

## **Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral and Post-Pastoral as Reading Strategies**

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### **The Pull of the Pastoral: A Story from England**

When we have arrived home from work after the start of another school year, my wife Gill and I, both teachers, have taken to driving out of the big industrial city where we live in Sheffield, England, past the last houses of our suburb, and up over heather moorland to park on a hill top. Fifteen minutes from our house and we have passed a sign into the Peak District National Park. We walk along the hill's crest to the start of the rocks called Stanage Edge that look out far to the west. We're in the very last of the daylight and we don't go far. Darkening gales and rain blow us back to the car quite quickly. But just on at least one day a week we've escaped briefly from the shackles of work and preparing the evening meal. Then we coast back down into town feeling slightly pleased with ourselves and quietly better within ourselves. Why?

Is it because we've snatched, against the odds, a forbidden mid-week after-taste of, say, 'Flying Buttress', our rock-climb on Stanage Edge the

weekend before? Not really. Our short dusk walk is a rather different thing. It's more to do with soaking up the place itself. Up on that exposed cliff top, facing west into the fading light and feeling the full force of the elements coming at us over Sir William Hill and Eyam Moor, we simply look left down the length of the Derwent Valley towards the majestic Chatsworth House, or in the other direction, up to the peaty Kinder Scout plateau. We take in a whole topography. At our feet a farm nestles under the road below us, apparently pegged down by its stone walls that enclose smooth lawns descending to rough sheep-grazed pasture dipping towards the hidden village of Hathersage. The western sky at dusk is part of it, as are the brooding rocks of the emerging, upthrust, gritstone edge that dips back towards impenetrable bogs and beyond, the twinkling city lights. I suspect that we take this horizontal walk so that we can look out more, take in that space, say again to each other, 'Aren't we lucky to be living next to this?' Then we return to our student suburb, which visiting American friends find to be a city neighbourhood of suffocating, over-crowded row housing and narrow streets. Actually, of course, we didn't choose to be living here. We've ended up with what we could afford in our economic circumstances, like everyone else. Secretly we'd like to live, if not actually in Robin Hood's Cave on Stanage Edge, then maybe in that farm below it.

Perhaps I'm giving too much away. You'll have guessed by now that we are aging hippies and fans of pastoral writing – writing about nature, wilderness,

or what in England we call ‘the countryside.’ We’re pastoralists – a sadly typical modern urban sub-species of the breed. No, of course we don’t herd sheep, in the original meaning of being a ‘pastor’ or shepherd, although I’ve admitted that unrealistically, we’d secretly like to escape the city to that little farm and do just that. But what we’ve been subconsciously enacting on these evening jaunts, and our weekend walks and climbs, is the ancient pastoral impulse of retreat to a rural landscape and return to the city. This is what Shakespeare’s pastoral dramas – *The Winter’s Tale* and *As You Like It* – are about, and this is why we have popular weekend hikers’ buses out of Sheffield to visit our local ‘Bohemia’, ‘the blasted heath’, or ‘the Forest of Arden.’ Indeed, this is why the Peak District National Park, right on the shoulder of Sheffield, is the second most visited national park in the world, serving as the ‘lungs’, or breathing spaces, for the big crowded industrial cities of Sheffield, Manchester, Leicester, Birmingham, and even week-end rock-climbers condemned to live in London. This is why the Scot, John Muir, invented National Parks (after he emigrated to America from Scotland with his parents at the age of eleven), preserving Yosemite National Park in 1892 ‘for public use, resort and recreation’ - the kind of re-creation that would result from a retreat to a national park, to be followed by a return to the city somehow renewed, changed a little, and most importantly for Muir, changed in the direction of wanting to preserve the national park from commercial exploitation and the destruction of its ecosystems. Muir was not to know, in his time, that the

strength of the pastoral impulse was eventually to threaten the very source of renewal itself: queues of cars clog both Yosemite and the Peak District national parks at the weekends.

