

## Georgic Echoes in *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* by Cynan Jones

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### Abstract

From his debut novel, *The Long Dry* (2006), to his most recent, *Stillicide* (2019), the non-human has played a prominent role in Cynan Jones' fiction. Of Jones' texts, *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* (2014) specifically engage with cultivation, farming, and raising livestock in a Welsh rustic setting. Both novels present a rural world that resists idealised forms of representing nature as some kind of idyll, thus calling into question the separation between human and non-human. Starting from this premise, my working hypothesis is that the relationship between human and non-human constitutes a relevant trope in Jones' fiction since they are both caught in the very same moment of crisis, change and transformation. To this end, I would like to read *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* through Timothy Morton's idea of the mesh that connects human to non-human. Firstly, I will discuss the generic features of the novels, such as shifting focalisation and temporal disorientation which can be said to favour an encounter between storytelling and material reality. Secondly, I will address Jones' interest in the erosion of the border between human and non-human, illustrating the affective bonds and sensory ties that connect both dimensions. Taken together, Jones' novels entail a deep eco-georgic stance in that rural life is recast in terms of a thematic and material space that brings together human and non-human, conflating change and crisis, failure and success.

**Keywords:** Cynan Jones, eco-georgic, narrative form, human, non-human.

### Resumen

Desde su primera novela, *The Long Dry* (2006), hasta su más reciente, *Stillicide* (2019), lo no humano ha jugado un papel prominente en la ficción de Cynan Jones. De entre todos los textos de Jones, *The Long Dry* y *The Dig* (2014) versan específicamente sobre el cultivo, la agricultura y la cría de ganado en un entorno rústico galés. Ambas novelas presentan un mundo rural que se resiste a las formas idealizadas de representación de la naturaleza como algo idílico, poniendo en tela de juicio la separación entre lo humano y lo no humano. Partiendo de esta premisa, mi hipótesis de trabajo es que la relación entre lo humano y lo no humano constituye un tropo relevante en la ficción de Jones, ya que ambos están atrapados en el mismo momento de crisis, cambio y transformación. Con este propósito, me propongo leer *The Long Dry* y *The Dig* a partir de la idea de Timothy Morton de la malla ("the mesh") que conecta lo humano con lo no humano. En primer lugar, analizaré rasgos genéricos de las novelas tales como el cambio de focalización y la desorientación temporal, que podría decirse que favorecen el encuentro entre ficción narrativa y realidad material. En segundo lugar, abordaré el interés de Jones por erosionar las fronteras entre lo humano y lo no-humano, ilustrando los vínculos afectivos y sensoriales que conectan ambas dimensiones. Consideradas en su conjunto, las novelas de Jones conllevan una profunda postura eco-georgica en el sentido de que remodelan la vida rural como un espacio que aúna lo humano y lo no-humano, amalgamando cambio y crisis, éxito y fracaso.

**Palabras clave:** Cynan Jones, eco-georgico, forma narrativa, humano, no-humano.

In an interview with *Wales Art Review* (2017), Welsh author Cynan Jones, born and raised in Aberaeron (Ceredigion, West Wales), describes his body of work as concerned with the “tangible relationships” (Lavin) between human and non-human:

I’ve been near the sea, this sea, the majority of my life. I wanted to write a story which had none of the things my other books call heavily on. Certain sense of place; integration into that place; tangible relationships. To cast a person out onto the water seemed the right way to tell a story like that. My own experiences over the years informed the physical action of the novel. The landscape delivered the possibility of the story. (Lavin)

While the above quoted passage specifically refers to Jones’ fourth novel, *Cove* (2016), the non-human is of paramount importance in his entire *oeuvre*. In the very same interview, Jones says of his writing that he needs “to understand the place, and what is possible there, in order to draw the story from it” (Lavin). Jones’ attention to the human/non-human dynamic interaction discloses the inextricable nature of the bond between material earth and inhabited world. In Jones’ works, readers can find that hope and failure, hard work and natural hazards coexist, reminding us of the entanglements with the more-than-human world. Take, for instance, Jones’ latest novel, *Stillicide* (2019). With its “dense web of connections between characters and stories” (Allan), *Stillicide* engages with the disastrous impact of climate change on water resources in a near future, as an uncanny feeling of unhomeliness connects human to non-human. While *Stillicide* grapples with the sense of precariousness that equally impinges on humans, insects, and natural resources in a metropolitan area, *The Long Dry* (2006) and *The Dig* (2014) specifically get to grips with cultivation, farming and raising livestock (cows, pigs and lambs) in a Welsh rustic setting. Both novels present a rural and georgic world where everything has to be worked for, making readers aware that the countryside, with its lambs, ewes, cows, calves, pigs, badgers, bogs, flowers and ponds, is as central as humans. To some extent, Jones can be said to fit within an English rural tradition that reaches back to Thomas Hardy, among others; a literary tradition that insists on the “unconventional use of the pastoral codes” (Head 12). As Dominic Head explains, Hardy’s modernity arises from his exploration of “the connection between different periods of agricultural decline, rather than celebrating an earlier rural heyday” (12). Likewise, Jones represents woes and difficulties of country life, since “human and animal tragedy provides a foundation” (Bernhard) for his stories. While the reference here is to *The Dig* and to the fact that “there is ‘no bucolic pastoral’” (Bernhard), this lack of idealisation is typical of Jones’ works in which joys and woes are closely intertwined.

