

A Long Foreground: Exploring the Postmodern Pastoral

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century it is only a short leap from civilization and its discontents to the postmodern pastoral. *Postmodern* and *pastoral*: two exhausted and empty cultural signifiers reactivated by forced proximity, united by the logic of mutual and nearly assured destruction. With gas and food prices climbing, with the planet's accelerated warming, with the contraction of our cheap-energy economy and the rapid extinction of plant and animal species, both the flat world of global capitalism and the green world of fond memory are in the process of vanishing before our eyes. As Frederic Jameson has remarked, "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations" (xii). His claim was anticipated two centuries earlier by Percy Bysshe Shelley, who in his "Defence of Poetry" lamented that "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest" (695). It is that question of creative faculty, of dystopian and utopian imagination, to which *The Arcadia Project* addresses itself.

The universe of postmodern pastoral must be a universe of language, with none of the naive pretensions to an immediate presentation of reality held by "nature poetry." But it is also a demystified point of connection to what Charles Olson called "the human universe." In his essay of the same title, Olson claims that "discourse has arrogated to itself a good deal of experience which needed to stay put—needs now to be returned to the only two universes which count, the two phenomenal ones, the two a man has need to bear on because they bear so on him: that of

himself, as organism, and that of his environment, the earth and planets” (156). A postmodern pastoral situates itself in, forms a bridge between, those universes, but at the same time stands against simple representation or propaganda. Olson’s projective verse represents one of the first major attempts by a self-consciously postmodern poet to orient his sense of environment and place within the profoundly felt, deeply if eccentrically researched context of history and mythic traditions—the universes of discourse that are a reader’s primary defense against the deadliness of ideology and repetition.

George Oppen is another angel of this anthology for his onto-ecological astonishment (“The wild deer bedding down — / That they are there!” he cries in “Psalm”) and his skepticism about the realization of a pastoral politics. As he wrote in his only published essay, “The Mind’s Own Place”:

There is no crisis in which political poets and orators may not speak of trees, though it is more common for them, in this symbolic usage, to speak of “flowers”: “We want bread and roses”: “Let a thousand flowers bloom” on the left: on the right, the photograph once famous in Germany of Handsome Adolph sniffing the rose. Flowers stand for simple and undefined human happiness and are frequently mentioned in all political circles. The actually forbidden word Brecht, of course, could not write. It would be something like aesthetic. But the definition of the good life is necessarily an aesthetic definition, and the mere fact of democracy has not formulated it, nor, if it’s achieved, will the mere fact of an extension of democracy, though I do not mean of course that restriction would do better. Suffering can be recognized; to argue its definition is an evasion, a contemptible thing. But the good life, the thing wanted for itself, the aesthetic, will be defined outside of anybody’s politics, or defined wrongly. (36)

This tension between the aesthetic and the political is precisely the fault line or ecotone navigated by the postmodern pastoral. These poems offer themselves as points of reference, as “cognitive maps” in Jameson’s sense, rendering visible the fatal gap between our fading sense of paradise and the system—call it late capitalism, call it globalization, call it the limits of ecology themselves—we must each of us discover for ourselves if we hope not just to survive, but to

reclaim and foster what Oppen calls “the good life, the thing wanted for itself.” It’s the same thing that Marianne Moore, a modernist forerunner to this version of pastoral, demanded of poetry itself: “real toads in imaginary gardens.”

What distinguishes this poetry from that gathered under the rubric of environmental poetry or ecopoetics? In one sense these are needlessly invidious terms; Marcella Durand, in an essay titled “Spatial Interpretations: Ways of Reading Ecological Poetry,” has written that “I intentionally vacillate between using eco-/ ecological/ environmental poetry to describe whatever it is that I’m talking about. It’s not a School—it’s more an interest or at best, a process” (Iijima 201). We insist on our subtitle not to separate out the poetry in this anthology from that which concerns Durand and others; postmodern pastoral is very much a part of the larger “process” of poetic engagement with the natural world. Rather, postmodern pastoral interests us as a way of re-engaging this poetry with history and textuality. Environmental poetry is fundamentally a poetry of place, and risks *being* postmodern—spatialized, presentist, pluralistic—without *reflecting* on that postmodernity. The term *pastoral* recalls to this mode of poetry its long history (from the *Eclogues* of Virgil to Marlowe’s passionate shepherd to the English Romantics and American Transcendentalists), while *postmodern* uncovers and “dis-scribes” what’s troubling in that history—what reinforces the belief in “nature” as a transcendental *outside* that makes it so difficult to reimagine the human relation to the environment in fundamentally ecological, processual ways.

