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Christie Margrave, *Writing the Landscape: Exposing Nature in French Women's Fiction, 1789-1815*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2019. 306 pp. Acknowledgements, abbreviations, quotations and translations, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-781887-04-2.

Response by Christie Margrave, The Australian National University.

I wish to thank Giulia Pacini for her thoughtful review of my book, *Writing the Landscape*, and *H-France Review* for the opportunity to explore some of the questions raised by her in that review. The questions she raises are both interesting and very useful as a starting point for future discussion and research. Whilst the focus of *Writing the Landscape* was a blend of close textual analysis and a rooting in contemporary socio-political context—with regard both to the situation of women in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France and to engagement with debates around specific natural spaces—there are other directions that a study of landscape in novels of this period could take researchers and I welcome the chance to ponder them.

With regard to women's writing of this period in general, and certainly the novels which form *Writing the Landscape's* corpus in particular, there is, to the best of my knowledge, little in the way of direct interaction with what might be traditionally termed "georgic" or physiocratic discourse. The French were relatively slow to engage with the georgic tradition until the publication of Saint-Lambert's *Les Saisons* in 1769 (drawing on the English writer Thomson's *The Seasons* rather than directly from Virgilian models), and, writers such as Cottin, Genlis, Krüdener, Souza and Staël interacted more closely with the prose of Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in their engagement with the notion of a "return to nature" than they did with the poetry of Saint-Lambert. I have been unable to uncover reference to Saint-Lambert's *Les Saisons* in the writings of Cottin, Krüdener and Souza, and have only found tangential, circumstantial links to Staël (though not to her novels). Furthermore, although Genlis's memoirs certainly reference Saint-Lambert, they do not do so particularly favourably. She writes: "Cette année M. de Saint-Lambert donna son poème des *Saisons* [...] et cet ouvrage eut dans le monde beaucoup de succès: mais les vrai littérateurs, en convenant qu'il est en général bien écrit, trouvèrent que c'est un mauvais poème, sans intérêt, sans imagination et très ennuyeux. Il y a d'un bout à l'autre, dans cet ouvrage, une teinte sombre et monotone qui en rend la lecture fatigante." [1]

Cottin and Krüdener praise Bernardin de Saint-Pierre highly in their correspondence. Their fictional works undoubtedly interact with Bernardin's portrayal of nature in *Paul et Virginie* and *La Chaumière indienne*, both of which can be said to reflect a certain georgic element in the importance they attribute to the cultivating of land, attention to the seasons and ripening of fruit according to season, etc. However, the effect Bernardin has on women's novels tends to be

concentrated around either portraits of utopian space or, more commonly, the sentimentality of experiencing emotion within space. The works of Cottin, Krüdener, Genlis, Souza and Staël reveal no real discussion of agriculture as such. Genlis perhaps comes the closest with her writings on botany and her encouragement to teach this subject to children. Nonetheless, her references to cultivation are, to the best of my knowledge, confined to horticulture and planting flowers (often with specific symbolic meanings) rather than to farming. Krüdener makes reference to planting with regard to seasons in *Valérie*, but this is exclusively in order to draw attention to the heroine's grief at the loss of her child, and in fact Valérie's planting of flowers and shrubs reveal a desire to cheat the seasons and to transcend natural time.

There are other respects in which an echo of some of Saint-Lambert's French georgic might be said to be applicable, however. According to Sjödin, "Saint-Lambert had opened his preface by stating that his poem belonged to a genre at which 'the French had not yet tried their hand', georgics not for actual rural laborers, 'but for those whose responsibility it is to protect the countryside'. Still, to most critics, the relation to Virgil was as apparent as the relation to Thomson."<sup>[2]</sup> This would seem to link the French georgic tradition to a certain commitment to environmental praxis. In this context, we might discern a link to the French georgic tradition in the works of Staël, Genlis, Souza, and Cottin. However, as Pacini acknowledges, the field of ecocriticism is not the focus of *Writing the Landscape*, partially due to the often essentialist nature of such scholarship (the essentialism of the perceived connection between women's biological reproduction and nature, for example, is something which women writers of this period in fact appear to be challenging) and partially because the present study does not aim to investigate whether the novels of women writers of the First Republic and First Empire discuss a need to protect the countryside. The latter is a topic which merits further and deeper investigation and is a sufficiently wide topic to produce another monograph. I have, however, begun to publish a little in this area.<sup>[3]</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most intriguingly, when we talk of an interaction with georgic tradition, there is one more aspect which is worth bearing in mind, and which is certainly pertinent to women's writing of this era. Sjödin argues that: "[T]he georgic is something more than a didactic treatise on rural matters. Virgil's model poem is the quintessential 'middle poem' in several senses of the word. Thematically, it is poised in the middle between lowly things such as rural life, and loftier affairs to which it constantly, if obliquely, refers."<sup>[4]</sup> The works of Cottin, Genlis, Krüdener, Souza and Staël reveal an important recurrence of the notion of a "middle space," the creation of which is used to criticise the practice of defining a social role according to a specific gender binary. Furthermore, women's writing of the period 1789-1815 itself occupies a middle space, between the dominant periods of Enlightenment and Romanticism, bridging the gap between both and building on the former to pave the way for the latter. There is likely, therefore, to be potential in an investigation of the ways in which women construct landscapes as "middle spaces" and the ways in which the georgic model can be said to occupy a middle ground. This is particularly the case since the middle ground which Virgil's *Georgics* occupy provide it with a flexibility, and "[f]or many eighteenth-century practitioners of the genre, this flexibility of the georgic promised the possibility of a new, programmatic, and ideologically motivated combination of landscape and politics."<sup>[5]</sup> Certainly this use of middle ground as a podium to combine landscape and politics is highly relevant for women's writing, as the conclusion to *Writing the Landscape* argues.

