson allow. "A Song for Occupations" negotiates a crisis in labor's social definition, attempting to represent what Whitman regards as its unalterable value while operating with full attention to capital's transformations in valorization.

"A Song for Occupations" addresses the "workmen and workwomen" of America, diagnosing their current state of devaluation and offering recognition of their merit. Measured by the "usual terms" of social worth, the collective whom

Whitman ([1855–81] 2002a, ll. 9, 28) addresses might regard itself as invisible, "unseen, unheard, untouchable and untouching." The poem insists, however, on the fundamental value of the workers, an insistence couched not in "amounts" but in an "evenness" the speaker alone recognizes:

> Workmen and workwomen!
> Were all educations practical and ornamental well display'd out
> of me, what would it amount to?
> Were I as the head teacher, charitable proprietor, wise
> statesman, what would it amount to?
> Were I to you as the boss employing you and paying you, would
> that satisfy you?
> . . . .
> Neither a servant nor a master I,
> I take no sooner a large price than a small price, I will have
> my own whoever enjoys me,
> I will be even with you and you shall be even with me.
> (ll. 4–7, 10–12)

Introducing various social identities and exchanges dependent on hierarchy, Whitman focuses particularly on transactions centered on wages and the mediation of human relationships via "price." The poem forcefully rejects these relations, hinting at their sheer arbitrariness—"what would it amount to?," Whitman wonders—and instead claiming a unique relationship with the addressee based in an acknowledgment of elemental similitude. Unlike these mechanisms of valuation that measure a workman or workwoman laboring for wages as of lesser worth than a "charitable proprietor" or "boss," the poem's speaker will eschew all forms of social measurement to enact an unconditional validation of the addressee. The speaker in turn is both "even with" the addressee and uniquely able to adjudicate his or her essential value: "I own publicly who you are, if nobody else owns" (l. 30).

This leveling address is a familiar Whitmanian strategy made famous by the democratizing framework of "Song of Myself": there, as here, Whitman ([1855] 2002b; ll. 2–3) proposes a radical equality wherein "What I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." And indeed, "Song of Myself" and "A Song for Occupations" share a common origin—they appear as the two first poems in the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* ([1855] 2002), so it would make sense to align their poetics of recognition and equivalence.[5] But while there are some important similarities between these two poems, the concept of evenness in "A Song for Occupations" diverges from its better-known counterpart, for this poem roots equivalence not in ecstatic *being* but in the capacity for *making*, the creative potential expressed in acts of labor. Human capacity dwells here in the person of the worker, from whom all culture, artifacts, and monuments emerge: "Doctrines, politics and civilization exurge from you, / Sculpture and monuments and any thing inscribed anywhere are tallied in you" ([1855–81] 2002b, ll. 88–89). Civilization *exurges*—arising, welling up—from the body of the laborer, in whom all culture is imagined and made manifest. All past history is "tallied" in the addressee, whose collective labor has brought about our enduring forms of civilized life and who contains the capacity "this hour" (l. 139) to create as yet unimagined forms. This ceaseless creative potential that defines the "you" has a sacredness that underwrites even religion itself:

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[5] "A Song for Occupations" undergoes a series of changes across the multiple editions of *Leaves of Grass*. As the Whitman editor Michael Moon (Whitman [1855] 2002, 177)

> We consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not divine,
> I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still,
> It is not they who give the life, it is you who give the life.
> (ll. 78–80)

This life-giving potential inheres inalienably in the living body of the human, regardless of social status. Whitman's definition, connected as it is with the power to create tangible goods and intangible ideas, calls to mind Marx's (1981, 270) idea of labor power, or "labor-capacity," which he defines as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets into motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind." It is this capacity, intrinsic to our "physical form" and exercised in the act of making, that Whitman identifies as the principle of equivalence on which "A Song for Occupations" is based, importantly distinct from the leisurely, erotic fluidity of selves that "Song of Myself" celebrates.

