

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 43

Issue 1 *Engaging the Pastoral: Social, Environmental, and Artistic Critique in Contemporary Pastoral Literature*

Article 4

December 2018

Special Focus Introduction: Conceptualizing an Engaged Pastoral in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature

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Recommended Citation

Cro, Melinda A. and Paparone, Rachel (2018) "Special Focus Introduction: Conceptualizing an Engaged Pastoral in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2058>

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Abstract

This special focus section seeks to examine and problematize contemporary pastoral works from the perspective of engagement. Despite assertions that the pastoral tends towards reductionism, the mode actually serves as a productive space wherein to examine issues like global warming, resource exploitation, and pollution. Through a range of texts and artistic projects, the authors of this section explore the nexus of engagement in contemporary pastoral production particularly with regard to the relationship between the human and the non-human.

Keywords

pastoral literature, engaged literature, ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell, Terry Gifford, French and Francophone literature

Introduction: Conceptualizing an Engaged Pastoral in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature

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The pastoral, as American critic Lawrence Buell notes, has been figuring in Western thought as an important mode of artistic expression and representation for over two thousand years: “pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (*Environmental* 32). This assertion points at once to the mode’s adaptability and continued interest on the part of authors and readers to revisit Arcadia. The pastoral milieu serves as a place to experiment and ruminate from a critical distance, bringing into focus aesthetic and stylistic choices that prioritize what has been identified as a simplification or a distillation of the real. William Empson, Raymond Williams, and Roger Sales have each, to varying degrees, proposed that the pastoral reduces what is a complex reality, permitting authors to focus on an aesthetic representation. While Empson asserts that this focalization is done for artistic reasons to allow the examination of more complex social issues, Williams and Sales read political motivations behind the aesthetic choices, maintaining that they are designed to either hide or prevent the full examination of the power structures related to land ownership and the resulting exploitation of those who worked the land.

As Richard Schneider points out, the idealized version of nature represented in pastoral is not meant for dwelling; instead, it is a place more aptly suited for visiting (vii). Given our apparent inability to do without the pastoral, the idea that we visit nature and do not dwell there is highly problematic, at least from a rhetorical perspective. In North America, where pastoral is reconfigured as wilderness, the establishment of wilderness areas such as National Forests and National Parks provides a compelling example of the ways in which the pastoral problematizes our relationship with the environment. French author Jean-Christophe Rufin contends that the psychological impact of cordoning off areas that are consecrated to wilderness is such that any guilt for individual actions that harm the environment is alleviated by the existence of said wilderness spaces. The result is a feedback loop: the more societies create spaces devoted entirely to the natural world, the more waste they tend to produce. The consequence of the creation of pockets of pristine nature uncontaminated by human influence—a construct of nature that is in fact impossible—is the creation of what are essentially wilderness ghettos: small oases that are surrounded by an increasingly uninhabitable environment (Rufin 194).

Given the potential problems that arise from pastoral constructions of both real and imaginary space, it is only logical that we also look to the pastoral for possible solutions. In *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*, Buell stresses that global climate change is not simply a crisis of “economic resources, public health, and political gridlock,” but a crisis whose solutions hinge on “attitudes, feelings, images, narratives” (1). Literature that activates the environmental imagination, Buell reminds us, allows readers to engage with the experiences of the human and non-human alike in ways that increase their caring for the physical world (2). Working in the same vein as Buell, Terry Gifford maintains that “[e]xchanging songs that mediate our relationship with the land and with each other has never been more important if the human imagination is to find a solution to the crisis we face in these relationships. Whilst scientific imagination works at technological solutions, the literary imagination is one place where the necessary shifts in sensibility can be imaged and debated” (“Post-Pastoral” 16).

It would be reductive to assert that the pastoral has become merely escapist in light of the integral role the mode has played in Western understanding of the environment and the relationship between the human and the non-human. While Empson and Williams take aim at early modern pastoral (primarily sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts), we should not forget that authors of this period like Cervantes or Sorel used the pastoral frame as a means of disguising their critiques, be they social, aesthetic, or political. What the pastoral prioritizes and facilitates, in rich abundance, is a meeting place where affect and beauty dominate discourses that consider a range of social and political topics encompassing the human and the natural. That is, the pastoral inevitably calls on an aesthetic that beautifies and idealizes. In post-pastoral texts, the aesthetic is imbued with a sense of responsibility that repositions nature not as a utopian milieu that welcomes leisurely pursuits of the upper classes, but as an entity impacted by those pursuits in varying ways, an impact that is made clear to the reader even if it escapes the characters portrayed therein.

