

Sub-versions of Pastoral: Nature, Satire and the Subject of Ecology

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Abstract

One of the strengths of ecocriticism is its evolving multi-valency. This essay revisits a core stream of inquiry – the pastoral tradition in America – by interrogating the relationship between romantic and satirical pastoral and teasing out a paradox lurking in the idea of “Nature’s Nation.” Via a late essay of Kenneth Burke on satire and novels of Gilbert Sorrentino and Richard Brautigan, it examines ways in which satiric pastoral texts disturb the roots of American subjectivity onto which the ideological conceit of “Nature’s Nation” was grafted. It also attempts to show how, within the framework of ecocritical analysis, the pastoral, far from being merely a usefully invoked trope, becomes the progenitor and enabler (the sine qua non) of various fantasies of national or regional identity as these are routinely enacted, improvised, and—as the case may be—parodied and burlesqued.

Initially the preserve of hardcore “nature writing” enthusiasts, ecocriticism—having carved a niche within the groves of academe—has begun the task of broadening the parameters of its concern. Indeed, critical theorists interested in problems of ecology, such as Timothy Morton, have dispensed with the category of “nature” altogether—except as an object of deconstructive cultural analysis—and argued instead for the practice of a literary-critical “ecology without nature.”

Given the staggering scope and complexity of ecological problems, the recognition that “nature writers” have, in fact, no exclusive purchase on environmental concern comes less as a surprise than as a welcome relief. “Nature,” Joyce Carol Oates pithily observes, “inspires a painfully limited set of responses in ‘nature writers’—REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYSTICAL ONENESS” (236). Collectively, such responses have served to consolidate a kind of moral high ground within ecocritical discourse, from which influential proponents, such as Glen A. Love, have pontificated against the evils of, among other things, postmodernism (1). Yet the influx of diverse literary genres and themes, as of critical and theoretical approaches to its subject matter, promises to make of ecocriticism a more resilient, more fruitful, and ultimately more relevant scholarly discipline.

In light of this ecological turn “against nature,” the present essay ventures to elaborate on the relationship between environmental degradation, ecological subjectivity, and a certain kind of postmodernist fiction that might best be termed satiric (as opposed to idyllic) pastoral. Of the two American novels considered in this regard, one of them—*Trout Fishing in America*, a bestseller by

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Richard Brautigan—has spawned a considerable volume of criticism, much of it however predating the current climate of ecocritical concern. The other text under consideration, Gilbert Sorrentino's experimental fiction *Blue Pastoral*, is yet to receive the critical attention it clearly merits, not least from ecologically minded literary scholars. As I hope to demonstrate below, both books offer oblique—and occasionally, pointed—commentaries on the significant cultural and psychological investments continually being undertaken and renewed in the name of a threadbare ideological conceit, the discourse of so-called “nature's nation” (Miller; Opie). In satiric opposition to the platitudes of environmental discourse, these books—alongside others by the likes of contemporaries Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme and Don DeLillo—highlight the *ideological* effects of ecological degradation.

A series of critical interrogations—from Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* through Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* to Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*—has drawn attention to what Buell calls the “ideological multivalence” of American pastoral (42). Following Smith and Marx, Buell seems to mean by this phrase simply that pastoral metaphors may serve *both* to legitimize *and* to critique officially sanctioned lifestyles, attitudes, policies and institutions. This much seems obvious. Witness, for example, First Lady Laura Bush's attempt to shore up support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq by means of an official White House poetry reading of Whitman and other poets, offset by an oppositional event during which the same poets—and perhaps even the very same poems—were read in protest. By the same token, the Walden Font Company (which specializes in nineteenth-century typefaces) advertised its support for the 2003 Gulf War in a sidebar attached to its website—even as the name “Thoreau” was being invoked, in honorific tones, by activists in the antiwar movement. But this evident duplicity of inherited pastoral discourse is neither peculiarly American nor purely contemporary, given Lerner's observation that classical pastoral “automatically has one face to praise rural delights, another face of satire” (148). Nor, for that matter, may “ideological multivalence” be an exclusively pastoral effect, but rather a latent property of all discourse. Be that as it may, American pastoral criticism is very often concerned with the transposition of pastoral devices from a purely literary (and perhaps intrinsically psychological) frame of reference into a much broader social and ecological context (Marx 3; Meeker 87). Broached but never adequately addressed in such criticism are thornier questions of ideology—the interpellation of Americanized, ecologized forms of subjectivity—and their role in the formation of ecocritical imperatives.

One possible route into such problems is afforded by Thomas Cole's “Essay on American Scenery” of 1836 (the same year, incidentally, that Ralph Waldo Emerson began his career as an essayist, albeit anonymously, with the publication of “Nature”). Even more florid than his famous landscape paintings, Cole's essay probes for a distinctly American aesthetic, one which its author posits in the visually dramatic sweep of his surrounding environment. Cole implores his ideal reader, whom he imagines “seated on a pleasant knoll,” to:

look down into the bosom of that secluded valley, begirt with wooded hills—through those enamelled meadows and wide waving fields of grain, a silver stream winds lingeringly along—here, seeking the green shade of trees—there, glancing in the sunshine: on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers—from yonder dark mass of foliage the village spire beams like a star. ... On the margin of that gentle river the village girls may ramble unmolested—and the glad school-boy, with hook and line, pass his bright holiday. (108-09)

This sylvan scene is hardly to be reckoned “destitute of historical and legendary associations”—evidently the complaint of European observers—since, as Cole asserts, “the great struggle for freedom has sanctified many a spot, and many a mountain, stream, and rock has its legend, worthy

of poet's pen or the painter's pencil." Nevertheless, again in deliberate contrast with European pastoral values, "American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future. ... In looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; ... mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness; and poets yet unborn shall sanctify the soil" (108-09). Cole's quintessential American scene is precariously poised between nostalgia for a lost "golden age" and an equally unquenchable longing for futurity. Whereas Cole's painted landscapes may be read as expressions of this temporal predicament (Herzogenrath 83-103), the "Essay on American Scenery" is a rather more awkward attempt to reconcile nineteenth-century cults of "Nature" and "Progress" (Smith 52, 256). The discourse of "nature's nation" (to borrow Perry Miller's phrase) would seem to demand allegiance to both—and thus divided allegiance, a self-contradictory subject.

