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Writing the Environmental Crisis: the Case of the Pastoral

Constance Pompié

Introduction

I want to start this presentation with a few lines from a novel entitled *At Hawthorn Time*, written by British novelist Melissa Harrison and published in 2015. Jack is a drifter who walks through the English countryside and observes what he encounters on his way. His observations are compiled in a notebook in which he inventories various elements of the land. During his walks, he reflects on the evolution of the land and the visible effects of the environmental crisis:

There was sickness and sickness, Jack thought, pausing by the roadside and looking up at an ash. [...] He remembered the graceful elms. So did the rooks; you could hear the loss of them in their chatter still. Things didn't always turn out as you feared, though; the countryside was still full of saplings, but fugitive, sheltered in hedgerows and abetted by taller trees. One day they might come back. (Harrison 69)

This passage describes the degradation of the vegetation in our modern times. However, this extract also sets the scene for hope: the hope that by observing, inventorying and tending to species they will find a way to come back and thrive.

Since this passage is evidently set in the countryside, it has a pastoral quality. Terry Gifford lists three definitions of this word: firstly, the pastoral is a historical literary form with a long tradition which began in poetry and developed into drama and novels. Secondly, the word 'pastoral' can refer to any literature that describes the countryside. Thirdly, the term 'pastoral' can be used sceptically, as a word that describes idealising and simplifying nature and the reality of life in the country (Gifford 1—2).

In this presentation, I am going to look at the literary tradition of pastoral which originates in Theocritus' *Idylls*, a series of poems written for the court of Alexandria and based upon the shepherds' song contests in Sicily. These songs consist in a nostalgic vision of the simplicity of life in touch with nature. From those early times, the pastoral evolved, moving from Virgil, through the Renaissance and the Romantic period, to the new pastorals of the twenty-first century and it has been accommodated by various formal configurations. Nowadays, the pastoral continues to evoke rural life, putting into perspective the relationship between the human subject and nature using many different forms.

Literary scholars have observed that there has been a shift in recent years in British literature. While early 2000s authors, such as Peter Ackroyd or Martin Amis showed interest in the convoluted space of the city, a great deal of contemporary novels and short stories tackle issues pertaining to rural spaces and their specificities. I argue that this shift is a result of the threat of environmental destruction and is conveyed through the use of canonical forms such as the pastoral mode. But how can the pastoral tackle the gradual disappearance of its primary *locus*?

What I aim to demonstrate is that the pastoral can be effective to write the environmental crisis and to question the place of the human subject within ecosystems. In order to fully grasp the ways in which the literary pastoral responds to the environmental crisis, it is necessary to explore its origins and the way it has been transformed in recent years.

My talk is divided in three parts. I will start by tackling the ambivalence of this debated literary form, before detailing its various conventions and the way they have been updated in recent fiction. Finally, I will explain how new pastoral fiction has established a form of ethics that emphasises the role of literature in a world in crisis.

I. An ambivalent literary mode

In a very influential work Deborah Lilley has coined the term “new pastoral” in order to define recent pastoral novels that take into account the environmental crisis. The definition of the pastoral she puts forward is the following one: "the pastoral is concerned with the relationships between people and place and the dualistic concepts of 'the human' and 'the natural', the country and the city, and the past and the present" (Lilley 31).

If the pastoral tackles the relationship between the human subject and the environment, how come it was deemed obsolete until now? Indeed, many critics have explained that the pastoral should not be brought back to literary works of fiction. It is known for representing an idealised and artificial nature imbued with nostalgia. Such a perception of the countryside renders invisible the social consequences of the land management systems depicted in pastoral writings. The idealisation of rural space as a refuge, portraying a form of nostalgia for a bygone golden age, served in particular to buttress the *enclosure* system, which dispossessed thousands of labourers of their land in the 16th and 17th centuries, thus perpetuating systemic social exploitation (Williams 105). Therefore, the pastoral has a strong political conservative connotation and it was used as a political tool for many centuries. The genre is never neutral and its use has to be minutely analysed.

Along its political connotations, other problems arise from the pastoral mode. Since it portrays an idealised version of nature, it serves as a refuge from environmental degradation by drawing attention to an ideal created in opposition to the effects of the environmental crisis. Various critics explain that there can be no critical value in falling back on a better, older world that is not a memory but an idea of nature privileged because of its distance from current conditions (Barrell and Bull 432). This concern is addressed in the novel *The Wolf Border* written by Sarah Hall in 2015. In the novel, Rachel manages a project aiming at reintroducing wolves to the Lake District. It is funded by Thomas Pennington, a wealthy aristocrat who owns the Annerdale Estate, a large property in which the two selected wolves will be welcomed. As Rachel walks in the estate, she notices:

The moors were endless, haunting; they hid everything and gave up secrets only intermittently [...] She did not know it then, but in reality it was a kempt place, cultivated, even the high grassland covering the fells was manmade. (Hall 2015, 29)

This is another display of the issues of the pastoral, namely that of the commodification of nature and the power relations it presupposes. Rachel realises that what she thought was a natural land is the result of careful economic and political planning. The aesthetic and idealised nature the passage displays is nothing but a creation.