The Lineage: Modernist Pastoral

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, “Nature and New Painting” (42)

The terms “pastoral” and “postmodern”—both of which seem to name large swathes of cultural practice while resisting close definition—are only apparently incompatible. We associate the pastoral with a vision of harmony between humans and the natural world—what Leo Marx called “the middle landscape,” outside the city without being entirely outside civilization, and natural without being wholly wild or inhospitable to human beings. Postmodernism, meanwhile, is closely associated with urban and with virtual experience: whether we call it the information age, the society of the spectacle, or globalization, it would seem obvious that nature has nothing to do with it. The most fundamental categories of nature, after all, are space and time, both of which are severely abridged by a postmodern age in which consumption as well as production have been outsourced, so that our clothes come from Bangladesh, our computers from China, and our customer service representatives answer the phone in India. Not only space and time but our capacity for attention is fragmented, as we hunt and gather e-mails, videos, tweets, and other primarily visual data on multiple and simultaneous screens. It all seems a far cry from Tityrus piping on his oaten reed while reclining on an Arcadian hillside in Virgil’s *Eclogues*, or Wordsworth questioning the leech-gatherer, or Frost’s lonely swinger of birches, or even the consumerist pastorals reproduced by Restoration Hardware catalogs and *Cooks Illustrated* magazine.

As the passage from O’Hara’s essay “Nature and New Painting” attests, the site of postmodernism’s intersection with the pastoral can be located at the moment that “nature” becomes recognizable not as outside history but part of history, a discourse in itself. Yet this does not reinscribe the modern divorce between nature and humanity that we can date at least as far back as Descartes’ cogito: for O’Hara, the postmodern condition means that “man and nature

have become one.” This merging, as he is aware, creates the potential for catastrophe on an unprecedented scale: “A scientist can be an earthquake. A poet can be a plague.” But it also suggests the potential for a fully postmodern poetry to enter this zone of the pastoral—the vision of humanity undivided from nature—and activate its ambiguities, making readers more fully consciousness of the discursive and social reality churning beneath the surface of either idyllic or appalling images.

Pastoral manifests humanity’s oldest fantasy of *otium*, leisure, liberation from Adam’s curse and the need to sweat for one’s bread. Postmodernism represents the bankrupt culture of consumer society: it is the nightmarish or farcical realization of the pastoral fantasy, a world in which meaning(ful) production is not so much obsolete as out of reach. Through its attention to the physical world, postmodern poetry can become something other than a glib or cynical celebration of our culture’s fragmentation. And by passing through postmodernism’s focus on the materiality of language, the historicity of discourse, and the constructedness of subjectivity, pastoral sheds its naivety and tactically refocuses our attention on the strategies of greenwashing and obfuscation by which the corporate powers that be work to hide, quite literally, our own nature from us.

In the wake of nature’s disenchantment by the progress of capitalism and modern science, the word “nature” becomes more ideological than ever: drained of its mythic content, pastoral comes rushing in to fill the vacuum. We do not often think of Modernist poets as maintaining close associations with pastoral or the natural world: the major exception is Robert Frost, whose Modernist credentials are often questioned precisely because of his preoccupation with natural phenomena and the New England landscape, not to mention his adherence to traditional English

