# *Introduction*
# *Georgic modernity: sensory media and the affect of history*

> *scilicet et tempus veniet, cum finibus illis agricola incurvo terram molitus aratro exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila, aut gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanis, grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulcris.*
>
> *Georgics*, 1.493–97

Here, at the end of the first *Georgic*, Virgil famously imagined his own violent present as the future's past: "A time shall come when in those lands, as the farmer toils at the soil with crooked plough, he shall find javelins eaten up with rusty mould, or with his heavy hoes shall strike on empty helms, and marvel at the giant bones in the upturned graves."[1] If one had to choose a representative anecdote for the pervasive georgic influence in eighteenth-century poetry, this scene would make a good candidate.[2] Again and again, with notable flexibility, it makes its appearance in poems of varying political sympathies, whether these are explicit formal imitations of Virgil's poem, such as John Philips's celebratory 1708 *Cyder* (where "Coins, and mould'ring Urns, / And huge unwieldy Bones . . . the Plowman haply finds, / Appall'd"), or topographical verse where the influence is more diffuse but still strong, as in Charlotte Smith's less complacent *Beachy Head* (published in 1807), where "wondering hinds" gaze on the enormous bones of a captive elephant from a Roman campaign and "in giants dwelling on the hills / Believed and marvell'd."[3]

The tableau could also be said to organize much scholarship on georgic-descriptive poetry from the seventeenth century through Romanticism, whether the focus has been on georgic as a strictly defined genre or, more loosely, on georgic as a mode exerting a rhizomatic underpresence across a variety of affiliated descriptive and didactic verse genres. But with a crucial difference: under critical scrutiny the *versus*, which in Virgil's generative pun designate both the furrows of the field and the lines of verse on the page, are seen to turn the debris of history the other way, not up but under. So Alan Liu's extraordinary study of 1989, *Wordsworth: the Sense of*

*History*, offered this formulation, which remains influential in the study of topographical verse:

> Georgic is the supreme mediational form by which to bury history in nature, epic in pastoral. Like the tour mode, it is the form in which history turns into the background, the manure, for landscape. Through georgic, Wordsworth is able, at least at first glance, to make the entire under-narrative of the Revolution sink into unbroken invisibility. . . . The purpose of the mirror of georgic nature is to hide history in order, finally, to reflect the self.[4]

The trope of overturning has a long, distinguished genealogy in British rural ideology critique. Before Liu, and treating a different period, James Turner put the case as follows: "Rural poetry of the civil war period [1630–60] does not simply embellish or ignore the things of the world; it inverts them." Raymond Williams described the table-turning as a "magical extraction of the curse of labour" by the "simple extraction of the existence of labourers" in his classic analysis of Jonson's and Carew's country house poems. What the work of art buries or extracts the critic can recover. "[W]e must peer under the classical draperies of this personified Industry," wrote John Barrell of a passage in James Thomson's *The Seasons*, "and ask who she is imagined to be."[5] Even Kurt Heinzelman's recent and ongoing work on Romantic genre, which has maintained that *Virgilian* georgic did possess "a requisite sense of history," argues nonetheless that "eighteenth-century uses of georgic already tended to undermine, to the point of silencing, the genre's capacity for historicist thinking" – and that after the 1760s, "the genre quite suddenly disappeared, at least by name, from literary practice" into the fissure of a Foucauldian epistemic break.[6] (Heinzelman's qualification, "at least by name," like Liu's "at least at first glance," is important, and so we will return more than once to the work of both scholars.) Before the scholars, there were the poets: George Crabbe's exclamation – "Then shall I dare these real ills to hide / In tinsel trappings of poetic pride?" – anticipates the twentieth-century discussion.[7] Much of the strongest work we have to date has shown us the ways in which the georgic influence on historical representation in eighteenth-century and Romantic poetry has worked like Marx's and Engels's famous *camera obscura* of ideology: "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from the physical life process."[8]

These analyses have been immensely productive: both directly and indirectly, they have done much both to invigorate the study of the georgic

in particular, which for some time had lagged considerably behind our versions of pastoral, and to reanimate topographical poetry from the seventeenth century through the first phase of Romanticism more generally. One would not want to forfeit the acuity of the negative hermeneutic or the awareness it has given us of the constraints placed on representing the rural poor, those documentable hard facts that lie on what Barrell aptly calls "the dark side of the landscape."[9] Still, it seems time to ask whether there are ways in which the poetry can and does offer a substantial register of "history." Do those georgic *versus* in some instances "work" as agents of disclosure in ways we have not been able to recognize, even as they attempt ideological closure in ways that we have? What happens if we – not naively but heuristically – take Virgil's tableau at its word and explore the possibility that the problem is sometimes not that the plough or the pen buries what should be disclosed, but that the critic's predicament, like that of the farmer and the poet, is the difficulty of recognizing the historical meanings of what does get turned up, not under, by their lines?

