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by Stefano Rozzoni and David Lombard



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The Pastoral: New Trajectories in the Anthropocene

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The Pastoral in the Anthropocene: An Introduction

“Pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (1995, 32). Through these words, Lawrence Buell not only highlights the wide extent of the pastoral in western literature and culture, but he also invites scholars to reflect on its ongoing influence. Even though its manifestations can be traced throughout history while embracing different styles, aesthetics, and discourses, the pastoral has come to be generally considered—in a broad sense—as “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” or as “an idealisation of the reality of life in the country” (Gifford 1999, 2). Since the advent of ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies, however, it has become evident that the pastoral also provides information on evolving perceptions, representations, and conceptualizations of the environment (Buell 1995; 2005; Slovic 2010). In this regard, one can reflect on how, today, the pastoral represents a unique, privileged trope—along with others such as dwelling, apocalypticism, and the sublime—for investigating the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in an era of environmental disruption.

The recent emergence of diversified, ecocritically-oriented analytical perspectives on this topic has underlined the centrality of the pastoral in contemporary studies on culture and the arts which investigate the urgencies and ethical challenges associated with the Anthropocene, in which the nature-culture divide is being constantly questioned. This scholarship progresses along two main strands. The first regards the interest of critics in the (ever-)new forms and functions of the pastoral in contemporary literature: this is the case, for instance, of the so-called “postmodern pastoral” (Corey and Waldrep 2012), the “necropastoral” (McSweeney 2015), and the “dark pastoral” (Sullivan 2017), which, among other neologisms, signal the increasing attempt to revise the

traditional and anthropocentric dichotomies (e.g., country/city, urban/rural, nature/culture) that have characterized the (study of the) pastoral for a long time. Terry Gifford's notion of "post-pastoral" introduced this trend, paving the way for a new pastoral "discourse that can both celebrate *and* take responsibility for nature without false consciousness": the post-pastoral, in fact, attempts to move "beyond the closed circuit of pastoral and antipastoral to achieve a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human" (1999, 148).

The second thread in the recent (eco)critical "turn" in studies on the pastoral regards the growing scholarly interest in re-reading past works through *updated* (Coole and Frost 2010) heuristic lenses. Revisions of these dated literary and cultural works have shown that overlooked pastoral texts can be put in dialogue with contemporary ecological concerns in order to enrich the understanding of the various environments that we, humans, inhabit. Ken Hiltner's study on Renaissance pastoral (2011), for instance, informs current readers of how environmental issues, such as deforestation and growing pollution, could already be observed in past eras. Or, again, Gifford's "post-pastoral" (1999) has been deployed to explore the various, albeit related ways in which classic poets and writers in proto-environmental literature, from Blake and Wordsworth to Thoreau, Muir, and Lawrence, renegotiate the controversial nature-culture divide, thus anticipating certain issues developed in ecocritical scholarship.

Comparably to the concept of "wilderness," which is "contested ground" (Miller 2014, vii), "pastoral" remains a "contested term," an expression that Bryan Loughrey adopted for describing the "bewildering variety of works" that different critical scopes on this phenomenon have determined (1984, 8). According to Paul Alpers's idea that "it sometimes seems as if there are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics who write about it" (1982, 437), it is evident that continuous and extended manifestations of the pastoral—in its many forms—developed hand in hand with its widespread critical production. Consequently, the pastoral may also be considered in reference to a bewildering variety of *critical* works rather than only as a literary phenomenon, in a strict sense. In recent years, this extended and variegated production has assumed new, less negative implications, particularly when considering it in alignment with Donna Haraway's urge to "stay with the trouble" (2016). With this expression, Haraway aims to reconfigure the relationship between planet Earth and its human and nonhuman inhabitants by taking into account both the complexity of their enmeshment and the fact that this bond is engrained with economical, sociological, and cultural processes. Just like, for Haraway, "staying with the trouble" becomes an opportunity for developing ethics "to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (Haraway 2016, 1), the intricacy characterizing the understanding of the pastoral can be reassessed both as a

vector of meaning in the Anthropocene and as a way for responding to its many ethical challenges.