In Jones’ novels, the mutual imbrication between human and non-human, care and decay, technical skills and disruptive forces forms the basis for the argument in my paper. *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* bring to the fore a shared condition of change and transformation in an echo of Virgil’s *Georgics*. As William Batstone contends, the debate on the nature of Virgil’s poem has yielded “a diversity of compelling interpretations” (Batstone 125). On the one hand, scholars, like L.P. Wilkinson, see the *Georgics* as a didactic treatise on agriculture and technical skills, where country life is depicted as “a way of life” (Wilkinson 12) with its merits and attractions. On the other, critics have called special attention to the “tragic and pessimistic aspects” (Batstone 143) of the poem.

Michael Putnam, for instance, understands the *Georgics* not as essentially didactic but as a gloomy meditation on self-fulfilment where “nature’s negative indifference to man’s situation can only be partially altered by man who, with continuous effort and the constant imposition of order on her chaos, can expand her rhythms to embrace growth as well as decay” (Putnam 7). For Batstone, however, “the gathering of the discrepancies and harmonies of our presence in the world into word and thought” (Batstone 128) reflects the true strength of the *Georgics*. In this respect, Jones’ narratives express the same georgic emphasis on skills, care and responsibility. To a certain extent, *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* call up Virgil’s description of physical and intellectual labour in Book I (ll. 145-46) of the *Georgics*, “[r]elentless work conquered / all difficulties—work and urgent need when times were hard” (8). This quote illustrates, as Batstone points out, that *labor* (“work”) in Virgil can entail failure or success in that it conveys a divergent and discordant meaning, “simultaneously victory and defeat, effort and the need for effort, artifice and the failure of artifice” (Batstone 137). These lines can then be read as an example of the polyphonic universe of the poem, thereby calling into question the divide between human and non-human, failure and success. In their ability to intermingle human with non-human, joys with woes, Jones’ works can be approached from a georgic perspective that reminds readers of who they are and of their enmeshment with the world around, pointing to what Timothy Morton calls “the mesh”, a total interconnectedness without absolute centres, where “everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground” (*The Ecological Thought* 28). In “the mesh,” care and lingering sense of failure, rootedness and alienation coexist.

Similarly, Jones’ novels challenge binary oppositions, reminding us of the ever-changing modes of the human/non-human interaction. *The Long Dry* opens with the description of a farm where a pregnant cow is missing, while secrets and silences impinge on the lives of the characters, disclosing a feeling of aching melancholy. In Jones’ debut novel, Gareth, a farmer who has inherited an almost unproductive farm in the Welsh countryside, has to cope with a series of financial and personal problems affecting his own family. With a temporal dislocation, straddling the borders of past, present and future, *The Long Dry* portrays the pervading sense of loss that affects human and non-human alike. In the same lyrical vein, *The Dig* combines two narrative strands: the grieving lamentation of a recently-widowed Welsh farmer, Daniel, with the illegal activity of an unnamed badger-baiter, known as “big man.” In this novel, mournful and elegiac tones are intertwined with images of brutality, such as in the birth of malformed lambs or in the scenes where dogs and badgers savagely fight. Moreover, Jones’ novels emphasise that everything has the potential for growth but is also subject to decay without practical application and care. The attention to details and the potential exhaustion of natural resources is possibly indebted to Virgil. As Janet Lembke argues in the “Introduction” to her translation of the *Georgics*, Virgil’s poem suggests that despite hard work, “the world in which we live has never been made perfect” (xiii). This is what makes Virgil’s *Georgics*, Lembke explains, a “poem for our time” (xiii) as it strikes to find a balance between the anxieties that pervade societies and the hope that a new birth might be possible.

As alluded to before, farming and raising livestock are crucial themes in *The Long Dry* and *The Dig*. Consistent with the spirit of Virgil's *Georgics*, Jones' vivid picture of the hard conditions of farming life provides a way to examine the relationship between writing and material reality, human and non-human. The rural world we find in Jones' works is not an idyll, a naïf product of the Golden Age. It instead evinces what Jakob C. Heller calls a "proto-ecological perspective" (250) on the imbrication between human and non-human because of its attention to details that makes the idyll "itself produced" (250). As David Fairer argues, the georgic mode does not lay emphasis on the healing and contemplative effects of nature but on "the minuter readjustments and qualifications that allow life to continue" (207). Unlike the pastoral, a trope which typically entails "the perspective of the aesthetic tourist" (Garrard 108), a kind of retreat that "obscures the realities of labour and hardship" (33), the georgic presents a world demanding pressure and physical toil. Whereas it is true, as Terry Gifford contends, that the pastoral tradition can be described as "a roller coaster ride" (159) with all its variants, the georgic unveils the quotidian and ordinary connections between intellectual and physical efforts. The georgic mode, Laura Sayre claims, combines "emotion and technical detail, hope and despair, drudgery and delight, feeling and intellect, observation and lore—and that therein lies its appeal" (194).