This book proposes that those material georgic *versus* can be complexly communicative sites for certain kinds of history, particularly that aspect of the flux of historical process that Raymond Williams called social experience "in solution," not yet or never quite precipitated out in the form of the "known relationships, institutions, formations, positions" or other familiar terms. When Williams spoke and wrote gropingly of "the experience of the present" or history as "presence," he did not necessarily mean the temporal present, which is equally susceptible to the "precipitating" and fixative effects of analysis as the historical past, but that immanent, collective perception of any moment as a seething mix of unsettled elements.[10] The issue he points us to is not "presence" or immediacy, as is often concluded, but, as his late interviews with the *New Left Review* make much clearer, *presentness*.[11] And presentness can be analyzed as a mediated problem or a problem within mediation. However uncertain Williams's talk of "experience" and "feeling" was – and in the pages and chapters that follow I will treat it as a problem, with *its* own history – nevertheless, the analytic and conceptual dilemma he tried to diagnose remains a real one. It is a version of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: the difficulty of recording and recognizing history-on-the-move, or, to invoke grammar rather than physics, the difficulty of treating or recreating the historical process as a present participle ("the present tense, so to speak grammatically," he insisted) rather than as a past perfect.

My overarching argument will be that historical presentness is often "turned up" by georgic as *unpleasurable* feeling: as sensory discomfort, as

disturbance in affect and related phenomena that we variously term perceptive, sensorial, or affective – I refer to the noise of living (the aural trope will be examined), rather than to shapely, staged, or well-defined emotions (the sentiment of a Yorick, the feeling of a Harley).[12] It is no doubt true, as we have come to say almost ritually, that affects have a history, are conditioned by specific material circumstances, etc. Certain affective positions may indeed belong to the set of coping practices that Pierre Bourdieu designates "habitus": "durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures." However, I hope to show that other affects, especially affective dissonance, can conversely be a neglected postern of certain kinds of history. (That is not to say that they are the only postern, merely an important one that needs more analysis.) As discomfort, they are not well described by the term that Bourdieu, sounding remarkably like a modern reader of the *Georgics*, uses: "habitus, history turned into nature, i.e., denied as such."[13] Nor are they particularly well encompassed by most definitions of ideology, even Louis Althusser's sophisticated and capacious sense of ideology as a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," since Althusser's corollary question ("why do men '*need*' this imaginary transposition of their real conditions of existence in order to 'represent to themselves' their real conditions of existence?") indicates that he, too, considers ideology a coping practice, a way of preserving as much as possible the pleasure principle, or at least the pleasure principle modified and restricted by the reality principle.

In a rhetorical flourish at the end of the important first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson wrote that "History is what hurts." The aphorism has been so often cited that I suspect Jameson himself might now want to retract or rephrase it, but, if so, then it is all the more interesting to ask, and to understand, how something like "hurt" became a powerful index of what Jameson calls, by turns, the Real (after Lacan) and (after Althusser, following Spinoza) the "absent cause."[14] As unlikely as this proposition may at first sound, I will examine this uncomfortable affect of history as a production and a legacy of the georgic mode as it inflects British poetry of the "long" eighteenth century.