Moreover, "A Song for Occupations" offers a response to a particular crisis in the social valuation of the "you"—a crisis largely absent from the wide-ranging affirmations, scenes, and moods of "Song of Myself." As "A Song for Occupa-

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points out, Whitman's revisions to "A Song for Occupations" progressively "diminish the sense of intimacy" established in these opening lines, highlight instead the bodily dimensions of work rather than erotic "contact," and focus on the "you" rather than the merge between "you" and "I." Whitman also retitles the poem various times—including "Poem of the Daily Work of the Workmen and Workwomen of These States" (1856), "Poem Number Three of 'Chants Democratic' " (1860), "To Workingmen" (1867), "Carol of Occupations" (1871, 1876), and "A Song for Occupations" (1881)—and first expands it over the first several editions, then edits it down to its current 151-line length. Here I quote from the final (1881) edition of the poem, which most definitively captures its georgic strain. Much of the poem's stance on labor and value, however, is already present in its first (1855) version.

tions" insists on labor power as a marker of human equality and the source of all value, it acknowledges that it is precisely through the commodification of labor power that social inequality is increasing. The rendering equivalent of persons with things by rating and tallying the capacities of the worker, placing a monetary value on creative potential and selling it on the market, leads to a radical devaluation of humanness itself, which the laborers have come to feel keenly. "Why what have you thought of yourself? / Is it you then that thought yourself less?," the speaker demands of the addressee (Whitman [1855–81] 2002a, ll. 20–21). Whitman directs his attention particularly to the incongruity of weighing human value in monetary terms, pointing to the speculative, apparitional nature of money and taking an incredulous tone as it contrasts the idiom of amount, property, stock, and profits with descriptions of persons:

> When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the night-watchman's daughter,
> When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my friendly companions,
> I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them
> as I do of men and women like you.
> (ll. 148–50)

Even as Whitman points up the ludicrousness of "minted gold" standing in as a living substitute for "the night-watchman's daughter," his lines betray a fear that Marx argues has already been realized as commodity fetishism, that the inanimate bearers of value threaten to supplant their creators as the active agents of contemporary life. Structured around a contrast that sets the immateriality and irrationality of the forms of value embodied in market relations—money, the commodity—against the inherent value of the laborer, the poem insists that the worker not "[think] yourself less": "It is not you I call unseen, unheard, untouchable and untouching, / It is not you I go argue pro and con about, and to settle whether you are alive or no" (ll. 28–29).

The poem's goal, then, is to present a concept of value as fixed—as Whitman (l. 58) puts it, "not something which may yet be retracted in a certain contingency"—at a moment when value appears inconstant in a speculative marketplace and when personhood is increasingly defined in the language of exchangeable property. To do so, the speaker insists that he alone will "offer the value itself" by recognizing the potential inherent in the addressee:

> I bring what you much need yet always have,
> Not money, amours, dress, eating, erudition, but as good,
> I send no agent or medium, offer no representative of value, but
> offer the value itself.
> (ll. 41–43)

Here the complexity of Whitman's portrayal becomes clear: to "offer the value itself," Whitman must eschew not only all hierarchical forms of social identification that differentiate and hierarchize but also any "agent or medium" of value—anything that stands in as "representative" of the inherent value that humans "always have." To make his argument that this value precedes and thus supersedes the abstract valorization process of the market, which uses an "agent" (the money form) to quantify the value of human labor power, Whitman must depict labor power as not susceptible to representation. It is this shared immeasurability beyond all modes of valuation that makes us inherently equal and exposes the inadequacy of rating labor power on the market. As he writes, "Will we rate our cash and business high? I have no objection, / I rate them as high as the highest—then a child born of a woman and man I rate beyond all rate" (ll. 72–73). Yet this definition of human potential as that which cannot be measured or represented—as "beyond all rate"—presents a dilemma to a poem that asserts itself as "offer[ing] the value itself." Indeed, Whitman (ll. 45–47) acknowledges that this immeasurability cannot be captured in language:

> It is not what is printed, preach'd, discussed, it eludes
>   discussion and print,
> It is not to be put in a book, it is not in this book,
> It is for you whoever you are, it is no farther from you than
>   your hearing and sight are from you.

Embodied in the "you" as an intrinsic characteristic like "hearing" or "sight," human potential cannot be abstracted into a medium of exchange, such as language, and thus it is "not in this book." In this way, Whitman affirms the value of the "you" by refusing to quantify or distill it and instead gestures toward its sublimity—to represent it through negation by disclosing its unrepresentability.

