The Georgians and the Environmental Imagination: Re-evaluating *Georgian Poetry (1911-1912)* through an Ecocritical Lens

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Abstract

Although growing scholarly attention has been dedicated to rereading literary periods through a more environmentally oriented lens, there remain several phenomena whose ecocritical potentials are disregarded. Georgian poetry, which was developed in early-twentieth-century England, represents, in this sense, a missing link between increasing ecocritical attention on Victorian and Modernist literature. By addressing the neglect toward Georgian literature that not only began during that era, but which still endures, the present study offers an ecocritical reading of the first volume of Edward Marsh's anthology: *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (1912). My study aims to express how a nature narrative trajectory that appears to emerge in selected poems of this volume allows for its possible critical re-evaluation. Specifically, emphasis is placed on how the environmental imagination of the Georgians: a) displays traces of a 'mature' aesthetics in regard to the notion of the environment, echoing the growing environmental sensibility in the 1910s; b) allows for establishing a dialogue with ecocritical epistemology that has been enhanced by current environmental crises. This operation, therefore, represents a useful baseline for current readership to engage in discussions on issues of human-nonhuman connectedness in early 1910s England, which resonates with present-day ecological concerns.

Key-words: Georgians, Georgian Poetry, environmental humanities, ecopoiesis, modernism, Williams H. Davies, Rupert Brooke, Gordon Bottomley, Wilfred Wilson Gibson, D. H. Lawrence.

"Few readers have the leisure or the zeal to
investigate each volume as it appears;"
(Edward Marsh, "Prefatory Note", *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912,* 1912)

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1. Introduction

Since the earliest stages of ecocriticism, past literary works have stood out as privileged sites for disclosing reflections about how to respond to the ecological concerns of the present-day world. While great scholarly attention has also been dedicated to current literary phenomena, a revisionist stance (Clark, 2011: xiii) emerged when ecocriticism began: this approach aimed to negotiate rooted, traditional assumptions in cases of natural world representations for unveiling new narratives in alignment with what Lawrence Buell determines "a mature environmental aesthetics" (Buell 1995: 32).

In spite of the growing awareness that the future of literary studies in the Anthropocene is interlinked with the rediscovery of the long-term ecological potential of the archives of literature (Zapf 2020), certain literary periods and phenomena still remain neglected by ecocritics (Schliephake 2016: 2). It is the case of 1910s Georgian poetry, which covers an age appearing as a(nother) missing link in the scholarship amidst recently increasing ecocritical interest in the Victorian (Taylor 2015; Hall 2017; Mazzeno and Morrison 2017) and the Modernist (Sultzbach 2016) periods. In order to fill this gap, the present study aims to reread a selection of Georgian poems in order to surpass the idea that these works primarily prolong a traditional and conservative trend, as they are often accused of doing. Attention is therefore placed on how, if regarded through current ecocritical epistemology, Georgian poetry becomes useful for unveiling issues of human-nonhuman connectedness, which can a) better connect this case to the environmental discourse of early-twentieth-century England; b) establish a dialogue between Georgian writing and the urgencies raised by the Anthropocene. Specifically, the focus of this essay is the first volume of Edward Marsh's collection, titled *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* (1912), which makes particularly evident the relevance of the Georgians' environmental imagination if regarded through the lens of current ecological discourse.

The present study engages with Jonathan Bate's discussion about how poetry can be observed as a valuable cultural agent, while fostering the development of new environmental ethics for reflecting on current times, as he expresses through the concept of *ecopoiesis*. Since, as he states, poetry, can determine "thoughtfulness and attentiveness, and attunement to both words and the world"

and is useful "to acknowledge that, although we make sense of things by way of words, we do not live apart from the world" (Bate 2000: 23), the present study reflects on how *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* can also become "a making of the dwelling"[1] (Bate 2000: 75): in this sense, it can be understood as inspiring ethical forms of human-nonhuman relationality in the present-day world, if read through an ecocritical perspective. Moreover, echoing Zapf's idea that "imaginative literature acts like an ecological force within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (Zapf 2016: 27. emphasis in the original), rereading *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* in the time of major environmental crises acknowledges new values of this collection: attention is dedicated to the way it can enrich today's environmental discourse with narratives emphasising a sense of human-nonhuman connectedness.

A methodological caveat is needed to clarify that this study adopts an all-encompassing perspective of the poems published in the volume, even though it appears as a composite collection of works and authors: specifically, my analysis delineates an ecocritical thread running through several poems appearing in the collection that centre on the topic of human-nonhuman connectedness, as an echo of the wider environmental sensibility in the (cultural) background of early-twentieth-century England. Hence, while less attention is dedicated to the stylistic and formal qualities of each poem, a discussion on internal analogies of the volume, on a more thematic level, is offered. Keeping in mind some of the dominant critical evaluations of the Georgians, which regard the idea that they produced banal nature poetry (Stephen 1996), they were nostalgic voices detached from modern situations (Spender 1963: 159) which "lost contact with contemporary reality" (Johnson 1964: 3), my study still offers a more attentive reading of the green trajectory running through *Georgian Poetry Vol. I*. By adopting an ecocritical and more cultural oriented lens, rather than relying on enduring Eliotian-oriented perspectives when evaluating their works, I provide a possible (eco)critical re-evaluation of the first volume of Edward Marsh's anthology.

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[1] As Jonathan Bate informs, "[e]copoetics asks in what respect a poem may be a making (Greek *poiesis*) of the dwelling-place – the prefix eco- is derived from the Greek *oikos*, 'the home or place of dwelling'" (2000: 75).

This study is divided into two main sections. The first is dedicated to reflecting on the label 'Georgian', while stressing the limits of its current, dominant critical understanding, in order to access alternative meanings. While shedding light on its critical appraisal in the early 1910s, and on the growing environmental sensibility occurring at that time, emphasis is placed on the intrinsic, still undiscussed ecocritical potentials of this volume. In this regard, the second part of this study analyses selected passages taken from six poems (out of the thirty-six present in the collection) in which the display of issues concerning the intertwining between human and nonhuman entities is more evident. In this way, an opportunity for a critical reassessment of this volume is offered, which acknowledges how the Georgian environmental imagination can assume new (eco) critical values in light of related subjects in contemporary ecological discourse.