On this view of it, the pastoral landscape becomes a site not of reconciliation but of contestation, essentially over what it means to be "American." Tellingly, toward the end of his essay, Cole entertains a proto-environmentalist criticism of the American nation, only to realign himself more fully with its incipient sense of "manifest destiny":

It was my intention to attempt a description of several districts remarkable for their picturesqueness and truly American character ... Yet I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away—the ravages of the axe are daily increasing—the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation. The way-side is becoming shadeless, and another generation will behold spots, now rife with beauty, desecrated by what is called improvement. ... This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road society has to travel. (Cole 109)

Cole stops short of lamentation, or jeremiadic admonition: technological "improvement" exacts an inevitable toll upon the landscape, as it does upon the psyche—but the manifest destiny of the nation remains inviolate. The vacillation in mood of Cole's essay intimates that ideological claims on subjectivity are profoundly ineluctable—as well as ambiguous. Thus, although Cole depicts the enjoyment of natural scenery as the intrinsic right of every American, this enjoyment is nevertheless a duty or obligation, akin to a civic responsibility or moral imperative:

[American scenery] is a subject that to every American ought to be of surpassing interest; for, whether he beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic—explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery—it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity—all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart! (Cole 98)

To deny American scenery its singular charms is, for Cole, to refuse "pleasure's purest cup"—making of his idealized landscape a veritable "shrine of the pleasure principle," as Marx disparagingly refers to sentimental pastoral kitsch (28). Yet Cole readily, almost willingly, concedes that the loss of natural scenery is an inevitable consequence of the civilizing process, a reasonable sacrifice to be made in exchange for such advances as the Jeffersonian "pursuit of happiness" in an agrarian paradise: "where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten," etc.

I want to suggest that this vacillation is not idiosyncratic, and not even simply of its time, but symptomatic of a more general way of inscribing and inhabiting the American landscape. The ambiguity of pastoral signifiers points to the fundamental duplicity of American subjectivity, a

category which is in fact unthinkable without this very freedom of movement between points of a singular discursive field or constellation. To be sure, Cole's "Essay on American Scenery" lends support to the consensus among pastoral critics that categories such as "landscape" (in the nineteenth century) and "environment" (in the twentieth) are integral to a sense of American cultural identity. But to the extent that it illuminates, it also qualifies Buell's view of pastoral rhetoric as a double-edged sword with which to attack or defend social structures and institutions, for better or worse ecological outcomes. Rather, we may be inclined to view pastoral as an inherited cultural discourse which gives shape and form to subjectivity itself, irrespective of any particular outcome or course of social action to which it is—always, already—antecedent. Discourse may be the implement of an ecologized subjectivity, but in this sense the converse is equally true.

The pastoral, then, far from being merely a usefully invoked trope, becomes the progenitor and enabler (the *sine qua non*) of various fantasies of national or regional identity as these are routinely enacted, improvised, and—as the case may be—parodied and burlesqued.

The close affinity of pastoral and satire may be inferred from Kenneth Burke's literary-theoretical treatment of "technological pollution" in an ingenious essay published in 1974. For Burke, pollution is ideally susceptible of treatment in terms of satiric fabulation, not reportage and least of all "nature writing" which—like Nature itself, according to Oates—"has no sense of humor. ... It lacks a satiric dimension, registers no irony" (236). The irony, for Burke, is that an excess of rationalism—particularly economic rationalism, the dogma of a culture hell-bent on the maximal consumption of resources—entails ecological despoliation on a planetary scale. Given the imperatives of global capitalism, Burke projects the establishment of "Helhaven," an artificial Eden or "culture bubble" on the Moon. Thus, as Burke points out, the satirist merely takes "conditions that are here already" and "perversely, twistedly, carries them 'to the end of the line'" (318). Burke is adamant on this point, for underlying the satire on ecological despoliation or the concomitant quest for bucolic bliss

must be the fact that *in principle* the Helhaven situation is "morally" here already. For instance, you're already in Helhaven insofar as you are, directly or indirectly (and who is not?) deriving a profit from some enterprise that is responsible for the polluting of some area, but your share in such revenues enables you to live in an area not thus beplagued. Or think of the many places in our country where the local drinking water is on the swill side, distastefully chlorinated, with traces of various industrial contaminants. If, instead of putting up with that, you invest in bottled spring-water, to that extent and by the same token you are already infused with the spirit of Helhaven. Even now, the kingdom of Helhaven is within you. (321)

Unwittingly, perhaps, the ecological subject is implicated in the very processes of planetary despoliation fuelling the Helhaven enterprise. In its insistence that we acknowledge the fact of our "moral" contamination and complicity, Burke's model of satire corresponds closely with the kind of "dark ecology" theorized by Morton, in which the exemplary *noir* thriller (rather than satire *per se*) serves to inoculate readers against so-called "beautiful soul syndrome" (187-88). Burke's own version of "beautiful soul syndrome" is the doctrine by which, in theory, "the *ills* of technology could be left to soil the Earth, the *virtues* of technology could rise transcendently elsewhere" (327). Significantly, Burke shows that the inherited discourse of American pastoral—particularly the kind of "vatic real estate promotion" to be discerned in the poetry of Whitman, which he parodies with characteristic aplomb (330-37)—may be pressed into service in order to shore up legitimacy, and indeed affection, for what might best be described as "the machine's imperialistic invasion into ever-wider gardens of the Third World and ... the cosmos" (Yanarella 181).