And yet the poem does not close with this refusal to represent human potential but instead insists on accounting for the "developments" of the present through an extensive catalog of current occupations in action. Turning toward this inventory of the material, embodied, vital nature of labor as practiced by America's workmen and workwomen, Whitman (ll. 101–2) explains this seeming logical reversal by declaring, "Strange and hard that paradox true I give, / Objects gross and the unseen soul are one." For Whitman, then, the hourly routines of the workers are a manifestation of this "unseen," ever-present potential that is labor power while never wholly exhausting its potential or subjecting it to totalizing representation. It is this catalog that raises the objections of many Whitman critics, who regard it as an idealized celebration of the status quo that, unable to imagine a more viable alternative or to grapple with the inequalities attendant on the division of labor, “subsumes . . . [the system of occupations] by singing it, subsumes it to an ideal version,” as Alan Trachtenberg (1994, 131) asserts. Yet Whitman’s catalog can only be read as an idealized refusal to grapple with present-day conditions by eliminating any reference to the “paradox” Whitman describes, which suggests the inextricability of the living examples from the larger, abstract capacity that they denote—and by extension from the larger contrast Whitman elaborates between the market’s quantifications and the immeasurability of human potential. The catalog serves not as justification of unjust conditions but as illustration of what cannot finally be illustrated—and thus quantified—in its entirety.

In turn, the acts delineated in the catalog ground, identify, and offer significance to the worker as the antithesis of “untouched” personhood. This inventory begins:

> House-building, measuring, sawing the boards,
> Blacksmithing, glass-blowing, nail-making, coopering, tin-
> roofing, shingle-dressing,
> Ship-joining, dock-building, fish-curing, flagging of sidewalks
> by flaggers,
> The pump, the pile-driver, the great derrick, the coal-kiln and
> brick-kiln,
> Coal-mines and all that is down there, the lamps in the
> darkness, echoes, songs, what meditations, what vast
> native thoughts looking through smutch’d faces;
> Iron-works, forge-fires in the mountains and by river-banks, men
> around feeling the melt with huge crowbars, lumps of ore,
> the due combining of ore, limestone, coal,
> The blast-furnace and the puddling-furnace, the loup-lump at
> the bottom of the melt at last, the rolling-mill, the
> stumpy bars of pig-iron, the strong clean-shaped T-rail for
> railroads.
> (Whitman [1855–81] 2002a, ll. 103–9)

Employing a dactylic meter and rapid-fire repetition of gerunds, Whitman conveys a sense of energetic action underlying all of these various occupations. This distinctive rhythm of laboring aligns different forms of work into one unified, vigorous tempo, suggesting that these particular actions are all rooted in a common energy—the energy of human labor power. At the same time, the catalog emphasizes the sensory specificity of these various tasks, the particular environments and materials they involve, the sounds and textures they evoke for the laborer. These details assert a powerful reciprocity between the laborer and his or her work, a sense that the labor process not only creates external objects for everyday use but creates the laborer himself or herself. Whitman's "workmen and workwomen" are named here by their occupations—"the pile-driver" and the "flagger"—revealing the elaboration of the self that work spurs. All the objects and the tools Whitman evokes are in material relation to the laborer—raw goods, such as "lumps of ore" and "limestone," in the process of gaining new form, and tools that operate as extensions of and protections for the body at work, connected to the worker even in their anthropomorphic names ("tooth-chisel," "knee-strap" [ll. 111, 117]). Each material particular is bound to the physicality of the laborer and is a reflection of not only his or her manual effort but his or her inventive capacity.[6] This physicality of laboring, its grounding in the rhythms and capacities of the body, convey the realization of human capacity that occurs in the act of production. Yet this inventory, which continues with its energetic listing for twenty further lines, not only portrays the realization of labor power in acts and products but also its inexhaustability, its ability always to exceed one particular example and be revealed in a new form. In the sheer abundance and tireless listing of Whitman's occupations, he gestures toward the sublime unrepresentability of labor power as the principal force underwriting social life.