2. The challenges of being (a) Georgian

Similarly to many other critical labels in the field of literary studies, 'Georgian' represents a *contested term* (Loughrey 1984: 8) due to its polysemy and to the many possible interpretations that it has stirred. Remaining in the field of English studies, this word possesses at least three main understandings: a) the eighteenth-century writing style matured under the reign of Queen Anne, George I and George II, also known as the Augustan age; b) as an (umbrella) adjective, it refers to the composite literary *milieu* cultivated under the reign of George V (1910-1936); c) as a more specific noun, it relates to the poets appearing in the five-volume anthology edited by Edward Marsh, published between 1912 and 1922.

Even when focusing on this last understanding, the ambiguity of the term 'Georgian' is not completely overcome, for this label applies to a wide range of writers possessing different styles and working on different themes. Moreover, many of the poets known as the Georgians did not perceive themselves as belonging to a similar grouping. Differently from other poetic trends that began at the turn of the twentieth century, and which developed concurrently with the publication of literary manifestoes, like Imagism or Futurism, Georgian poets are not part of a clear, self-aware coterie; rather, they should be considered the result of a combinatory critical operation

led by their editor, Edward Marsh. A renowned intellectual, well positioned in the literary environment of 1910s London, Marsh envisioned a rising generation of poets in the fermenting poetic landscape of his time, which, albeit differently from the revolutionary intents of the vanguards, still displayed aspects of novelty and a reaction toward dominant, late-Victorian poetic trends. As Edward Marsh in fact affirmed in the preface of *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912*[2]: "we are at the beginning of another 'Georgian Period' which may rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past'" (Marsh 1912). These words are useful for inscribing the volume within the wider spirit of innovation characterising English poetry in the early twentieth century after the first decade of poetic stagnation (Ross 1965: 10ff). In this sense, Marsh's evaluation allows for better aligning Georgian poetry with the upsurgence of the many cultural movements that paved the way to what would be soon acknowledged as the Modernist sensibility, from which this phenomenon is often excluded. Marianne Thormählen's recent reframing of Edward Marsh as "the indefatigable promoter of a fresh and vigorous kind of verse that breathed new life into English poetry in the early twentieth century" (2020: 727) is useful for reorienting and reappraising the poems published within the *Georgian Poetry* anthology through a perspective that acknowledges the importance of taking distance from mere dismissive attitudes toward the Georgians, while stressing their overlooked critical values.

Although, as previously said, the Georgians were a composite group of poets, a surprisingly cohesive, critical evaluation characterises their reputations in today's literary criticism. It is, in fact, common to see them primarily remembered as traditionalist and conservative voices, while the label 'Georgian' often assumes pejorative implications, with the accusation of prolonging Romantic clichés and old-fashioned styles during early Modernist England. Aligned to this assessment are, for instance, several encyclopaedias of literature, which, namely, depict the Georgians as "minor poets, quite traditional in form" devoted to what Robert Graves called "uncontroversial subjects" (Baldick 2004: 140), or "poets who did not follow a modernist agenda" (Auger 2010: 126). Likewise, the

[2] From this point forward, *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912* will be referred to as *Vol. I.*

term 'Georgian' is commonly emphasised "as an often-arbitrary designation for a kind and insipid rural verse" (Millard 1991: 10). Furthermore, although this negative understanding, which particularly started from the Sixties, has been critiqued for being a "widespread acceptance of oversimplified stereotypes and half-truths" (Ross 1965: ix), contemporary scholars generally remain attached to the established idea that the Georgians represented, first and foremost, nostalgic, conservative voices, in antithesis to the innovative and experiential character of Modernist poetry (Thormählen 2003: 80).

The idiosyncrasy of the styles of the authors gathered under the label 'Georgian', is already enough for questioning the generalized evaluations of the many poets appearing in the anthology, even when limiting attention to the authors published in one single volume. In addition, the idea that the Georgians primarily perpetuated traditionalist styles seems to contradict the fact that among them were also representative poets of early-twentieth-century modern British literary sensibilities, like D. H. Lawrence and Rupert Brooke. Along this line, current dismissive perspectives of Georgian poetry can also be disputed if one considers the positive critical and commercial reception that *Vol. I* obtained.

Beyond the fact that, seven months after its publication, the book had reached its sixth edition (Ross 1965: 106), it is relevant to stress that a general, affirmative critique emerges from the reviews following the launch of the anthology in 1912. They largely agree with the idea that "[i]f they [Georgians] have not yet started a new period, they have at any rate done with the old", especially, referring to late-Victorian trends still dominating the fin-de-siecle English taste (see Lascelles Abercrombie's review, titled "Victorians and Georgians", *The Manchester Guardian*, 6 January 1913, p. 5, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 61). In this sense, although "there is nothing […] very violently revolutionary" (see Edmund Gosse's review, titled "Knoking at the Door", *The Morning Post*, 27 January 1913, p. 3, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 75) in the Georgian spirit, aspects of modernity can still be noticed in the selected poems of this study, as the analysis will demonstrate. Moreover, as Lascelles Abercrombie presented in his 1913 review, these signs of innovation can be observed in the case of "the technical daring of Mr Rupert Brooke, the elusive elaborate splendour of Mr Bottomley, Mr de la Mare's subtle rhythms, Mr

James Stephens's vigorous tunes, the fresh simplicity of Mr W.H. Davies, and Mr J. E. Flecker's delicacy" (Rogers 1977: 62). Hence, contrary to still enduring, dominant critical trends, the Georgians should be refigured as key voices in the landscape of their time, for they brought aspects of innovation to early-twentieth-century England, particularly in regard to the environmental imagination, as is discussed in the following paragraphs.