While my argument thus clearly resists the demystifying charge of the Romantic new historicism and its forerunners in British ideology critique, it does take its cue from them in one important respect. The significance of some kind of "feeling" ("sense," "hurt") as a mode of historical manifestation is an underexplored or undeveloped insight of the most articulate exponents of both methods. Again, I think of Liu, who asks

toward the beginning of his study:

> How precisely does literature "sense" the sense of history? The solution to this inquiry, I suggest, requires that we unthink the "idea," which from Locke through modern history of ideas has as much blocked as facilitated the passage between historical context and historical knowledge . . . [I]deas and their influence are always after the fact. Historical context first makes itself known to an author in concrete, highly charged phenomena that are accepted as material because they are prior or unacceptable to idea . . . It is the excess of negativity in such markers of difference [constitutive of historical context] that manifests itself in the author's *pre-ideational consciousness* as an elementary *feel* for representation.[15]

Liu does not often return to this (collective, even if here connected to the author) "pre-ideational consciousness." His project is to write *The Sense of History*, not the history of the "sense of history," and it may also be that History steals the show from Sense in his study. Nonetheless, this passage and ones like it are wonderfully suggestive, and they prompt me to wonder about such a *history of* the *sense of history*, not only in Wordsworth but as it preceded him and is later inherited by twentieth-century thought. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the Lockean "idea" is problematic from its inception, and its "unthinking" is a process scrutinized in the writing of the period bounded, roughly, by Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) and Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1815).

Although Liu is not directly indebted to Raymond Williams, and apparently different in his Althusserian commitment to History as "the absence that is the very possibility of the 'here and now,'"[16] Liu's collective pre-ideational consciousness resembles the "feeling" of history-in-motion that Williams tried to give some theoretical standing and dignity, perhaps better in such later works as *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and *Politics and Letters* (1981) than in *The Long Revolution* (1961), the first time he discussed his elusive signature phrase, "structures of feeling," at any length. For Williams as much as for Liu, "ideas" are after the fact. Protesting what he considered the settled habit of treating the "social" or historical present as "past, in the sense that it is always formed" (or, in his favored chemical analogy, already "precipitated"), Williams argued that we turn by default "to find other terms [than the social] for our undeniable experience of the present." If the terms of analysis, "the known relationships, institutions, formations, positions," are fixed and explicit, then "all that escapes from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal[,] this, here, now, alive, active 'subjective.'" Yet this is a misrecognition: what the historian or sociologist has often "taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating" misconstrues "social experiences in solution."[17]

However, as I suggested above, Williams's appeal to "experience," the "lived," and "feeling" sets off all sorts of alarm bells among many of his readers, who have heard the sound of a Leavis or a naive empiricism. The interviewers from the *New Left Review* wondered if his commitment to the possibility of "an emergent experience beyond ideology seem[ed] to presuppose a kind of pristine contact between the subject and the reality in which this subject is immersed," and Joan Scott has since accused him of making experience a foundational authority whose discursive construction goes naively unexamined.[18] The phrase "lived experience" seemed particularly disabling because it seemed to coincide too perfectly with Williams's reticence on the significance of Britain's empire to the "country and city" model. After all, his critics have pointed out, in the periods Williams most frequently wrote about, an entire account of the conditions that made possible any experience in England, Scotland, or Wales would have to account for far-flung coordinates not verifiable at the level of sense, by first-hand sight, touch, hearing, etc.[19] As Fredric Jameson writes (with a later stage of imperialism in mind, but the problem holds for earlier stages as well): increasingly, "the truth of [any individual] experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire. . . . Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people." History is thus, for Jameson that "absent cause," a system of relations inaccessible at the level of individual cognition.[20]

During his life Williams resisted these and similar charges. His "feeling" was not attached to isolated subjects, he explained; rather, the category of the "merely subjective" precipitates out during the process of analysis when our categories cannot accommodate the flux or the excess of events. Nor was he supposing a "pristine contact between the subject and the reality in which this subject is immersed." In response to that question from his interviewers, he answered firmly: "No. That should be very clear. For after all the basic argument of the first chapter of *The Long Revolution* is precisely that there is no natural seeing and therefore there cannot be a direct and unmediated contact with reality." However, he continued more enigmatically:

> [I]n the whole process of consciousness – here I would put a lot of stress on phenomena for which there is no easy knowing because there is too easy a name, the too easy name is "the unconscious" – all sorts of occurrences cut across the established or offered relations between a signification and a reference. The

formalist position that there is no signified without a signifier amounts to saying that it is only in articulation that we live at all. . . . I have found that areas which I would call structures of feeling as often as not initially form as a certain kind of disturbance or unease, a particular type of tension, for which when you stand back or recall them you can sometimes find a referent. To put it another way, the peculiar location of a structure of feeling is the endless comparison that must occur in the process of consciousness between the articulated and the lived. The lived is only another word, if you like, for experience: but we have to find a word for that level. For all that is not fully articulated, all that comes through as disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble seems to me precisely a source of major changes in the relation between the signifier and the signified. . . . [O]ne has to seek a term for that which is not fully articulated or not fully comfortable in various silences.[21]