Starting from this premise, in this article I want to read *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* through Morton's idea of the "mesh." Firstly, I will discuss the generic features of the novels, such as shifting focalisation and temporal disorientation which can be said to favour an encounter between storytelling and material reality. Secondly, I will address Jones' interest in the erosion of the border between human and non-human, illustrating the affective bonds and sensory ties that connect both dimensions. Taken together, Jones' novels entail a deep eco-georgic stance in that rural life is recast in terms of a thematic and material space that brings together human and non-human, conflating change and crisis, failure and success.

## Generic Features

In the aforementioned interview with *Wales Art Review*, Jones points to the elemental nature of his prose as an indication of how his style is "instinctual, and [...] determined by the narrative, the story. It's about the surface, the meniscus – that's the language" (Lavin). As Jones' words suggest, his narrative technique is aimed at conveying the free flow of human thoughts but also the tangible experiences of the physical world as if "seeing it for real" (Lavin). So, I want to reflect here on the generic features of *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* in which a set of negotiations between human and non-human arise in terms of care, responsibility and alterity. This enmeshment discloses changes, gaps and transformations that highlight the sense of "strange strangeness" (*The Ecological Thought* 15) in the encounter between human and non-human. Morton's ecological stance admits the notion of "the mesh" as "a sprawling network of interconnection without center or edge" (*Dark Ecology* 81) where human centrality is questioned. Morton imagines that the interconnectedness between human and non-human is both alien and intimate, a paradox

that emerges when we realize that we can never be acquainted with another entity completely. This meets up with the idea of georgic dwelling as a “long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work” (Garrard 108). Greg Garrard, referencing Martin Heidegger as one aspect of georgic, sees georgic dwelling as a set of rural and agricultural practices that result in a figurative “marriage of man and place, culture and nature” (113). However, in *The Ecological Thought*, Morton criticises the Heideggerian idea of dwelling, specifically the German philosopher’s human-centred understanding of *Dasein* as “being-in-the world” (*Being and Time* 32). According to Morton, the encounter between human and non-human displaces human centrality, generating a “vast mesh of interconnection” (*The Ecological Thought* 38). In narrating this enmeshment, Jones’ novels show how georgic dwelling is not fixed. *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* orient our understanding in the direction of multiplicity. To a certain extent, Jones’ fiction recuperates the “simultaneous sense of continuity, discontinuity and interdependence” (Batstone 129) that informs the georgic mode in Virgil. Specifically, in *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* varying focalisation and temporal shifts contribute to a generic form characterised by dialogism and interaction, that metaphorically opens up to others’ life forms. Moreover, the paragraphs of the novels are separated by white spacing that makes for shifting focalisation and temporal ellipses, while dialogues, as usual in Jones’ fiction, are bereft of speech marks to let thoughts flow freely.

*The Long Dry* can be read as a polyphonic narrative where human voices, non-human traces and the memoirs of Gareth’s ancestors are inextricably interconnected. Winner of the Betty Trask Award, *The Long Dry* hinges around a farm located somewhere in Wales, “on a low slope a few miles inland from the sea” (3), where Gareth lives with his wife Kate, their children, Dylan and Emmy, and their ailing dog Curly. Gareth has inherited the farm from his father, who left his job as a bank clerk in the aftermath of World War II. This information is imparted to readers fragmentarily through Gareth’s reading of his father’s memories. Gareth turns to his father’s diary to find consolation, reading the manuscript at night “to help himself sleep. To bring some sound into the stillness” (27). The metafictional incorporation of the manuscript adds a further narrative layer to the polyphonic organisation of the novel. *The Long Dry* comprises ten chapters, with the omniscient narrative voice darting in and out of the various points of view. Each chapter is structured in short and fragmented sections and the titles bear the names of characters, animals, places or objects, such as “the Vegetable Patch” (13-14), “the Ducks” (19-28), “Emmy” (37), “the Mole” (39-41), or “the Tractor Wheel” (49-52). In readers, this gives rise to a multifaceted and fractured vision: through impersonalisation and personification, both human and non-human are hence endowed with a narrative voice. Similarly, *The Dig* orchestrates smells and sounds of georgic life and the result is an intrinsic dialogism reflected, for instance, in the ways the tale is structured. The five sections of the novel are divided into short chapters where Daniel’s viewpoint is juxtaposed to the perspective of the “big man.” More importantly, animals, places and objects, “The Horse” (7-50), “The Dig” (53-76), “The Cloth” (79-100), “The Sea” (103-28) and “The Shard” (131-54) are employed as tiles of the sections and are thus placed in an agential position. The narrative, then, stems from these intra-actions that allow human

and non-human bodies and meanings to converge. This dialogic structure is evocative of the vibrant agency of material things. It reminds us, as Jane Bennett contends, that “a source of action [...] can be either human or nonhuman” (viii). Matter, Karen Barad argues, is “a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still” (170). This implies that there is no privileged position from which knowledge is produced and that we can find agency in different forms, such as in things and animals. From a material ecocritical perspective, such an object-oriented reformulation of agency produces knowledge in the very terms of the encounter between human and non-human, thus in their coming together as in the mesh. New materialism recognises the porosity of things; that objects and sentient beings have a more intimate entanglement than might be expected. Environmental writing should be, as Morton argues, “a way of registering the feeling of being surrounded by others, or more abstractly, by an otherness, something that is not the self” (*Dark Ecology* 17). Thus, object-oriented ontology entails that meaning and matter are connected and this finds in Jones’ use of places, animals and objects as titles of the chapters a direct and linguistic attention to the non-human.