3. Beyond the Georgian / Modernist *querelle*

Yet why does a dismissive attitude persist when regarding the Georgians and the anthology *Georgian Poetry*? The answer, as Robert Ross suggests (1965: 235ff), lies primarily with the cultural impact of the First World War, and of its cultural consequences. The eruption of the global conflict caused a general shock in the landscape of 1910s England, which resulted in a deep shift in literary style and imagination, as many studies focusing on the connection between the conflict and Modernism have extensively discussed (Tate 1998; Sherry 2004; Norris 2015). Also, the post-war literary scenario witnessed increasing quarrels between coteries; the prevalence of the Modernist sensibility (Ross 1965: 235), among other trends, had a major effect on the reputation of Edward Marsh's anthology, which was then perceived as proposing aesthetics not adequate for reflecting the spirit of the age which fomented an anti-Georgian reaction (Ross 1965: 189). A contrast can, in fact, be observed between the vitalist, positive attitude characterizing the general tone of *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912*, and the more critical, pessimistic tone of several modernist post-war poets. In this sense, the fact that the last volume of the collection appeared in 1922, coinciding with the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* epitomizes the aesthetic changes occurring in British poetry, as well as the dichotomy Georgians / Modernists, which infused the critical landscape of that time and still survives today.

Marianne Thormählen has underlined how the negative connotations attributed to the Georgians are also due to a general trend in English Studies that developed from the tendency to situate them in opposition to modernist poets, while acknowledging the latter for their critical value and originality and, contrarily, perceiving the first as serving as "a metonymic representation of literary

conservatism" (2003: 80). While defying the Georgian / modernist dichotomy, Thormählen observes that "qualities commonly associated with 'Modernist' poetry were also present in them [the Georgians] (2019: 190). Moreover, Thormählen undermines the implicit judgement that the use of critical labels in literary studies carry, especially when it comes to a restrictive understanding of Modernism that "obscures the universality […] and the degree to which each participant proceeded according to his/her individual impulses" (2003: 91). In this alignment, the Georgians will be discussed here as presenting aspects of innovation in their works, just like other poets writing in the first few decades of the twentieth century: this focus allows analyses to move away from popular, Modernist oriented literary evaluations.

Among these misconceptions is the sweeping claim that the Georgians prolonged Romantic trends by replicating past clichés, including the adoption of the pastoral mode and references to traditional environmental imagery, in a time when similar outcomes were considered outdated. This allegation refers primarily to the influential, critical works of T. S. Eliot, who, from the pages of *The Egoist*, claimed that Georgian verses appeared "insidiously didactic", "Wordsworthian", "decorative, playful or solemn minor-Keatsian" (see T. S. Eliot's review, titled "Verse Pleasant and Unpleasant", *The Egoist*, March 1918, pp. 43-44, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 215). While this reception suggests an undoubted negative assessment of the Romantic echoes among the Georgians, this connection, in ecocritical terms, presents an opposite result, especially when regarded alongside Jonathan Bate's seminal study *Romantic Ecology* (1991). Just like Bate demonstrates how Romantic authors, particularly Wordsworth, possess valuable environmental attitudes resonating with current epistemologies as a "preliminary sketch towards a literary ecocriticism" (Bate 1991: 11), one can consider how similar aspects also regard Georgian poetry's asserted Romantic traces. Moreover, as Peter Howarth also suggests, the echo of Wordsworth in the Georgians can be understood in more complex terms if one considers the engagement of Modernist aesthetics with tradition: "if the whole of reality does form a simultaneous order, why should Wordsworth's presence embarrass the Georgians, if poetry is not the expression of impersonality but the voice of Tradition in the poet?" (2005: 58) In this sense, it becomes

evident how the alleged, old-fashioned simplicity and naturalness of which the Georgians have been accused of pursuing possess a wider spectrum of interpretations and evaluations. Hence, rather than only appearing as elements signaling the alleged lack of modernity of Georgian poetry, Romantic traces and nature narratives in *Georgian Poetry Vol. I* become visible as a useful baseline for unveiling the latent ecocritical potentials of the collection.

A similar consideration can be extended to other popular Modernist attacks perpetrated toward Georgian poets, particularly in reference to the idea that they resulted a "school of the wistful, the dreamy, the unsatisfied and the faint" (Ross 1965: 198) due to their wide reliance on natural imagery, or to the idea that "the corporate flavour of the coalition is a false simplicity" (see J. Middleton Murry's review, titled "The Condition of English Poetry", *The Athenaeum*, 5 December 1919, pp. 1283-5, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 232). These words make reference to the common presence in Georgian poetry of pastoral and rustic elements, which often became targets of critique by its contemporaries: at first glance, the reasons for these attacks are easy to understand if one considers the evident distance between a similar Georgian imagery from the prevailing Modernist urban and sinister aesthetics developing in the same years, as exemplified by works such as T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915). However, contrary to similar evaluations, it is important to consider how Modernism's sensibility also attains several important environmental trajectories (Sultzbach 2016), which as it will be later discussed, allow for debunking the idea of an absolute early Modernist stigmatization of Georgian poetry even though this is evident in the context of the harsh post-war critical *querelle* among several coteries (Ross 1965: 235). In this alignment – and following Thormählen's call to move beyond the well-established "picture of Georgian poetry as conventional in subject matter and technique and nostalgic, not to say sentimental, in tone" (2003: 77) – the environmental imagination becomes a useful tool for shedding light on an innovative understanding of Georgian poetry.

A more attentive glance at the reception of *Vol. I* reveals alternative evaluations, for which the environmental spirit of the collection represents the very baseline for enacting a critical appraisal. When observing the several reviews of the volume, in fact, the presence of natural elements not only results as its trademark,

but also as one of the peculiarities of its modern spirit. An example of this vision is Edward Thomas's review, which discusses how *Vol. 1* "brings out with great cleverness many sides of the modern love of the simple and primitive, as seen in children, peasants, savages, early men, animals, and Nature in general" (see Edward Thomas's review, titled "Georgian Poets", The Daily Chronicle, 14 January 1913, p. 4, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 67). Thomas's words suggest that elaborating natural images in poetry was not a completely unfamiliar action in the artistic sensibility of the 1910s, and that this effect represented, in fact, a sign of originality in the period.