If the pastoral experience of retreat from the tensions of the court (or of work, or of the city) into the country for raw contact with nature is still a social need, is pastoral writing still alive? Some English academics do not think so, arguing that the separation of town and country is now defunct – even rural living is urbanised in so many ways. The internet, for example, has turned many rural retreaters into workers in the global marketplace, their work directed from offices in urban tower blocks. So any writing about the English countryside, or rural landscapes in other regions of the world, must now be tainted by urbanisation or even globalism of different kinds as villages have become suburbs and wild land has become domesticated and populated with urban hikers.

When, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Theocritus wrote the first pastoral text for the Greek court in Alexandria about the shepherds he remembered from his youth in Sicily, he idealised the country for his urban audience. His book was called *The Idylls*. Two centuries later Virgil set his Latin pastorals in Arcadia, a real part of Greece which has come to represent the idealised location of pastoral literature – for Shakespeare ‘Bohemia’ and ‘the Forest of Arden.’ So

there has always been something suspect about pastoral writing – nostalgic, escapist, comfortingly timeless and stable – in a word, ‘Arcadian.’

Well, is that how I described our view from Stanage? How can I celebrate a valued place, and its impact upon me, without idealising or prettifying it? Take another look at my opening paragraphs.

I really love this wild place and I want to communicate that feeling in my writing. Is ‘nestling’ prettifying? Perhaps it is. And I’m sorry about the alliteration. I just can’t help it when I want you to enjoy, through my expression in language, what I enjoy about ‘feeling the full force of the elements.’ How can I avoid the traps of ‘pastoralisation’ – an idealising tone - when I come to use language to evoke my feeling for my special place? How can a reader recognise that tone? Can a reader tell self-indulgent idealisation from genuine insights brought back by the writer on return from a rural retreat?

Well, I could have mentioned in my opening paragraphs the Hope Valley Cement Works on the horizon, the scars made by quarries that I can see being dug daily in the National Park, the urban pay-and-display machine at the Stanage Edge Car Park, the nineteenth century industrial grime on the grit, the current economic predicament of the struggling hill farmer, and the urbanisation of the road beyond Ringinglow by the series of road-signs warning of lambs, bends, walkers, parking restrictions, etc. This would have turned my writing into anti-pastoral. George Crabbe, an English anti-pastoral poet of the

eighteenth century life of cottagers, wrote, 'I paint the Cot, / As Truth will paint it, and as Bards will not' (*Pastoral* 125). He sought to draw attention to the difference between 'the poet's rapture and the peasant's care'. Indeed, he might have been addressing the modern Stanage hill-farmer when he wrote, 'Can poets soothe you, when you pine for bread, / By winding myrtles round your ruin'd shed?' (*Pastoral* 125). Modern English shepherds, like their counterparts throughout Europe, are having as tough a time as they always have, despite subsidies from the European Union. Perhaps modern writers like me about delightful walks through the agricultural crisis of English hill farms should take advice from George Crabbe.

If they did, and they did not want to simply focus on an anti-pastoral corrective to idealisation of the countryside, what third way is left open to them? Well, without wishing to sound prescriptive, I could offer suggestions for six features of what I call 'post-pastoral' writing about the countryside: awe leading to humility in the face of the creative-destructive forces of nature; awareness of the culturally loaded language we use about the country; accepting responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas; recognition that the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources. It is the differences between reading a pastoral text, an anti-pastoral text, or a post-pastoral text that this chapter will try to clarify.

## **What is pastoral literature?**

The pastoral is an ancient cultural tool. It has been a major way in which we, in Western culture, have mediated and negotiated our relationship with the land upon which we depend and the forces of nature at work out there in ‘outer nature,’ as we have at the same time mediated and negotiated our relationships with each other and what we think of as our ‘inner nature.’ The very first pastoral texts from ancient Greece described shepherds’ song competitions. These textual mediations are still the ‘songs’ that we sing to each other as writers and as readers, and never have these songs, and the debate about their interpretation, been more important to our culture. Today the very survival of our species depends upon, not just this debate itself, but our ability to find the right images to represent our way of living with, and within, what we variously characterise as ‘nature,’ ‘earth,’ ‘land,’ ‘place,’ ‘our global environment.’