Contrasts emerge in *The Long Dry* through the juxtaposition of fertility and sterility at the same time. On the one hand, the calving season is a symbol of birth. And yet, the landscape around Gareth’s farm discloses areas of symbolic darkness. I am thinking in particular of the bogs where the intertwining of earth and water work as a vehicle for strange encounters that destabilise reality. In *The Long Dry*, the bog is described as an unsettling place of green weeds and trees whose branches “lifted up like a man standing on somebody’s shoulders” (68). The personification of the bog promotes the landscape to the status of an actant. An actant, Bennett writes, “is neither object nor a subject but an ‘intervener’” (9) and, in *The Long Dry*, the bog becomes increasingly attractive to cows which usually go there “to think” (68), thereby pointing to the place as one where consciousness and awareness are raised. Still, many cows have died in the bog as thick mud clogs up the soil and readers gradually discover that Gareth’s missing cow has moved towards the bog. This place, as local people say, is inhabited by a chimeric beast. The beast is like a kangaroo, with the legs of an elephant and the face of a rabbit and it obviously feeds on children. This monstrous creature is endowed with human qualities as it shows a grimace on its face and “its teeth could give away emotion” (86). When the cow reaches the bog, readers are allowed to enter into the mind of the animal that feels “watched” (73). The pregnant cow is tormented by heat and by the weight of her calf, its breath rasping (85), while it thinks of doing “crazy things” (95).

The transspecies dimension of Jones’ georgic world is predicated on a shared condition of crisis that affects also the objects in the farm. Take, for instance, the old tractor that has been in the farm since Gareth’s family moved there in the aftermath of World War II. The presence of rust and corrosion, together with the faded colour, illustrates the georgic motif of *labor*. In spite of its corroded surface, the tractor “still had a personality” (94). While children would use it as a kind of toy, pretending to drive it, the tractor displays signs of human resilience. Its engine recalls a human heart, in that it works “like a person who is strong” (94). The parallel between the tractor and a strong human being lays emphasis on the exhausting nature of georgic *labor* which symbolically

makes the borders between human and non-human permeable. The self-reflexive stance promoted by Jones' fiction chimes with Morton's human/non-human concatenation consisting of "infinite connections and infinitesimal differences" (*The Ecological Thought* 30).

However, Morton's ecological perspective does not point to a sense of familiarity. It conjures up "the uncanny, the strangely familiar or familiarly strange" (50) which can be argued is not only anti-pastoral but anti-georgic as well. However georgic writing does exhibit uncanny encounters in which human and non-human converge, as Virgil depicts them. In this respect, *The Dig* constructs a cluster of destabilising meaning around the motif of digging. Daniel, for instance, removes a shard from the earth. Daniel sees the metal object as a "mark" (*The Dig* 39; emphasis in the original), a mythological element belonging to the place. To a certain extent, the shard exemplifies the vitality of the soil and its removal deprives the landscape of its familiar qualities. With the material traces inscribed on its surface, the shard embodies a more-than-human history, testifying to the entanglement of human and non-human. Daniel, at some point, restores the shard in the open ground, noticing "a strange part-familiar lettering" (141), an "ogam" that should never be removed. Like an obscure ancient alphabet, which summons up the archaic inscriptions on wood and stone, the shard with its linguistic power consolidates the material presence the landscape.

Moreover, the scene of digging contains indirect allusions to the farmer's digging up the war remains in the soil in Book 1 (ll. 494-97) of Virgil's poem: "the farmer working the soil with his curved plow shall discover javelins corroded and scabrous with rust or clank on empty helmets with his heavy hoe and wonder at the huge bones found in uncovered graves" (19). Material remains, related to the civil wars that plagued the Roman Empire before the rule of Augustus, striate the soil in Virgil's poem. Just as the *Georgics* signals that regeneration is possible through violence, so *The Dig* underscores the signifying potential of the non-human. However, on that very soil, where crops grow and animals are raised, Daniel's wife was killed in an accident, her head crushed by a horse; in a similar violent fashion, badgers and rats are hunted by the "big man", their heads smashed by his terriers, their "flurried clatter of killing" (*The Dig* 34) producing a solid and terrible noise. Alternating between these multiple instances of gain and loss, Jones performs a choral narrative where a common sense of struggle looms large. The novel then continuously interrupts human perspectives: by embedding non-human imagination, the narrative thematises the deep imbrication between human and non-human that participate in a broader dialogue. This interaction is also represented by a fragmented temporality, an estranged sense of passing time where shifting perspectives converge.