poetic forms.¹ More significant for the purposes of this anthology would be T.S. Eliot in his most radical phase, the phase of *The Waste Land*: for Eliot, nature is at best an uncanny supplement to the brave new world of industrial capitalism and mass political movements, a ghostly absence or zombie presence (““That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / ‘Has it begun to sprout’?” [71-72]). The very title of his poem is enough to suggest this, as the poem traces a “dry,” disturbing nature in which April, time of renewal, has mutated into “the cruelest month” (1). The natural world of Eliot’s poem is corrupt and slimy when it is not desiccated and empty: it is a negative pastoral, an anti-pastoral, and only the deus ex machina of myth derived from a non-Western context, the Hindu Upanishads, is able to produce *otium* or at least stasis in the poem’s last line: “Shantih shantih shantih” (433). The poem does therefore achieve something like pastoral closure, but only by turning away from the implications of a disenchanting modernity toward a peace that literally passeth understanding; a retreat from rationality that foreshadows Eliot’s conversion to high Anglicanism. A mythified and tentative pastoral returns to manifest itself in *Four Quartets*, in which he writes, “I think that the river / Is a strong brown god.... Unhonoured, unpropitiated / By worshippers of the machine” (emphasis mine). But Eliot’s Anglo-Catholic version of pastoral is neither persuasive nor useful to poets who are wary of an undialectical reversal of the progress of disenchantment.

Ezra Pound’s diagnosis of a diseased and decadent nature was similar to Eliot’s, but his prescription for its cure was more radical and more sinister. Pound writes an explicitly Fascist pastoral conditioned by his rigid idealism, which renders landscape as a once-beautiful artwork

¹ See for example Robert Pinsky, “Old Made New: Was Robert Frost a Modernist?” *Slate*. *Slate*, 27 April 2010. Web. 5 April 2011: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/poem/2010/04/old_made_new.html

corrupted by usury, to be purified by the labors of Il Duce, the supreme “artifex.”² The “history” that Pound’s epic “includes” proves to be an unstable mix with pastoral (traditionally a zone of escape from history and politics), so that his attempt to construct “un paradis terrestre,” collapses into shards and fragments along with Mussolini’s regime: “I cannot make it cohere.”³ But in spite or perhaps because of his Fascist politics, Pound may be the high Modernist with the most to offer postmodern pastoral, because of his willingness to bring politics into contact with pastoral, undermining the claims of purity attributed to both discourses.

The problem of nature as repository of mythic value was engaged by most of the other American Modernist poets at one time or another. H.D. was more benign than Pound in her attempt to re-invest the natural world with the sacred qualities of her beloved Greeks, but the path she forged was narrow and by her own characterization, hermetic—though her influence on Robert Duncan and, through him, a visionary tradition in postwar American pastoral cannot be underestimated (more on Duncan below). Marianne Moore’s poems engage playfully and prankfully with the animal world, layering precise observations within the witty constraints of syllabic verse, but those she influenced were less radical. Gertrude Stein makes for an interesting and necessary predecessor to the work of this anthology: her writing often flirts with pastoral tropes (the abstracted French countryside of *Stanzas in Meditation*, or the domestic interiors of *Tender Buttons*) in language that manages to be at once deliberately impoverished and

² “Any thorough judgment of MUSSOLINI will be in a measure an act of faith, it will depend on what you *believe* the man means.... Treat him as *artifex* and all the details fall into place. Take him as anything save the artist and you will get muddled in contradictions.” The title of the book from which this quotation says everything, really, about Pound’s agrarian/pastoral ideology: *Jefferson and/or Mussolini: L’idea Statle: Fascism as I Have Seen It*. New York: Liveright, 1936, 1970.