Attentive readers of contemporaneous literary works will recognize a number of salient concerns addressed in Burke's treatise, not least of which is the complex ideological question raised by a recrudescing discourse of American pastoral. Indeed, questions of ecological subjectivity and national identity recur like an *idée fixe* throughout the fiction of American postmodernism, as the following readings of *Blue Pastoral* and *Trout Fishing in America* may suffice to demonstrate.

Blue Pastoral

Virgil and Theocritus are generally cited as the progenitors of pastoral poetry. But according to Serge Gavotte, the naïve protagonist of Gilbert Sorrentino's novel *Blue Pastoral*, the literary form which "for some reason has appealed to wild-eyed poets down through all the ages" was originally "slapped together" by "great Ovid" (Sorrentino 85-86). Given that Serge (nicknamed "Blue"), an aspiring professional musician, is only dimly aware that the black keys of a piano serve a musical purpose, we don't really expect his literary history to be authoritative. On the other hand, perhaps Serge (and almost certainly, Sorrentino) is cleverer than we think. Not only are the glades and groves of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* drenched in a violence analogous to Sorrentino's vicious textual disruptions; they are also frequently the setting for "humor, or even burlesque" and Ovid's "extended parodies upon ... bucolic conventions ... from Theocritus to Vergil" (Parry 272, 280). Perhaps *Blue Pastoral* is, in this sense of violent parody and intertextual metamorphosis, the offspring of Ovid, as opposed to either Vergil or Theocritus.

Among the book's "idyllic bout[s] of nomenclature" (277), further discrepancies abound. Chapters are variously styled "eclogues," "eclogues," or "eglogues"; "pastorals" or "pastourelles"—these inconsistent spellings attesting to the richness of the pastoral tradition and textual diversity underlying Sorrentino's invariably "frolicsome bucolics" (142). Transposing the inherited pastorals of antiquity into the discordant modalities of contemporary America, *Blue Pastoral* demonstrates that there is no definitive pastoral mode, just as there is no singular "American" voice or perspective.

Together with his wife Helene, his infant son Zimmerman, and a piano in an ornate pushcart, Blue takes leave of New York, "the city of vain idle hopes" (64), in search of the perfect musical phrase: "the Phrase to make all chime as one in Beauty!" (274). What the Gavottes discover, on the contrary, across this picaresque narrative, is a bewildering babble of voices and echoes, an overwhelming heteroglossia set "amid the vast space of weird America."¹ It is against this discordant background that the Gavottes' hopes—that "they might live forever, far from the tumult and corruption of the city, live in peace and tranquillity" (274)—are finally dashed. For no uncorrupted glade is to be found in that "Great Nature" so painstakingly debunked by Sorrentino's art (102). Except as empty rhetorical gestures, or ludicrous plays for political, economic or sexual power, "the glories of Nature" (143), "the wonder and glory of Natural Ecology" (52), etc., are nowhere to be found. Or, rather, such phenomena are encountered—indeed, seemingly at every turn—but only as artifacts of an astonishingly fecund, if fragmentary and erratic, "universe of discourse" (Barthelme 45). It is, Blue remarks, "in the nature of fiction that its creators do whatever they wish, busting to tatters eternal verities and such things as the 'unities'" (192).

True to this principle, the novel itself is scarcely coherent but rather a pastiche of styles ranging from classical pastoral poetry to contemporary discourses of black power, Christian fundamentalism, and radical ecology (cf. Karl 43-45). Nothing, it would seem, is sacred, least of all the belletristic discourse on nature bequeathed by American Transcendentalism.

Ah, Nature ... The vetch quivers. The tares rip. The nettles yearn. ... Time, space, seasons, the universe itself, are suspended like a pair of nylons from Mother Nature's flow'ry unmentionable. The elders shake. The birches break from the nature poet's weight. The bayberries, the sweetferns, aye, the wax-myrtles ache sweetly for release. ... There are no atheists in the brambles. (146)

This travesty of Transcendentalist prose—published by *The Reno Ratchet*, no less—is only mildly irreverent, at least by Sorrentino's standards.² It suggests that a selection of American "nature writers" has been included in the Gavotte's "Traveling Library," that collection of "well-thumbed, dog-eared volumes to delight the senses and fertilize the mind with their renewing horseshit" (29). Other parodies explored in *Blue Pastoral* include *American Lake Poetry* (296); "Supper at the Kind Brown Mill: A Country Drama" (300); "The Booklet on Winter Gardening" (268); and sundry "pamphlets pertaining to Arts and Crafts, and Doing for Oneself as Did Our Forefathers" (261-67). Interspersed throughout *Blue Pastoral* are fragments of a salacious French play, its various "sex acts" set in the vicinity of a horticultural college. Sorrentino's textual resources are many and varied, his fiction a fabulously rich panoply of voices and doubles, impersonations and metafictional asides.

In keeping with pastoral convention, Blue himself is a master of disguise. At one point he adopts the moniker "Bucol Suck," enthraling listeners gathered around a campfire with tales of near-death experiences in the wilderness: "Yessir! give a man days and weeks and months o' that type o' life, and he comes to know he ain't more'n a pork rind or a rabbit ass in the great scheme o' things" (100-101). Bucol Suck advocates a do-it-yourself approach to deep ecology: "When one lives ... in the country, one is compelled to do things, to become one with the slow and even heartbeat of the land ... One learns to—how shall I phrase it?—shift. Make do. Slap together. Patch up. Be handy" (99-100). The reader can hardly be expected to take such wilderness tips at face value. Rather, in light of the aforementioned ascription to Ovid, the wording of Bucol's advice ("slap together") asks to be construed as a self-reflexive description of literary method.