The temporal structure of *The Dig* refers to a single day, from dawn to sunset, though flashbacks and recollections, at times represented in italicised paragraphs, continuously disrupt the chronological linearity of the narrative. Various echoes of the past are also conveyed by the figure of digging. The action of digging evokes a way to explore the unconscious mind, thus illustrating the persistence of a past that lies hidden and is not easily accessible. The trope of digging gives visual, tactile and olfactory

substance to this kind of temporal rifts. We can almost hear the spades “cutting through the thread roots” (67), see the ground “sodden with rain and sticky” (67) or feel “the smell of rotted leaves” (67) on the dug-up soil. Like the various holes that mark the Welsh rural landscape, so the narrative displays a fragmentary form, ridden with holes where contradictions, gaps and ambiguities overlap. Through the recollections of people, animals and objects buried underground, Jones tries to unbury the most visceral feelings of the georgic world. The polyphony of Jones’ writing is evocative, in my view, of Seamus Heaney’s famous lines in “Digging” where the Irish poet draws a parallel between the ways farmers used to dig the soil and how a poet can explore a human mind, which establishes connections that cross the borders of time and space. The “cold smell of potatoes” (1 Heaney) that Heaney evokes in the penultimate stanza of his famous poem testifies to the synesthetic qualities of memory as it straddles the temporal boundaries “through the living roots” (1), thereby unearthing hidden connections among sounds, smells and time.

The temporality of *The Long Dry* is similar to that of *The Dig*. Here, Jones disrupts the chronological linearity of Gareth’s narrative strand by interspersing his search for the cow with flashbacks and flashforwards that bring to the fore the thematic unity of a looming sense of crisis. Analeptic incursions stretch chronological time to the limit, instilling the idea of a long-term imbrication between human and non-human. This is suggested, for instance, by Gareth’s constant recollection of his father’s memoirs that overlap with the level of the story. The manuscript is written in Welsh, a language that Gareth sometimes fails to fully understand, forcing him to “make bridges of meaning here and there” (27). The memoirs reconstruct his father’s life before the purchase of the farm, while local tales of folklore are mingled with historical facts, like World War II and the diseases that affected pigs in the 1950s. Gareth is particularly fascinated by the story of a child who had once seen an angel in the waterfall (28). Years later, the same child, by then a young man, sees the angelic figure again while he lies dying in a bomb crater and a man runs past “with a shard of metal, blast-whitened in his back, ripped and shaped like wings” (29). In these memoirs, Gareth seeks comfort and inspiration but what he eventually finds out is a common condition of crisis, discovering that a similar condition of disorientation affects the present. The embedding of various narrative strands echo the correlation among the chaos of the civil wars, political instability and contagious diseases in the *Georgics*. In a similar vein, Gareth’s quest for the missing cow symbolically alludes to a much broader quest for meaning. In this respect, the convergence of various plotlines creates a mosaic-like frame where legends and facts are intertwined. Significantly, this feeling of change and crisis is not only refracted in the uncertainties of the present; it also informs the future. In the sixth chapter, readers learn that Gareth’s child, Emma, will die “nine days from now” (69). Here, Jones shifts to the future tense, immersing readers in a proleptic scenario: Emma will go into the woods, pick up a mushroom and die of *Amanita virosa*, the so-called “Destroying Angel” (71). The poison will percolate through the organs of the child and cause death. As these quotes illustrate, the non-linear temporality of *The Long Dry* suggests that narratives can favour attentiveness to a shared condition of change and crisis, mixing up facts and fiction.

In formal terms, then, the combination of scenes of birth and death, savage brutality and caring tenderness showcases the impossibility of separating these dynamic tensions in the georgic world where, in Fairer's words, "stringent and often uncomfortable" ("Where Fuming Trees Refresh" 212) feelings arise. As Fairer makes clear, georgic writing exhibits a fascination with "resistant and indecorous, even obstinately unpoetic, elements" (205) that serve as physical reminders of the frustrations and negotiations that characterise human and non-human. In Jones's novels, the ever-changing natural forces testify to the importance of humble details and common struggles, invoking, as Fairer argues, "a sense of being tested through time" ("The Pastoral-Georgic Tradition" 114). Jones' fiction can be read as a celebration of man's care for agriculture and raising livestock which however problematises the trope of agricultural success, revealing how, as Richard Thomas argues, "resurgent nature destroys man's efforts to subjugate nature through cultivation, and the ways in which man's success in subduing and transforming nature carries along with it the seeds of a spiritual loss or failure as it sets him outside of and against the natural world" (121). Jones' treatment of georgic dwelling takes the form of a peculiarly charged encounter between human and non-human. In my view, his novels present a world that retains, in Kevis Goodman's words, a "sensory discomfort" (Goodman 3), exhibiting an interplay between emotional responses and the material world of smells, sounds, space and time. By varying the focal perspective, Jones brings attention to the relevance of the non-human which asks to be disclosed in its own language. In depicting a world in a state of flux, the georgic mode in Jones' fictional world raises crucial concerns about the way we perceive our relationship to the rural world, reminding us of the contingency of our existence.