Bearing these issues in mind, to what extent could the pastoral be used to tackle the environmental crisis? Is it a mode that reinforces social inequalities and whose representation of nature is ill-suited to the development of the environmental crisis? It is precisely in this ambivalence that the critical potential of the pastoral lies. The discrepancy between the pastoral subject and its representation allows us to question the interrelations between nature and the human subject, at a time when these interrelations are intensified and complicated by current environmental instability. Thus, by questioning the gap between subject and representation, and the selectivity of the spaces represented, we are looking at the interrelationships that lie at the heart of pastoral representation. This ambivalence, whereby the pastoral highlights certain problems while giving the impression of escaping from them, is summed up in William Empson's definition of pastoral as: "the process of putting the complex into the simple" (Empson 23). The apparent simplicity of pastoral representations actually reveals a critical opportunity to explore how we perceive and relate to our environment, and how this influences the way we behave towards it.

The pastoral is thus a protean and ambivalent mode, long considered suspect and ill-suited for evoking real ecological concerns. Yet, this ambivalence and adaptability allows the pastoral to flourish in contemporary British literature. The reflexive nature of the novel allows

it to be reformed while at the same time calling into question its modes of representation. This reflexivity allows for a renewal and redefinition of the main conventions of the traditional pastoral.

II. Pastoral Conventions

The pastoral mode is predicated upon a series of conventions that have evolved over time resulting in the newer versions of pastoral available nowadays. I am going to focus on one convention: the pastoral interlude and the contrast it creates between urban and rural spaces.

The archetypal pastoral plot unfolds in this way: a character escapes urban anxieties by visiting the countryside. The aim of this retreat is to reflect upon a dominantly urban present through a detour in the idealised past of simplistic rural life. The retreat is usually followed by the return of the character, which constitutes the moment when the result of the reflection can be implemented. This stereotypical movement is a literary device that allowed poets to promote the countryside and the supposedly luscious lifestyle it offered. A modern version of this interlude is displayed in *At Hawthorn Time*, in which a retired couple move to the countryside. Their quest for peace ends in disillusionment as the lifestyle is different from what they had envisioned:

All those years spent dreaming of moving to the countryside [...] nothing like the shining visions she had carried around in her head for so long. (Harrison 41)

The couple's expectations relied on the images produced by the pastoral. The couple's quest for a nicely quaint little village cannot come to fruition, since it is based on a fabricated myth. The interlude is therefore thwarted: the only lesson that comes out of it lies in the realisation that no space is neutral.

The pastoral interlude implies a distinction between urban and rural space that seems more and more outdated. As the city nibbles away at the countryside, a distinction between these two types of space is simply no longer relevant (Barrell and Bull 432). Indeed, the gradual disappearance of the countryside in the advent of modernity makes it hard to imagine that such an interlude remains possible. More than anything, the interlude is now a way for authors to keep the countryside alive and to memorialise it before it disappears. The clearcut demarcation between urban and rural space is questioned in modern texts, though it can be used to make a social and environmental point.

The novel *Haweswater* written by Sarah Hall presents the dispossession of an entire agrarian community, back in the 1930s. A dam has to be built in a rural valley in order to

provide the cities of northern England with water. The landscape is represented through the prism of loss and the intersection of urban and rural spaces in favour of the city's economic interests leads to the annihilation of the rural community of Mardale. Additionally, the industry encroaches on the ecosystems that inhabit the land. When Jack Liggett, the representative of the water company, arrives in Mardale, he is immediately identified as someone from the city:

The automobile was very new and very fine. [...] [Jack] had come to the valley as a man would enter a room to receive a guest—territorially, impossibly possessive. He was dressed for a dinner, or a dance, like an unusual, exotic bird, its silk and sheen foreign in the cold landscape. (Hall 2002, 44)

Jack Liggett is described here as an intruder who embodies urban space through the incongruity of his car in a rural setting, the comparison to an exotic bird, his flashy outfit and his manners. Furthermore, he represents a form of technological progress that looks to the future at the expense of a rural area that is deemed obsolete, thus supporting the idea that relations between town and country are defined by urban interests. To put it in a nutshell, the novel showcases the loss of the countryside through a very distinct contrast between urban and rural space inspired by previous iterations of the mode. More specifically, the novel suggests that such a distinction is untenable and has to be deconstructed.

The new pastorals of the 21st century use and re-form ancient pastoral conventions in order to adapt them to the current environmental context and to reflect on the various connotations attributed to territories. By refashioning pastoral conventions, authors create a pastoral ethics that questions our place within ecosystems.