³ I have argued elsewhere that this failed coherence is Pound’s greatest legacy: the anguished, searching, fragmentary *Pisan Cantos*, in which the poet’s grandiosity dissolves in a solution of microscopic natural phenomena—“When the mind swings by a grass-blade an ant’s forefoot shall save you”—is an epicenter of postmodern pastoral. Corey, Joshua. *The American Avant-Pastoral: Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, Ronald Johnson*. Diss. Cornell University, 2008. Print.

ceaselessly elaborative. We must also not neglect the influence of Wallace Stevens, who, particularly in the poems of *Harmonium*, characteristically juxtaposes a deliberately ascetic, anti-Romantic vision of the natural world (“One must have a mind of winter”) with a lush, intoxicated, aestheticized, manifestly artificial diction in pursuit of what we might call the skeptical paganism of a poem like “Sunday Morning”:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
Not as a god, but as a god might be,
Naked among them, like a savage source. (55)

After the first generation of Modernists the so-called “Objectivist” poets—among whom we can include Oppen, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Lorine Niedecker—are among the significant predecessors for the poets in this anthology. Following Pound, they are responsible for opening the field of the poem to research and the document, integral to the practices of poetic postmodernism and ecopoetics. Williams is perhaps best known for the variations he rung on pastoral in *Spring and All*: the anti-pastoral of “The pure products of America / go crazy,” the *ars pastora* of “The Farmer,” the elliptical pastoral of “The Red Wheelbarrow.” His long poem *Paterson* might well be described as a pastoral epic or even a pastoral elegy writ large, as the figure of the title personage sprawls across the New Jersey landscape that Williams portrays as much through the collaged inclusion of ethnographic reports, newspaper articles, and private letters as he does through lyric evocations of picnickers and waterfalls. Louis Zukofsky, though a quintessential poet of New York (and not just any New York but the New York of Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side—a locale much closer to Jacob Riis’ images of tenement squalor than the wide-open spaces typical of North American pastoral), nevertheless resorted often to pastoral images and ideas. “A”, his “poem of a life,”

devotes much of its length to the development of an idealized domestic pastoral centering on himself, his wife Celia, and his son Paul, while one of its late sections, “A”-22, is a kind of Mallarmean natural history. His last work, *80 Flowers*, reads as an attempt to permit language itself to bloom spontaneously through the intensive collage of homonyms, puns, citations, and fragmentary references to the “flowers” that each poem imitates in its mode of becoming, laying the groundwork for the mode that *The Arcadia Project* calls “textual ecologies.”

Of all the poets associated with the Objectivists, Lorine Niedecker’s work is the most consistently pastoral in its subject matter, yet reaches toward the postmodern in its intensive collage of natural, historical, and personal details, creating a portrait of the artist inseparable from a portrait of the rural Wisconsin landscape in which she lived. Living and writing for decades on Black Hawk Island in Wisconsin, Niedecker adapted Zukofsky’s emphasis on “sincerity and objectification” and “the clear physical eye” for her own life and physical environment. One of Niedecker’s best-known poems, “Lake Superior,” is emblematic of her practice in its fluid combination of lyricism and research. It distills more than three hundred pages of notes into just five pages, compressing its extensive range of reference into intensive packets of short lyrics. The career of seventeenth-century French explorer Pierre-Esprit Radisson, who discovered Hudson’s Bay, is encapsulated in six lines:

Radisson:
“a laborinth of pleasure”
this world of the Lake
Long hair, long gun
Fingernails pulled out
by Mohawks (232)

Niedecker referred to her own “Poet’s work” as “this condensery” (194) a play on Ezra Pound’s famous equation DICHTEN = CONDENSARE: a condensery is a factory for

manufacturing condensed or evaporated milk, the sort of business Niedecker the Wisconsinite had an intimate familiarity with. This combination of high modernism with more homely and local concerns is emblematic of Niedecker's practice and of a version of postmodern pastoral committed to negotiating with everyday activities and landscapes. Her poems are an intensive collage of natural phenomena, the personal, and what she called "the real world of history, wars, depressions, art and science." She is a practitioner of what I call *ecolage*, a neologism intended to bring the terms "collage" and "bricolage"—the most characteristic and significant technique of twentieth century art—into contact with a concern for ecology and environment. (There is an inherent and useful tension between the frame-breaking logic of collage and the supposed integrity of the *oikos*, the "home" that ecology seeks to study and economy to manage.) Niedecker's *ecolage* comes close to realizing the promise of what Olson called "page as field" writing: the poem as environment, in a complex, more-than-descriptive relation to actual places, ecotones, habitats, and histories that does not erase the tensions between those varying discourses and their normative contexts.

