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## Arcadia Redux

IN THE PASTORAL TRADITION, love appears in myriad forms. The pasture's ease and retirement are the attracting force when Virgil sings "let the country charm me, the rivers that channel its valleys,/then may I love its forest and stream, and let fame go hang." Poets in the Latin Arcadian tradition choose contemplation and retirement—what Barry Weller (1999) has called a "pastoral retreat from responsibility"—so Virgil renounces corrupt city life in favor of an apparently private and peaceful existence in the country. Renaissance pastoral poets also invent timeless enclaves where lively shepherds, all body and no mind, attend to present pleasures. Here, though, an adolescent world predominates, playful, witty, and self-consciously fictive.

The idyllic, the pastoral, the *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden), are rich but antique imaginative sites. So why do Eden, Arcadia, and the *locus amoenus* (beautiful, perfect place) maintain their hold on us still today? Each invites us into a world out of time, meant for leisure, contemplation, for free play and rapture without consequence. Enclosed in a safe haven, we sing of love, pastoral's abiding subject. What do our versions of paradise reveal about us? All narratives of paradise, Susan Snyder suggests, lead toward a familiar destination; in the end, the "story (from bliss to temptation, sin, knowledge, and expulsion into a harsh world demanding self-sufficiency) is . . . about growing up" (1998).

Both Latin and Renaissance pastorals play off the invisible backdrop of a tarnished world burdened with adult duty. Most pastoral poets of these periods write with an attending nostalgia for a golden age, for childhood's simplicity. They pair innocence with a frank erotic pleasure. Both circumstances, by implication, ought to be enjoyed while they are available. Robert Herrick's "The Argument of His Book" (1648) celebrates this bodily and spiritual aliveness despite time's encroachments. Our transience on earth intensifies the pastoral's necessity:

I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers,  
Of April, May, of June, and July-flowers;  
I sing of May-poles, hock-carts, wassails, wakes,

Of bridegrooms, brides and of their bridal-cakes;  
 I write of youth, of love, and have access  
 By these to sing of cleanly wantonness;  
 I sing of dews, of rains, and piece by piece  
 Of balm, of oil, of spice and ambergris;  
 I sing of times trans-shifting, and I write  
 How roses first came red and lilies white;  
 I write of groves, of twilights, and I sing  
 The court of Mab, and of the fairy king;  
 I write of Hell; I sing (and ever shall)  
 Of Heaven, and hope to have it after all.

Youthful pleasure lies at the center of this enchanted and enchanting bower. But “blossoms, birds, and bowers” surely ripen and decay, so Herrick hopes to keep both the ideal and real in balance, singing “of times trans-shifting” in the face of all our desires. So too sings Thomas Campion in “I care not for these ladies” (1601). Here the poet praises direct and casual carnality, comparing the cold, cultured women of town to the more elemental and generous Amarillis, ever available, ever aroused:

I care not for these ladies,  
 That must be woode and praide:  
 Give me kind Amarillis,  
 The wanton countrey maide.  
 Nature art disdaineth,  
 Her beautie is her owne.  
     Her when we court and kisse,  
     She cries, Forsooth, let go:  
     But when we come where comfort is,  
     She never will say No.

Pastoral love is painless, guilt-free, grounded in a sex-world of delight. But, of course, this ideal haven “where comfort” abounds is fictive, an allegorical world where the players knowingly inhabit an illusion. As a holographic image shifts from one picture to another, so a reader of pastoral balances two different worlds. Perhaps because sexual pleasure itself is fragile and momentary, these idylls are temporary, threatened, and evanescent.

Medieval and renaissance representations of *hortus conclusus* were built as living embodiments of the words of the Song of Solomon, spoken by the bridegroom

to his bride ("My sister, my bride, is a garden close-locked, a fountain sealed."). A *hortus conclusus* encloses virginity, valorizes the Christian model of chastity, and is itself an emblem of the life of Mary. This version of pastoral locates chastity inside the garden, the fortified and secure space being also the most blessed and sanctified. With high walls and narrow passageways, orderly borders and self-contained fertility, the *hortus conclusus* can also serve as a stage set for dramas of courtly love and the *fin amor* tradition. An unattainable woman, pure and chaste, waits at the center of this garden.

