The Pastoral

Overview

The pastoral is central to poetry. In a simplified definition, it is that mode of poetry that sought to imitate and celebrate the virtues of rural life. Arcadia was once a real place, a small Greek area that developed a pastoral civilization in 400 B.C. But it quickly became a fiction. In Greece the fictive possibilities of the pastoral were written by Theocritus in his *Idylls,* in Rome by Virgil in his *Eclogues.*

In 1504, the Italian poet Jacopo Sannazzaro published *L'Arcadia,* renewing the fashion and visibility of the pastoral. His plot, about a heartbroken shepherd who finds comfort in the simplicity and shelter of a rural place spoke to a deep European unease about power, urbanization, and the demands made for a new centralization. Philip Sidney confirmed this renewal in England with his publication of what is now called "The Old Arcadia" in 1590. In the Elizabethan court the pastoral glowed as an oblique political comment on power: a poetry in which a perspective of grief and yearning is taken on and rural manners and customs are idealized from the vantage point of a corrupt and treacherous court.

By the end of the sixteenth century, and the start of the seventeenth, the pastoral convention had become one of the true intellectual engines of poetry. On the surface, it appeared to be about an ornamental and sometimes fictional view of the rural and bucolic

life. But huge questions lurked below that clear surface. In the pastoral mode poets could experiment with these questions, some of which verged on a philosophical subversion of traditional religious themes in poetry. Was man made for nature or nature for man? Was the natural world to enter the poem as a realistic object or as a fictive projection of inner feelings? Would the natural world always enter the poem shadowed by the religious myths of the Garden of Eden and man's fall?

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pastoral convention was a constant in poetry. Shepherdesses and tidy rural constructs abounded. The pastoral was still both an escape and an idea. Then in the Romantic movement, within a period of thirty years, this historic convention suddenly cracked open. And there at its center—troubled, troubling, compelling, and crucial—the embryo of the contemporary nature poem.

It's not surprising that the pastoral broke apart in the early nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution had, quite simply, destroyed its habitat. A poet's imagination could no longer find that easy rest in an ever-present countryside that was a communal as well as an imaginative possession. In this incarnation, the wounded pastoral became a seismic reader of the relation between the poet and society. When cold, fast streams were harnessed just above Manchester in the first years of the nineteenth century, and the mill wheels began to turn, the pastoral was both challenged and renewed. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution replaced the court as a place from which to mourn for and celebrate rural life. The pastoral mode proved its resilience and some of the compelling poems of that century are there to prove it.

Perhaps the best reason for including the pastoral mode here is its enduring presence—both tested and contested—in the nature poem and the importance of recognizing its old force in the newer forms. In this section we have moved as quickly as possible to the exciting contemporary negotiation with the pastoral that is to be found in our time. This convention, this mode can be recognized throughout the twentieth century, echoing in laments about urban intrusion, celebrations of urban hubris, speculations about the future of the physical world, right up to the new eco-poetry. We have deliberately chosen these poems to reflect the provocative unsettled relation with the old

pastoral that contemporary poets state and restate. Whether looking west in California, or staring at Australian broad beans, the contemporary poet remains haunted by that strange mix of sweet dream and rude awakening that the pastoral convention has always offered.

What is particularly interesting is that the speaking parts of the pastoral—the inhabitants of its silent and idyllic neighborhoods of the past—have been assigned in our time to new actors. From Charles Wright's dark view of Laguna Beach to Jane Kenyon's dark "Let Evening Come" poets show their need and their ability to shatter the idyll of the pastoral while still making reference to it, just as Larkin's shadows and distances make up the violated pastoral of "The Explosion." The twentieth-century poets here continue a sparkling, subversive argument with all the old ideas once stored within this concept.

In the twentieth century the pastoral is often the almost invisible distance in the nature poem. A nature poem in which the dream becomes a nightmare—like Hughes's "The Thought-Fox"—or in which the idyll is restated with a new pessimism by a poet like James Wright.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;

Fair-linèd slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber-studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The shepherd swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

from *Love's Labor's Lost* (V.ii. 912–929)

When icicles hang by the wall
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
  And milk comes frozen home in pail.
When blood is nipped and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
                Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who: a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
  And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
                Tu-who;
Tu-whit, tu-who: a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

JOHN KEATS

Ode on a Grecian Urn

I

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearièd,
Forever piping songs forever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
Forever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets forevermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

V

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

A. E. HOUSMAN

Loveliest of Trees

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,

MARY OLIVER

The Black Walnut Tree

My mother and I debate:
we could sell
the black walnut tree
to the lumberman,
and pay off the mortgage.
Likely some storm anyway
will churn down its dark boughs,
smashing the house. We talk
slowly, two women trying
in a difficult time to be wise.
Roots in the cellar drains,
I say, and she replies
that the leaves are getting heavier
every year, and the fruit
harder to gather away.
But something brighter than money
moves in our blood—an edge
sharp and quick as a trowel
that wants us to dig and sow.
So we talk, but we don't do
anything. That night I dream
of my fathers out of Bohemia
filling the blue fields
of fresh and generous Ohio
with leaves and vines and orchards.
What my mother and I both know
is that we'd crawl with shame
in the emptiness we'd made
in our own and our fathers' backyard.
So the black walnut tree
swings through another year
of sun and leaping winds,
of leaves and bounding fruit,
and, month after month, the whip-
crack of the mortgage.