But the pastoral spirit is hardly the possession of any one movement or group, as Marcella Durand has reminded us. Even as the "Objectivists"—Niedecker aside—pursued their largely urban and suburban poetics of the object, the postwar poets associated with the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, and Black Mountain College were in diverging ways bringing the techniques and preoccupations of an emerging postmodernism to bear on pastoral themes. I will single out a few crucial figures from each movement to evaluate their impact and persistence in the postmodern pastoral poetry being written today.

The Postmodern Pastoral from Snyder to Ashbery

The career of Gary Snyder towers like a colossus over the landscape of twentieth-century writing concerned with ecology and nature. His stature as an environmental activist and the popularity of his writing over decades may have served to obscure how innovative his poetry can be, and how deeply, formatively engaged it is with the postmodern condition. Snyder's influential early poems may appear to offer naive portrayals of unmediated oneness between humans and nature; but as Nick Selby has argued in his essay "Poem as Work-Place: Gary Snyder's Ecological Poetics," even an apparently straightforward nature poem like "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" from Snyder's first book, *Riprap* (1959) in fact demonstrates him to be aware and anxious of the mediation of nature through language. The poem documents Snyder's work as a lookout watching for wildfires—an eminently pastoral, shepherd-like form of work that blurs labor and leisure in the act of looking.

Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat, after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir-cones
Across rocks and meadows
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup
Looking down for miles
Through high still air. (399)

In its brevity, apparent clarity, and meditative tone, the poem seems almost to bypass Imagism, Objectivism, and other -isms, instead harking back to the Chinese nature poems and Japanese haiku fundamental to Snyder's poetics. Snyder himself writes of these models that they do "the work of seeing the world without any prism of language, and bring that seeing into language" (quoted in Selby, n.p.). But Selby's reading of "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain

Lookout” directs our attention to the complex pastoral dialectic of its two stanzas: the first, which registers the presence of the landscape and the speaker’s work, as fire lookout, of interpreting that landscape; and the second, which introduces the “I” as remote and alienated from culture (“things I once read”) and civilization (“A few friends, but they are in cities”). Crucially, this “I” is also remote from the landscape he reads for signs of fire; he is “Looking down for miles / Through high still air” and as Selby remarks, “Clear as this air may seem, it is still a medium through which the landscape must be read” (n.p.).

From his earliest poems, therefore, Snyder demonstrates a consciousness of the slippage (what Selby calls “anxiety”) between word and world that characterizes a postmodern writer’s approach to nature, though he is often mistaken for the sort of naive nature writer that the larger literary world responds to with piety at best and condescension at worst. (In a 2005 interview in Jonathan Skinner’s invaluable journal *ecopoetics*, Snyder remarks on how a recent book, *Danger on Peaks*, which combines restless formal experimentation with highly charged political speech, was dismissed by critics as “another nature book about nature” [XX].) Snyder has spoken out in his essay, “Is Nature Real?” against “high-paid intellectuals trying to knock nature and trying to knock the people who value nature and still come out smelling smart and progressive” (387), warning that the notion of nature as “social construction” risks reinscribing the Western Enlightenment view of nature as a resource requiring human administration: “Deconstruction without compassion is self-aggrandizement” (388). Nature is really *there*, Snyder reminds us: “Wild is the process that surrounds us all, self-organizing nature: creating plant-zones, humans and their societies, all ultimately resilient beyond our wildest imagination” (389). His vision of wilderness is discursive without being entirely reducible to discourse, and even as discourse it is not reducible to a single interpretation, a single narrative. The wild, for Snyder, includes and

penetrates the human mind and human body, as he writes in another essay, “The Etiquette of Freedom”: “There are more things in mind, in the imagination, than ‘you’ can keep track of— thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas . . . The conscious agenda-planning ego occupies a very tiny territory, a little cubicle somewhere near the gate” (176).