Furthermore, discussions about environmental imagination and the Georgians appear as a common thread for *Vol. I* reviewers, who, through this element, emphasized the positive critical reception of *Vol. I*: an example is John Buchan, who discusses how the Georgians revolted "against poetic *cliches*" (see John Buchan's review, titled "Georgian Poetry", *The Spectator*, 18 January 1913, p. 107, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 72, emphasis in the original) typical of late Victorian aesthetics since they were "not afraid of their imaginations or their minds, and though much in both thought and fancy is crude, there is more that is bold and fine" (p. 72). It is then visible how the Georgians' imagination was perceived by their contemporaries not only as distinctive, but also as possessing an innovative character. In this sense, as observed by an anonymous reviewer in regard to Rupert Brooke's poems in *Vol. I*, Georgian poets "[know] that there are forces in Nature before which the blindest passion grows clear-eyed" (see the unsigned review, titled "Georgian Poetry of the Twentieth Century", *The Westminster Gazette*, 4 January 1913, p. 3, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 54). Therefore, Georgians' attention to the surrounding natural world is to be considered as a key for understanding their critical value, an opportunity to unveil the ecocritical potentials that they entail, as well as an element for challenging the dominant, dismissive critical reputation of the volume.

Finally, Edmund Gosse's words are clarificatory in this sense, for they stress the depth that constituted the character of the environmental sensibility of *Georgian Poetry Vol. I*:

> there seems to be traceable in most of these poets a conviction, or a vague belief, that Nature as seen in the external world and the mind of Man as cultivated within the human individual are parallel to an extent which

may be partly discerned by our own senses, so far these are quickened by imagination and sympathy. This is a curious feature of the new school, and stamps them as Pan-psychical (see Edmund Gosse's review, titled "Knocking at the Door", *The Morning Post*, 27 January 1913, p. 3, reprinted in Rogers 1977: 76).

These words effectively inform today's critics about how the Georgians were portraying a keen sensibility toward the environment, which extended far beyond the idea that they aimed at prolonging artificial Romantic, or traditional natural imagery. Rather, this review underlines how these poets possessed a deep sense of connectedness within their figurations of the environment, which was expressed in a new, innovative way – as the neologism "Pan-psychical" also suggests. One should also consider how the contribution of Darwin studies was fundamental for encouraging, even beyond Britain, a cultural revolution from the mid-nineteenth century onward regarding the depiction of the interconnectedness occurring between humans and nonhumans. As will be discussed later, acknowledging the Georgians as being part of a cultural milieu prompted by Darwin's – among others' – innovative perspective favours the observations of 'mature environmental' (Buell 1995: 32) narratives in their poems.

4. How can ecocriticism resurrect the Georgians?

Before delving into the literary analysis of the selected poems, it is useful to clarify at least two benefits of approaching *Georgian Poetry Vol. I* through an ecocritical lens while aiming at its critical re-evaluation. The first aspect regards the fact that reinscribing the collection within the wider environmental discourse of early-twentieth-century England allows for better understanding the ecocritical potentials embedded in these poems. The second benefit resonates with the idea that re-addressing the relevance of nature narratives in Georgian poems provides current readership with new sources for reflecting on issues of human-nonhuman relationality, in light of the environmental challenges of our time.

In regard to the first aspect, it is important to point out the usefulness of recent critical attention dedicated to the ecocritical potentials of Modernist literature. Kelly Sultzbach's study represents

a valuable contribution for refusing to regard Modernism only along the idea of "a singular movement away from one end of the binary, a Romantic foregrounding of organic nature, toward its opposite, the rise of an urban culture of detached aestheticism" while stressing how Modernist texts "are pressed through a sieve of ecocritical theoretical questions, [and] they often offer startling representations of a more-than-human world that is in the midst of naming and breaking such binaries" (Sultzbach 2016: 4). With these words, Sultzbach suggests that scholars should develop a more critical attitude towards the evaluation of environmental narratives in the Modernist period by shedding new light on oft-silenced narratives in works primarily considered as exalting urban aesthetics, including Woolf and Foster. And while Georgian poetry does not display the thematic innovative stylistic characters affiliated with the Modernist poetic sensibility by authors such as T. S. Eliot and Pound, one can still consider how their environmental engagement can be understood as anticipating the environmental narratives that would later be found in Modernist authors.

It is, in fact, important to consider how "the modernist layers of thought build from earlier strata and provide the groundwork for existing ideology shaping twenty-first-century environmental consciousness" (Sultzbach 2016: 10). In this sense, it is interesting to reflect on how Georgian poetry displays traces of the environmental discourse of the 1910s, and that this literary phenomenon also contributes to prolonging it in the early twentieth century. Even from a short survey of major scientific and philosophical discoveries, and related literary phenomena occurring at the verge of the twentieth century, one can consider how England was not estranged from the maturation of a (proto)ecological sensibility, which also has points in common with current ecocritical epistemology.

One can consider, in this sense, that it was 1859 when Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species,* a watershed for the maturation of an early posthuman responsiveness, especially in relation to how, as Freud reminded, he inflicted a deep narcissistic wound upon the Western subject (Braidotti 2019: 31). Or, for instance, it is useful to think that George Eliot's translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, completed in 1856, is symptomatic of a growing consciousness, in late-nineteenth-century England, of a more philosophical discussion regarding the sense of the human-nonhuman intertwining also

evoked in contemporary environmental discourse. Beyond the several achievements in the field of biology and sciences occurring in that period, evidence of a growing awareness of the relationship between humans and the environment can also be traced in regard to proto-environmental cultural and political actions: this is the case, for instance, of the debates which lead to the creation of The Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) in 1926; or one can observe the growth of the Organicist movement in the same years (Diaper 2018). Or it is interesting to consider the works of other writers of the period, who provide striking evidence of a similar, growing environmental awareness: among others, the work of Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925) is crucial: as Sinan Akilli observes, Haggard's work offers "a distinct eco-consciousness that was reminiscent of twenty-first century posthumanist philosophies" (2020). These accounts, therefore, allow for better understanding the substrata from which the environmental imagination of the Georgians developed, and they provide a way for considering their works as a prelude to the Modernist environmental imagination. With this in mind, it becomes evident how, as Martin Stephen also suggests (1996), a) the allegedly banal nature poetry of the prewar Georgian poets should be considered as one of the several myths developed around the Great War; and b) a more attentive evaluation of them through the lens of contemporary perspectives should be embraced in order to ensure a re-evaluation of several poetic works written during that time.