Poets who depict earthly paradise as a shaped landscape, separate from the messier, less productive system outside the garden walls, make a case for the civilizing forces of culture against the presumed wildness of nature. In terms of garden economy, enclosed gardens are simply more productive and, therefore, of greater real and moral value. Hard labor follows the fall from Eden, but labor leads, in turn, to spiritual reward. For instance, in *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), Edmund Spenser uses seasonal metaphors of birth, growth, and harvest in order to describe the necessary transition from innocence to experience, infancy to full adulthood, along with a whole world of political and religious consequence to follow. And so the fall from innocence is allegorized in portraits of nature. In this way, pastoral grows up and becomes georgic.

Today all the old metaphors are new again. We still believe a garden is nature shaped to a human design. If the design is "good," then the garden will succeed. Current periodicals such as *Fine Gardening* or *Horticulture* promote orderly and well-bounded gardens as sites for restoration and renewal. Even a popular-culture maven like Martha Stewart steers her consumers toward this inherited pastoral tradition. Open the pages of any of these magazines and see how we define "the good life."

Indeed, much of what I would call contemporary georgic is actually written in prose; today's nature writers may describe their flight from city to country as a journey toward a moral or authentic life. A host of essayists (some of them are also poets) find their own spiritual health flowering inside the gardens they labor to create. Sue Hubbell, Michael Pollan, Maxine Kumin, Jamaica Kincaid: All of these writers have crafted miniaturized Edens, reforming untamed or fallow land through the work of their hands. Though the flower garden of Jamaica Kincaid and the heirloom kitchen garden of Martha Stewart are visually quite different, each embodies the values of discipline, beauty, and utility, as both writers wax nostalgic for a lost past where gardens were central to a community. Because they

recognize how quickly beloved landscapes vanish, they place an intensified value on those that remain.

This is how heirloom vegetables and antique apple varieties become endowed with nostalgia; we long for the lost garden of “good” food. Turning food into fetish, epicurean consumers seek out rarities. When morels, for instance, were elevated from fungus to cuisine, their prices soared accordingly. Poet John Clare, shut out of once-communally farmed fields by the enforcement of the Enclosure Acts of the nineteenth century, would surely recognize these economic circumstances. They demonstrate what William Empson has called the “essential trick” of pastoral, “to imply a beautiful relationship between rich and poor” (1960).

Despite all this I must admit a real affection for these georgic essays of American life on the land. The words of most contemporary nature essayists are instructive and evocative, written from a position of genuine longing for the knowledge the land provides. But I’m troubled by how some gardens are situated not only as peaceful and contemplative places for their own sake, but also as sites where envy and aspiration gather. Ambitious gardens often model what life might look like in a pastoral retreat, but only for those with the taste and capital necessary to install them. Today the *locus amoenus* exists for many of us as an airbrushed advertisement for a way of life to be found only in the pages of magazines.

So is it possible to write a pastoral poem today? We’re still talking about how gardens produce pleasure. We continue to seek out spiritual retreat. How do these two directions—the garden as a bower of bliss and the garden as haven for chastity—play out in recent poetry about nature and gardens? Are there fresh ways to approach the pastoral metaphor of Eden? Why do we even bother to return to such a self-consciously artificial mode?

Steven Marx (1984) suggests that, despite the limitations of the pastoral landscape, we continue to yearn for a safe haven where contemplation and dream may flower:

The motive of seductive rhetoric, no matter how artful or self-conscious, is real desire. The *locus amoenus* is a mythic rather than a merely rhetorical place. Like all myths, it means more than any interpretation can articulate, and whether consciously believed in or not, it shapes people’s sense of the world and it motivates their behavior.

A powerful source and solace, nostalgia for lost time motivates anyone interested in memory’s landscape. Again, Marx suggests why these ideas continue to stir us.

Feelings of nostalgia stem from an impulse to idealize memory and history, the communal memory not just of place, but of our particular sense of childhood as a lost paradise:

Whether manifested as the *locus amoenus*, the Garden of Eden, the Golden Age, or the land of Arcadia, the ideal of innocence is itself a metaphor for another world in the past that all people have inhabited: the world of adolescence, childhood and infancy, the world of their own youth recollected as different and dislocated from their present selves.

W. H. Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" (1951) speaks to the attraction we feel toward a fragile landscape, one, in this case, sculpted and shaped from limestone: "If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,/ Are constantly homesick for, this is chiefly/ Because it dissolves in water." Anthony Hecht argues that Auden's poem embraces the flaws in this fallen world even as it seeks consolation inside that same space. This double vision also occurs in Philip Larkin's lovely "When First We Faced, and Touching Showed" (1975):

When first we faced, and touching showed  
How well we knew the early moves,  
Behind the moonlight and the frost,  
The excitement and the gratitude,  
There stood how much our meeting owed  
To other meetings, other loves.