The main goal of this cluster is not, as it has already been done in previous studies, to further Thomas Pughe's take on the pastoral as "a laboratory for the possibilities of literary discourse's 'ecological work'" (2016, 1). Instead, in our cluster we wish to offer a concise, representative selection of essays that demonstrates the importance of coming to terms with the *troubledness* of exploring the pastoral in the present-day world. Specifically, this cluster highlights the necessity that critics pursue an exploration of the pastoral, which is pluralistic and simultaneous: pluralistic, in the sense that it embraces multiple perspectives when dissecting the multifariousness of this phenomenon; simultaneous, in the sense that both current and past mobilizations of the pastoral in diverse media should be considered alongside each other. Since the Anthropocene cannot be determined as one, single phenomenon but, rather, as a controversial enmeshment of time spans, conceptualizations, and occurrences, approaching the pastoral *in* the Anthropocene should follow a similar premise.

Nevertheless, despite this emphasis on heterogeneity and diversity, the five contributions included in this cluster share commonalities, especially with respect to their awareness that the biospherical alteration of the Earth made a new critical praxis necessary when investigating literary and cultural phenomena connected to the representation of the environment, such as the pastoral. More precisely, the contributions of this cluster are embedded in the blooming field of the Environmental Humanities insofar as they seek possible responses to the anthropogenic environmental crisis: this effect has often been discussed in terms of a crisis of representation because traditional forms of understanding the environment (which include the pastoral) seem to have revealed their limitations, especially in comparison to more pluralistic figurations inspired by ecocriticism.

Approaching the Pastoral in the Environmental Humanities

Dissecting the complexity of the pastoral is one of the main goals of this cluster. Leo Marx first discussed "complex pastoral" in regard to traditional pastoral scenarios disturbed by references to modern technology (1964, 5-11). Yet, today, a new sense of complexity surfaces in relation to the epistemological and transdisciplinary stances advocated by the burgeoning field of the Environmental Humanities. As Oppermann and Iovino point out, the Environmental Humanities aims at "building new environmental imaginaries, formulating new discursive practices, and making changes in economic and political structures" (2016, 3). Referencing the Environmental Humanities when studying the

pastoral thus represents a scholarly attitude that accommodates an array of cross-pollinating methodologies and viewpoints centered on the representations of human and nonhuman entities in interaction. In other words, to be disentangled, complex issues require complex analytical approaches.

Deborah Bird Rose and Libby Robin have discussed the Environmental Humanities as being aligned with the idea of “connective ontology” inasmuch as the field highlights the impossibility of separately studying issues related to political justice, the natural sciences, and the social sciences (2004, n.p.). Similarly, Ursula K. Heise observes the Environmental Humanities in regard to its ability to “combine humanistic perspectives and methods that have already developed” in collaboration with, and moving across, disciplines (2017, 1). While this scholarship, as Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman affirm, fosters the idea that “[h]uman beings, cultures and natures have been, and remain, deeply entangled and interdependent” (2014, 5), it has become evident that the Environmental Humanities represents a favourable angle from which revisions of present and past tropes can be pursued when addressing the interactions between humans and nonhumans. In this respect, the relevance of this cluster also lies in the fact that critics are invited to establish connections between the many ways of interpreting this phenomenon in order to favour a re-discovery and re-discussion of still unexplored narratives in present and past case studies.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning Hubert Zapf’s call for ecocritics to re-read and re-evaluate the archives of Western literature in order to better respond to the current environmental crises (2020), which parallel our intention to reconsider examples of the pastoral from different periods with the aim of coming to terms with some crucial issues raised by the Anthropocene. Considering how, in a general sense, archives are involved in processes of constant making and re-making, exploring the pastoral archives opens the way for different scopes, fashions, and urgencies that need to be addressed. Moreover, since new items have, in the past few years, enriched the Western archives of literature and culture, it is important to consider how not only poems and novels, but also other cultural displays, such as films, music, and videogames, can be considered as case studies when investigating the evolution of the pastoral today. In this sense, this cluster has invited scholars to explore the uncharted territories in the pastoral realm of Western literature by reframing ready-at-hand pastoral theories and adapting them to original case studies beyond the domain of literature and literary studies.

All these evaluations represent the vitality of studies on the pastoral, which, under the scope of the Environmental Humanities, becomes even more visible as a privileged site for disclosing imaginative ways of responding to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

In this cluster

This collection comprises five essays by scholars from different fields of study.