The georgic task of "A Song for Occupations," then, is to offer a unique form of poetic redress that acknowledges the laborer and his or her labor not merely by listing the various occupations he or she might undertake but by conveying the greater impossibility of ever adequately representing the energy that motivates them. The poem succeeds by pointing to its own representational incapacity as it discloses the transcendent nature of labor's value beyond all social forms of evaluation—its "eternal meanings" always outstripping its present "developments." In this way, "A Song for Occupations" diagnoses the central problem facing a form of poetry dedicated to representing work in its specificity and its greater cultural significance under an economic system that obscures both of these dimensions. The answer to this problem, the poem reveals, cannot be simply to critique these operations by way of ideological demystification or intensive description of the concrete processes of labor. A georgic poem must acknowledge labor itself as a representational problem, grappling with the abstract character of labor and its susceptibility to differential valorization. Such a poem must gesture toward its limits in drawing labor and labor power into a sphere of legibility as well as in adequately compensating the individual laborer for the market economy's inequities. If "A Song for Occupations" argues that its poetic form can "offer the value itself" to the devalued laborer, it also concedes that this transaction cannot provide full recompense for this social devaluation and its very real consequences. Instead, its more limited form of redress makes visible the disjunct between labor's unchanging human value and its evolving social value and highlights the former as the rightful index of cultural progress and prosperity.

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[6] Elaine Scarry (1985) writes of this extension of the human body into its usable objects—what she calls the "presence of the body in artifacts"—as a means of magnifying its powers of making.

3. Labor as "Love," Labor as "Need": Frost's "Two Tramps in Mud Time"

Such questions about the value of labor and poetry's unique capacity to adjudicate it similarly preoccupy the work of Frost, whose poetry, like Whitman's, has rarely been sustainedly read through the lens of the georgic. Of all American poets, Frost is arguably the most directly influenced by georgic poetry, particularly Virgil's *Georgics*, and its most sustained interlocutor, as he inquires into the ways this genre is and is not adaptable in his historical present.[7] For Frost, agrarian labor, as a giving over of the conscious self to the mysteries of the seasons and the physical rhythms of tilling the soil, unfolds an essential truth that poetry can reflect in its own rhythms. He turns again and again to scenes of such labor in action in his work, often drawing complex connections between the creative labor of poetry writing and the bodily labor of cultivating the ground. In this way, Frost carries on the legacy of the Virgilian georgic, suggesting that there is material knowledge to be gained from submitting to the physicality of work—a knowledge that remains mysterious and even intangible in Frost's poetry, connected to bodily perceptions rather than rational deduction. Yet Frost's epistemological interest in the processes of agrarian labor is indelibly marked by a sense of their endangered status. As does "A Song for Occupations," Frost's poetry often examines the fault lines where older forms of labor confront the exigencies of a changed present.

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7. Frost has more often been read as a pastoral poet. See John Lynen's definitive text *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (1967) for a thorough treatment of Frost's engagement with the pastoral tradition. I would suggest that reading for the georgic in Frost's work illuminates the important ways the pastoral and the georgic diverge in their generic conventions and expectations. Most broadly put, the pastoral, highly self-conscious about its presentation of an alternative mode of life, tends to eschew representations of the very sphere of material necessity on which the georgic meditates. Labor as a socially necessary act is axiomatic to georgic poetry, central to its depictions of the processes of cultivation.

And like Whitman, Frost reflects on the larger problem of labor's value arising from the incommensurate nature of these various forms and on poetry's ability to exemplify this value. For Frost, these moments also reveal the belatedness of his own relation to a georgic poetics, his sense that his own poetry is a latecomer to a tradition whose terms no longer seem fully viable.

One of Frost's most complex georgic poems is his Depression-era "Two Tramps in Mud Time"—a poem that has been the subject of critical derision. Richard Poirier (1977, 273) describes it as an "inexplicably embarrassed and apologetic effort"; David Bromwich (1989, 220) reads it as a poem expressing "charity denied."[8] Certainly the poem describes a disconcerting interchange, one that seems callous on the speaker's part (and by extension Frost's). Reading the poem through a georgic lens, however, we might begin to retrieve it from its taint of insensitivity. Published in 1936, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is structured around an abrupt meeting: the speaker, who is "splitting wood in the yard" (l. 2), is interrupted by the entrance of "two strangers" (l. 1) who emerge from the woods. The speaker is engaged in the kind of georgic work Frost often evokes in his poetry: self-enclosed, noncirculating, and undertaken for its own sake. In a quintessentially Virgilian move, Frost emphasizes the ambient atmosphere surrounding the act—the spring weather, the song of a bluebird nearby—to relate the speaker's absorption in his task and the phenomenological pleasures it creates. The woodcutting blends pleasure and need in its powerful rhythms:

