

Lecture 6: Intro to the Environmental Humanities, *Pastoral (ecocriticism)*

Pastoral

Pastoral is not a literary genre (like a play, a novel, etc), but rather is a mode of writing that can inhabit many genres. Hence, there are pastoral plays (like Shakespeare's "As You Like It"), pastoral elegies (Milton's "Lycidas"), and so forth. Even Thoreau's "Walden" is in some sense a pastoral work.

Consequently, pastoral can take many, many forms. In fact, it need not be a work of literature at all, as there are pastoral paintings, and even pastoral music...

Come to me here from Crete,
To this holy temple, where
Your lovely apple grove stands,
And your altars that flicker
With incense.
And below the apple branches, cold
Clear water sounds, everything shadowed
By roses, and sleep that falls from
Bright shaking leaves.
And a pasture for horses blossoms
With the flowers of spring, and breezes
Are flowing here like honey:
Come to me here.

Sappho, 7th century BCE, Greece

Art and Literature

Perhaps not surprisingly, pastoral art frequently (in fact usually) depicts scenes that are literally pastoral: pastures filled with shepherds and sheep. What is surprising, however, is that pastoral literature may not principally be about shepherds, sheep, or the environment at all.

Like the word "nature," pastoral literature has undergone many changes in the past 3000 years. While pastoral can literally be about the environment, it has often (starting at least as early as Virgil) been a veiled way of talking about something else. Such pastoral art is not literal, but rather allegorical.

As allegory, pastoral provides a relatively safe way of broaching political, ecclesiastical, and other sensitive issues. For example, one could write about shepherds experiencing hard times as a way of critiquing a government. If

confronted, the author could deny everything, saying that it was simply a fanciful story about shepherds, not politics.

An example of pastoral literature as allegory would be Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, which was a Renaissance poem that critiqued both the reign of Queen Elizabeth and the Church of England, but at face value seemed little more than a pleasant pastoral story about shepherds.

In this sense, pastoral can mask subversive and dangerous political writing.

Pastoral, however, can also be a very literal form of nature writing. As we shall see with Virgil *Eclogue I*, the allegorical and literal aspects of pastoral literature sometimes intersect, as political actions can often have profound environmental implications.

Because pastoral art can take so many forms, and can both be and not be about the environment at the same time, it is wise not to make any initial assumptions about a pastoral work. In particular, do not assume that a text is an example of nature writing, which "*The Shepheardes Calendar*" for the most part is not, just because it is in the pastoral mode.

Pastoral as Nostalgic and Contemporary

Consequently, like Eden from Genesis, as well as the Golden Age from Hesiod and Ovid, pastoral texts often posit a *locus amoenus* where human beings lived at peace with the planet. Thus, pastoral art also contributes to the myth that in our past there was once an environmentally perfect time.

However, while the *locus amoenus* may be in the past in pastoral art, it can also be imagined in the contemporary rural countryside. Thus, even as early as Theocritus in the 3rd century BCE we have an inversion of the city/country dyad that we first encountered in the "*Myth of Gilgamesh*", as what lies outside of the walls of the city, the country, is now what is preferred.

Especially as a form of nature writing, one of the most conspicuous features of pastoral is that it is often highly nostalgic. In this sense, pastoral art often looks back to a "simpler time," when human beings were imagined as having had a better, perhaps even perfect, relationship with the planet.

Because the contemporary countryside is imagined as a *locus amoenus*, it often will be invoked in pastoral art when the modern world is perceived as being in a particularly worrisome and turbulent state.

Asher Brown Durand's "Pastoral Landscape," painted 1861 on the eve of the U.S. Civil War, desperately attempts to portray a perfect place at a time when the nation was falling apart. What was really happening in the countryside, where human beings were forced into slavery, was hardly bucolic. Durand's painting looks away from this turmoil to an imagined happier time and place.

As a form of nostalgia, the perfect place is often imagined both temporally and spatially, in the not-too-distant past, and in the not-too-distant countryside. As such, pastoral art can be utopian. It certainly can signal a break with reality.

From an environmental perspective

From an environmental perspective, what is ironic about the life depicted in pastoral literature is that, as Andy Goldsworthy noted in "Rivers and Tides", sheep are notorious for their ability to keep nearly any form of plant from growing to maturity, hence they are excellent at maintaining deforested areas.

Consequently, the pastoral life of shepherds is hardly an environmental ideal. Nonetheless, because such a life was frequently characterized by an abundance of leisure (*otium*), it nicely fit into the myth of the *locus amoenus*.

Because the absence of labor (*otium*) is a cornerstone of life in the pastoral *locus amoenus* (as it was in prelapsarian Eden and the Golden Age), shepherds are often, as they are in Theocritus, depicted as spending their days in pleasant pastimes such as singing matches and wooing shepherdesses.

