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Poetics and Politics of Place in Pastoral

International Perspectives

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Introduction

Poetics and Politics of Place in Pastoral: International Perspectives

In the wake of the ecocritical movement (e.g., Lawrence Buell, Glen A. Love, Lance Newman and others), the pastoral genres and pastoralism in general are often considered as anachronistic. In our period of global environmental crisis, pastoral celebrations of particular places can seem beside the point or, literally, out of place. Furthermore, since the 19th century at least, and arguably since the Renaissance, writers and critics have been wary of pastoral's frequently doubtful politics. Indeed, if pastoral can sometimes be construed as a way to encourage what today we would call "green" attitudes, it has also been employed to justify land appropriation and colonialism (cf. Buell, *Environmental Imagination*). And yet, if describing the present state of our planet would seem rather to call for anti-pastoralism, pastoral ideals – especially in relation to particular places and their specific history, geography and culture – are still alive even though they more often manifest themselves by ironic indirection than by straightforward celebration. (Many people suspect that the latter is sentimental, illusionary or downright cynical.) It is the continuing though tenuous presence of the pastoral and its enduring significance for writers and critics that this book tries to map.

Indeed, we should not oversimplify the pastoral; we should neither fall for its backward looking nostalgia, nor uncritically generalize its political ambiguity. Recent discussions of the subject – for instance, a roundtable devoted to pastoral at a 2011 conference hosted by the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment – have sought a more nuanced approach that revitalizes the idea. Instead of simplification, recent writers and critics have suggested that pastoral should be *radicalized*. Among the questions that were raised at the roundtable, the most frequent one concerned pastoral's possible reinterpretation or re-evaluation in a world in which climate-change, industrial exploitation

of natural resources and pollution force us to conceive of the natural environment in terms of the global.

Pastoral being traditionally an “island phenomenon,” how indeed can we connect “sense of place” and “sense of planet” (Heise 10)? Or is the connection already within our grasp? For Laura Walls, it is possible “to ‘root’ or radicalize the pastoral view by insisting that the local is already, and always has been, ‘planetary,’ just as ‘global’ is always under our feet, local at every point.” If such is the case, then the stakes are at once immediate and far-reaching, and representations of pastoral from the past have much to tell our “island” of the present about the future. At the same roundtable, Paul Outka suggested that studying the agricultural and agrarian tradition of pastoralism might be a way of getting to the roots of human modification of non-human nature between the Holocene and the anthropocene: “After all, domestication is one of the earliest and most profound of the human biotechnologies; we might learn lessons from the often unhappy history of such practices about how to integrate biotechnology and genetic modification into the landscape rather than seeing them as simply supplanting Nature and the natural.” Lastly, there is the question – or is it a problem? – of the feeling of nostalgia that often accompanies pastoral and the elegiac genres in which it is often couched. But is nostalgia – for a healthier environment allowing ways of living less fraught with anxiety – necessarily and only a sentimental manifestation of false consciousness? Or can it serve as a catalyst for action? Perhaps some form of regret over what is “going, going, gone” is an indispensable motor of political change. Outka similarly has argued that the artificiality and ambiguity of pastoral discourse is probably a realistic reflection of the state of what we have habitually thought of as Nature (with a capitalized *n*). Simply rejecting pastoral out of hand because of its frequent shows of sentimentality and hypocrisy, may come down to shutting our eyes to reality: “... in a postnatural world – one in which the natural sublime is, at least in part, always already a consumer product and what was ‘untouched’ wilderness is warming and tainted with POPs – the pastoral is arguably all that’s left.” If, as Outka suspects, the pastoral truly “is all that’s left” of the non-human world, it would follow that all artistic representations of nature today are, and perhaps have been for some centuries already, in one sense or another aspects of the pastoral. Perhaps anti-pastoralism,

for all its frequent virulence, ultimately testifies to the power of what one could call the pastoral paradigm. Seen from such a vantage point, one might also detect unsuspected connections between the Western tradition of nature writing, on the one hand, and, on the other, the practice of “greenwashing” employed by transnational corporations in order to calm people in the Northern hemisphere, where such corporations are frequently based, while continuing to spill chemicals and oil in the global South. Spinning out the cultural logic of pastoralism this far corresponds to what Terry Gifford would call a “post-pastoral” attitude.

The contributions to this volume are part of the groundwork for this ongoing concern with pastoral and pastoralism and with its critical revision. These chapters are less concerned with approaching the pastoral from an explicitly global perspective than with pastoral’s emphasis on specific places, filtered through a multitude of different genres and various media. Indeed, the essays in *The Poetics and Politics of Place in Pastoral* reveal the thematic scope and intellectual challenge that the study of pastoral holds for contemporary literary and cultural studies.

The notions of *poetics* and *politics* draw attention to the way form and ideology conjoin in pastoral evocations of place thus giving rise, for example, to explorations of the relation between the local and the universal or the specific and the allegorical; of the tension between pastoral retreat and its larger historical context (the court, the city, industrialism, international and colonial commerce, etc); of nomadic forms in which place becomes space; of pastoral alternatives to established and/or hegemonic forms of society and social relations; of the way class, race and gender may turn a pastoral place into an anti-pastoral one; of non-rural settings (urban or suburban, colonial, global) and the aesthetic and ideological stakes of such relocations of the pastoral.