### **A Symbiotic Relationship: Sensorial Continuity Between Human and Non-Human**

Jones writes about the rural Welsh landscape as a space that is inhabited, sensed, smelled, imagined and crossed by fears and hard work. To this end, he employs a wide range of nouns, adjectives, and past and present participles that portray the georgic spirit of growth, hard labour and decline. A good example of the procreative force of nature can be found, for instance, in the following quote from *The Long Dry* where the landscape is poetically depicted:

The view is stunning, with the land going gently away and the sea before you, silk and blue above a line of thick gorse, bursting into yellow. In this weather, in this heat, the gorse sometimes smells of coconut and honey, and you can hear the seed pods exploding in the sun with sharp snaps. (43)

Here, the extradiegetic narrator describes the view from the farm where *The Long Dry* is set, with a focus on the colours and smells that permeate the area, in an echo of pastoral idyll. With strongly lyrical tones, the place is infused with the varying shades and hues of the gorge, its perfume reverberating through the landscape. In formal terms, Jones tries to convey this symphony of smells and colours with the alliteration of the jarring sound "b" ("before," "blue," "above," "bursting") and the sibilant "s" ("stunning," "sea," "silk," "smells," "seeds," "sun," "sharp," "snaps"). Moreover, the rhyme "blue"/ "you" creates a

rhythmic pattern that, in a symbolic way, scatters the smell of honey and coconut, while the image of the pods popping in the sun is made manifest with the alliteration of the implosive sound “p,” thereby achieving a great acoustic effect. Before his father’s purchase, the farm had belonged to an eccentric widow who had lost her husband and sons during the war and had eventually gone insane. The earth was once covered with bracken and bramble that, when cleared, became “full and hungry” (13). Gareth then planted potatoes, cabbages, onions, beetroots, carrots and parsnips, while gorse flowers, celandines, daffodils, dandelions, primroses, dog violets and bluebells fill in the hedges with their scent. Albeit this vivid emphasis on the reproductive power of nature, *The Long Dry* is also a dramatic representation of the destructive force of nature. Early in the morning, Gareth goes into the barn and finds one of his cows “kneeling beside [...] lowing sadly and gently” (2) its stillborn calf. Then, Gareth discovers that one of his calving cows is missing. The search for the pregnant cow covers the entire novel, a quest that reflects the characters’ fears and anxieties for the future. *The Long Dry* is filled with apprehensions in a way that calls to mind “a certain anxiety” (Head 201) that things may succumb to death and disease as in the *Georgics*.

The narrative is set during the calving season, in a moment of the year marked by unusual heat, a harsh climatic condition that intensifies the hardship of georgic labour. This allusion to heat brings to my mind the “full heat of autumn” in Book 3 (ll. 479-80) of the *Georgics* which “brought death to all domestic animals, all wild beasts” (56). Moreover, the very same ominous impression conveyed by the dead calf in the opening scene can be found after a few pages when Gareth discovers that another cow has given birth to twin calves, one of which is born dead. The cows, mostly Friesians, a cattle bred originating from the northern Dutch provinces, are one of Gareth’s primary occupations requiring intense labour. Besides, financial troubles and family tensions are as burdensome responsibilities as his farming work. As the title itself suggests, the unusual searing heat of the summer pushes the landscape to the verge of dryness, thereby entailing a metaphoric erosion of the natural capacity to procreate. In spite of Gareth’s *labor*, the “dried land” (*The Long Dry* 1) of his farm is a foreboding presence that evokes Virgil’s depiction of the scorching heat in Book 1 (ll. 107-08) “when the soil dries up, its sprouted grain burnt, in summer’s heat” (6).

Like the cows, also the pigs suffer from natural afflictions and economic necessities. From Gareth’s father’s diary, we learn that, in the late 1950s, the traditional Welsh pig, a “strong, long pig with long wide ears and a long jowl” (31), came gradually to be replaced by the Landrace pig, a breed imported from Denmark and potentially more economic to raise and, especially, to breed from. In Gareth’s farm, these pigs later “developed raised lesions, had broken hooves, died easily of pneumonia” (32) and were eventually diagnosed with *Dermatitis vegetans*, a hereditary disease that caused lameness and heart attacks. Gareth’s pigs become “recognisably ‘depressed’” (33) and, on a symbolic level, the animals are presented as vulnerable and subject to diseases, a condition that blurs the boundary between human and animal. This depiction of pain and suffering, shared both by humans and beasts, resembles that of Virgil when, for instance, the Roman poet describes the death of an ox in Book 3 (l. 518): “[t]he sorrowing plowman

goes, unyoking the ox that mourns its brother's death" (58). In general terms, Jones' account of the diseases that affected the pigs parallels Virgil's depiction of the Noric plague at the end of Book 3 (ll. 556-57) that "wreaks carnage and piles up rotted bodies, foul and stinking, in the barns themselves" (59). Here, as in Jones' novel, Virgil explores the suffering of animals as analogous as the condition of humans. The close bond between humans and animals is highlighted by the common subjection to age and disease and by an anthropomorphic language that elicits the reader's empathy. As Virgil warns us in Book 3 (ll. 67-68), "sickness comes in stealth, with graceless old age and suffering, and death's relentless rigor seizes us" (42).