The initial caresses contain not only the erotic charge of contact, but also "the decades of a different life," embedded with the history of other loves and with the gestures of romance learned from experience. Despite these present pleasures, so needed, so precious, the past will not disappear, though it might be held at bay:

But when did love not try to change  
The world back to itself—no cost,  
No past, no people else at all—  
Only what meeting made us feel,  
So new, and gentle-sharp, and strange?

Engaged in a combination of erotic fantasy and an awareness of time, are we at our best, our truest? Or self-regarding and immature? Is pastoral a mode fated to be nostalgic? Or, as Larkin suggests, is it a necessary fiction where one willingly delights in—or rests awhile under the spell of—illusion?

Nostalgic pastoral often seeks to reconfigure the body of the earth as a human body. In John Crowe Ransom's "The Equilibrists" (1927), the woman's body is "a white field ready for love," as if to make love meant *to plow*. In one sense, of course, it does. When Ransom metaphorically merges topography and anatomy, he transforms a woman's body into a landscape over which to have dominion. This is essentially the same gesture, if in reverse, as one made by Christopher Columbus centuries ago; at the entry to the Orinoco River he wrote to his patrons, the King and Queen of Spain, to announce his discovery of "a river flowing out of Paradise." The land surrounding it, he said, looked like "a woman's breast on a round ball, and . . . the part with the nipple was higher and closer to the air and heaven . . .; and it seemed to him that the Earthly Paradise might be found on this nipple"—this according to the account of the conquest in Bartolomé de las Casas's *Historia de Las Indias* (1875–76). Columbus's conflation of paradise, purity, and sexual prospect make a tantalizing panorama indeed, worthy of exploration and thus of further sponsorship.

If a *locus amoenus* comes to be seen as a trope for a woman's body, allegorized into landscape, if metaphors of conquest and imprisonment are linked to gender, then the playfulness of the pastoral's context disappears or becomes more difficult to deploy without irony or willed ignorance, as Susan Stewart suggests in "Nervous System" (1995):

They set before us their harsh taxonomy: true, steady,  
distant, tender, stormy, gone astray, love  
made less by being in time. Each had claimed to be the other's  
half-world—paltry haven or hermitage  
now bursting at the seams. We saw the garden "fill  
with leaves"; we heard "the wind rage  
at the bolted door while the spray drove  
back the brackish sea." It's always the same, one goes  
and one stays, one turns his eyes  
from the awful scene and meanwhile the well-meaning,  
sincere one spies  
a flaw in the weaving the two of them have made. The task  
is repair, fray, tear, epitomize  
what metaphor could take the place of time's erosion.

The language inside quotations, the “paltry haven or hermitage” of their love, the knowledge that we are inclined in love to allegorize our actions: All send this scene into a downward spiral of failure. Stewart implies that we continue to follow the same old script of love, made no less affecting or “awful” despite its being “made less by being in time.”

Real gardens throughout history have walled out wildness in order to hold and protect the sacred. Anyone who enters a garden enters via a gateway or threshold; journeys from outside to inside are full of ritual and magic. But when contemporary poems include pastoral elements, or intentionally seek out an arcadia, it's often as part of a self-conscious or ironic performance, harking back to the scripted playfulness of Renaissance pastoral poetry. Many contemporary poets describe paradises now fallen, terrain ecologically damaged. Contrast Ransom's retrograde pastoral imagery with that of Australian poet John Kinsella, who writes what he calls “radical pastoral.” He seeks to recognize, as he says, that “the ecologic conversations between shepherds have become those between motorbikes and tractors, helicopters and light planes” (1996). In Kinsella's poems, environmental degradation coexists with beauty; the beauty of the land is politicized by the history of the people who live there. Nature is no longer a sympathetic haven in “Field Notes from Mount Bakewell” (2004), for example, where

The guy from the chemical company  
drinks a half-glass of Herbicide.  
“There you go, harmless to humans.”  
The farmer, impressed, sprays  
and gets his sheep straight back in there.