The following analysis focuses on some selected poems appearing in *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912*, which more evidently present environmental narratives aligned with the above-mentioned discussion. Attention is placed on two main aspects involving issues of human-nonhuman connectedness, which are particularly interesting to contemporary ecocritics: a) the idea that the environment is depicted as a complex connection between different forms of life, beyond traditional Western dualistic figurations; b) the difficulty of expressing a forcible ontological separation between humans and nonhumans. By echoing Jonathan Bate's studies on *ecopoesis*, and, therefore, interrogating texts under the perspective of current concerns, new ethical issues have a twofold effect on the re-evaluation of the Georgian environmental imagination: an (eco)critical lens supports a revision of both the overlooked

and dismissed reputations of the Georgians, and the attitude of contemporary readers toward how they sense the idea of human-nonhuman connectedness.

5. A 'mature' understanding of the environment: Williams H. Davies and Rupert Brooke

Among the poems appearing in *Vol. I*[3], the following analysis concentrates on six works by five Georgian poets in order to highlight a possible ecocritical thread running through the collection. Even though the natural imagery in the volume is not confined to the cases under examination, the selected poems allow for evident discussions on the topic of human-nonhuman connectedness. The first analytical section focuses on how Georgian poets consider the idea of the environment along a *modern* ecocritical evaluation, thus perceiving it as the intertwining among different organisms, both human and nonhuman, in parallel with current ecocritical epistemology.

Among the most evident traces of this sensibility in *Vol. I* are two poems by William H. Davies, *The Kingfisher* and *In May*, which strengthen his reputation as a nature poet (Hockey 1971: 89) and as the Georgian who "could get from nature genuinely", especially based on experience rather than on sentimentality (Stonesifer 1963: 102). *The Kingfisher*, a three-stanza composition dedicated to the eponymous bird, combines fantastic accounts of the animal with a more accurate presentation of the way it interacts with the surrounding environment. After the poem opens with a fanciful celebration of the colourful plumage of the bird ("it was the Rainbow gave thee birth", p. 63), the tone of *The Kingfisher* shifts to focusing on the aquatic habitat where the animal lives. In describing its surroundings, relevance is placed on the several forms of life, both belonging to the vegetal ("For haunts the lonely pools, and keep / In *company* with trees that weep", p. 63. emphasis added) and the animal realm ("Go you and, with such glorious hues, / *Live with* proud Peacocks in green parks", p. 63. emphasis added), which comprise the environment. Words expressing engagement, namely

[3] All the page number references of the poem excerpts included in this study refer to Marsh 1912.

"company" and the preposition "with", stress the sense of the bird's unity with the elements composing the location that it inhabits, which resonates with the idea that the environment is the combination of different entities. Therefore, rather than appearing as an abstract, static figuration typical of traditional Western thought, the idea of the natural world assumes features in Davies's poem which demonstrate a link to current ecocritical epistemology, in reference to issues of complexity and human-nonhuman enmeshment.

The third stanza introduces human beings and adopts a critical tone toward them. As the poem, in fact, presents: "Thou hast no proud, ambitious mind; / I also love a quiet place / That's green, away from all mankind" (p. 63). The rhymes connecting "ambitious mind" to "mankind" appear to apply a negative connotation to human beings since they ("mankind") are presented in contrast to the ethical qualities possessed by the bird (it has "no proud" nor "ambitious mind"). This consideration, in light of current ecocritical thought, suggests a possible connection with discourse on the critique of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism, in which, as was said earlier, issues of narcissism can be evoked as characteristics of the general human attitude toward the nonhuman world (Braidotti 2019: 31), as well as a perspective that also led to the Anthropocene (Ferrando 2019: 30).

While this negative connotation may, at first, appear to sustain the traditional Western human/nature dichotomy, and thus a sense of ontological separation between them, a more attentive glance at the poem sheds light on issues of connectedness between humans and nonhumans, which enhances the poem's ecological potential. This aspect emerges, for instance, in the poem's closing lines, where the idea of relationality between the lyrical voice and a tree is presented: "A lonely pool, and let a tree / Sigh with her bosom over me" (p. 63). By positioning a human within the kingfisher's natural realm – and thus within the net of organisms associated with it – the poem evokes an experience of proximity and interaction, which, again, suggests possible references to relational ethics connected to ecocritical sensibilities.

Moreover, while the kingfisher's habitat is described as being "lonely", it should not simply be interpreted as a mere empty space. In line with what the opening stanza suggests, the poem's ecosystem includes the presence of several lifeforms: the sense of loneliness

evoked in this excerpt, therefore, should be understood in relation to the presence of human beings beyond the narrator. The lyrical voice appears as the only human inhabiting the kingfisher's habitat primarily, for he/she possesses keen sensibility and the capacity of emotional involvement ("sigh") with the nonhuman world, almost as if he / she has overcome "ambitious" leanings and self-centeredness, along a more 'eco-logical' attitude.