Poets, often intrigued by this notion, frequently associated themselves with their shepherds, as their pastoral songs stand for the poet's lyric poem.

"Pastoral is the view of the pasture from the living room window." Henry David Thoreau

As Thoreau correctly notes, pastoral was rarely written by actual shepherds. Rather, pastoral art is largely an urban form that, from the perspective of the city, depicts life in the countryside as leisurely and perfect, which, of course, was rarely if ever the case. A fact not lost on many pastoral artists.

If a pastoral work is written in response to a turmoil, the problem to which it responds may not be a political situation (such as the Civil War), but rather an environmental one. For example, when the environment is endangered through human action, we might imagine a pastoral place free of such danger.

Rachel Carson, for example, opens "Silent Spring" in a very pastoral way, imagining an idyllic rural countryside free of problems, in order to draw attention to it being threatened by the dangerous use of pesticides like DDT.

Environmental Consciousness

When pastoral literature draws attention to the countryside and to the environmental dangers threatening it, it may be that the writer has developed, and would like to pass on to the reader, an environmental consciousness.

Briefly, it is often the case that we are not fully aware of the environment into which we are born and find ourselves. Of course, the environment is always there, but as we preoccupy ourselves with the activities of our lives, we often pay little attention to it.

(Heidegger considered this phenomenon in detail.)

However, if something should happen to the environment, such as it being threatened, we become both more aware of it, and aware of it as endangered.

An example would be Santa Barbara in 1969, when one of the worst oil spills in US history threatened the coast. Prior to the spill residents of Santa Barbara were of course aware of their beaches, but because of the spill, they became aware of them more fully, and as endangered, which underscored their value. This helped foster an environmental consciousness in the US.

Like anyone else, artists and writers can develop an environmental consciousness in this manner. This, for example, is what happened to Rachel Carson; she became shockingly aware of the environment as endangered through her research into widespread pesticide use in the U.S.

The challenge for the writer or artist, in this case Carson, is to facilitate the emergence of this environmental consciousness in the reader. In order to do so, the artist has to gesture to the environment, either the pristine one being threatened or the environment already damaged by human action, or both.

Traditionally, because pastoral was written by urban poets for an urban audience, these poets generally drew attention to the pristine countryside as a striking contrast to the environmental changes brought on by urban life. It is important to note that they may not have been aware that they were doing so.

The effect of such a maneuver was that the urban reader looked to the countryside, but in the process caught a glimpse of their own environment.

Ironically, because traditional pastoral art depicts pristine environments, critics have until recently assumed that these were accurate depictions of the environment at the time these artworks were produced. In part, scholars have been eager to do so because they accepted as fact that the earth was once a locus amoenus, little realizing that this notion was created by pastoral artists.

This is especially ironic as these pastoral artists were drawing attention to pristine environments as striking contrasts to endangered ones. Perhaps not surprisingly, this pastoral project can take an inverted form but have the same effect; when the artist directly draws attention to endangered environments.

Such works are in some sense a type of anti-pastoral, which is somewhat misleading as these works often function like traditional pastoral art as they draw attention to both pristine and endangered landscapes. An example would be the work of artist Edward Burtynsky, the subject of the documentary "Manufactured Landscapes".

Edward Burtynsky

There is something familiar about Burtynsky's landscapes, even if they seem somewhat alien to us.....as they are meant to remind us of something we have seen, which they are in fact gesturing toward...

Note how the river gives life to its surroundings, which would otherwise be dry and faded.....while nothing living surrounds Burtynsky's river. Even the trees in the background seem dead.

Although the order is reversed (in traditional pastoral the "natural" scene would have been gestured to first), which is why Burtynsky's work may in some sense be described as anti-pastoral, his photographs nonetheless pastorally draw attention to both the endangered and the pristine landscapes.

Because the extent to which the environment is being endangered has increased dramatically in the past few hundred years, it is hardly surprising that threatened landscapes are now given precedence over pristine ones.

Giving endangered landscapes precedence over pristine ones is a particularly clever move, as it avoids the danger that the pristine landscape will be mistakenly seen as the actual subject of the pastoral artwork.

This is a real danger, as we could mistakenly assume, as have so many scholars, the the pleasant countryside depicted in pastoral literature is its only --or even its

“true”--subject, ignoring that the work is in fact gesturing toward another environment (an urban or endangered one) that is in no way pastoral.

By showing us the endangered environment, Burtynsky avoids this danger. Nonetheless, traditional pastoral can similarly gesture to two environments.

Incidentally, many of Burtynsky’s images are meant as gestures.