The earliest origins of pastoral in ancient Greece set its characteristic mode of retreat and return that is replicated today – a retreat into contact with living nature/countryside/wilderness and a return with insights for those living in the court/city/computerised world. The first Greek and Roman pastoral texts also set the characteristic qualities of the pastoral: the idealising *Idylls* of the Greek writer Theocritus and the Arcadian nostalgia for a past Golden Age in the later *Eclogues* of the Roman writer Virgil. American literature has continued this European tradition from the writings of the eighteenth century farmer

Crèvecoeur, to Thoreau's *Walden*, to contemporary nature writing. So the features of pastoral literature can be summed up under the following headings.

### *Idealised*

Seeing nature through 'rose-tinted spectacles' is the old-fashioned way of expressing this. Another might be to say that an idealised text often emphasises fertility, resilience, beauty and unthreatened stability in nature. These are complacent and comforting representations of nature that strategically omit any sense of elements that might be counter to this positive image. Indeed, we have the word 'idyllic' from the original *Idylls* of Theocritus. What could be more idyllic than this?

We lay stretched out in plenty, pears at our feet,

Apples at our sides and plumtrees reaching down,

Branches pulled earthward by the weight of fruit. (86)

No sweat is needed in harvesting here, for Theocritus, since everything is within easy reach, with even the fruit itself reaching down to be plucked. The key idyllic word for this uncertain subsistence agriculture is 'plenty,' a notion made visible in heavy hanging 'weight of fruit'. It is a word used by the eighteenth century English poet Alexander Pope at the end of his idealisation of the royal forest in his long poem 'Windsor Forest,' where Pope also employs



the idealised image of corn, in this case, bending to tempt the hand of the harvester:

Here Ceres' gifts in waving prospect stand

And nodding tempt the joyful reaper's hand;

Rich industry sit smiling on the plain

And peace and plenty tells a STUART reigns. (*Pastoral* 34)

The 'joyful' worker is coyly 'tempted' by the seductively 'nodding' corn, the 'gift' of the corn god Ceres. But Pope's pastoral obviously has a political purpose of endorsing for his readers the 'peace and plenty' brought by the reign of his patron, the Stuart king.

In nineteenth century America John Muir delighted in conjuring an idealised diary entry for 11 July 1869 celebrating his first view down into Yosemite Valley in California from his camp beside the Merced River before it falls into the valley:

All the Merced streams are wonderful singers, and Yosemite is the centre where the main tributaries meet. From a point about a half a mile from our camp we can see into the lower end of the famous valley, with its wonderful cliffs and groves, a grand page of mountain manuscript that I would gladly give my life to be able to read ... Some of the external

beauty is always in sight, enough to keep every fibre of us tingling, and this we are able to gloriously enjoy though the methods of its creation may lie beyond our ken. (227)

This passage is full of Muir's most enthusiastic embellishments. 'Wonderful' (twice), 'grand' and 'glorious,' taken together might seem to be idealisations, but actually every time I have arrived at the rim to see again one of the wonders of the world, something like a 'tingling in every fibre' does take place in the face of its breath-taking beauty. The metaphor of streams as 'singers' might seem fanciful, but actually Muir would come to read the 'manuscript' of the rock to discover, against the scientific opinion of his time, the glacial 'method of its creation' as a huge ('grand') ice-carved trough. So despite Muir's tendency to gloriously idealise this landscape in pastoral writing, this actually inspired his scientific and later conservation writings that took a quite different tone.