These issues also appear in the poem *In May*, in which Davies offers a panegyric on the environment by celebrating springtime, which, however, also emphasizes the pluralism of lifeforms with which humans can become entangled during this season. The opening of the poem is eloquent in this regard:

Yes, I will spend the livelong day
With Nature in this month of May;
And sit beneath the trees, and share
My bread with birds whose homes are there; (p. 61)

Again, the emphasis on the preposition 'with' – here further stressed by being first in the line – reiterates the sense of connection between the poem's speaker and the flourishing natural surroundings. Moreover, the direct reference to "Nature", far from appearing only as a generic, abstract categorization typical of Western thought, can be evaluated more complexly if one considers the list of nonhuman beings to which the poem refers (including, for instance, "trees", and "birds"). Thus, the idea of the spring environment is here discussed as a composite interrelation between humans and nonhumans. This aspect returns in the final line: just as in *The Kingfisher*, *In May* seems to underline the ethical relationship that characterizes the lyrical I and the rest of living beings in the storyworld. While the notion of loneliness returns ("lonely cottage", p. 61), the human being represented in the poem is also reproposed as being surrounded by an array of nonhuman entities: "And having, on the other hand, / A flowery, green, bird-singing land" (p. 61). The retreat described in *In May*, in this sense, is once again visible primarily in regard to other human beings rather than in relation to other natural elements: this aspect, therefore, can be seen as emphasizing the intertwining between humans and nonhumans in the environment described in the poem, where issues of ethical relationality thus

emerge. Consequently, not only does the poem promote a more articulate idea of the environment, but it also determines the poems under examination as useful sites for shedding light on issues of cohabitation discussed in current ecocritical scholarship.

Rupert Brooke's *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester* offers a similar understanding. The poem focuses on the description of Grantchester, which is presented as a location where this sense of enmeshment among different lifeforms is particularly evident. For instance, in the opening lines, issues of human-nonhuman connectedness are evoked in the image of a blossoming garden:

Just now the lilac is in bloom,
All before my little room;
And in my flower-beds, I think,
Smile the carnation and the pink; (p. 33)

Positioning the human within this crowded, flowery scenario (where, in fact, "little room" also gives readers a sense of compression) serves as a possible way for repositioning humans within a network of other organisms, alongside a modern notion of ecosystem, of which the image of the 'flower-bed' is visible as a metaphor. Furthermore, the idea that the environment involves an ontological connection with humans, as has already been seen in Davies's poems, can be related to a passage of the poem, a few lines later, when Grantchester's natural engagement is described through a keen emphasis on issues of materiality and embeddedness:

Some, it may be, can get in touch
With Nature there, or Earth, or such.
And clever modern men have seen
A Faun a-peeping through the green,
And felt the Classics were not dead, […] (p. 34)

As the poem reveals, the experience of humans connecting with the nonhuman world ("get in touch with Nature") can be perceived through the narrator's emphasis that the natural environment that he or she describes is not limited to an idealized figuration typical, for instance, of ancient (pastoral) poetry, which is evoked by the reference to "the Faun" and "the Classics". In traditional pastoral literary understandings, the natural world generally aligns with

"(mostly) idealized descriptions of their countryside" (Gifford 1999: 1); however, by stating that the "Classics were not dead", attention is placed on how, in the poem, the notion of the environment is not limited to old-fashioned clichés, but rather, it possesses a more vivid and contemporary figuration, beyond abstractions and idealizations. Specifically, Grantchester's natural realm appears to be a location in which what antiquity attains, primarily on a theoretical level, is also materially embodied and characterized here by dynamics of human-nonhuman connectedness. For instance, the emphasis placed on the verb 'to touch', as suggested by the rhyme scheme associated with it ("touch" / "such"), underlines the concreteness that the ideal environment possesses in the poem: this specification results as another element in *Vol. I*, which challenges a mere figurative, naïve, and artificial sense of the concept of 'Nature' – which the Georgians have often been accused of pursuing, while inviting the reader to consider it in a more (eco)critical sense as an enmeshment of human and nonhuman material practices. The fact that the word "Earth" follows "Nature"– almost as an alternative, as the preposition "or" suggests – can be read as a further possible corroboration of the ecocritical reading of Brooke's poem. Hence, the natural world is visible here as the combination of the many living beings dwelling in it, just as occurs when approaching the understanding of planet Earth through an attentive, ecocritical lens.

6. Fusion and confusion between humans and nonhumans: Gordon Bottomley, Wilfred Wilson Gibson, and D. H. Lawrence

While certain poems of *Georgian Poetry Vol. I* become useful for challenging traditional dualisms in the understanding, and in the representation of, the environment as an ecosystem, another way of treating the issue of human-nonhuman connectedness is visible in the emphasis placed by some lyrics on the blurring boundaries between these two domains. In this regard, the following section sheds light on three poems that offer readers the opportunity to reflect on the impossibility of determining an absolute separation between humans and nonhumans, as another nuance of the ecocritical potentials offered by the environmental imagination of the Georgians.

A first example in this sense can be observed in Gordon Bottomley's *The End of the World*. The section of the eponymous longer poem contained in Marsh's anthology describes a wintery rural landscape at dawn, in which the whiteness of the snowpack covers the different elements composing this environment. As the poems relates: "The dawn now seemed neglected in the grey / Where mountains were unbuilt and shadowless tress / Rootlessly paused or hung upon the air" (p. 25). Attention is here placed on how an almost colourless scenario ("neglected in the grey") defies attempts of effectively determining differences among the several elements composing the landscape. In this situation, in fact, life becomes suspended and still ("pause or hung upon"), while the several entities comprising this overview almost seem to lose their materiality: trees do not cast shadows anymore ("shadowless trees"), and mountains dissolve with the rest of the surroundings ("mountains were unbuilt"). A similar absence of clarity is emphasized by the lack, except for few feeble sounds, of almost any signals of life in this description. One of them is, for instance, a sheep bleating, ("Until a sheep called once") which also attributes a pastoral atmosphere to this poem. Its relevance, however, is diminished both by the fact that the sheep called (only) "once" and considering that the colour of the sheep mantle – traditionally white – gets lost in the whiteness of the background if one considers the visual dimension of this section. Therefore, the possibility of clearly determining visual boundaries is at stake in this poetic vision. A similar sense of vagueness and indistinctness can be extended to a more 'conceptual level' when taking into account that this effect is recalled in reference to a human trace appearing in the poem's blurry overview, which, in fact, the narrator fails to properly recognize.