> Good blocks of oak it was I split,
> As large around as the chopping block;
> And every piece I squarely hit
> Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
> (Frost [1936] 1995a, ll. 9–12)

These lines portray an unalienated labor whose factual rhythms—accentuated by the iambic tetrameter, regular abab scheme and sonic effects that mimic the sound of chopping wood—generate a dreamlike, aesthetically fecund state. It is a state defined at once by its sensory immediacy and its immersion in the larger cyclical patterns of the natural world. Like Virgil's farmer, Frost's speaker works in attentive relation to the particularities of soil and climate with a deep comprehension of the recurring phenomena of the natural environment: the cloud patterns, the "lurking frost in the earth beneath" (l. 38). At the same time he is attuned to his own heightened physical capacities—the straight hit that produces a “splinterless” piece, the “life of muscles rocking soft / And smooth and moist in vernal heat” (ll. 47–48). But this portrait of creative georgic work is itself dependent on the far bleaker vision of work embodied by the two tramps.

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[8] See Perrine (1973) for an extensive catalog of critical responses to Frost's poem.

Dispossessed laborers, the tramps are wandering the woods looking for work, having spent the winter in the “lumber camps” (l. 51). They want, the speaker acknowledges, “to take my job for pay” (l. 8). The troubling presence of the tramps grounds the poem’s scene in a particular historical context, gesturing toward the massive unemployment and displacement of rural workers and the agricultural crises that characterized the Depression years. For these tramps, the very same skill that the speaker revels in—the ability to handle an ax—is their means of survival, and it is at the same time a skill that is no longer sufficiently valued to make their survival assured. These figures, Frost takes pains to note, are not shiftless vagrants but laborers who have ended up superfluous. They are craftsmen, skilled at their work: “Men of the woods and lumberjacks, / They judged me by their appropriate tool,” the speaker notes (ll. 53–54). And yet they are now, as Marx (1981, 786) puts it, “set free,” forced into unemployment despite their abilities. They survey the work of the speaker from across an unbridgeable distance, unable to inhabit its terms. As the speaker puts it, “They thought all chopping was theirs of right”—the right to earn a living by their hands (Frost [1936] 1995a, l. 52). The tramps thus introduce into the poem an idea of labor as historically determined and subject to exchange—a disenchanted counterexample to the speaker’s immediate and nonexchangeable work. The tramps, in offering their labor power to the speaker, frame this scene of desultory work as a market site and position the speaker as a potential buyer, undermining his sense of his own work as outside the bounds of history and the social.

Forced to contextualize his wood chopping in light of the tramps’ demands, the speaker asserts that their presence makes his task more meaningful, as they reveal its essential difference from a labor based in “need.” He declares:

> The time when most I loved my task
> The two must make me love it more
> By coming with what they came to ask.
> You’d think I never had felt before
> The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
> The grip of earth on outspread feet.
> (ll. 41–46)

The debased state of the tramps purifies the speaker’s work, he claims, defending the sensory enchantment he takes in a form of work that is its own means and ends. Their presence clarifies his understanding of what he calls the "mortal stakes" of his labor, which he claims are ultimately more enduring than that of the tramps (70). The speaker goes on to argue that while the tramps have the "better right" (1. 64) given their imminent need, his labor, at once necessary and grounded in creative "play," embodies a fuller example of the possibilities labor represents:

> Only where love and need are one,
> And the work is play for mortal stakes,
> Is the deed ever really done
> For Heaven and the future's sakes.
> (ll. 69–72)

This contrast between work for "pay" and for "play" divulges a georgic conception of labor as an essential expression of human character, much like Whitman's "eternal meanings." The speaker wants to preserve space for a form of labor separate from mere subsistence whose "stakes" can outlast the exigencies of the present, and it is to this unalienated labor—which references not only the wood chopping but the creative imperatives of writing itself—that "Two Tramps in Mud Time" turns in its closing lines.