### *Nostalgic*

In *The Idylls*, written in the third century BC, Theocritus was looking back to his childhood in Sicily and a nostalgic look back at the past is often a feature of pastoral texts. When it's not childhood that is the focus of memories of engaging innocently with a nature that's often represented as wilder than it is now, it might be the only just disappeared past of a few years ago. When he started looking into this aspect of writing about the English countryside the

English critic Raymond Williams detected that there was a kind of backwards moving escalator (60). A text might suggest that only ten years before life was better in the countryside. But the texts written at that time suggested that only ten years before that life lived in the same place was really better. And the texts written at that time also echoed this backward looking idealisation of nature at that time. And so on ... the Scottish poet and story writer, George Mackay Brown (1921-1996) lived on the Hebridean island of Orkney, which he left only twice in his life. He almost never wrote about the present but about a mythical past when life was, at times, tough, but was rooted in the security of the seasons without modern globalising technologies like the radio. (He wrote an amusing short story about the arrival a radio on the island.) The island summer practice of digging out brick-shaped lumps of peat from the bog to put, when dried out, on the home fire instead of expensive coal is back-breaking work. Mackay Brown's poem about this ancient activity ends with a typical myth-making gesture towards a vague geological past:

And a lark flashed a needle across the west

And we spread a thousand peats

Between one summer star

And the black chaos of fire at the earth's centre. (40)

The contemporary American farmer poet Wendell Berry also chooses a life without modern technologies, preferring horse to tractor, for example. In his long poem 'The Handing Down' he refers to a dialogue between a farmer (actually his grandfather) and a fern in which the farmer has learned from the fern what to do with his hands that he, in turn, has handed on:

In his handing it has come down

until now – a living

that has survived

all successions and sheddings. (47)

Here is a pastoral valuing of an idealised past to be set against the trials and uncertainties of the present.

### *Unproblematic*

Against the turbulence and confusion of the present and the future, a pastoral past often provides image in literature of order, stability and agreed values – a stable 'living' in Wendell Berry's terms. Henry David Thoreau went to live in his cabin at Walden Pond to simplify his life by escaping the tensions of so-called 'civilization' in cities. He wrote, 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not

learn what it had to teach [...]’ (135). Most people, argued Thoreau, are uncertain about the purpose of life and ‘live meanly like ants’ in busy cities, their lives ‘frittered away by detail’ in building careers, homes and wealth. For Alexander Pope his idyllic idea of Windsor Forest is a place where variety and difference can be acknowledged whilst ultimately achieving a stable coexistence: ‘Where order in variety we see, / And where, tho’ all things differ, all agree’ (*Pastoral* 34). Just like that! Perhaps the sudden glibness of this last line betrays its over-simplification of the difficulties of its achievement. For the American writer Annie Dillard, in the title essay of her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982), this sense of unproblematic unity is achieved by ‘witnessing’ the ‘silence of nature’: ‘There is a vibrancy to the silence, a suppression, as if someone were gagging the world. But you wait, you give your life’s length to listening, and nothing happens. The ice rolls up, the ice rolls back, and still that single note obtains. The tension, or lack of it, is intolerable. The silence is not actually suppression; instead, it is all there is’ (90). Pastoral literature can offer a reductive space in which the writer might encourage the reader to contemplate what the transcendentalist Thoreau calls ‘higher living.’

### *Golden Age*

In the classical European story of creation the earliest age of human life on the earth was an idyllic one:

Men had no need of weapons.

Nations loved one another.

And the earth, unbroken by plough or hoe,

Piled the table high. Mankind

Was content to gather the abundance

Of whatever ripened. (9)

This is a translation from the Latin by Ted Hughes in his *Tales from Ovid* (1997). Hughes was an environmentalist English poet (1930-1998) who made this translation with a modern audience facing a global environmental crisis in mind:

And the first age was Gold.

Without laws, without law's enforcers,

This age understood and obeyed

What had created it.

Listening deeply, man kept faith with the source. (8)

That listening we might now call 'ecology,' or 'The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,' or, as well shall see, 'post-pastoral literature.' Indeed, it might be argued that we now urgently need from writing out of the pastoral tradition are images of how we might 'keep faith with the source.'