Occasionally, *Blue Pastoral* lapses into anti-pastoral, deploying stereotypes of rural idiocy, backwardness, and sexual perversion, among other "powerful hostile associations" that have accrued around the idea of "the country" (Williams 1; cf. Sorrentino 208-14). Thus, Sorrentino situates his protagonists "out ... in the leaf-strewn boonies" (79). But even—especially?—here, Blue and Helene are liable to ideological interpellation: amid the "quaint sounds" of this "woodsy environ," they perceive a distant voice "growing clear as mountain stream acock with salutary pesticides" (76) as a radio broadcast espouses right-wing causes such as the "Wildlife for Jesus Federation" (24). Such stereotypes serve a contrastive (counter-pastoral) function in relation to the official discourse of American pastoral. When Blue and Helene chance upon a "Land of Enchantment"—glowingly endorsed in the literature of regional tourism promotion as a veritable "Garden of Eden"—they encounter a discourse replete with lewd "signs of a Strong and Rosy America" (260) yet full of empty promise:

The air is excellent for the consumption and asma, if upwind from the booming nuclear plants that proudly work to bring the fruit of Progress to little sleepy villages. Yet also, experts for the Power Company have proved that studies show that even if you are downwind it is not without its boons, the slight touch of radiation in the air healthily killing all the dirt and filth garbage atoms as well as cockroaches and scorpions as well as bobcats and wolfs and ciyots what like to eat campers and household pets. [sic] (257)

Impoverished, bored, dissatisfied and/or intellectually challenged residents of this "Land of Enchantment" import their potable water from outside. They reassure themselves constantly, as

they must, just “how great it is to be out of the noisy city where it is impossible to get in touch with your feelings and paint pictures of splendid mountains” (262). Despite their much-vaunted solitude, a narrative voice wryly observes, there is nothing at all sublime about those landscapes, those “colorful *ojos de Dios* that are on the rough adobe walls above, below, and in between the oil paintings that you’ve made of the mountains at sunset” (262). The enjoyment of natural scenery—the prerogative of every American subject, according to Cole—has been reduced to an automatic impulse, a neurotic repetition and reiteration of pastoral iconography: enchantment, indeed.

During a penultimate moment of reprieve from “the tumult and corruption of the city,” Blue and Helene come close to apprehending their “ever-elusive goal” (274). They discover a landscape of shimmering, shifting desert sands, as pure an embodiment of the sublime as one could expect to find. Upon such a scene one ideally gazes, Blue remarks, in solitude: either “alone, or with another person or two, or even a small group as long as they didn’t chatter and yak it up” (275). Thus, sublime experience emerges in diametric opposition to the “proliferation of other consciousnesses” (Dean 229; also see Ferguson 114). The protagonists’ encounter with the sublime, although suffused with visual wonder, is fundamentally lacking in that innocent or childlike gaze so highly prized by Emerson and Thoreau (Tanner 27, 51 and *passim*). Much less romantically than their nineteenth-century forebears, the Gavottes associate successive waves of color in the desert landscape with an inventory of dubious cultural cum ecological endowments. Invoking the satirical spirit of *Slaughterhouse-Five*—“Blue is for the American sky ... White is for the race that pioneered the continent, drained the swamps and cleared the forests and built the roads and bridges. Red is for the blood of American patriots that was shed so gladly in years gone by” (163)—the Gavottes survey “dunes that shine like the teeth of a fascist movie star, ... knolls white as the contract ceding public lands to oil companies, ... white as the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb” (Sorrentino 276). Other desert tones include the “luscious green of money”; pinks and reds which invoke “the lambent tones of the polluted Passaic” or “the delicate flush of radiation lesions”; yellows that are “the color of healthful smog” or of “the tons and tons of butter rotting in cold storage”; a shade of orange that “sprawls delightfully” like napalm, Agent Orange, the “fire from pre-emptive strikes” and “the millions of California oranges bulldozed and buried so the spicks and niggers cannot have ’em.” Shades of blue “bring to mind certain emblems of our proud and firm-jawed civilization” such as “the perfumed exhaust from the Rolls-Royce”; brown is the color of “prairie smoke” as of “the tons of shit forever roaring ’neath our cities, towns, and hamlets to the rivers and the seas,” and “the sky that gleams o’er Pittsburgh.” Blackness—as the sun sets on our couple of pastoral observers—“makes one think of sterner stuff, like smoke and steel and battleships!” (276-80).

Cole’s idyllic notion of “American scenery” is effectively vandalized by such symbolic associations of the nation with wholesale social and environmental injustice. To invoke a more sympathetic (and contemporary) painterly correspondence, the satirical effect of Sorrentino’s prose is not unlike that of Sandow Birk’s painstakingly rendered pastoral landscapes of state and federal penitentiaries (Spieth 7-16). Yet this subversion of American pastoral is also a sub-version. That is to say, although sentimental pastoral—as a legitimizing system of representations—may well be the overt target of the passage condensed above, there is also a strong element of implicit critique in Sorrentino’s satire, the force of which derives from the preservation, in some form, of a “pastoral standard” of judgment (Lerner 138, 145). We, like the satirist, implicitly condemn racial poverty, smog and nuclear waste, etc. because we can envision, however dimly, an ideal alternative in which nature and society appear as they should.