Someone passed down the valley swift and singing,
Yes, with locks spreaded like a son of morning;
But if he seemed too tall to be a man
It was that men had been so long unseen,
Or shapes loom larger through a moving snow. (p. 25)

The stress placed on the uncertainty regarding the identity of the figure moving across the snow ("he seemed too tall to be a man") leads the speaker to interrogate himself/herself about the moving

entity envisioned in the snow, on the basis of the clues that the narrator provides, including height and shape. This difficulty of categorization, through an ecocritical lens, suggests an interesting parallel with more philosophical discussions about the limits of the ontological boundary between humans and nonhumans. Darwin's theory challenged the strict, absolute separation between the two realms, or, as Norris explains "collapsed the cardinal distinctions between animal and human, arguing that they exhibit intellectual, moral, and cultural differences in degree only, not in kind." (1985: 3). Similarly, posthumanism and new materialism, which philosophically ground multiple ecocritical evaluations today, defy a forcible separation between the notions of the human and the nonhuman: along the line of these contemporary frameworks, the wintery landscape of this poem becomes visible as a useful metaphor for discussing the limits of an absolute conceptual divide between human beings and their natural surroundings, and consequently, their sense of continuity and blurring boundaries.

This interpretation is fostered throughout the poem by a series of linguistic effects emphasizing the idea of uncertainty and vagueness, in relation to which the poetic voice interrogates himself / herself. For instance, one can consider a passage in which the lyrical voice enquires about the causes of some snow falling from a tree: "Shaking the tree, it *might have been* a bird / Slipping in sleep or shelter, whirring wings;" (p. 25. emphasis added). Or one can reflect on the indecision regarding the origin of a certain noise from afar: "The dog had howled again – or thus it *seemed*" (p. 26. emphasis added). Words such as "might have been" or "seem" stress that what occurs in the poetic wintery scenario is characterized by the impossibility of establishing precise and well-defined identities of what composes the surroundings. This consideration is brilliantly summarized a few lines later, when the lyrical I expresses his/her feelings while observing the snowy landscape: "O glad / To be so safe and secret at its heart, / Watching the strangeness of familiar things" (p. 26). The lines seem to repropose the idea that Bottomley's poem is useful for discussing the challenges to the possibility of conducting absolute categorizations regarding human or nonhuman entities: the boundaries of "familiar", traditional concepts, starting from 'human' and 'nonhuman', rather than absolute margins, are evoked here as porous and objects of constant discussion alongside current ecocritical evaluations.

Parallel reflections can be determined in Wilfred Wilson Gibson's *The Hare*. The long poem presents the relation between a human being and the eponymous animal, which intermingles with a metaphorical account of a sensuous relationship with a woman. Beyond the fact that presenting an animal in the title – just as has already been seen in the case of Davies's *The Kingfisher* – stresses the relevance of nonhumans in the collection, Gibson's poem offers another literary discussion on the sense of entanglement between humans and nonhuman animals in Georgian environmental narratives. The poem opens with a pathetic scene portraying a hare suffering after falling into a trap ("My hands were hot upon a hare, / Half-strangled, struggling in a snare", p. 93), which is reiterated in several sections of the poem. The scene is useful for discussing cases of human-nonhuman relationships, particularly if one considers their empathetic and affective connection, a topic increasingly discussed, for instance, in the field of Animal Studies[4]. A similar issue is visible in other authors of that period: particularly, it is interesting to refer to Thomas Hardy: *Jude the Obscure* (1895) shares an episode about a rabbit trapped in gin, crying and suffering a prolonged death (West 2017: 147). This parallel fosters a sense of continuity between the Georgians and their predecessors, which stresses even further how issues of empathetic and affective human/nonhuman connectedness fed the poets' environmental imagination, while making evident their rootedness in the wider cultural context of early-twentieth-century England.

Issues of human-nonhuman connectedness, however, are even more prominent in the fact that, in the poem, the hare assumes an ambiguous identity: at times, the description of the animal becomes equivocally confused with that of a woman, who, in her turn, is involved in an intimate entanglement with the lyrical voice. This effect appears, for instance, in the following lines: "The wind and I must spend together / A hungry night among the heather. / If I'd her here…" (pp. 96-97). Not only does the word "together" recall the idea of connection between the two, but the reference to a sense of affective attachment between them ("If I'd her here",

[4] For a further discussion on the topic of affective engagement between humans and animals, see, for instance, Nyman and Schuurman 2012 or Carter and Nickie 2011.

where use of possessive adjective 'her' emphasize the ambiguous identity in the liminality of the human and nonhuman realm) fosters the engagement occurring between the lyrical I and his/her human-nonhuman entity, which becomes the object of desire. This relationship, however, does not appear only from a human perspective: the hare *herself*, in fact, seems to be involved in an intimate attachment with the human, as the following lines reveal:

And now as I caught up with her,
Just as she took the moorland track,
I saw the hare's eyes, big and black …
She made as though she'd double back …
But when she looked into my eyes,
She stood quite still and did not stir … (p. 101)

The emphasis attributed to the eyes ("I saw the hare's eyes" / "she looked into my eyes") as witnessing the hare's affection, suggests surprising parallels with contemporary discussions regarding human-animal affective attachment. Just as, for instance, philosophical attention has been dedicated to the animal glance, starting from Jacques Derrida's *L'Animal que donc je suis* (Derrida 2006)[5], Gibson's poem enacts a similar critique of the traditional figuration of animals, for instance, by Descartes, who conceived them primarily as automata (Thomas 2020). Oppositely, attention seems to be placed here on the nonhuman-animal capacity to experience emotions and affective entanglement, just as occurs in the case of human beings. Therefore, when read through the lens of ecocriticism, these lines allow readers to consider a possible dialogue between the Georgian environmental imagination and contemporary discussions and critiques of human exceptionalism, while enhancing the blurring boundaries between traditional categorizations of human and nonhuman subjectivities (Braidotti 2019).