Of course, pastoral writing that refers to a Golden Age does not have to be set in the past, as a utopian novel like Victorian writer William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891) demonstrates. However, although set in an imaginary future, Morris's novel does idealise a return to Medieval peasant village agriculture. Perhaps I might dare to suggest that the modern equivalent might be the romantic notion of the Golden Age of the pre-contact 'ecological Indian' that can be detected in some of the writings of the Native American poet, novelist and essayist Linda Hogan.

### *Retreat and return*

At the end of Shakespeare's pastoral plays the characters who have retreated from the turmoil of the court into an apparently simpler life close to nature must inevitably return to the court. Marriages and reconciliations follow because lessons have been brought back that now make these possible. Thoreau seeks to 'see if I could not learn what [the woods] had to teach' and his desire to publish the book *Walden* is his delivery of the results (135). In this he was following the pattern of what his mentor Emerson called 'the chant' in which an experience of more elevated living in contact with nature carries with it the responsibility to communicate it upon return to ordinary, if now morally better, life. The 'chant' or 'song,' or poem, or story delivers the insights gained from the retreat. This common pattern to the pastoral impulse suggests that the best travel writing, and even mountaineering and adventure literature, serves a pastoral function for its

readers. Does it make a difference if readers are aware of this? Here is a question to test out on, say, John Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996).

### *Arcadian*

Today you can visit Walden Pond, walk around its shoreline and into the woods to find the site of Thoreau's cabin. When I went it was raining and if I had written about getting cold and wet in those unimpressive thin woods beside the bleak chilly lake what I would have written would hardly have been an idealisation of the place. In other words, it would not have been 'Arcadian' writing. The idealisation of the pastoral is a literary construct that transforms an actual place, with its real mixture of positive and negative qualities, into a glowing 'Arcadia.' This literary term derives from Virgil's having set his famous pastoral verses titled *The Eclogues* in the real place in Italy named Arcadia. Virgil's literary representation of that place as a haven from wars and land disputes has come to be known as 'Arcadian.' Of course, in Biblical terms the first Arcadia was the Garden of Eden, so we might also call an idealised description of a real place as 'Edenic.' For Pope Windsor Forest could be turned into a green Eden by the heightened description of the song of his verses: 'The Groves of Eden, vanish'd now so long, / Live in description, and look green in song' (*Pastoral* 34). When I talked about the European pastoral tradition to scholars in a university in Nepal I realised that European travellers had idealised a mythical hidden mountain village in Nepal as 'Shangri-la.' This was an



elusive Himalayan Arcadia invented by early travellers. Is the hidden cove in Thailand in Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* (1996) a Shangri-la? Is Edward Abbey's version of Arches National Monument in *Desert Solitaire* (1967) an Arcadia?

*Sentimental or Complex Pastoral?*

Most of the features of pastoral literature listed so far have been about the idealising distortion of the literary construct of the pastoral. But what of the lessons delivered on return from the retreat into nature? Could it not be the case that what had been expected to be a delightfully simplified experience of the harmony, peace and repose in nature had actually turned out to be more complicated than that? Might the literature of return contain insights into the complexity of our relationship with nature and affect our inner nature, with implications for the personal or social justice of our relationships with each other? In 1964 the American literary critic Leo Marx offered, in his landmark book *The Machine in the Garden* a distinction between what he called 'sentimental pastoral' and 'complex pastoral' (25). The former delivers no insights, but merely indulges in complacent escapism in its celebration of retreat into nature. But 'complex pastoral' offers lessons, often implicit, or delivered with ironic disguise. Marx's great example is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, at the end of which Marx argues that Prospero's renewal comes as a result of 'an effort of mind and spirit' from inner resources gained during his island retreat

from the court (70). But Marx also includes comments on an American tradition of complex pastoral from *Moby Dick* (1851) through *Walden* (1854) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The challenge for contemporary readers is to distinguish between sentimental and complex pastorals today.