The essays collected in this volume focus on painting, photography, poetry, essay, fiction and film, from the Renaissance to the present. They also take into account an astonishing variety of pastoral places, in Europe, Africa, North America; country and city; suburbia and industrial zones. Lastly, beyond such generic, chronological and geographical considerations, a deeper dynamic is at work that follows a three-step movement through the political implications intrinsic to pastoral.

Part 1 of the book, ‘*Celebrating the Pastoral Ideal: Classical Locations, Modern Places*,’ addresses the resilience of the pastoral ideal

over time, and how its political values have endured in both Old and New Worlds. It begins with new readings: Andy Auckbur reconsiders Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and underlines the *inward dimension* of his work that goes beyond conventional assumptions about nostalgia and ensures the poet's ongoing interest to today's readers, who share in the creation of pastoral within their minds. Fabien Desset offers a fresh perspective of Percy Bysshe Shelley's depiction of the role of nature in ancient ruins and how the trappings of antiquity are more than a gothic prop or a simple political allegory; Shelley's pastoral subverts the traditional division of nature and culture and may be found in urban areas.

Part 1 also underlines the sheer variety of places concerned by this ideal. Mathilde Arrivé shifts the focus to the "New World" and to the photographic uses of a highly plastic and adaptable "Indian" pastoral, whose multiple meanings reveal a rich swathe of history via a complex therapeutics. Nancy Coleman Wolsk examines the various "pastoral visions" of Rosa Bonheur, from her famous painting *The Horse Fair* to her lesser-known graphite drawings, and addresses the tension between the realism of a new Positivist age and the aesthetic of an ancient pastoral tradition. Lastly, Amy Wells combines pastoral with a gender perspective and a geocritical approach to elucidate a specifically gendered Arcadia in the five volumes of Anaïs Nin's *Cities of the Interior*.

Part 2, '*Critical Reappropriations of Pastoral Place*,' explores pastoral's flexibility both in form and themes – through various reappropriations, from modern poetics to postmodernist ecocritical perspectives. The problem of the co-existence of pastoral with modernity animates Aurore Clavier's discussion of the poetry of Marianne Moore, which shows how the poet negotiated her own version of pastoral which eschews the constrictions of an American imagined wild or of a European golden age in favour of a more open-ended concept. Andrew McKeown reconfigures the pastoral as a space *in language* in the poetry of Edward Thomas, and shows how this space, where "natural" and "cultural" inclinations combine and come into conflict, anticipates a new form of nature writing. Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd shows how Thomas Pynchon's California trilogy embraces a variety of locations (urban, suburban and fantasized pastoral place) before taking the reader to the freeway as a meaningful locus of retreat for those looking for "somewhere else."

Part 2 also examines how reappropriations of pastoral are played out in the aesthetics and politics of pastoral places. Idom Inyabri broadens the perspective to Africa, more specifically to the Niger Delta and the poetry of Joe Ushie, where the ideal of pastoral retreat confronts modern challenges from oil producers, poachers and international tourism, while remaining a viable, eco-centric and life-affirming ritual. Thomas Pughe scrutinizes the American writer Rick Bass's struggle with the crosscurrents of pastoralism and the question, "Can advocacy be art?" The work of an environmental activist and of a fiction writer working within the conventions of pastoralism incites new ways of seeing the natural environment while advancing literary art.

Finally, Part 3, '*Challenges and Relocations: the Simple Made Complex?*' confronts the limits of the dynamic. Pastoral works, even among the earliest examples, explore tensions between ideal simplicity and complex political realities. The pastoral locus itself becomes increasingly mutable and elusive, and stable values come under assault. François Specq returns to the foundational work of Thoreau to show how it can contribute to the current debate on radical pastoral. Thoreau is more radical than accommodationist because his "greater garden" is not a way of colonizing nature as much as acknowledging its otherness, which functions as a figure of a desired anthropological revolution. Aurélie Griffin returns to the Renaissance romances of Sir Philip Sydney and Mary Wroth and demonstrates how Arcadia is an ever unattainable ideal disconnected from any specific geographical location; rather, it is a quest which drives narration and the invention of new models. Anne-Lise Marin-Lammelet describes the quest for a *locus amoenus* in the urban settings of British social-realist cinema and how pastoral motifs are at play in this seemingly incongruous setting.

The limits of pastoral place are tested in Laetitia Sansonetti's discussion of strategies of displacement in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which in fact are a process of constant approximation reflecting the tension between the poet's courtly ambitions and the pastoral aspirations of his art. Charles Holdefer considers how George Saunders' fiction, in its depiction of "dysfunctional gardens" such as strip malls and theme parks and his use of post-anthropocentric characters, offers a glimpse of the post-pastoral, and of our species' possible reconciliation with the machine in the garden.

The Poetics and Politics of Place in Pastoral testifies to the breadth and ongoing interest in pastoral, across disciplines, genres and continents. It reaches beyond the traditional Arcadian model and anticipates the presence of the global in the local and the possibility of a radical pastoral. These chapters not only reassess the past and what has been done in pastoral studies, but they also provide a sense of what might be done in the future as the pastoral reinvents itself for the 21st century.

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