In *The Long Dry*, the threat of complete dissolution is not only suggested by the heat that torments the countryside, by the stillbirth of calves or by the disease that affects the pigs. This condition of crisis also extends to human beings, having some hold over the characters' lives. As the narrative progresses, we learn that Gareth's wife, Kate, has had a series of miscarriages between her adult son Dylan and her much younger daughter Emmy. These tragic events intensify the collisions between Gareth and Kate, leading them to emotional distance, silence and evasive behaviour. Kate experiences a severe sense of loss and frustration because her body is getting old and plump. As the narrator observes, she was "damp like autumn, not wet in the way young women are, like spring" (*The Long Dry* 36). Here, a parallel is drawn between Kate's body and a humid fruitless season. This reading is further complicated by the fact that Kate's dysfunction arises from her husband's work in the farm. Gareth has contracted chlamydia, "transferred in fluid from handling the sheep" (49) and has infected his wife. Kate, who was not born in the countryside, symbolically represents a foreign body that comes to be contaminated by the fluids of georgic labour. In other words, Jones depicts Kate's disease as a further connotation of decay, albeit in an unconsciously misogynistic way. Jones' novel can be said to bring to light Virgil's connection among *labor*, *amor* and disease. While *labor* is important to control the forces that might imperil the animals, *amor* is fundamental to farming but it can also become destructive. Both in Virgil and Jones, *amor* and disease can be seen as afflictions causing victims. As in the *Georgics*, here readers can find a continuous movement of hard work, hope, failure and guilt. Emotional scars are inseparable from physical changes and they find in the georgic mode a way to refract economic pressures, labour and the search for material and affective care, recalling the intricate web in which human and non-human are interwoven. By the end of the novel, the cow is returned to Gareth by Bill, a neighbour and the drought that plagues rural Wales gives space to pouring rain, producing "a slightest change in the air" (105) that symbolically compensates for the sense of loss and pain. The rain, a symbol for rebirth, embodies the cyclical process of growth and decay in line with the tenets of the georgic mode.

In *The Dig*, a certain georgic orientation is similarly at the heart of the narrative, though the interface of human and non-human is depicted with bleaker tones. Jones' fourth novel is a stark account of two lonely men, Daniel and the "big man." As in *The Long Dry*, so in *The Dig* the story is set during a moment of rebirth, "lambing time" (*The Dig* 1), while everywhere in the valley "farms were involved in their own private processes" (1).

In a georgic fashion, *The Dig* pays homage to the typical values of industriousness and hard work. In the opening scene, Daniel is putting gel on his hands, ready to help his ewes to lamb. The animals, which belong to Beulah breed, a Welsh native species with a distinctive speckled black and white face, are one of Daniel's main concerns. Readers can almost feel and visualise the smell of the "grease of birth" (12) and the "fluids and motherly efforts" (9) in the barn as Daniel's arms draw the lamb from the ewe. This image of birth however clashes with Daniel's emotional turmoil. As readers gradually enter Daniel's mind, it becomes clear that sounds and smells continuously flow in his consciousness. The smell of piss in the barn is intertwined to other animal smells. This chain of sensory associations brings to Daniel's mind the scent of his wife's skin, thus revealing a kind of "mammalian power" (16) that relates humans and animals. Despite this vivid evocation, it is only at the end of the first chapter, however, that we realise that Daniel was recently widowed.

Notably, the landscape around Daniel's farm is imbued with fragments of noise and other sensory perceptions that create a "strange ventriloquy of sounds" (12): the sucking and clapping of the cattle, a barking fox, the wind coming over the trees, the sound of the tides coming from the coast, the sigh of the sheep, the clap of the cattle's feet in the mud, the chains of the dog (11-13) are the various materialisations of human *labor* and animal life. By foregrounding the sounds and smells of *labor*, *The Dig* illustrates the relevance of agricultural tasks in a georgic fashion. The sounds and smells that permeate the Welsh countryside carry several echoes of Virgil's "scent of heat at bay" (47) in Book 3 (l. 210) or "the smell of muck" (61) in Book 4 (l. 49). However, Jones complicates the sonic texture of the rural landscape that, as Daniel states, can be said to perform "some measureless whiteness in the air" (*The Dig* 13). These sounds produce "some primitive hushed whisper of the performance of vast things" (13), disclosing hidden connections between the rural landscape and the desolation that characterises the lives of the characters. The sounds and smells that reverberate through the air seem to be timeless, carrying an ancientness reflected also on Daniel himself who "could be a man of any age" (9). This impression of sensory interconnection chimes with Goodman's reading of the georgic mode as motif infused with an "*unpleasurable feeling*" (3; emphasis in original) where the noise of living conveys a sense of "disturbance in affect and related phenomena that we variously term perceptive, sensorial or affective" (3-4). Affective bonds are then established between the sounds of the landscape and the emotional uncomfortableness of the characters. Daniel, for instance, "was convinced he could sense illness in the air" (*The Dig* 28). While his perceptions here are related to the animals in the farm, this uncanny feeling is eventually juxtaposed to a disturbance "in relation to his own body and his personal understanding of his health" (28). The lurking fear of disease contributes to create a mood of despair in a suggestive language reminiscent of Virgil's words of warning in Book 3 (ll. 454-56): "the harm is nourished and lives by concealment when the shepherd refuses to lay healing hands on the sore and just sits there imploring the gods for better omens" (55). Here, Virgil reminds us that diseases are natural phenomena and that humans must learn how to deal with them.