In “Towards the Post-pastoral: A New Materialist Reading of Richard Jefferies’s *Amaryllis at the Fair*,” Adrian Tait makes use of insights from New Materialism to provide an analysis of Richard Jefferies’s 1887 understudied novel, which reveals the ecocritical implications of its apparently traditional pastoral references. More specifically, building on the theories of Karen Barad (2007), Jane Bennett (2010), and Stacy Alaimo (2010), Tait sheds light on the interplay between the material world and the human beings who inhabit the novel’s pastoral setting, which explains how *Amaryllis at the Fair* can be interpreted as both an early case of post-pastoral and as a site for exploring further environmental affinities with current scholarship on New Materialism.

A re-reading of another overlooked example of pastoral writing referring to modern environmental concerns occurs in “Insidious Pollen”: Toxicity and the Post-Pastoral in J.A. Baker’s *The Peregrine*”: in this study, Robert Newton investigates J.A. Baker’s experimental nonfiction book, *The Peregrine* (1967), and reflects on how its reliance on the pastoral informs readers of the rise of industrial toxicity and ecological science occurring in 1960s Britain. In addition, Newton observes how the book defies readers’ expectations about the English rural landscape by including references to the toxic residues and their persistent, long-term effects on the environment. Therefore, this essay represents an opportunity for discussing the growing attention to toxicity in literature while calling into account early forms of environmental activism through the pastoral mode.

Pierre-Élie Pichot’s exploration of the interaction between the pastoral and environmental perspectives in “Ecology and the Pastoral in Recent French Poetry: Jean-Claude Pinson, Pierre Vinclair, and Olivier Domerg” aligns with a similar interest. He investigates three (hyper)contemporary and innovative pastoral manifestations occurring both in French poetry and literary criticism. From Pinson’s essay, Pichot explains how the pastoral continues to function today as a key poetic expression of the “the everlasting voice of Nature,” despite the phrase’s debatable characteristics in the context of the Anthropocene. Moreover, reading a selection of Vinclair’s and Domerg’s pastoral poems, Pichot shows that contemporary pastoral, on the one hand, appears in regard to an array of diversified issues, from reflections on mountains to sheep’s adiposity, and that, on the other hand, contemporary mobilizations of the pastoral are exposed to the new imagery of pollution and technology that is characteristic of the Anthropocene.

In “Pastoral Videogames: Industry, Entropy, Elegy,” Laura op de Beke traces the emergence of a new environmentally oriented trajectory in the treatment of the pastoral

in different kinds of contemporary videogames, from more traditional farm games (e.g., *Stardew Valley* [ConcernedApe, 2016]) to related gothic versions [*Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*] (2015), *Graveyard Keeper* (2018), and *The Stillness of the Wind* (2019). Op de Beke observes how pastoralism in videogames increasingly defies the display of traditional pastoral issues of retreat and escapism, while opening onto a growing involvement in current ecocritical topics: from references to the ambivalent relationship between technology and industry to examples of pastoral elegiac representations that resonate with Timothy Morton's notion of "dark ecology" (2016). Today's videogames, Op de Beke argues, offer alternatives to customary approaches to the pastoral and stress that it is not a strictly literary phenomenon.

Along this line is the argument of the closing essay of this cluster. By means of a reflection combining current discourses on space exploration with an increasing negotiation of traditional critical assumptions on the pastoral, Brad Tabas examines the notion of "On Astropastoral in the Anthropocene." Tabas proposes a new possible categorization in Robert A. Heinlein's *Farmer in the Sky* (1950), Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* (1956), Kim Stanley Robinson's *Green Mars* (1993), and Paul McCauley's *Gardens of the Sun* (2009). In these novels, the pastoral is associated with practices of space exploration that attempt to find an inhabitable alternative to our endangered Earth. This discussion allows Tabas to both critically interrogate the powerful ideology of space expansionism and to argue that technology may also be used to convey a sense of ecological awareness. As a result, the "astropastoral" emerges in "Post Planetary Pastoral: Imagining the Landscapes of Outer Space in the Anthropocene" as a critical tool for reflecting on possible futures in the evolution of pastoral lyricism.

The five contributions exemplify this cluster's intention to exhibit the importance of pursuing a critical investigation that moves across a wide array of possible patterns and disciplines in contemporary studies on the pastoral. Such trajectories, however, could not completely or definitively cover the many possible study paths on the pastoral in the Anthropocene. Still, this collection hopes to inspire its readers to delve into the exploration of the pastoral's malleable potentials when it comes to dealing with the ethical and environmental urges of the present-day world, through a broad, pluralistic perspective.

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