### **What is Anti-Pastoral Literature?**

Some writers have wanted to correct the idealisation of the pastoral by presenting counter evidence that emphasises the opposite features in a gritty ‘realism.’ George Crabbe has already been mentioned as an anti-pastoral poet of the eighteenth century, but it was the farm worker Stephen Duck who took on Pope on his own terms and style. Telling it how it was, with sweat ‘in briny streams’ running down his face, in *The Thresher’s Labour* (1736) Duck directly countered Pope’s version with the agricultural reality:

No Fountains murmur here, no Lamkins play,

No Linnets warble, and no Fields look gay;

‘Tis all a gloomy, melancholy Scene,

Fit only to provoke the Muses’s Spleen. (*Pastoral* 121)

Duck attacks the idealised verbs of Pope's kind of pastoral: 'murmur,' 'play,' 'warble.' Pope's classical Muse would be sent into a melancholy mood by the reality of the labour that actually maintains the countryside. As long as there have been idealised pastoral texts there have been elements of anti-pastoral in literature. So the features of anti-pastoral literature can be summed up as the opposite of those of the pastoral:

- Corrective of pastoral, often explicitly
- Unidealised – harsh, unattractive,
- Emphasises 'realism'
- Problematic – shows tensions, disorder, inequalities
- Challenges literary constructs as false distortions
- Demythologies Arcadia, Eden, Shangri-La

Sometimes writers of texts that are mainly pastoral will introduce elements of anti-pastoral to give their texts authenticity. Even *The Idylls* carries a health warning for peasants going barefoot on idyllic Mediterranean hills: 'You shouldn't go barefoot on the hillside, Battus. / Wherever you tread, the ground's one thorny ambush' (71). Even Thoreau complained that his bean-field was under attack from first worms, and then woodchucks. But perhaps the most common contemporary anti-pastoral texts are dystopian novels of a future in

which humans have devastated the environment to such an extent that it threatens their own survival. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) would be an extreme example. In this novel the last birds have already flown and the novel's final paragraph reminds the reader that the future of the brooktrout and, indeed, pure water itself, lies in their hands. The apocalyptic anti-pastoral novel can act as a warning about the very future of nature itself upon which we all depend. But such a stance by a writer, hoping not just to frighten and threaten, but to engage with the complex questions for our species, might better be described as 'post-pastoral.'

### **What is Post-pastoral Literature?**

Whilst the English literary critics John Barrell and John Bull, editors of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* (1974), were declaring the pastoral to now be dead, the American critics Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell were suggesting that it was so important that we could expect to see it re-inventing and re-invigorating itself into the future. Indeed, Buell's confidence in the radical role of pastoral in America to offer critiques which then became institutionally accepted and acceptable – 'dissent becoming consensus' – led him to suggest that this was a continuing pattern: 'So American pastoral has simultaneously been counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored' (50). But the year following Barrell and Bull's announcement, the English critic Raymond Williams in his book *The Country and the City* (1975) finally put the

nail in the coffin of the term 'pastoral' for critical use in any other than a negative, pejorative way. He exposed the politically conservative function of English pastoral literature through its distortions and omissions, emphasising only idealisation and seeing no evidence since Shakespeare for a notion of complex pastoral. And since 1964 no critics seem to have taken up Leo Marx's distinction between sentimental and complex pastoral. The term 'pastoral' has come to be associated only with idealisation, as in the verb to 'pastoralise' the representation of a landscape. So what was clearly needed was a term for writing about nature that outflanked the closed circle of the pastoral and its opposite, the anti-pastoral. In 1994 I offered the notion of 'post-pastoral' in relation to the poetry of Ted Hughes and later developed the idea to apply to different kinds of literature. In some senses this is an alternative term for Marx's 'complex pastoral.' Post-pastoral texts, I now suggest, are texts that raise for readers some or all of the following six questions, illustrated with examples from British and American poetry:

1. *Can awe in the face of nature (eg landscapes) lead to humility in our species, reducing our hubris?*