This final turn frames Frost's ([1936] 1995b, 731) descriptions of the speaker's manual labor as "ulterior" code for ars poetica. As Laurence Perrine (1973, 674) writes, "Writing poetry, not chopping wood, is the work which he not only loves but on which he has also staked his life: the game that he plays 'for mortal stakes.' " This move, which shifts from past tense to present and from narrativized scene to declarative statement, refers to the long-term "stakes" of composing poetry—a kind of work whose end results are necessarily deferred rather than immediately accessible and which represents, for Frost, the proper blend of "love and need," "work" and "play." In *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Poirier (1992, 86) sees such meditations on labor in Frost's work as articulating a pragmatist belief that poetry "represents in itself the ideal achievement and attainment of *all* work," so that far from "represent[ing] life," "life" instead "represents poetry." In turn it is such moves that lead critics to find in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" an evasive retreat from intractable social concerns into a solely aesthetic realm that unproblematically merges "avocation" with "vocation" (l. 67).[9] Yet it is important, I argue, to preserve the real social fissures this poem catalogs—and ultimately leaves unresolved—rather than to define the "stakes" of "Two Tramps in Mud Time" as only, or most importantly, metapoetic. For if, as the closing lines argue, poetry writing can embody a kind of unalienated labor no longer viable either in the productive sphere of the marketplace or in the private sphere of "work" for "play," the poem's task becomes precisely to *record* these larger historical circumstances and their accompanying social tensions. "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is in fact powerfully direct in its insistence on dramatizing a confrontation between incompatible conceptions of labor. And even as Frost closes by depicting his own writing as a site of undivided creative endeavor, the divisive scene on which this assertion depends remains necessarily unanswered by poem's end.

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[9] See, for example, Jeffrey Meyers's (1996, 215) assertion that "though it would be socially beneficial to give employment to the tramps, Frost believes—since the physical pleasure of chopping wood while observing the hesitant coming of spring is absolutely essential to the creation of

Indeed, as in "A Song for Occupations," unalienated labor can only be understood in "Two Tramps in Mud Time" by way of a negation—or, in this case, a negative example—that confronts real historical limits. Both poems frame their georgic definitions in opposition to what they regard as a present perversion of labor's essential value, here represented by the tramps' demand to exchange their work for wages. These definitions by negation, finally, reveal the impossibility of representing this essential value outside the bounds of the historical circumstances that threaten it. In the case of "Two Tramps in Mud Time," the complex pleasure and meaning the speaker draws from his labor is realized not as an abstract, transcendent value but in direct comparison with an adulterated form of labor. This revelation of his labor's value, moreover, comes at the expense of undercutting the tramps' means of survival—a quandary that the poem is by no means unaware of. The speaker, in defending his own labor, acknowledges both the immediate pressures facing the tramps—a condition where labor as "love" and "need" "exist in twain"—and their more primary "right" to labor for "pay" (Frost [1936] 1995a, ll. 62–64).

In light of this acknowledgment, the poem is left at an impasse: the speaker can continue with his labor or cede it to the tramps. "Two Tramps in Mud Time" ends, however, not by revealing the outcome of this dramatic scene but by leaving it entirely unresolved. We never learn what decision the speaker makes or what

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his poetry—that his personal needs are paramount. The speaker looks after Number One rather than Number Two." For Poirier (1977, 274), this closing turn is suggestive of Frost's need for "comparisons," a need that produces, in this case, "poetically and intellectually compromising" results, as Frost never clearly describes the relation between these various spheres of love and need, vocation and avocation, chopping wood and composing poems.

happens to the tramps.[10] This refusal to provide narrative closure to the confrontation is, for some critics, a sign of the poem's creative deficiency. As Hayden Carruth (1995, 156) grumbles, "The two tramps and the mud time are left stranded." Yet we might read this lack of closure not as a poetic faltering but rather as a disenchanted admission of its own impossible "stakes." The antagonists remain locked in a stalemate for which there is no satisfactory representational outcome: the speaker's more idealized form of labor cannot be extricated from the specific demands the tramps place on it, and the tramps' labor cannot be elevated to the transcendent value the poem lauds.