Yet *Blue Pastoral* mocks the institutionalization of such pastoral fantasies, lampooning their deployment within, for example, a political speech the transcript of which constitutes the book’s thirteenth chapter. There, Representative Hal Glubit defends himself against charges leveled at him by “disruptive bands of radical ecologists,” adopting a tone of moral indignation and mock

incredulity through which, in the name of democracy, sentimental pastoral discourse—in fact, a counter-pastoral rebuttal to the “radical” pastoral standard invoked by his political opponents—legitimizes animal experimentation, military service, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons: “One of the most powerful weapons in the great arsenal of democracy is the love of the common soldier ... for the simple grass, the ear of wheat, the ant and bird and lowly toad!” (54-55).

As if to underscore the pastoral values underlying and informing this American way of life, Glubit protests:

I would *like* to spend the long and lazy days, that are the heritage of all Americans, napping under a tree in the countryside, or lolling by a peaceful stream with an old fishing pole, my thoughts far from the hurly-burly and hustle and bustle of public life, warmly and wonderingly smiling at the bees that hum and buzz amid the honeycombs. But I cannot! (53)

This is about as direct an invocation of Cole’s “Essay on American Scenery” as one could imagine. The infinite regress of pastoral and counter-pastoral justifications in the debate over Glubit’s moral worth leads to a sense of mutual cancellation. Sorrentino’s novel reminds us that pastoral imagery is amenable to a wide spectrum of political and moral positions, none of which is ultimately endorsed or privileged by the text. On the contrary, virtually all such positions are ruthlessly parodied, the discursive foundations of any such “moral high ground” relentlessly undermined. One would be hard pressed to discern a moral within such textual dissipation as characterizes the last two chapters of *Blue Pastoral*—a tissue of fragments, ellipses, and multiply crossed references to preceding sections of the book. And yet, for all of Sorrentino’s apparent delight in confusing categorical oppositions—urban versus rural, purity versus pelf—*Blue Pastoral* is still that: a pastoral, or at least, a polymorphously perverse permutation of pastoral form.

Trout Fishing in America

Distinctions between city and country, idyll and satire, regionalist and postmodernist, prove treacherous in the life and writing of Richard Brautigan. His first two novels, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* and *Trout Fishing in America* were both satires on the pastoral ideal of “getting back to nature.” *Trout Fishing in America* was completed in the summer of 1961 while Brautigan was camping with his wife and daughter in the picturesque Idaho Stanley Basin. Subsequent to the phenomenal publishing success of *Trout Fishing in America*, Brautigan spent much of his time in Paradise Valley, Montana, where fellow novelist Thomas McGuane had invested in ranch property. There Brautigan was rewarded—along with other literary and Hollywood celebrities—with privacy and seclusion, and the opportunity of male bonding through such pursuits as “fishing every evening in the Yellowstone River, drinking in cowboy bars, shooting up the countryside” (Manso and McClure 112). According to occasional Paradise Valley resident Peter Fonda, Brautigan

was often here from before the mayfly hatch until the end of the game season. Then he took to traveling to Europe or Tokyo, but what I think he liked about Montana was the clarity. Really, it’s survival day to day. Simple things but nevertheless natural things, like cutting wood for the stove. And Richard did those things if he had to. Mainly he wanted to write, though. (qtd. in Manso and McClure 113)

On the one hand, as McGuane recalls, Brautigan’s “personal mythography included a sense that west of the Mississippi was his terrain to raid for language and imagery” (qtd. in Manso and McClure

112). On the other, as Dennis Hopper, Fonda's costar in *Easy Rider* (yet another manifestation of American pastoral) recounts:

he would talk an awful lot about Paradise Valley and how important it was for him to get away and go there. But he also said he'd be out at the ranch watching the deer, or out on the river fishing, and suddenly he'd say to himself, "God, what am I doing here? I have to get back to the city." (qtd. in Manso and McClure 113)

Thus, Brautigan's perpetual movement as a writer, encapsulated in the title of his collection of short fiction *The Tokyo–Montana Express*, is one of vacillation between the poles of pastoral discourse. His literary career, like the movements of his fictional characters, repeatedly transects the urban–rural divide. Partly because of this double allegiance—and despite the fact that his writing is reputedly "as West Coast as a Douglas fir" (Manso and McClure 64)—Brautigan fails to conform to a model of regionalist/realist "Western American" literature (Boyer 49-50). By the same token—given that the emergence of ecocriticism was framed by a raft of position papers tabled at meetings of the Western Literature Association in 1994 and 1995—Brautigan's whimsical and absurdist prose has been all but disregarded by the arbiters of ecocriticism's foundational canon (cf. Cooley, *Earthly Words* 10).

Brautigan's status as a postmodernist writer is relatively assured, despite the close association of his literary career with the vicissitudes of 1960s counterculture, and a carefully crafted public persona caricatured by Hicks: "a creature of the new consciousness, Mr. Gentleness and Soft Drugs himself, the antigeneral commanding the Green Brigade, a guy nonfighting the un-war against mean Mr. Alcohol Suburbia" (Hicks 152-53). It would seem that in his personal life, and as Hicks implies, in the very best of his writing (invariably narrative fiction rather than poetry), Brautigan excelled at effacing this heavily publicized façade of sentimental pastoral naiveté.

Brautigan's "underground" poems frequently lack the ironic and satirical aspects of his novels, adopting instead the optative mood of longing for the attainment of bucolic bliss. *Please Plant this Book*, a set of eight poems printed on packets of seeds (native Californian flowers and vegetables) and distributed for free, embodies the naïve optimism of the counterculture circa 1968. "The time is right to mix sentences," reads one packet, containing squash seeds, "sentences with dirt and the sun/with punctuation and the rain with/verbs, and for worms to pass/through question marks, and the/stars to shine down on budding/nouns, and the dew to form on/paragraphs." The sentiment is one of which Thoreau, for example, might have approved, but there is something almost superstitious, and almost certainly unsustainable, about the form of this experiment in literary ecology.