As a wounded character, because of the loss of his wife, Daniel becomes aware of his own vulnerability in the encounter with fragile others and he strives to keep them safe from harm. In *The Dig*, the theme of *preservation* carries a double meaning. On the one hand, it entails *care*. In the course of the narrative, a strong relationship between humans and animals makes Daniel inseparable from the landscape where he dwells. He witnesses the birth of a malformed lamb, a brutal image that elicits “hopeless anger” (120), and he feels protective towards a small weak black lamb that does not seem to put on weight. He rubs the animal, “trying to bring some warmth into its muscles” (80), like a caring parent. While his father would have killed the lamb, Daniel lacks his father’s pragmatism, preferring instead to nurture the lamb. Daniel’s caring for animals recalls Virgil’s invocation of *cura* which is used several times in the poem. In Book 1 (ll. 3 and 26), for instance, it is evoked as “what care the cattle need” (3) and as “care for our lands” (4), thus entailing a link among humans, animals and land. However, Daniel feels pity for the weak lamb. His compassion and his *amor* then contrast with Virgil’s invitation, in Book 3 (ll. 96-7 and 390), to reject an old or imperfect animal: not to pity “his sorry old age” (43) and “look for another in your abounding flock” (53). In *The Dig*, this feeling of anxiety extends also to the landscape. As Daniel notes, the countryside was changing “into a thing he didn’t know intimately any more” (*The Dig* 37) because of the fires and the devastation caused by illegal hunting of badgers. Both Daniel and the “big man” search beneath the ground: Daniel thinking to his dead wife buried in the country churchyard and the man exterminating rats for local farms and hunting badgers for money. Digging, hence, discloses different ways of seeing the non-human world. If Daniel’s attachment to the land is connoted by nurturing and caring attitudes, the cruel hunting of badgers by the “big man” does equally represent, as Evie Wyld suggests in *The New York Times*, “violence clearly born of the desire to belong” (Wyld). A “forgotten outcast rejected by society” (*The Dig* 122), the “big man” is a perpetrator and a victim at the same time, his dwelling in the georgic world entailing a state of displacement. However, when badgers confront dogs in cruel fights, the “big man” experiences a similar emotional sense of entrapment, recalling the period he spent in the jail, feeling dizzy as badgers feel disoriented in the cage. By contrast, Daniel’s protective touch with land and animals is hence completely different from the cruel and illicit ways of the “big man.” This shows how human imbrication with non-human is not always based on mutual respect and how dwelling can be precluded.

On the other hand, *preservation* carries the meaning of keeping memories alive. This is the case, as already discussed before, of the sensory associations with lingering smell that connects animals to humans. The evocative power of sensory elements is also made manifest in objects and places which are endowed with the sentient power of preserving memory. The reader of *The Dig* encounters mnemonic residues that mirror the fragmentary mechanisms of human memory, emphasising how the cycles of life and death are more like a continuum than two opposite worlds. Sentience, like intelligence and consciousness are considered “necessary components of the measuring device” (Barad 336). However, as Barad notes, the recognition of our entanglements leads us to reconsider the correlations between human and non-human. The malformed lamb, for instance, with his monstrous head, conjures up Daniel’s wife, whose head had been

smashed by a horse in the fatal accident. Daniel decides to throw the corpse of the lamb in the wood, in the place where his wife died. Under a heavy rain, “some combination of things about him balled into another memory” (*The Dig* 126): here, the loop of memory discloses a sign of relationality in which the recollection of the departed remains alive. From the perspective of material agency, memory becomes agential and recreates the past when it is evoked. The land does not only have a language of its own, such as the cries of the birds, the bleating of the lambs or the whiffs of wind through the wood. As Daniel muses, a place “can remember” (113) or, as he specifies, a place “has to remember” (114). The fragments of the past are encoded in the very landscape where a looming sense of crisis joins humans, animals and places. The non-human thus becomes text and through the motif of digging Jones metaphorically unearths the common vulnerability between human and non-human.

## Conclusion

Care, fears and attention to details lie at the core of Jones’ georgic world. To a certain extent, *The Long Dry* and *The Dig* resonate with Virgil’s georgic allusions, suggesting that technical skills, devotion, and experience are crucial to farming and agriculture. As Batstone argues, the value of Virgil’s poem is that it reminds us of our limitations and that our understanding is “larger than these pressing necessities and that the contingencies of life have already implicated us in failure and greatness” (143). In Fairer’s words, the georgic mode refracts a crisis in nature can be understood as “a more fundamental crisis of humanity” (“Where Fuming Trees Refresh” 201) and this common crisis informs Jones’ literary aesthetics. In certain respects, Jones juxtaposes divergent forms of dwelling, edging towards what Head calls a sense of duty that entails “an interrogation of the continuing relevance of what might be preserved” (17).

In conclusion, loss and crisis abound in *The Long Dry* and in *The Dig*. Memories, sounds and scents permeate the georgic world of Jones’ works, establishing a dialogue with other’s life forms that transcend human life and human temporal scales. Through metaphoric, synesthetic and figurative language, the novels I have explored here blur the border between human and non-human, promoting a deep sense of care and relationality. Shifting focalisation and temporal dislocation participate in a process that unveils the entanglements of human and non-human, with vivid evocations of the material force of the georgic mode. Moreover, by making past and present impinge on the lives of humans, animals and places, the narratives lay emphasis on the persistence of memory and on a sense of community that emerges from a shared condition of loss. I would then argue that Jones’ georgic fiction reminds us that there is a sprawling mesh of interconnection between human and non-human and, more importantly, that the seeds of our emotions are to be found in the very moments of crisis. Through its generic instability and by alerting readers to the sensory connections between human and non-human, Jones’ fiction sheds some light on an ethically-oriented way to practice solidarity, specifically in our contemporary world where ecological questions require immediate attention.

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