The problematics of artistic representation in the mode are echoed in the question of social representation and lead to the criticism that pastoralism, particularly American pastoralism, tends to exclude marginalized figures, valorizing male over female perspectives. Such criticisms thereby refute the positive values associated with other views that read pastoral works as exemplary of a developing social conscience (Buell, “American” 2). This historical tendency towards exclusion also problematizes the roles attributed to women within the pastoral, objectifying the feminine and prioritizing a male-oriented poetics of desire (Cro 71-72) or associating the land with woman and subjugating it to male desire. As Annette Kolodny argues, there is an elision between land and woman that characterizes “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy.” She continues to

describe this elision as “a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction” (171). Marie-Chantal Killeen, in a similar vein, examines how landscape in the pastoral is feminized—that is, the female anatomy is projected upon the landscape, resulting in pastoral “womanscapes”: “This fantasied natural landscape, in which woman repeatedly and insistently serves as *ground* to man’s *figure*, constitutes one of the founding tropes of the pastoral” (322). Hence, nature in the pastoral often undergoes a transformative process wherein the poetics of the mode operate on it in varying ways, resulting in a problematic representation that reflects the unease of relationships between the human and the non-human.

Where pastoral represents an exclusionary, hegemonic narrative, the potential for engagement seems dubious, or at least fraught. However, despite or perhaps because of its historical dominance in the Western tradition, contemporary authors continue to use pastoral modes of representation—whether consciously or not—to circumvent the full details of real-world issues and invite readers to engage with said issues emotionally and aesthetically. Focusing in this way on the aesthetic and the affective productively encourages readers to engage actively with the themes considered. After all, as Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrard point out, “research shows that emotions are at least as important as rationality in decision making, on personal as well as institutional levels” (35-36). In an age when the means by which factual information, and the information itself, have come into question from all sides, the pastoral mode offers an opportunity to engage with issues like global warming, resource exploitation, and pollution in a way that invites dialogue and debate.

On Post-Pastoral and Engagement

The challenge of working with pastoral literature is above all one of definitions. If the only works that can be classified as pastoral must adhere to a narrow set of conventional constraints—if there must be shepherds, for example—then very few works written after the Renaissance could be considered pastoral, openly contradicting Buell’s (very reasonable) claim that the pastoral is fundamental to the Western understanding of the environment. On the other hand, not every work that contains rural and urban spaces should be considered pastoral.

Within the literary form, identified as a mode rather than a particular genre (Alpers 44), Gifford proposes three forms that could be described as “inflections” or “attitudes” of the author towards the pastoral—the first is simply “pastoral,” conforming to classical convention. The second is anti-pastoral and stems from those authors who seek to use the pastoral in a satirical way to undercut and critique

the form. As Gifford reminds us, by calling attention to the pastoralized landscape, authors are able to create a social history that often veers toward the political, highlighting “the irrelevance of the pastoral to rural poverty” (*Pastoral* 127). Like Buell’s conception of toxic discourse, which highlights, among other things, the “threat of hegemonic oppression” (*Writing* 41) as well as the real-world implications of perpetuating stereotypes that separate nature and culture into urban and rural zones (*Writing* 46), anti-pastoral works typically refuse the tendency of discourse to “become its own sanctuary” (*Writing* 50).