Another of Brautigan's poems, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" (first published in 1967 as a mimeographed broadside under the auspices of ComCo, the media arm of the San Francisco Diggers) naively posits spiritual and social redemption in some as-yet-unrealized "cybernetic" pastoral technology. The poem revisits the trope of "the machine in the garden" but ascribes to that machine a potentially benign function within a so-called "cybernetic ecology." In Brautigan's version of earthly paradise, "mammals and computers/live together in mutually/programming harmony"; "deer stroll peacefully/past computers/as if they were flowers/with spinning blossoms," and we are set "free of our labors/ [...] joined back to nature/returned to our mammal/brothers and sisters/and all watched over/by machines of loving grace." Invoking "the quintessential American Eden"—a symbiotic fusion of nature and technology—Brautigan's poem outlines "a plugged-in, harmonious ecological utopia," a "landscape of reconciliation" or "middle ground between the mythic freedom associated with the primitive American forest and what the Diggers and others in the counterculture saw as the sterility of

modern American life" (Cavallo 123-24). The American quest for pastoral's *locus amoenus* looms large in the visions of 1960s counterculture: witness Ken Kesey's 45-hour film of the psychedelic bus trip "Furthur," entitled "The Merry Pranksters Search for the Cool Place" (Cavallo 110). In Brautigan's poem we are asked to imagine a blissful world in which tensions between the natural and the technological have become completely relaxed. But "mutually programming harmony" is prone to all sorts of contingencies: "bugs" and other cybernetic pests, not to mention authoritarian abuses. His bucolic wish-image is as fragile and evanescent as any "spinning blossom" or indeed, "Summer of Love."

Brautigan's fiction, too, has been taken to task for its "gentle pastoral imagery" and pseudo-politics of "imaginative re-creation," the leading effect of which may be to "reinforce ... the values of a subculture that sees itself as flipped outside of goal-oriented, psychically and socially repressive, exploitative, aggrandizing American technological society" (Clayton 63, 58, 59). For some readers, the satire of *Trout Fishing in America* is altogether too gentle, too subtle in light of pressing social and environmental realities. Thus protesting, John Clayton invokes a counter-pastoral standard of judgment:

To change society requires some share of those same qualities that Brautigan's style denies: causality, goal orientation, and outrage. We have to look at the debris of American cities and be angry. We have to respond with *reasonable fury* to the attempts by the ruling class to manipulate us and to control the rest of the world. We must be organized and move toward the goal of a life-nourishing society, while Brautigan's style conveys a peaceful, humorous response which seems to transcend present evil. ... It accepts everything, even the world that is destroying the pastoral possibilities it asserts. (Clayton 67, 64)

Precisely what are these "pastoral possibilities" which *Trout Fishing in America* is supposed to have asserted? In a fundamental sense, Brautigan returns pastoral to its original domain: that of purely poetic fantasy, a pastoral of the literary imagination. This is the only conceivable place for "pastoral possibilities" to flourish, since the American wilderness glimpsed in Brautigan's text is so very "badly diseased" (Cooley, "Garden" 414). It may be that the photograph of Brautigan and female companion which bleeds off the cover of *Trout Fishing* merely reflects the counterculture's sentimental "nostalgia ... for a simpler, more human, pre-industrial America" (Clayton 67). But given its narrative voice of "ironic pastoral pessimism" (Cooley, "Garden" 414), Brautigan's novel may best be understood as a self-reflexive examination of "the myths and language of the pastoral sensibility that reappeared in the sixties" (Schmitz 125). This evident concern with language itself—as distinct from any tangible pastoral location—is a sign of the book's postmodernism.

Within it, the protean phrase "Trout Fishing in America" denotes not so much a discrete object or entity as an entire "semiological system" and "mode of signification"—a pure concept which has been "deprived of its organic predicate, streams, and its physical object, trout" (Schmitz 121). What the novel's protagonist encounters, then—not once but many times, in a relentless process of gradual attrition—is "the emptiness of the signifier, the sentence shriveled into a fossilized phrase" (Schmitz 122). In search of authentic experiences of unmediated nature, as William Stull notes in his account of the book's inherent intertextuality, "Brautigan's characters cast into the waters only to come up with the detritus of America's past" (Stull 68). By virtue of its Barthesian "mythological" status, however, "Trout Fishing in America" is nothing if not flexible and resilient. Its fate, Schmitz eloquently suggests, is "to be continually and diversely changed, ... to become everyone's myth of the natural act, the writer's myth, the politician's myth, to become the concept that joins Ishmaels on motorcycles and suburban families pulling luxurious trailers in the same remorseless hunt" (122). Beyond the "literary" imagination of American pastoral values—Schmitz cites Hemmingway,

Thoreau, Twain, Emerson, and Whitman in his discussion of *Trout Fishing in America*—lie those “sentimental” variants, “the banal public images found in calendar art, in promotional photography and the mass media” (Schmitz 122). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon labels such forms of pastoral representation “pornography.” (155). Schmitz apparently concurs with this assessment by suggesting that, in the hands of the advertising copywriter, “desire [for nature or the great outdoors] becomes a lust” (Schmitz 122). This is not to reinforce, but rather to undermine, the distinction between “imaginative” and “sentimental” forms of American pastoral identified by Leo Marx. As Schmitz writes of Brautigan’s novel: “the catholicity of the myth is something of a comic horror. ... There is no escape from its signifying presence, its multifarious appeal to that passion for pastoral simplicity, the natural life in the woods” (Schmitz 122).