Let us not forget that Williams was an expert on modern communications media. He knew, as he put it in a 1978 essay, that "means of communication" are always "means of production" because they frame and filter their content in determinate and recognizable ways.[22] To my mind he cannot be accused of a naive empiricism or a cult of the "lived"; at the same time, however, he was not willing to settle for the equally naive position that all experience is reducible to its discursive or technological mediation.[23] What interests him, this passage suggests, is the fact that all received articulations have their interference, their static, or their uneasy silence ("all sorts of occurrences cut across the established or offered relations between a signification and a reference"). However inadequate or misleading it proved to be, "feeling" – not as unmediated experience but as that elusive "present participle" for the historical process – was the name he gave to such cognitive noise. He groped, in a wayward, occasional, even baffled way (perhaps all too well matched to his object of study), to give such dissonances some meaning, to find for those interferences and shifts in signification a referent which is not merely personal; for example it can be glimpsed, he suggested, in the wide recurrence of a suddenly charged "semantic figure."[24] Although he probably would have resented the comparison since, notwithstanding his appreciation of Lucien Goldmann, his Anglophilic preferences remained largely resistant to currents in French thought, the later Williams seems to me at certain points quite close to Jean-François Lyotard's conception of the "differend": "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be." "This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling," Lyotard writes, then adds, significantly: "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them."[25]

The conditions of the "here and now" may not, then, be any less absent for the later Williams than for Althusser, Jameson, or Liu; or rather they are absent as *idea* and present as that uncomfortable suprasensory *feeling*. Nonetheless, it is true that Williams never did give a full account of the relationship between those elusive excesses and the media or discourses that collaborate to shape them. He may have been too busy avoiding another "too easy" thesis, at the time being advocated by Marshall McLuhan and other technological determinists.[26] Nor was he eager to examine his own relation to Locke and British empiricism, whose central aporias, particularly a difficulty theorizing a pre-ideational or extra-ideational feeling, he inherited – they are evident in his wary shying away from Freud in the extended passage quoted above. Perhaps for that reason the "structure of feeling," as David Simpson has observed, "has not proved an exportable concept."[27]

I do not plan to import it. But I would like to dilate and give a literary prehistory to the insight, lurking in the formulations of Williams, Liu, Jameson, as well as Simpson,[28] that some sort of affect or cognitive dissonance registers those unfixed elements of history that elude or exceed the Lockean idea. Rather than start from the premise that this is the case, however, I will study those affects, *not* as they emerge from some kind of immediate contact with the real (that infamous "lived experience" that Williams was suspected of harboring a nostalgia for), but rather as they are produced in selected long poems of the later eighteenth century and Romantic periods when their verses compete and clash with rival media, or pathways of perception and communication. Each of the poems I study at greatest length, James Thomson's *The Seasons*, William Cowper's *The Task*, and William Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, is in its own way written under the sign of the georgic mode, and the focus of my readings falls on those moments in which each confronts the *failure* of mediation to produce what Joseph Addison, reading Virgil's *Georgics* most carefully at the turn of the eighteenth century, called, by turns, "Pleasure," an "Idea," and, later, as he elaborated his early "Essay on the Georgics" in *The Spectator* papers, "the Principle of Pleasure." Of course, Addison's influential reading of georgic, whether in his "Essay" on Virgil or as disseminated in *The Spectator* papers, has no monopoly on the discussion of pleasure or displeasure, but it will be key to my argument that the georgic mode allows an intense and historically situated focus on early developments in and conceptualizations of media or "mediums"[29] (the more frequently employed contemporary plural). Poetry invested in the georgic mode obsessively tests its mediating power, and even when it attempts to narrate or otherwise contain history,

something else – an affective residue – will out. I am interested in these moments of excess and dissonance as records of an otherwise unknowable history. (I should caution however, that my interest in history-on-the-move and its affect does not produce an analysis of the sort that explains a poem by showing the relevance of some particular event or cultural force; part of the challenge is to find a way to give rigor to processes whose resistance to clear apperception is part of my very subject.) This book's focus on the legacy of georgic, in other words, is not motivated by a *quid pro quo* impulse to overturn ideology critique on the georgic ground that founds many of its influential analyses, although it will be clear that I am critical of simpler versions of the *camera-obscura*-of-ideology interpretations of the genre. Rather, I am prompted by what I take to be a difficult and undeveloped connection between "mediation" and "media" in Williams and those he has widely influenced. And I believe these are concepts which the later eighteenth-century and Romantic fate of the georgic can illuminate in return.