Much pastoral poetry begins with awe but leans towards comfort and complacency. In the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins awe at 'God's Grandeur,' in the poem of that title, leads to humility. This is essential if the hubris of our species' treatment of its environment is to be recognised. The Scottish poet

Sorley MacLean (1911-1996), in a Gaelic praise-song for the deserted township of Screapadal on his native island of Raasay, laments the brutal clearances of 1852, but concludes his poem 'Screapadal' by transforming the image of a basking shark into the back of a nuclear submarine, representing a hubris 'that would leave Screapadal without beauty / just as it was left without people' (309). Pope's pastoral celebrated the human exploitation of the gift of nature, but post-pastoral poetry recognises the dangers of a complacent view of our fragile relationship with nature, seeking to avoid hubris. The contemporary American poet Gary Snyder provides plenty of evidence for all six questions in his selected poems *No Nature* (1992) so his work will illustrate each question. Snyder's awe for nature leads to the humility of seeking a purified form of attention to it by close contact: 'I'll sleep by the creek and purify my ears' (*No Nature* 26).

2. *What are the implications of recognising that we are part of nature's creative-destructive processes?*

The awe at the heart of Blake's famous poem 'Tyger' is for the circular dynamic of its 'fearful symmetry': its very vitality is sustained by a destructive power. It is not a paradox that both tiger and lamb are necessary; it is simply the awesome mystery that a biocentric vision offers. The perspective of pastoral is static and anthropocentric. A biocentric view accepts that what grows is decay, that in turn feeds growth; but neither growth nor decay are dominant. The early

poetry of Ted Hughes satirised the cultural protections that we erect to avoid confronting and celebrating the death process. Blake's major project in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is an exploration of how we might view ourselves in a destructive-creative universe 'if the doors of perception were cleans'd' and we could break our own 'mind forge'd manacles' such as the pastoral. For Blake, what the pastoral suppresses creates an actual hell out of what should be a heaven, a heaven of both bees and worms, in which the tiger and the lamb live their deaths. In his poem 'Ripples on the Surface' Gary Snyder evokes salmon ripples in the birthing and its dying stream as an image of vitality in nature and its erasure, 'Ever-fresh events / scraped out, rubbed out, and used, used again' as an image of what we learn from nature: 'the little house in the wild, / the wild in the house'. (381)

3. *If our inner nature echoes outer nature, how can the outer help us understand the former?*

The result of such a recognition is that the destructive-creative processes in the natural world around us can give us images for understanding our own inner processes. Indeed, our inner processes have a continuum with the outer world, as singers of folk-songs have always known: 'But I oftentimes have snatched at the red rose-bud / And gained but the willow tree.' In the twentieth century Peter Redgrove's poetry, for example, explored the way in which we are influenced by external natural forces of which we have lost our understanding.

We respond to atmospheric pressure, natural electricity, the seasons and phases of the moon in our sensuous apprehension of the world, but it is in our dreams that we often formulate our understanding of this relationship. Redgrove's poem 'The Big Sleep' suggests that maybe women who live by the sea have a pregnancy that is related to the tides and that their dreams are also influenced also by rhythms of the sea, the 'immense sea-clock'. Snyder takes a simple view: 'creek music, heart music' (308).

#### 4. *If nature is culture, is culture nature?*

In an obvious way this is what poetry has always done, even before it was written down. The oral tradition largely consists of images by which our inner nature is understood by cultural constructs that define external nature, as the singer of the folksong quoted above, 'The Seeds of Love,' clearly understood. Thus natural images in poetry only work because nature is culture, and poetry in particular plays upon the instability or variability of our constructs. One person's 'sowing' of the seeds of love is another person's sexual harassment.

