Lecture 11: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Denham, Philips, & Milton*

"Cooper's Hill" Sir John Denham, 1642, 1654

Cooper's Hill was one of the most popular English poems of the 17th century:
In part, the poem was so popular (it was reprinted literately dozens of times) because it allegorically dealt, in the form of an imagined stag hunt (lines 263f.), with the beheading of King Charles I (in 1649).

"Cooper's Hill" is the first modern "loco-descriptive" poem in English:
As the name suggests, loco-descriptive (sometimes called "topographical") poetry provides lush descriptions of specific locales. Loco-descriptive literature will become enormously popular in upcoming centuries. Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, repeatedly praised "Cooper's Hill".

Loco-descriptive poems come on the scene as "country-house" poems die out:
Because loco-descriptive literature is not moored to an estate (along with the patronage system), it is a more general-purpose form of nature writing.

In general terms, loco-descriptive literature is a form of pastoral:
Although loco-descriptive literature will sometimes eschew the conventions of pastoral poetry (such as the obligatory inclusion of shepherds & sheep), such literature nonetheless pastorally gestures toward an environment.

Interestingly, Cooper's Hill gestures to a variety of environments:
The panoramic view from Cooper's Hill includes both urban and country locales: St. Paul's cathedral, London, Windsor Castle, St. Anne's Hill, a section of the Thames River, Windsor Forest, and a washland meadow.

Unlike Denham, future loco-descriptive poets will often turn away from the city:
Writing a century or more after Denham, Romantic poets (such as Wordsworth) will often completely ignore urban areas, as they instead look to, indeed fetishize, more pristine, rural locales.

The view from Cooper's Hill, as it would have appeared to Denham:
Including Windsor Castle
London would be far in the distance
Cooper's Hill inaugurated the popular genre of the "hill poem."

Loco-Descriptive Literature

Perhaps not surprisingly, loco-descriptive literature is often very descriptive:

In order to “capture” a locale between the boards of a book, from the early modern period onward writers will provide more vivid and increasingly longer descriptions of the environment, as their works become more and more representational.

Hence, nature poetry is becoming more representational and less gestural.
If one looks closely at classical, medieval, and early Renaissance pastoral literature, including “To Penshurst,” it becomes clear that the locales being described are hardly described at all, as these works do not extensively employ mimesis (a literary term, derived from Greek, for “representation”).
Instead, these works gesture to, rather than lavishly describe and represent (often to the owners of these places), familiar and nearby environments. This is a major difference between loco-descriptive poetry & earlier works.

If the reader can actually visit a locale, representation is less important:

In this sense, “To Penshurst” works like a nature guide; like a human guide walking beside us, making gestures at every turn: “Look, ‘the broad beech and the chestnut’” (12), “Look, ‘the purple pheasant with the speckled sides’” (28), “Look, ‘the painted partridge lies in every field’” (29), etc.

Descriptions, such as the pheasant being “purple,” are of course present in “To Penshurst,” but what is far more important is what is gestured to, which lies outside of the text. Consequently, such a work works best if it does not overly draw attention to itself or its own representational images.

If a nature guide walking beside us succumbed to the temptation of representation by lavishly describing a countryside, it would not only be superfluous, as the emergent scene itself was now present, it would risk being counterproductive by detracting from the environment itself.

Loco-descriptive poets attempt to effectively describe what may never be visited:
Hence, literature from the early modern period onward is going to become more representational and less gestural, as the imagined reader may not--and as far as the author is concerned, need not--ever visit the locale.

Loco-descriptive poets actually attempt to create an environment in their texts:
If not create, loco-descriptive poets at least hope to emulate an environment in their texts. Whether they succeed at this is, of course, debatable.

Similarly, painters will increasingly try to create an environment on canvas:
Our word “landscape” first appeared around 1600 (when Shakespeare and Jonson were writing), as artists increasingly became interested in the environment, especially the “landscape,” and its successful representation.

Loco-Descriptive Literature, cont'd.

Prior to the Renaissance, painters made little effort to accurately depict landscape.

Such as “Hunt of the Unicorn” (1500)...

...and “The Crucifixion of Saint Peter with a Donor” (1450)

Dutch painters, such as Pieter Bruegel, produced some of the first “landscapes."

Such as “The Harvesters,” 1565.
The goal of these works was to accurately represent an environment on canvas.

By 1640s and ‘50s, when Denham was writing Cooper’s Hill, the French artist Claude Lorrain was approaching near photographic fidelity to reality.

Note also that the human presence in these works is diminishing; increasingly the environment is taking over the scene, as anthropocentrism is being questioned.

As England becomes more human centered, anthropocentrism is questioned:
Nature poets questioned whether human beings should dominate the earth.

Denham brought to poetry what Lorrain (and others) did to painting: a desire to create a highly successful representation of an environment:
From the middle of the 17th century onward, poets will increasingly strive for “photographic” realism in their work through the primary tool that they have at their disposal: description. From this point onward, descriptions of the environment will both become more lavish and more precise.

Poetic description will at times approach contemporary scientific writing:
As poets describe the environment more and more minutely, their writing will often seem like, and draw from, scientific writing. This will become especially apparent with writers like Thoreau (particularly in his later works), who considered himself as much a naturalist as a writer.

Jonson’s “Praises of a Country Life” & Philips’ “A Country Life”

Jonson’s and Philip’s “country-life” poems are translations of Horace’s Epode II.

Horace was a contemporary of Virgil. His Epode II seemingly begins as a celebration of the simple country life, imagined as a literal golden age:
Happy the man who, far away from
business cares, like the pristine race of

mortals, works his ancestral acres with his
steers, from all money-lending free.