Over the course of this book, then, I offer the following proximate theses, which may sound counterintuitive at first and are nothing unless they acquire more detailed textual substance. (1) A curious, quirky blend of prosaic subject matter and self-consciously opulent diction and figuration, the georgic in its Virgilian and post-Virgilian incarnations is a mode distinctively concerned with the transmission of precept and intelligence over time and space. Moreover, as it moves from its classical sources into English, the history of the georgic mode was intimately intertwined with the history of efforts to extend, by means of an array of artificial "organs," what Francis Bacon called "the reports of the sences" in *The Advancement of Learning* – the project that he also called (not coincidentally) "these Georgickes of the mind."[30] (2) Within and in part under the influence of georgic, the poetry of the long eighteenth century underwent a process whereby it became conscious of itself as one "sensible path" among others (I take the phrase from the microscopist Robert Hooke).[31] Such verse inhabits a cultural situation in which it has to define itself not only against an array of prose genres, whose material it often usurps, but also in relation to non-written means of perception and communication, whose several mystiques it often courts. This second category includes both optical technology (explored in chapters 1 and 2 , best read together if possible) and oral interchange – the latter ranging from *à la mode* urbane conversation (chapter 3) to residual, rural storytelling (chapter 4). (3) Where almost every scholar to date has concentrated on the "smoothness" of georgic's apparent pleasures – its easing of contradiction – I am most interested instead in the communicative

or perceptual interferences that emerge within the poetry in its rivalry with other "sensible paths," during a period that both promoted fast changes in the notions of space, place, and time and suffered the anxieties of its own expansions. These clashes are the ground, as it were, out of which georgic can plow a sensation of history as affective discomfort, cognitive "noise."

By calling the georgic mode a site for exploration or heuristic, I have tried to indicate that *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* is not a genre survey (e.g., *The Modern Georgic*), especially in the sense that its motives are obviously not anthological, nor are they merely restitutive. While I very much hope that the poems studied will seem newly interesting in what follows, and while I believe that literary history and criticism have not been able to account fully for their high profile in their own time, I come not (simply) to praise georgic, nor to bury it. Having read both the original *Georgics* and British georgics carefully for some time, I would like to open up relatively specialist matters (as work on those subjects has tended to be) to a wider purview: to the history of the feelings, to a revised historicist method that reserves a place at the table for sensation and affect, and, perhaps above all, to the early history of contemporary media in relation to print culture – and thus to the pre-history of concerns that dominate modern and postmodern "media theory." For a comprehensive picture of the literary history of the georgic as a genre with a set of formal conventions, we already have a variety of fine studies; I have learned much from them and will engage them in the main discussion, where relevant, and more extensively in the notes (I hope some of these can offer bibliographical essays of sorts).[32] Moreover, particularly after chapter 2 which treats Virgil's *Georgics* and their Restoration and early eighteenth-century critical reception, my emphasis is not on what James Turner and others have called real or "true Georgics" – the flurry of full-scale formal imitations that succeeded Dryden's translation of 1697 (works by Philips, Gay, Somervile, Smart, Dyer, Grainger, and even as late as Jago) – but rather on texts that appeared, at least in full, from mid-century on, when purer instances of the genre were waning or fully in decline.[33] My conviction is that georgic is most influential, if less well understood, not as a relatively short-lived Augustan genre but when and where it persists afterwards as a subtle underpresence and discipline. As such georgic became, I argue, a subtle foundation for poetic practices during the later eighteenth century, offering itself to that period as an occasion for negotiating temporal flux, spatial extension, and concerns about the transmission not only of traditional precept (Virgil's *praecepta*) but also of new scientific information and "intelligence" (a term from the period's news culture). In this respect I concur with Kurt Heinzelman, whose comment