Poets who continue to engage with the pastoral tradition inevitably reexamine metaphors of Eden, asking not only personal but also environmental questions about gardens as well as questions of economy and access. Poets who write themselves into gardened spaces do so, at least in part, because poems themselves are shapely and focused, relying on boundaries and the limitations of form to achieve breadth and beauty. Besides John Kinsella (*The New Arcadia*) and Susan Stewart (*The Forest, Columbarium*), contemporary poets examining the continuing possibilities of pastoral include Chase Twichell (*The Ghost of Eden*), Adrienne Rich (*Dark Fields of the Republic*), Jane Hirshfield (*The October Palace*), Carl Phillips (*Cortege, Pastoral, The Rest of Love*), Louise Glück (*The Wild Iris*), and Brigit Pegeen Kelly (*Song, The Orchard*).

Brigit Pegeen Kelly's darkly beautiful poems sometimes feel as if they should be illustrated by Edward Gorey. Shaded by gothic elements, her paradise is more graveyard than garden. In *The Orchard* (2004), monuments to the past lie scattered across the poems' grounds. And though the spooky atmosphere retains a sexual quality, eros in "The Satyr's Heart" is debased and damaged:

Now I rest my head on the satyr's carved chest,  
 The hollow where the heart would have been, if sandstone  
 Had a heart, if a headless goat man could have a heart.  
 His neck rises to a dull point, points upward  
 To something long gone, elusive, and at his feet  
 The small flowers swarm, earnest and sweet, a clamor  
 Of white, a clamor of blue, and black the sweating soil  
 They breed in . . .

With no head, no heart, a body made of stone, the satyr makes an entirely unsatisfactory lover. His neck "rises to a dull point, points upward" to a lost heaven, or perhaps merely a vacant spot left where his head once was. As the poem proceeds, its images confirm and extend the feeling of corrupt emptiness, the "birds turning tricks in the trees," "the wind fingering/The twigs," while at her feet, flowers seem merely childish, "earnest and sweet." She has no time for them, and instead uproots a stone to uncover "what is brave." Only beneath ground does she locate an army "of pale creatures who/Without cease or doubt sew the sweet sad earth."

Kelly's poems merge Christian and Classical tropes; and in her garden of earthly delights, death, chaos, and destruction are as fully present as love. If you can't look with confidence to heaven, her pastoral implies, it might be worth looking earthward, beneath the surface of the ruined garden. The success of traditional pastoral depends on a conflict between the simple and natural, and the urbane and cultivated. But now this opposition exists not between innocence and corruption, or the garden and the city, but wholly within the complicated garden itself. It's as if the garden now contains multitudes, ghosts from the past who insist upon making themselves heard.

Some of the most complex pastoral encounters recognize the need for magic in our lives, even as they acknowledge the limitations of old metaphors. Carl Phillips's poems often dramatize scenes of eros played out as performance and, in the next moment, just as simply put away. Phillips contends with difficult contradictions; in his poems the pastoral idyll is longed for and occasionally achieved, but also abides



alongside a contingent daily life with its pain, its social reality. "Against His Quitting the Torn Field" (2000) calls up idyllic images, locating them in a contemporary context. Desire is drawn from Classical tropes but takes form in an urban city park:

the mouth that says *You can do anything, here;*  
the arm tattooed with—  
as obviously as if this were  
dream—the one word:  
*Paradise; . . .*

Phillips's erotic encounter is ritualized even as it is made strange, quickened into fragment. Likewise, in "Afterword: Autumn, Mixed Music" the boundaries of waking and dream are not fixed, not settled:

In the long dreaming, the old gods are again  
with us: some in the guise of ordinary  
light through the green leaves they love  
. . . . .  
your body not your body any longer, nor mine  
mine to give thought to, but the gods':  
theirs, the hands that cast out; theirs,  
the hands to fetch, surely, us back . . .

As with Brigit Kelly, Phillips's lost Arcadia is a dreamland, a magic space. Fragile, momentary, these scenes are haunted by the ghosts of other arcadias.

Regarding dreams, dreamers have a choice: Analyze the dream or leave the magic intact. If pastoral lives today, it does so in images of private meditation, in poems marking out the boundaries and limits of a sacred interior space, and in rituals of privacy between lovers. That pastoral occurs in the context of ritual and transformation reminds us of its origins in ecstatic encounters. That it often takes the form of allegory, as in Phillips's "Teaching Ovid to Sixth Graders" (1995), tells us

how any myth  
is finally about the lengths the mind will  
carry a tale to, to explain what the body  
knows already.

And that pastoral continues to allow poets to live in two realms at once demonstrates how much we need such imagined interior landscapes.

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