But the realisation that culture itself is natural provides a vital opportunity for the poetic imagination. At the climax of *Home at Grasmere*, William Wordsworth struggles at the limits of language to articulate what Andrew Marvell had hinted at a century and a half earlier in 'The Garden.' Wordsworth says he is,



Speaking of nothing more than what we are -

How exquisitely the individual Mind

(And the progressive powers perhaps no less

Of the whole species) to the external world

Is fitted; and how exquisitely too -

Theme this but little heard of among men -

The external world is fitted to the mind. (*Pastoral* 151)

If, as Gary Snyder says, the writing of poetry is 'the practice of the wild mind,' then poetry is not thinking about nature, but nature thinking. If 'the external world is fitted to the mind,' then our thinking is either leading to our own natural extinction as a species, or to our adaptation to our environment. As Snyder says, 'We *are* it/ it sings through us' (234).

5. *How can consciousness, through conscience, help us heal our alienation from our home?*

The revolutionary degree of Wordsworth's discovery can be seen when one considers the importance of the idea for the Enlightenment that consciousness

was what separated us, indeed elevated us, from the rest of nature. But for those who, like Wordsworth, sought a connectedness with nature, consciousness remained a source of alienation from the rest of nature. With consciousness comes conscience and the exercise of choice to reverse some of our alienating conceptions, such as those D. H. Lawrence refers to as 'the voice of my education' in the poem 'Snake.' A 'petty' attitude towards the possibly of threatening the otherness of nature's underworld is actually, he points out, a demeaning of humanity. The logic of such an idea can lead down the road of a poetry that can remind us of a taken-for-granted exploitation of 'natural resources,' as Snyder puts it: 'The log trucks remind us, / as we think, dream and play / of the world that is carried away.' (289)

*6. Is the exploitation of our planet aligned with our exploitation of human minorities?*

Ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant have pointed out that the exploitation of women has derived from the same mindset that has been exploiting the planet for centuries under the guise of science. Ecofeminists argue that we need to counter both at the same time, otherwise there will be no uncontaminated environment in which emancipated women, and others, can live in the future.

The treatment of environment in the poetry of Black and Asian women poets writing in Britain today is often found to be parallel to considerations of the

treatment of people. The Guyanan poet Grace Nichols, in her sequence *i is a long memoried woman* (1983), assumes that a woman's ease or anger about her own treatment is echoed by that of the landscape in which she lives. This is not so much metaphorical as sensuously linked within the poetry. In a sense, a woman's life in Guyana, the poetry suggests, is lived through the environment. Crimes against nature are crimes against women, in this case, as in so many others around the globe.

Such holistic thinking embedded in Indian mythology is contributing to contemporary British culture through a poem like Debjani Chatterjee's 'Ganapati.' After telling the story of the elephant god marrying the banana tree, the poem's concluding line suggests that by embodying in myth such an unusual marriage, 'We stretched our notions of humanity' (51). It is an expanding of humanity to conceive of a marrying of the animal and the vegetable in a natural as well as a cultural sense. Thus the poem claims to have challenged 'swamps of intolerance.' Intolerant attitudes can obscure our conceptions of nature as well of cultures that challenge those conceptions. Gary Snyder thought of North America as Turtle Island, colonised internally and externally: 'North America, Turtle Island, taken by invaders who wage war around the world.' (237)

### **Pastoral as a Reading Strategy**

If our 'art itself is nature', post-pastoral literature might be seen as nature's way of offering us imaginative challenges to conceptions that are leading to our

extinction. Each of the six features of post-pastoral literature is a field of urgently needed exploration, raising key questions that are engaged by contemporary science, environmental ethics and cultural geography, for example. Post-pastoral writing provides a mode for integrating and questioning these enquiries in a holistic ‘stretching of our notions of humanity.’ Such writing might be able to nudge us into some ways of answering the most crucial question of our time: what is the right relationship by which people and planet can live together?

But first, the obvious challenge to the contemporary reader of literature that refers to nature in whatever form is to distinguish between the pastoral, the anti-pastoral, and the post-pastoral. Such a reading strategy will help the reader to consider which writing is likely to raise the most useful questions for our time.

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