Brautigan’s novel is concerned, then, not just with its own linguistic and literary resources, but with an ubiquitous discourse of American pastoral—a Barthesian “network of references, ruses and enigmas, the traces of a culture and its writing”—which it renders, metonymically, as “Trout Fishing in America” (Stull 68). Brautigan’s narrative indulges a quasi-childlike, counter-pastoral questioning of the cult of wilderness and the great outdoors, a self-reflexive lampooning of the timeworn conceit of “nature’s nation” and its claims upon subjectivity, social practices, and the mundane rituals of everyday life; self-reflexive because, as Kenneth Burke suggests, “If I am to write a satire, when all the returns are in it mustn’t turn out that I am holier than thou. I must be among my victims. That is to say: I take it that my satire on the ‘technological psychosis’ will be an offspring of that same psychosis” (317). By the same token, *Trout Fishing in America* is the mutagenic offspring of the very discourse (“trout fishing in America”) that it would relentlessly debunk. The irony of “Trout Fishing in America”—as of *Trout Fishing in America*—is that the discourse of American pastoral has recrudesced so virulently at precisely that moment when “nature” appears to have reached a direful terminus. Throughout the novel, there is a sharp disparity between environmental conditions (characterized by toxic pollution, radioactive contamination, etc.) and the American pastoral ideal. This disparity, the wellspring of the book’s black humor and irony, is reflected at the level of literary form, in the book’s fundamental tension between “the positive, inventive force of Brautigan’s language, and the language of pastoral disintegration” (Cooley, “Garden” 415).

For Brautigan, the project of restoring subjectivity, much less the American wilderness, “to some pristine, Edenic state” is, properly speaking—in deference to that literary prototype of the narrator of *Trout Fishing*—“quixotic” (Halpern and Frank ix). Imagination may be enhanced, perceptions altered but subjectivity never effaced, no matter how startlingly psychedelic Brautigan’s figurative juxtapositions become. The whimsical levity of Brautigan’s prose belies a perilous undercurrent in terms of both a repressive and an ideological state apparatus. A placard nailed to a tree parodies America’s systematic “incarceration” of wilderness areas: “IF YOU FISH IN THIS CREEK, WE’LL HIT YOU IN THE HEAD” (Brautigan, *Trout Fishing* 60; see also Birch; Karl 71). The threat alone is sufficient to discipline Brautigan’s narrator, and such warnings are ultimately superfluous given the efficacy of ideology or “pastoral technology”—Foucault’s term for an internalized “modality of power” that constantly “keeps watch” over the lives and actions of eternally vigilant subjects—a far more insidious apparatus, it should be noted, than the benevolent “computers” of Brautigan’s “All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace.”

As an ideological apparatus and discursive regime, “Trout Fishing in America” has roots in the memory of Brautigan’s narrator that precede the onset of subjectivity: “As a child when did I first hear about trout fishing in America? From whom?” The narrator dimly recalls an alcoholic stepfather discoursing on a “precious and intelligent metal,” a “steel that comes from trout, used to make buildings, trains and tunnels. ... Imagine Pittsburgh. ... The Andrew Carnegie of Trout!” (3). This inherited discourse culminates some hundred pages later with the naturalized spectacle of a trout stream and waterfall being divided up and sold “by the foot length,” with “trees and birds, flowers,

grass and ferns” included for a nominal fee (104). The narrative consciousness has been well primed for this event, having mistaken a flight of wooden steps for a waterfall as a child (4). Thus, “naturalization”—rather than the plight of “nature” per se—becomes the leading ideological effect, or symptom, of the discursive regime known as “Trout Fishing in America.” Brautigan evidently delights in playfully subverting its attendant social norms:

It is all right for a trout to have its neck broken by a fisherman and then to be tossed into the creel or for a trout to die from a fungus that crawls like sugar-colored ants over its body until the trout is in death’s sugarbowl.

It is all right for a trout to be trapped in a pool that dries up in the late summer or to be caught in the talons of a bird or the claws of an animal.

Yes, it is even all right for a trout to be killed by pollution, to die in a river of suffocating human excrement.

There are trout that die of old age and their white beards flow to the sea.

All these things are in the natural order of death, but for a trout to die from a drink of port wine, that is another thing. (29)

In a similar (yet ultimately more sinister) vein, Brautigan caricatures an unpunished—indeed, officially sanctioned—serial killer:

The disguise was perfect.

Nobody ever saw him, except, of course, the victims. They saw him.

Who would have expected?

He wore a costume of trout fishing in America. He wore mountains on his elbows and bluejays on the collar of his shirt. Deep water flowed through the lilies that were entwined about his shoelaces. A bullfrog kept croaking in his watch pocket and the air was filled with the sweet smell of ripe blackberry bushes.

He wore trout fishing in America as a costume to hide his own appearance from the world while he performed his deeds of murder in the night. (48)

Thus, iconic signifiers of America’s pastoral inheritance may serve to camouflage atrocities perpetrated against humans, animals, and their shared physical environment. Like Sorrentino’s couple surveying the multi-colored shifting sands of the American West, Brautigan’s narrator cannot help but associate the ostensibly innocuous pleasures of “trout fishing” with such gruesome paraphernalia as “gas chamber” (53), “air raid” (57), “Hiroshima” (108) and “H-BOMB” (98). As Brooke Horvath notes, a characteristic obsession with “strange, unnatural” forms of death “underlies the now-famous vignettes of blighted landscape and polluted streams, perverted myths, frustrated hopes, corrupted values, corporeal and spiritual death in *Trout Fishing in America*” (Horvath 473). A pond laden with green slime, bright orange scum and a flotilla of dead fish is hardly the place for either a romantic idyll or the regeneration of life (Brautigan, *Trout Fishing* 43-44).

