A Site for Sore Eyes: Recovering the Rural Laborer’s Poetic Vision in British Georgics

When writing about the strength of Virgil’s *Georgics* in his “Essay on the Georgic,” Joseph Addison contested that the poem “let us see just to much as will naturally lead the Imagination into all the parts that lie conceal’d” so as to “suggest a Truth indirectly, and without giving us a full and open view of it” (98). The georgic poet thus leads the reader through a Picturesque pathway of shaded turns, ultimately leaving us to wander through the thicket alone and find our way back into the light; seeing serves as both the goal and the means to which we achieve that goal. Whatever the particular truth a Georgic poet intends to convey in their work, sight acts as an integral force when both describing and experiencing the natural workspace of the rural labor’s world. This project consequentially launches with two connected questions: “What happens when the rural laborer no longer retains the ability to engage the imagination in the work of seeing their surrounding landscape? When the work of one’s life deadens the poetic eye, what does the work of recovering that crucial sense entail?” I argue that storytelling serves as the site of recovery for British farmers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revealing not only the dynamic and intimate local communities forged in the face of a growing global economy, but also the importance of childhood in shaping our imaginative capabilities.