However, its ending reveals that this country ideal is con-structed in the city:
When the money-lender Alfius had uttered this,
on the very point of beginning the farmer's life,
he called in all his funds by the end of the month --
and next month seeks to put them out again!

Hence, Horace knows that the perfect country life is a constructed ideal.
Although Horace, like Ovid, echoes the story of the golden age, he is fully aware that his contemporary rural countryside was not a locus amoenus, and that this notion was culturally constructed--specifically from the vantage point of the city--which Horace takes great joy in parodying.

Jonson’s translation of Horace’s Epode II proves that he too understands this:
Jonson’s line-by-line translation also ends by noting that the poem, an improbable dream of a perfect rural life, has been uttered by a urban usuer.

Philips’ 1667 translation of Horace’s Epode II actually leaves off the ending:
Philips provides a highly stylized translation of Horace’s Epode II, which fails to reveal that the poem’s celebration of country life is a parody.

Philips’ “A Country Life”

Katherine Philips was the most popular woman writer in 17th-century England:
In part, Philips was able secure such acclaim by knowing just what--and what not--to say. As a woman writer, she carefully constructed herself as non-threatening, unlike contemporaries such as Margaret Cavendish. She also understood how attitudes toward the environment were changing.

Philips gave the reader what they wanted, unequivocal praise of country life:
While Horace, Jonson, and Philips (by way of her reading of Horace) knew that the portrayal of the contemporary countryside as a locus amoenus was a culturally constructed illusion, she also knew that, faced with increasing environmental devastation in London and elsewhere, her readers very much wanted to imagine life in the countryside as perfect.

Philips describes--in detail--life in the country as utterly perfect:
As Philips constructs them, “country folk” do not rule over anyone (line 15) nor envy their wealth (17), they do not eat animals (19), they (like Thoreau) live in a simple cottages (34), and they are in every way opposed to the city and the "State" (54).

To include so much description, Philips adds over twenty lines of her own in translating Horace’s original text.

Philips is a harbinger of generations of poets that fetishize the environment:
After Philips, many English nature poets (such as Wordsworth) will not only celebrate life in the country, but actually move there themselves. In encouraging a literal move to the countryside, such poets ironically hastened its destruction. After celebrating England’s Lake District in verse, Wordsworth fought against tourism (and a rail line) to the area.

Milton’s "Paradise Lost" (1667,1674)

"Paradise Lost" is a reinscription of the opening three Books of Genesis:
Milton took the brief Genesis account of Adam and Eve in Eden and expanded into over 10,000 lines of poetry. More than just a retelling of the story, Milton provides radical (even heretical) interpretations of scripture, as he weighs in on the Trinity, free will, the nature of God (and of women), and a host of other topics, including issues of interest environmentally.

Milton’s Eden is a locus amoenus, even though Adam and Eve garden there:
As Genesis 3.17-19 made (essentially) georgic labor a punishment for original sin, in every account of Adam and Eve in Eden before Milton, the pair never did any work before the Fall. Milton, however, has them gardening in the Garden (see lines 625-34, and elsewhere).
Milton is thus, like Al Gore, a proponent of a Christian stewardship approach to the planet, which entrusts care of the earth to human beings.

In "Paradise Lost," Milton portrays Eve as the genius loci of Eden:
Milton’s Eve “nurses” the plants in her domain, sees to the bounty and beauty of Eden, protects the place from “nightly ills,” attends to Eden with morning “haste” (as she visits and keeps track of all the plants in her domain), and is as attentive to a spiritual realm as she is to the Earth.

Milton deconstructed the notion that Christianity was inherently dualistic:
Milton was a monist. He neither believed that human beings were split beings of spirit and flesh, nor that Earth and Heaven were fundamentally different. To Milton, there is but “one first matter” (Book V.472) of which everything in Heaven and Earth (with the exception of God) is composed.

Milton would erase the boundary between the physical and the metaphysical:
To Milton, this boundary is not inherent in Christianity, but rather is an ideology inherited from Greek and Roman thinkers, like Plato.

In fact, the most famous lines of "Paradise Lost" parody dualistic thinking:
The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (I.254-55). This is the boast of metaphysical philosophers, such a Milton's contemporary René Descartes, voiced by Milton's Satan.

By Book IV, Satan realizes what is for him a horrible truth: place matters:
"Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell" (IV.75). Milton scoffed at those thinkers who, like Satan (and Descartes), proclaimed that the mind can pull free of the body, the earth, indeed of the entire physical realm.

To Milton, you do not reside in your body, you are your body; you do not live in a place, you are the place:
Milton not only erased the boundary between mind and body, but between mind and place. In other words, "The mind is its place," be it Hell, Earth, or Heaven. We, like Milton's Eve, do not live in a place, we are that place.

Obviously, Milton interpreted the Judeo-Christian Bible differently than Donne:
While John Donne argued that "The world is but a carcass…Forget this world, and scarce think of it," Milton, eschewing both mind/body and physical/metaphysical dualism, argued for the possibility of a regenerative Christian era, here and now on earth. He was not alone in this belief.

The debate between Donne and Milton continues; Is paradise lost?
In March of 2007 a number of prominent Christian activists, led by James C. Dobson (founder of Focus on the Family), called on the National Association of Evangelicals to dismiss an official who urged that global warming be taken seriously. To Dobson, the earth reached a "tipping point" 6000 years ago; it is now irretrievable decaying; paradise is lost.
Rejecting the notion that the earth is lost, other Christian activists, such as Al Gore, are calling for extraordinarily efforts to regenerate the planet.