

Class notes

Last week we looked at Renaissance poems focussed (mostly) on inner landscapes; this week's reading focusses on the landscape outside.

Most general version of the questions posed by these poems:

- What does this landscape tell me about what can, will, or should be true about my own life, or human life in general?
- Am I like the landscape, "natural," or different from it, "cultural"? If I am different from it, what is the nature and value of that difference?
- How does this landscape make me want to characterize "nature"?

Two modern versions of pastoral (a name for the genre of poem which considers these questions):

I'd planned to begin by talking about two more recent poems, to give us a way into the older material – Stevie Smith, "Pretty" (1934) and an ee cummings poem, "since feeling is first" (1928). When you read these poems, it becomes pretty evident that they are working with very different ideas about nature, and coming up with very different kinds of answers.

ee cummings:

- balances nature (spring, flowers) to the rules of grammar (syntax, paragraph, parenthesis).
- human beings exist in between, made up both of the brain and its gestures, and the irrational beauty of "your eyelid's flutter," along with the desire it inspires.
- "feeling is first": the poem argues that we should give ourselves "wholly" over to follow nature's impulses as opposed to culture's rules and restrictions.

Stevie Smith:

- nature is more than flowers and spring; it is also fall, when flowers die, and the life of animals (including scaly fish) who must kill to survive.
- nature does not respect the distinctions we make (e.g., between land and water); it is careless (not, as in cummings, *carefree*, if you see the difference) and indifferent. It respects neither human meanings nor individual lives.

Now in some ways, these poems do similar things – they say that nature and culture balance against each other, that culture follows rules but nature doesn't. And they also *end* in the same consideration, which is that of the individual's death ("you'll be able very soon ...to be delivered entirely from humanity"/"death is no parenthesis"). For these poets, looking at flowers and water rats which die works as a reminder that we will die too -- and leads to at least the implied question, how should I live *given* this knowledge?

So I hope you see that the two poems have a similar structure of ideas – but the ideas about nature (and culture) which get plugged into that structure are very different. Here are two terms to describe them:

Soft pastoral:

- nature is pretty, delightful, easy, innocent, good, a source of moral understanding and renewal, a true alternative to the ills of social life.

Examples: cummings, Marlowe.

Hard pastoral:

- nature is "pretty" -- harsh, unforgiving, violent, amoral, unredeemed by human altruism or idealism, a condition from which culture (and religion) promise to save us.

Examples: Smith, Raleigh.

("Pastor" = shepherd. Greek and Roman pastoral poems were about shepherds who passed the time as their sheep grazed by making poems and falling in love; hence Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd").

Pastoral in literary history:

Very quickly, there are two "ideas" about where these kinds of poems stand in a history of literary genres and when they arose (you'll see in a minute why this matters).

- Nature and love were the original topics for poetry, so pastoral is an early, *primitive* genre, and pastoral poems are correspondingly simple.
- Only sophisticated people are nostalgic about nature and the simple life, so pastoral poems are a late, complex genre in which speakers take on the persona of a simple person (shepherd, mower, yokel) in order to (for instance) represent a fantasy about the simple life, or perhaps to mount a critique of complexity behind the mask of being simple.

So in version 1, pastoral is like an undiscovered island in the South Pacific; in version 2, pastoral is more like Club Med or Le Petit Trianon. Renaissance theorists tended to think version 2 was closer to the truth. *You* don't need to know the literary history part of this unless it interests you; but you should have these versions of pastoral in mind as you think about (e.g.) whether a poem like Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd" is naive or ironic.

What sophisticated simplicity looks like in an older poem – "To Penshurst" (296):

- This is a poem about a house set in a landscape, where both are ideal and the relationship between them is also ideal.
- The house belongs to the family of Philip Sidney, the poet ("his great birth where all the Muses met," l.14). Notice the passage which follows: trees here were planted not at random, by squirrels, but to commemorate the birth of gifted, aristocratic poets. On this and other trees, many have carved their names as a kind of primitive love poetry (PS x PR); the lines seem to suggest that people fall in love and write about it partly because they want to imitate Sidney! (Or are they simply writing their own names – "Jonson was here"?). Compare the Katherine Philips poem.
- As you read down from l.19, notice that the landscape surrounding the house supplies it with game, meat, fish, and fruit, but does so apparently *voluntarily*, and *not* because these resources are extracted – e.g., deer are not caught and killed by hunters, but the copse (grove of trees) "never fails to serve thee seasoned deer" – on a plate???
- From l.45, this relationship of house to landscape is mirrored in the relation of the Sidney family (rich aristocrats) to their tenants (farmers, peasants, etc.); their power and wealth don't come from oppression or violent extraction, but are given (again) voluntarily, as suggested by the procession of farmers bringing them gifts of their catch, their produce, even their "ripe daughters" (!) (ll.48-56).
- I'll skip over what happens *inside* the house (hospitality, liberality, fruitfulness and chastity), which folds together ideal scenes from *Martha Stewart Living* and *Gourmet*.
- This poem depicts a profoundly *social* landscape, with buildings, history, literature, government, class structure, agriculture and husbandry – but it imagines that the power which structures this landscape does no violence, has no secrets, and works as *naturally* as, say, the growth of a flower – that what was (for Jonson) the present could take on the properties of Eden or the Golden Age, where nature nurtured all without labor or hardship.

Pastoral and the sense of loss – Marvell's poems (440-44):

- But, we can't help noticing, things are mostly not like that. What happened?
- Marvell's "Mower" poems both meditate on an original sin or fall *out* of an earlier, more innocent condition. In "Against Gardens," gardening itself becomes the transgression, when men demarcate land for gardens and begin to cultivate and breed plants, "seducing" them from their prior, wild condition. In "to the Glowworms," one of my all-time favorites, the original dislocation is effected by love. (Notice that in the last stanza, the not-quite-rhyme of come/home echoes this dislocation).
- "The Garden," finally, imagines *returning* to that state before culture (here again, lovers are carving their beloveds' names on trees in l.20), where "ripe apples drop about my head" – as in the Jonson poem, nature offers itself, and there is apparently no guilt associated with eating the apple. There are also no other

people; the real Eden, in this poem, was when Adam walked *alone* in the garden before the creation of Eve. This is a weird, tricky, beautiful poem, difficult but well worth the effort.

A final topic:

As Marvell's poems make evident, pastoral poems can take the simple topic of landscape and use it for what become fairly profound meditations on the origins of consciousness and culture: "**how did I become different from the landscape?**" This is true even or especially in an apparently short and simple poem like "Glowworms".