Two of the more significant poets for the lineage of postmodern pastoral to emerge from the San Francisco Renaissance, Robert Duncan and his protégé Ronald Johnson, are often committed to exploring what Snyder calls “inner wilderness areas,” albeit with different tools and with a far greater emphasis on the “inner.” Duncan, like Pound, invests his natural imagery with mythic significance, re-enchanting the world as it appears or disappears into his characteristically episodic or series-structured poems of esoteric knowledge. Unlike Pound, the mythic references of this self-consciously “derivative” poet function, as Michael Davidson has written, “not as privileged signs of cultural order . . . nor as allusions but as generative elements in the composing process” (39). For Duncan, as mid-twentieth-century recuperator of the rhetoric of late Romanticism and the ambition of the Modernists, pastoral manifests in its highest and most idealizing mode. But that idealization is rarely simple. Consider for example one of his most famous shorter poems, “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow.” As Peter O’Leary has written of the poem’s eponymous meadow, “it’s an ambiguous place, neither made up by the mind (‘as if it were a scene made up’) nor belonging to the poet, but an actual ‘made place’ that he claims as his own.” For O’Leary the meadow is primarily “an apocalyptic battlefield” of the spirit;⁴ but I would argue that the poem consciously creates, exploits, and depends upon the

⁴ Peter O’Leary, “Robert Duncan: ‘Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow’: On Robert Duncan’s incantatory summons.” The Poetry Foundation, 2 January 2011. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/poem-guide.html?guide_id=180438

tension between the pastoral associations of the word *meadow* and the monumental or epic “architectures” and warlike “hosts” of the poem’s mythic “Lady” for its full effect. The poem’s conclusion suspends the meadow between its pastoral associations and its role for Duncan as the site of mystical initiation and danger:

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

The meadow acts *as if* it were a “property of the mind” but by those words is implicitly both more and less than this: real meadow, ideal meadow, meadow of revelation. The “that” of the penultimate line, a pronoun referring back to the meadow, implies that it is only this ambivalent and manifold meadow (epic, idyllic, actual) that can be “a place of first permission” and an omen—a sign, a foretelling—of being. The prophetic pressure that Duncan puts on the pastoral is a mark of his commitment to a Romanticism that operates nevertheless under postmodern conditions, though by doing so it risks losing contact with a recognizable natural world altogether.⁵

Ronald Johnson’s increasingly influential poetry is more concerned than Duncan’s with bringing the observed and particular phenomena of the actual natural world into his poems, while at the same time following Duncan into realms of ecstatic and transcendental knowledge. Like Duncan’s, Johnson’s poetry takes the form of a generative mosaic of “everyday fragments of phrase, words plucked out of context, trouvailles to be worked and knitted and sawn or welded in” (“Planting” 2, quoted in Scroggins 148). His models include not just Pound, Duncan, and the

⁵ See also my article “Robert Duncan’s Visionary Ecology,” forthcoming in *Paideuma* 40 (2012).

Objectivists, but also naïve artists like Simon Rodia, the creator of the Watts Towers (an image of which graces the cover of the Living Batch Press edition of Johnson’s masterwork, *ARK*), who constructed visionary “gardens of revelation” (the phrase is John Beardsley’s) out of bottlecaps, unbroken glass, wire, and other fundamentally unvalued materials to achieve what Johnson wonderfully terms “scrupture” (*ARK* 90). Johnson’s own visionary gardens often take the form of concrete poetry, as in his poem “earth” from his 1970 sequence “Songs of the Earth”:

eartheartearth
 eartheartearth
 eartheartearth
 eartheartearth
 eartheartearth
 eartheartearth (Johnson 67)