D. H. Lawrence's *Snap-Dragon* prolongs this discussion by offering other examples fostering the sense of fusion and confusion

[5] In this seminal study, central is the episode described by Derrida in which his female cat looks at his naked body. This event inspires the philosopher's discussion on nonhuman animal ontology.

between humans and nonhumans in the collection. In a dreamlike atmosphere, the poem narrates the interaction between the lyrical I and a *femme fatale*. A flower, the snap-dragon cited in the title is the leitmotif of the poem, which becomes central for evaluating the effects of this mysterious relation.

After being asked by the woman to follow her into a garden, the narrator's attention is addressed to a flower, which, when picked up, seems to have a magical effect: what occurs with the flower is replicated on the body of the poem's speaker:

She laughed, she reached her hand out to the flower
Closing its crimson throat: my own throat in her power
Strangled, in my heart swelled up so full
As if it would burst its wineskin in my throat,
Choke me in my own crimson; I watched her pull
The gorge of the gaping flower, till the blood did float

Over my eyes and I was blind – (p. 113)

This excerpt displays, once again, a sense of intertwining between the human body and a nonhuman entity by describing how what the lady does to the flower directly impacts the human. Just as the narrator becomes a victim of her seductive force ("in her power") and suffers physical pain ("Choke"), the flower is torn away from its stem, losing connection with the roots that preserve its life. This parallel situation invites readers to reflect on the link occurring between humans and nonhumans by underlying possible similarities between them. The idea of human-nonhuman bodily enmeshment is also suggested by the chiasmus presented by the verses "Closing its crimson throat" / "Choke me in my own crimson" which reproduces, on a linguistic level, the sense of interlacing among different entities running through the collection: just as the flower suffers from having been picked up, the lyrical I suffers from the emotional grip of his passion, which is exacted on his throat. It is interesting to observe how, as further evidence of environmental narratives feeding the Georgian imagination, similar accounts appear, again, in the way that Thomas Hardy describes the relationship between Tess and the cart horse Prince in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). In an interesting parallel with my discussion, Akilli Sinan has, in fact, referred to this kind of relationship as "'confusing and conflating' the tragedies of

human and horse" (2019: 52), emphasizing how it recalls Darwin's idea of the interconnectedness of all species.

Therefore, when regarded through a more ecocritical perspective, D. H. Lawrence's poem offers another trace of *Georgian Poetry 1911-1912*'s powerful environmental imagination, not only by suggesting the possibility of rediscussing the idea of an absolute separation between the realms of humans and nonhumans; also, it is useful for considering how what occurs to nonhumans has effects on humans, presenting another potential environmental narrative that echoes contemporary discussions, for instance, on how the impact of the Anthropocene on the environment also represents a dangerous consequence for human beings. Thus, approaching this poem with a keen perspective on its ecocritical potentials allows for unveiling useful narratives that create a bridge between the Georgian ecological conscience and contemporary discourses on the environment.

7. Conclusion

As the analysis has demonstrated, *Georgian Poetry Vol. I* offers multiple examples of nature narratives which, when regarded through an ecocritical lens, inform contemporary readers about different ways of conceiving the notion of human-nonhuman connectedness in alignment with current ecocritical epistemology. Through an array of linguistic effects and images, a trajectory in the volume is visible that allows for understanding the Georgian imagination as epitomizing a 'mature environmental aesthetics' developing in early-twentieth-century England. In this perspective, *Vol. I* appears surprisingly *modern* in the eyes of critics for two main reasons: a) it provides traces of the growing ecological sensibility in the early Modernist period; and b) it offers parallels with the several discussions populating present-day ecological discourse, especially regarding the idea of human-nonhuman connectedness.

In the first case, it becomes evident how *Vol. I* anticipates environmental sensibility, which recent ecocritical scholarship has retraced within Modernist aesthetics. Consequently, the dismissive reputation that the environmental narratives in Georgian poetry have suffered – mainly due to Modernist critiques accusing it of representing late, old-fashioned Romantic trends – can be refigured and re-evaluated as displaying a proto-environmental sensibility.

Consequently, while poetry from the early 1910s still appears as a missing link in the ecocritical revision of traditional periodizations, this paper inspires further investigation in the literature produced between the Victorian Age and Modernism: it becomes visible as a liminal epoch in which the environmental discourse is both a binding force between different cultural scenarios, and a fertile soil for negotiating rooted and dominant critical classifications.

In the second case, attention can be placed on how a similar perspective gives critical relevance to *Georgian Poetry Vol. I* for its capacity to dialogue with current urgencies and related ecological discourses. Evidence has emerged that some of the poems in this collection suggest links with, for instance, present-day discussions on the continuum between human beings and the natural world explored by new materialism, or the more philosophical posthuman sensibility. More attentively, as the analysis unveiled, two main perspectives of the notion of human-nonhuman connectedness emerge in *Vol. I* as evoking contemporary ecological reflections. On the one hand, there is the idea that the Georgians possesses a 'mature' vision of the notion of the environment, which does not appear as a single, static, abstract concept alongside the traditional human/nature dichotomy: rather it becomes more aligned with the notion of ecosystem, in the sense of being a more complex version of the environment, reflecting on the network between different organisms and different forms of material entanglement. On the other hand, one can consider how *Vol. I* presents traces of a critique of traditional figurations of human and nonhuman entities, where, again, the sense of ontological separateness is at stake, while shedding light on the porosity of traditional categorizations.

This study, therefore, becomes relevant in light of the current scholarly challenge, inspired by the Anthropocene, to re-evaluate the archives of Western literature though an ecocritical lens. In this sense, the possibility of disclosing new narratives from disregarded case studies, such as that of Georgian poetry, becomes a way for responding to present-day environmental crises, while highlighting the sense of connectedness among humans and nonhumans. This effect occurs by acknowledging the literary environmental imagination deriving from past poems as an inexhaustible source for reflecting on ourselves, and it highlights surprising parallels for developing more ethical forms of human-nonhuman relationships in our time.

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