Gifford’s final category, or inflection of the pastoral, is the post-pastoral. Both post- and anti-pastoral modes of representation rely on the framework of the pastoral tradition, but where the anti-pastoral utilizes pastoral conventions in a dialogic manner in order to satirize the mode and its authors, post-pastoral characterizes those works that do not seek to create an antithetical relationship to the pastoral, but rather demonstrate an ecocritical awareness on the part of the author who recognizes nature, humanity, and culture as intertwined and interrelational. Taken altogether, the rise of the ecocritical conscience in pastoral writing means that the mode has the potential to explore “human choices about car-use, ethical forest management, international timber economics, responsibility for the webs sustaining biodiversity, wilderness in relation to national identity and how humans can be in dialogue about the meaning of forests” (Gifford *Post-Pastoral* 21). Gifford holds these up as examples of environmental concerns that seem quite urgent to many different fields: writers and environmentalists, of course, but also economists, international organizations, business owners, etc. In this way, the pastoral mode of representation becomes highly relevant, and its scope expands beyond the borders of literature, pushing outward and underscoring the potential for the pastoral as a productive means of engagement.

This dynamic inevitably calls to mind Jean-Paul Sartre’s notion of engaged literature. The concept is not entirely new nor isolated to contemporary literature. Sartre’s view of *littérature engagée* ‘engaged literature’ affirms that the artist must always consider what is useful to society and that art must serve some type of moral imperative. Instead of understanding literature as art for art’s sake, engaged literature uses meaning, action, and language in such ways that “the writer’s act of projection integrates the present and the future with the aspiration of generating further action and projection on the side of the reader” (Just 293-294). Sartre’s evaluation of literature according to whether or not it facilitates social change almost always orients the reader towards the urban, or at least towards society. This cluster of essays proposes to explore that nexus of engagement in contemporary pastoral production, particularly with regard to the relationship between the human and the non-human.

The authors featured in this special focus section privilege in their accounts of contemporary pastoral the post-pastoral as it is informed by the development of

ecocriticism and what might be termed the ‘ecocritical’ conscience: recognition of the indissolubility of nature and culture, as opposed to satirical or ironic uses of the anti-pastoral that expose the “distance between reality and the pastoral convention” (Gifford, *Pastoral* 128). Indeed, the post-pastoral is a highly conscious mode of writing, aware of both pastoral and anti-pastoral conventions and capitalizing on the same, finding “a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language” (Gifford, *Pastoral* 149). Inherent within post-pastoral is a recognition of the various tensions that characterize the mode as a whole and a conscientious attempt to regulate and ultimately reconcile nature and culture, city and country, human and non-human.

Towards an Engaged Pastoral

Because pastoral literature is centered on the land and its artistic representation, it is tempting to limit the discussion of engaged pastoral to questions of environmental justice. However, in many of the works examined by the authors of this special focus section, the environment is at once the focal point of pastoral critique and a vehicle for delving into other social issues. In the same way that the ecofeminist school of ecocriticism refuses to separate environmental violence from racial, gender, or sexual violence, so contemporary pastoral necessitates considerations of contemporary society and its institutional constructs. In a moment when social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and #metoo have quickly garnered worldwide attention and have made real strides in legitimizing previously marginalized voices, the study of the pastoral in contemporary literature opens intriguing new dialogues centering on environment, race, and gender. Landscapes in the works examined in this special focus section are not populated by shepherds singing across plains, but rather disenfranchised and displaced people whose songs draw attention to the collateral damage of decisions made and policies enacted by hegemonic power structures.

Margaret Flinn’s essay extends the examination of the pastoral to contemporary French and Belgian *bandes dessinées* ‘comic strips.’ The corpus of works considered in Flinn’s essay is drawn from what she calls “a noticeable uptick in agriculturally-themed *bandes dessinées*” (henceforth *BD*) in the expansive *BD* publishing industry, a resurgence that focuses primarily, although not exclusively, on wine production. Situating these texts in the Georgic tradition, Flinn contends that the representations of artisanal agriculture, which often contradict the reality of European agricultural production, in fact are “more memorializing or aspirational than [they are] actual.” From this point of departure, Flinn raises intriguing questions about the intersection of nationalism and environmentalism in a pastoral context. As Flinn points out, the protectionist politics of the conservative

right in France are typically at odds with the more environmentally-minded liberal parties, and yet in the context of agriculturally-themed *BD*, the two meet; at the same time that this corpus of work can be interpreted as pro-environment, the predominant notion of terroir indisputably privileges Franco-French interests and viewpoints. Flinn suggests that this pastorally-structured corpus is ripe for further examination, especially in terms of labor issues and various conflicts that arise in the agricultural sector. Flinn's analysis of this new trend in *BD* thus illuminates the ways that pastoral can be used to engage critically with artisanal agricultural production as well as with contemporary locavore movements.