In this deceptively simple poem, an entire chorus of words pulses in and around the title word *earth*: *hearth*, *heart*, *hear*, *ear*, *art*, *the*, *he*, as well as fleeting combinations and homophones formed by the eye: *hearth he*, *earthy*, *ear the art*, *hear the heart*. The visual play instigated by the form transforms the apparently solid block made from a single word into a highly compressed and intensive collage. Johnson’s *ARK* can itself be conceived as a concrete poem on a much larger scale, its construction structured by architectural metaphors (its three major sections are “The Foundations,” “The Spires,” and “The Arches”). At the same time *ARK* is “a garden of the brain” (110), a “made place” in Duncan’s phrase, that marks for Johnson the location of the human body as sharer and perceiver of nature. For Johnson, the brain, the eye, and the sun are all points on a great chain of perceiving and being, so that he seeks to efface the difference between physical vision and the visionary, or rather to mark that transition, that boundary, as the territory proper to poetic language: “A is the fulcrum, I, the lever (eye). Out if it ray these three: L F E – single, double, triple vision: L I F E” (*BEAM* 28).

Closely associated with Duncan and the San Francisco poets are the writers associated with Black Mountain College and the *Black Mountain Review*. Located in a rural part of North Carolina near Asheville, the college was founded in 1933 by the innovative American educator John Andrew Rice; from his stewardship it passed into the hands of artists Josef and Anni Albers before Charles Olson, who had taught there occasionally, became rector in 1951. Financial woes led to the college's shuttering in 1957, but not before it had been a utopian gathering place for a who's who of innovative American artists, including Merce Cunningham, Willem DeKooning, Robert Creeley, Ben Shahn, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Buckminster Fuller, and many others. The college was a self-consciously Arcadian institution, where writers and artists at odds with the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s could explore alternative means of expression (in their personal lives as well as in art).⁶ The college was also an experiment in agricultural self-sufficiency, with students and faculty alike doing the manual labor required to keep the facility going. At best modest success was achieved in this regard, but this utopian-agrarian dimension remained a signal part of the college's self-image and legacy.

Olson, the official or unofficial "boss poet" of Black Mountain, has perhaps done the most to integrate the collage tradition of Pound with a concern for the local, place, and the environment: *The Maximus Poems* could well be described as a pastoral epic that attempts to integrate the particular and specific history of the fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts with world history and prehistory. But just as significant for some of the more radical strains of postmodern pastoral is the work of another writer associated with Black Mountain, the poet and composer John Cage. You will find little pastoral imagery per se in Cage's music or writing. Rather, Cage's work offers a kind of ecological *via negativa*, through an ethics and aesthetics of

⁶ The definitive history of Black Mountain College continues to be Martin Duberman's recently reissued *Black Mountain College: An Exploration in Community* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

subtraction that leaves readers and listeners acutely conscious of their immediate environment (a state we might call “environ-mentality”): the sound, in *4'33*”, of no music being played instead discloses the wilderness of the mind (what does the listener expect?) and of the concert space itself (seemingly silent but really filled to the point of cacophony with creaks, coughs, nervous laughter, and what recording engineers call “room tone”). Like Gary Snyder, Cage was deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy and thought, and pieces like *4'33*” and texts like “Lecture on Nothing” are intended to be “a means of experiencing nothing” (114). Put another way, Cage’s is a pastoral of abstraction, that is nonetheless in his work connected to an active consciousness of and concern for the environment as something inseparable from humans, that requires “silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter the ego’s own experience” (Retallack xxviii).

While few (though a notable few) have followed in the visionary tradition of Duncan and Johnson, and others have assembled a documentary ecopoetics that owes much to Pound, Olson, and the Objectivists, the most influential figure for postmodern pastoral, as for postmodern lyric generally, has to be John Ashbery. Hardly a nature poet, closely associated with (yet unconfined by) the urban poetics of the New York School, claimed by avant-garde and establishment alike, Ashbery nevertheless consistently engages the division of word and world fundamental to postmodern pastoral in a manner that has proven to be highly generative and suggestive.