Thus as with Whitman's poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" stages its inability to represent fully the transcendent value of labor on which both poems insist and instead meditates on the quandary of labor—as a mode of everyday survival and an aesthetic experience—under capitalism's disenchanted circuits of production and exchange. As a georgic poem acutely attentive to its Virgilian heritage, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" further reflects on its internal difference from the *Georgics* and the poetic tradition Virgil inspired. While Frost's poem draws on Virgilian descriptions of the intimate relationship between weather patterns and the contingency of manual effort, "Two Tramps in Mud Time" does not discover the potential for disenchantment in the abrupt changes of the seasons but rather in the greater historical climate embodied by the tramps. This climate not only makes a labor combining "love and need" impossible to undertake but also disrupts the poem's own georgic descriptions of such labor in action. That the poem's georgic catalog is unsettled by the confrontation with the tramps is at once a sign of the representational dilemma labor raises and a metapoetic acknowledgment of the changed possibilities of georgic poetry itself. Under these conditions, the task of the georgic poem becomes that of chronicling, in Frost's famous phrase, "what to make of a diminished thing" (1995b, 116). "Two Tramps in Mud Time" contemplates, then, not only the "mortal stakes" of labor as a historical problem that resists resolution but the *generic* disenchantment the georgic undergoes in its chronicling of the novel pressures remaking labor.

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[10] A variety of critical readings of this poem hinges on the question of whether the speaker cedes the task to the tramps in the end. Malcolm Cowley (1944), Dennis Donoghue (1984), and Meyers (1996) claim that the speaker insists on finishing the task himself. Cowley (1944, 345) asserts, for example, that Frost's speaker lets the tramps leave "without a promise or a penny." Other readers, such as Perrine (1973), John Kemp (1979), and Walter Jost (1998), argue that the speaker finally allows the tramps to take over the wood chopping. My reading claims instead that Frost never reveals the speaker's decision in the final lines and that this unanswerability is key to the disenchanted georgic stakes of the poem.

Both Frost's and Whitman's texts offer examples of the ways the georgic in modernizing America does not altogether "exhaust its potentialities" but is reimagined in the face of the historical disenchantments of capitalism. As Whitman's and Frost's poems reveal, modern georgics face particular representational dilemmas in their attempt to navigate the contradictory meanings of labor under capital. These dilemmas are acknowledged and worked through, if not ultimately resolved by, the poems' specific formal strategies—the interplay of an abstract rhetoric of sublimity and concrete catalog of occupations in Whitman's poem and the unresolved dramatic encounter of "Two Tramps in Mud Time." In this way, the disenchanted georgic exemplifies Michael Denning's (1997, 244) claim that "work itself resists representation." But the difficulty of representing labor has less to do with its repetitive, nonnarrative nature, as Denning claims, than with its plural and irreconcilable forms.[11]

In turn, attending to the presence of the georgic in American poetry raises questions about why other modes of embodied being and knowing tend to be privileged as culturally relevant and why labor continues to function, as Nicholas Bromell (1993, 2) writes in his text on literature and labor in antebellum America, as a representational "blank." If Bromell's (7) claim speaks to the larger problem of labor in the American literary-critical imaginary—an inescapable human activity that, as he argues, "takes place everywhere yet appears to find cultural representation almost nowhere"—it seems particularly relevant to raise in relation to poetry, so closely affiliated in Americanist criticism with theories of lyric reading, as Virginia Jackson (2005) has cogently argued.[12] To read for the georgic would contribute, at one level, to recent poetic criticism that responds to this lyricizing tendency by highlighting the variety of formal techniques and generic conventions practiced by American poets.[13] And yet at another level, excavating a georgic poetics in American literature is less a matter of adding another genre to an ever-widening list than one of considering investments largely unexamined in this literary tradition about the ways poetry situates itself vis-à-vis labor—its employment of and resistances to the tropologies of production; discourses of improvement, cultivation, and value; and phenomenologies of manual labor. The georgic, in its reckoning with labor as lived activity, site of ceaseless potential, and alienated commodity, raises novel questions about how a poem represents its own productive life in and against the workings of history.

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[11] Of the difficulty in representing labor, Denning (1997, 244) writes: "Work itself resists representation: and the labor to render the repetitive manual tasks of shop and home can prove as boring as the tasks themselves, not because of the writer's failure but because of the reader's resistance. Stories, after all, come from travels, adventures, romances, holidays, events: interruptions of the daily grind."

[12] See Jackson 2005. Jackson (ibid., 9, 7) argues that this interpretative practice of lyric reading has come to dominate literary criticism over the past century and a half and has tended toward a "progressive idealization" of lyric into a dramatic site of self-expression "independent of social contingency."

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[13] For some recent examples of this broadening of generic categories in American poetry (particularly of the nineteenth century), see Bennett 2003; Cavitch 2007; Loeffelholz 2004; Richards 2004; Rubin 2007; Sorby 2005.

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