In his richly variegated account of Brautigan’s literary allusiveness, William Stull notes that despite obvious parallels and indeed, direct parodies, “the largely asocial world of *Walden*, centered on the individual,” remains fundamentally at odds with “the crowded landscape of *Trout Fishing*, a book

bristling with social satire" (Stull 73-74). Yet Brautigan's narrative persona does come to resemble "a half-assed, latter-day Thoreau" (Horvath 473) who—like the author of *Walden*—finds that he "cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect" (Thoreau 142). The subtext of sexual lament in Brautigan's fiction—the multiple anti-climaxes of *A Confederate General from Big Sur* would be a case in point—finds a curious echo in Jonathan Raban's description of the sheer materiality of "trout fishing":

When you kill a trout, blood seeps from between its gills. Its lovely colours dull in a few moments. It curls, and stiffens; in an hour or two it takes on the texture of the broken leather of an old shoe. At the end of all the wonder, the sense of communion with that other world, the rootedness in nature, one is left with a full-grown man, with smelly, bloodstained hands, standing over a small dead fish. *Pleasure?* Yes, but alloyed pleasure and perhaps one wouldn't even recognize it as pleasure if it weren't alloyed. (243-44)

Here, as with Brautigan's narrative fiction, the disparity between the myth and reality of "trout fishing in America" is heavily pronounced. The contemporary American pastoral affords, at best, an "alloyed pleasure." Little by little, Brautigan's episodic narrative drifts, apparently aimlessly, toward the realization that "there really is something ugly and absurd in what one had thought to be one's pursuit of a private Eden" (Raban 244).

Trout Fishing in America calls into question, even as it further instantiates—troping and overturning (i.e., turning over, as one does with soil)—the pastoral impulse in American writing. In contrast to the "nature writing" privileged by canonical ecocriticism, Brautigan's postmodernist literary ecology disrupts "the notion that there is a definite relationship between signifier and signified"; toys with the assumption of the "purity and organic wholeness of nature"; and exposes the threadbare conceit of "America as the New Eden" (Hoffmann 125). Like "America," Brautigan's text seems to assert, nature itself is "often only a place in the mind" (72); a vestige of the pastoral imagination; "a sort of picture post card which you look at in a weak moment," as Henry Miller suggests in *Tropic of Cancer*. The very real and material danger of the pastoral myth, Miller sarcastically notes, is that "it's always there waiting for you, unchanged, unspoiled, a big patriotic open space with cows and sheep and tenderhearted men ready to bugger everything in sight, man, woman, or beast. It doesn't exist, America. It's a name you give to an abstract idea."³

* * *

Decades on, the commodification, consumption, articulation and simulation of nature proceeds apace.

Environmental literary criticism, with its veneration of nature writing by means of which a postulated recovery of primal authenticity may be realized, is one manifestation of the attempt to come to terms with the absurdity of our contemporary ecological predicament. Environmental satire—from *White Noise* (DeLillo) to *The Simpsons*—is another. Perhaps the "throwaway" aspect of popular culture, as with the postmodernist "recycling" of literary tropes, readily lends itself to satirical treatment of consumer culture and its adverse (ecological, ideological) effects. Be that as it may, the globally catastrophic effects of "technological pollution" (in Burke's parlance) threaten to render even the most perspicacious satirist's vision at once prophetic and, consequently, obsolete.

Mainstream ecocriticism, even when deigning to concede the "ideological ambivalence" of pastoral representation, has tended to vindicate American literary tradition in its environmentally benign aspect. Under the rubric of postmodernism, novelists the ilk of Brautigan and Sorrentino exhibit a

relative lack of complacency with respect to their inherited modes of discourse. These satiric pastoralists strive to disrupt what Donald Barthelme described as “a comfortable American scene”; that is, one heavily inscribed with pastoral values.⁴ Probing deeply into what—if anything—it means to be “American” in an incipient age of ecology, these writers disturb the roots of American subjectivity to which the ideological conceit of “nature’s nation” was grafted. Their work invigorates a postmodernist literary ecology, without nature.

Notes

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1. Sorrentino 248. Thus, the novel calls into question the crude binary opposition of “pastoral” and “picaresque” modes posited by Joseph Meeker in a pioneering work of ecological literary criticism, *The Comedy of Survival*.
 2. As if portended by Sorrentino’s use of the word “ratchet”—imparting the sense of a steady and irreversible process—Reno would soon become the hub of ecocriticism in the United States, The University of Nevada establishing a professorship in Literature and Environment at its Reno campus in 1990.
 3. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* 210. By the same token, one of Don DeLillo’s early characters—the girlfriend of a rock star who tries to re-enact Thoreau’s Walden experiment from within the confines of his New York apartment—experiences a similar absence of an idealized origin: “Look at post card manufacturers. They take a sleazy tourist-trap lake and try to make it into the canoeing ground of the gods. But they do such a slick glossy job that you glance at the post card and you know at once this is a shit-filled lake and all the tourists here are either war criminals or people who spit when they laugh” (*Great Jones Street*, 89-90). Thomas Pynchon paints a remarkably congruent picture of Walden Pond, in his debut novel *V*. (349-50).
 4. Barthelme 45. Like both *Blue Pastoral* and *Trout Fishing in America*, Barthelme’s novel *Snow White* playfully draws attention to environmental discourse as discourse, and similarly discloses quasi-totalitarian aspects of America’s fixation on wilderness and the great outdoors. For a discussion of *Snow White* along these lines, see Coughran 110-14.

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