III. A new pastoral aest(h)etic

By producing new versions of pastorals, authors provide alternative ways to look at and connect with the environment. I am now going to focus on the ways in which the aesthetics of pastoral intersect with the ethics of environmentalism in order to reinstate the extent to which literature has an important role to play in the environmental crisis.

In early pastoral texts, the environment was considered as a constant figurative entity to which the characters only paid attention when it would shift or disappear. One step further, it was represented as a reservoir in which human beings dwelt, and from which they helped themselves. This conception of nature assumes that only living beings have power, and among living beings, human subjects find themselves at the top of a hierarchy (Braidotti 3). Neo-

materialist and posthuman theories debunk this idea of human exceptionalism and explain that non-human animals and matter are active. As human beings we are entangled in various webs of interactions on which we depend for our survival.

New pastorals accommodate these theories and therefore include both human and non-human agencies, acknowledging the interdependent connexion between both. For example, in *Haweswater*, the land is presented as a perpetually evolving and changing place, endowed with agency, as the repetition of the proverbial sentence “the land sucks back in what it once issued” (Hall 2002, 22) shows. Its milieu is represented as pulsating: “the high-altitude pools were vascular” (Hall 2002, 185). The adjective ‘vascular’ draws attention to a visual quality of the landscape as venous, but it also depicts it as a living organism, which could either be human or animal. This translation of non-living matter to living matter animates the land and highlights its vitality.

It is now clear that the pastoral questions our relation to our natural environment and the ways in which our actions damage it. In order to do so, authors erase the ontological boundary that separates non-human from human animals. In *Haweswater*, a little boy, Isaac, encapsulates a form of fluidity between humanity and non-humanity. Isaac thinks that he “I should have been a fish” (Hall 2002, 77). The boy spends a lot of time immersed in the icy water of the lakes, so much so that he seems to develop aquatic features. His skin is “glowing white”, his hair “almost white-blond”, and “there seemed to be an air of dampness about him” (56). Moreover, Isaac’s underwater observations are in stark contrast with the way in which the water company perceives water. Isaac is attentive to the ecosystems of the rivers and lakes, paying attention to every living and non-living entity: “the houses are filled with life even in winter, reptilian, marine, and the fish, sluggish in the near-zero climate. It is all worthwhile” (75). Though slow, the winter water contains multitudes of entities that sustain ecosystems. In opposition to that, the industry wants to “build water” deeming that the water trickling down from the near mountains is “wasted in rivers” (50).

The other characters of the novel also exemplify the merging of humans and environment. Their thorough immersion in the rhythms of agricultural causes them to feel “the presence of the near mountains, the pressure of them within the valley’s space of air”. The most striking example of merging with the environment is the becoming-mineral that pervades the whole novel, featuring what Stacy Alaimo calls ‘trans-corporeality’. ‘Trans-corporeality’ refers to a state “in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (Alaimo 2). On this continuum, human and non-human entities are seen to

come closer and closer until they blend. In the novel, farmers are described as “people of kept stone” (Hall 2002, 185), referencing both their strong connexion with the mountains and their stoicism. By endowing her characters with geological qualities, Sarah Hall exemplifies Stacy Alaimo’s ‘trans-corporeality’ by showing that both human beings and the land share a body.

New pastorals entail the transmission of an ethical position towards the environment: like Isaac, we perceive and pay close attention to the entities interacting with us and engage with our responsibilities as human beings. The most striking example of this behaviour can be found in *At Hawthorn Time*. Jack’s inventory of the species he encounters on his walks conveys an extreme attention to details, which is emphasised in the novel through minute descriptions. This attitude is contrasted with that of the disillusion of a retired couple:

She took the camera out and walked the fields, alert for things that declared themselves to be real, to be particular, rather than the kind of idealised pastoral vision that, she now saw, had been obscuring the actual countryside around her. [...] she could, somehow, connect. (Harrison 94)

This passage perfectly encapsulates the ethos of 21st-century pastorals; the desire to see the real behind the pastoral illusion and the desire to connect with the land and the various non-human entities it contains.

Conclusion

Pastoral writing provides an ever-evolving framework for representing the environment. In contemporary British literature, the pastoral is used to represent the environmental crisis, to question the place of the human subject within the environment, and to challenge its own modes of representation. Since its origins, the mode has represented spaces through the prism of the political and social conditions in which it is produced. It is therefore far from neutral, leading to an ambivalence that informs the debate. In order to capitalise on this ambivalence, contemporary writings stage a version of the pastoral that continues the tradition of adapting and questioning its conventions. The dichotomies on which the pastoral is based are deconstructed and reworked in order to account for environmental change. The materiality of the landscape is brought to the fore in order to draw attention to the inner workings of our common environment, in the hope that by putting a magnifying glass on them, human beings will not destroy what sustains them.

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