

PASTORAL
SONGS OF THE SHEPHERDS

WHAT IS PASTORAL?

- Poetry set in the pasture
- Idealizes the singing of cowherds, herdsmen more generally, and “rustics” even more generally
- Often associated with nostalgic thinking that looks back to a simpler “golden-age” of peace and harmony with nature
- After epic poetry, poets began to look to smaller scale writing

THE POLITICS OF THE PASTORAL

- Turning to the countryside for peace and reflection has always been a natural impulse of cultured professionals bureaucrats who imagine the limitless horizons of mountain and plain, forest and pasture, where lives are passed in the pursuit of rustic skills, nourished by a wholesome country air free from the corruptions of wealth and power and the

THEOCRITUS

- “The father of the pastoral”
- Ancient Greece, born ca. 300 BC
- Lived for a time in Alexandria
- His “Idylls” or “Bucolics” are an early example of highly wrought pastoral poetry

THE IDYLLS

- “Idyll” means “little picture”
- Related to “ideal”
- His poetry is very song-like and euphonious, highly-wrought with archaic phrases appropriate to the subject matter
- The bucolic idyll illustrates human attitudes and dilemmas within a conventional small-scale setting of country life and manners.
- Its most common theme is Eros (love & lust, personified) and all his painful paradoxes

THE PARADOXES OF EROS

- Temptation vs. fidelity
- The powerlessness to provoke a response
- Combination of inflamed lust and noble love
- Love and lust can engender hate

IDYLL II: "THE SPELLBINDERS"

- Simaetha and her maid Thestylis are preparing a charm to bring her lover Daphnis back to her.
- But even as she wants him to come back, she casts spells to hurt him.
- This may be irrational, but it is "psychologically realistic".

VIRGIL

- Famous roman poet
- Further developed pastoral based on Theocritus's example
- His "Eclogues" are a set of ten pastoral poems which are framed by the threat of being kicked off the land due to politics

ENGLISH PASTORAL

- Pastoral has often been returned to, since every age as looked back nostalgically to a supposed “golden-age” of simpler times more in touch with nature.
- The Romantics in particular are responsible for making pastoral poetry especially idealizing, whereas the original pastoral writers are more down-to-earth and even politically savvy.

OTHER FAMOUS PASTORALS IN ENGLISH

- Spenser's *The Shepherdes Calender*
- Sidney's "Ye Goatherd Gods"
- Marlowe's "Passionate Shepherd"
- Milton's "Lycidas"
- Pope's "Pastorals"
- Book VIII of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*
- Shelley's "Adonais"
- Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis"
- Frost's "Build Soil"

MODERN, URBAN PASTORALS

“Modern life has expanded our conception of nature and along with it nature’s role in our lives and our art--a woman stepping on a bus may afford a greater insight into nature than the hills outside Rome, for nature has not stood still since Shelley’s day. In past times there was nature and there was human nature; because of the ferocity of modern life, man and nature have become one. A scientist can be an earthquake. A poet can be a plague.”

-- Frank O’Hara from “Nature and New Painting”

WRITING PROMPTS

- Write a modern pastoral by imagining a song or singing contest of modern ranchhands, or factory workers, talking about themes familiar from pastoral
- Discuss the politics of pastoral with reference to Virgil's Eclogue I
- Discuss the portrayal of Eros in Eclogue II