Regarding the notion of non-human agency, although I struggle to find specific examples of agency of technology or of animals within this corpus of novels, it can certainly be argued that landscape is often endowed with agency and, in this respect, nature's language goes beyond the symbolic. In particular, wilderness certainly becomes an embodied agent: wild landscapes can either provide a genre of "antagonist"—a challenge to overcome, as does the unforgiving desert in Cottin's *Mathilde* (Chapter 3 of *Writing the Landscape*)—or a friend, providing shelter, as is seen in Cottin's *Malvina* (Chapter 5 of *Writing the Landscape*). Furthermore, Staël's Vesuvius and Cottin's storms, tempestuous waterfalls, and harsh desert present examples of landscape which are more than the mere object of human vision or human creative design. They are uncontrollable, powerful and decisive, not only in the threat they pose to human existence, but also in their ability to promote discussion of the limits of human knowledge of the non-human world. These features of the landscape show nature to be far from the comprehensible, controllable subject of Enlightenment thought, sculpted to suit order and rationality. Moreover, as non-human agents, they occasionally act as pivotal points in the novel, influencing events rather than simply mirroring them. This is certainly the case with Staël's Vesuvius passage, which comes at the crossroads of the novel and directly in between Corinne and Oswald's backstories. Some of the written landscapes in this corpus of novels can also be seen to be transcendental. In Cottin's *Malvina* and Staël's *Corinne* the Highland landscape transcends space, time and reality through its connection to the Ossian cycle. In so doing, it takes on an agency of its own, going beyond the visual and lived experience of the people within it. It is both ancient and current, present and absent, the space of reality and also of legend. It transcends the physical realm, allowing connections to be opened up between worlds, and permitting actions prevented to ordinary humans.

Finally, just as discussion of potential interaction between women's writing of the period 1789-1815 and the French georgic tradition might be established on the basis of environmental awareness and countryside protection, so too might discussion of landscape agency in these novels lend much to a future project on ecocriticism in the works of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century French novelists. A 2018 call for papers for the conference 'Tracing Non-Human Agency in Literatures in English' held in Düsseldorf argued that: "Though literature and other creative practices have always acknowledged the agency of non-human, it is only now—with the advent of more and more critical thought in the fields of posthumanism and ecocriticism—that we have the critical tools to adequately address the productivity of the non-human and its manifold influences and impacts." [6] I therefore believe that a new and separate analysis of ecocritical thought in this period's literature is a valuable project to be undertaken. However, it must not be limited only to women's writing or even to works solely based in the French metropolitan centre itself, but should incorporate writing from across the French-speaking world at this critical period in history, when French scientists, explorers and writers became increasingly aware of human impact on the environment, regarding pollution, ecological devastation and the alteration of landscape topology in the colonies. French literature of this period has much to add to our understanding of the climate change process, to the development of ecological thought, and to our understanding of non-human agency and landscape discussion in Enlightenment and Romantic literature. This is, in fact, the basis of my new research project.

## NOTES

[1] Mme de Genlis, *Mémoires inédits de la Madame la Comtesse de Genlis sur le dix-huitième siècle et la Révolution française, depuis 1756 jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Ladvocate, 1825), pp.424-426.

[2] Alfred Sjödin, "The European Georgic and the Politics of Genre: Johan Gabriel Oxenstierna and *The Seasons* in Sweden," in Sandro Jung and Kwinten Van De Walle, eds., *The Genres of Thomson's The Seasons* (Bethlehem Penn: Lehigh University Press, 2018), p.188.

[3] Christie Margrave, "Early Developments of Ecofeminist Thought in French Women's Early Romantic Fiction," *Essays in French Literature and Culture* 55(2018): 43-62.

[4] Sjödin, "The European Georgic and the Politics of Genre," p.189.

[5] Sjödin, "The European Georgic and the Politics of Genre," p.190.

[6] <https://avldigital.wordpress.com/2018/01/25/cfp-tracing-non-human-agency-in-literatures-in-english-duesseldorf-30-03-2018/>

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