The question of nationalism and environmentalism in pastoral literature is further explored by Gina Stamm in her essay on Jean Giono. While nationalistic ideologies are not necessarily evident in Giono's body of work, consideration of the pastoral in his corpus must acknowledge that Giono's well-publicized pacifism resulted in his accusation and imprisonment as an alleged Nazi sympathizer. Coupled with the Nazi and Vichy regimes' heavy emphasis on an almost prelapsarian, agriculturally-centered society, Giono's celebrated Pan Trilogy, as well as his oeuvre as a whole, could easily be interpreted as promoting a similar vision. And yet, as Stamm reminds us, Giono's work is more heavily steeped in ancient texts such as Virgil and the Bible than in Nazi or Vichy propaganda. Stamm thus proposes a reconsideration of Giono's oeuvre as post-pastoral in nature. In contrast to traditional pastoral, she asserts, Giono's characters consciously decide whether or not to live in harmony with nature, yet the author refuses to reduce the notion of harmony to a simplistic, singular interpretation, privileging instead a multiple and multivocal consideration of the relationship between the human and the natural as a place of contestation. In contrast to the traditional pastoral movement of retreat and return, Stamm theorizes that a post-pastoral reading of Giono's works actually permits a different type of movement indicative of the mode's relationship to time. Drawing on Bruno Latour's theories of the nonmodern, Stamm uses her examination of Giono as an opportunity to explore this extension of the post-pastoral as the "literature of the nonmodern." These characters, who are portrayed with a more nuanced ecocritical conscience than those typically found in the pastoral, are exhorted to respond to the call to engage with nature. How said engagement works and whether or not it is appropriate is a matter of interpretation left up to the reader to consider. Thus, Giono draws the reader into a polyphonic dialogue wherein aesthetic, affective, environmental, and social concerns figure prominently.

In contrast to the other authors in this special focus section who focus on twentieth- and twenty-first century explorations of the pastoral in continental Europe, Rachel Papparone examines contemporary pastoral engagement in North America by considering the work of Zachary Richard, a Cajun poet, singer/songwriter, and environmental activist. Through his focus on North

American Francophone landscapes, particularly Acadia, Richard's work engages and challenges traditional conceptions of the pastoral in terms of both content and form. Just as Giono's work, in Stamm's interpretation, serves as a call to engagement, Paparone's study of Richard underscores the poet's post-pastoral collection, *Feu* ('Fire'), as a richly engaged work that promotes a nuanced understanding of the environmental and imperial exploitation that has deeply impacted specifically the Acadian population but also, more generally, the Francophone minority in North America. From this perspective, the pastoral is at once a vehicle for social critique and the evocation of the social conscience while simultaneously serving hegemonic concerns, thereby problematizing the mode's function both aesthetically and ethically.

The articles in this special focus section examine and problematize contemporary pastoral works, demonstrating the breadth and impact that the mode continues to have. Ranging from new artistic forms that are born from the tradition to recent authors who evoke the mode to problematize its construction and use it in post-colonial contexts, these interventions in the field underscore the way in which the pastoral mode responds to contemporary historical and economic realities. War, resource appropriation, consumerism, and commodification each figure into the account of the pastoral in contemporary, globalized market economies and the continued renegotiation and delineation of national spaces. The striking contrast between the primacy of the aesthetic in relation to the differing material concerns of contemporary society provide fruitful ground for developing new inroads in the mode. The focus on French-language pastoralism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries offers an opportunity to productively explore the status of the mode in a range of sociocultural contexts stretching from France to North America. These contributions hint at the richness that such an approach, combined with ecocriticism, may yield. Moreover, these studies underscore the need for continued examination and interaction with the pastoral as humans struggle to understand their contentious and fraught relationship with nature. In light of looming environmental crises, it is, indeed, imperative that we engage fully with the real impacts that industrialization has had on the earth. This special focus section examines how the pastoral figures as an engaged mode of inquiry, ultimately pointing to how we might re-engage with the pastoral itself to tease out new insights into our world.

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