The ego is not so much silenced in Ashbery’s work as it is rendered multiple and fragmentary; in a review of Ashbery’s work Evelyn Reilly has described it as representing “the inner polyphony of ordinary consciousness” (n.p.). Ashbery presents the reader with the constant chatter of a mediated world meeting an equally mediated self, endlessly deferring and teasing the

false pastoral of authenticity. Consider for example this excerpt from his well-known poem “Into the Dusk-Charged Air” from the 1984 book *Rivers and Mountains*:⁷

If the Rio Negro
Could abandon its song, and the Magdalena
The jungle flowers, the Tagus
Would still flow serenely, and the Ohio
Abrade its slate banks. The tan Euphrates would
Sidle silently across the world. The Yukon
Was choked with ice, but the Susquehanna still pushed
Bravely along. The Dee caught the day’s last flares
Like the Pilcomayo’s carrion rose.
The Peace offered eternal fragrance
Perhaps, but the Mackenzie churned livid mud
Like tan chalk-marks. Near where
The Brahmaputra slapped swollen dikes
Was an opening through which the Limmat
Could have trickled. (*The Mooring of Starting Out* 174-75)

The rule of the subjunctive over this passage (“if,” “Perhaps,” “could”) and the ironic play of the poem’s constraint (nearly every line includes a river’s name) belies the gesture of its pastoral descriptions: like Duncan’s meadow, these are and are not real rivers in restless motion. As Angus Fletcher has written in his magisterial study *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination*, “With Ashbery the typical lyric uses its being written down, its textuality, to carry the reader away from the focused materials into a flux whereby those materials are processed.” Ashbery’s mediating “flux,” like the rivers of his poem, propels pastoral away from the static “middle landscape” described by Leo Marx and into the dynamism of postmodernism at its most robust and regenerative. The point is less the conjuring of an ideal landscape than involving the reader in the flux between word and image, foreground and background—to conjure, in short, a specifically poetic environment or

⁷ In an interesting bit of symmetry, the title *Rivers and Mountains*, a reference to a seemingly endless landscape painting by 18th-century Korean artist Yi Inmun, would later be picked up and reversed to serve as the title of Gary Snyder’s 1997 epic poem, *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. Notably, the painting itself is not “realistic” but depicts a “nonspecific and even imaginative landscape” on a “panoramic scale” (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mowa/hd_mowa.htm).

“environment-poem”: “these environment-poems aspire to surround the reader, such that to read them is to have an experience much like suddenly recognizing that one actually has an environment, instead of not perceiving the surround at all” (9).⁸

A postmodern pastoral poem such as Ashbery’s, therefore, turns the refuge of the “middle landscape” into an experience of the liminal, presenting a marginal representation “nature” that threatens always to collapse into the cacophonous mainstream of cultural discourse. Such poems are perhaps more to be encountered, in the manner of art installations, than read. But the emerging tradition of postmodern pastoral asks more of its readers than merely surfing the zeitgeist. It demands distinction, recognition, and criticism of the pastoral boundary between word and image, city and country, culture and nature. Most radically, it demands what Timothy Morton, in tune with ecopolitical theorist Bruno Latour, might call the end of nature itself as a category of thought. Nature, along with the older, ideological modes of pastoral, must give way to politics: a new “Constitution,” in Latour’s view, that recognizes both human and nonhuman entities as deserving and requiring voice and representation, so that the poetry of the earth might give way to a poetry of a radically inclusive and democratic world.⁹

Something of this is suggested by the progress of Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*, a book-length poem whose title suggests that the poem is intended to function as a kind of decision-making technology (a closely related device has a name that’s highly suggestive for our purposes: *decision tree*). Of course all decisions as to the poem’s meaning are left to readers confronted by

⁸ This notion of the “chorographic” poem (from the Greek *chora*, space, and *graphia*, writing) has helped to inspire Timothy Morton’s concept of “ambient poetics,” writing that “re-marks” a space or environment, making the reader fleetingly aware of the unstable boundary between inside and outside, and by implication between culture and nature (the latter being a category that Morton, in tune with the ecopolitical theorist Bruno Latour, would like to do away with entirely). See Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 47 – 54.

⁹ See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 2004).

dizzying ramifications of syntax, ambiguously proliferating pronouns, and sudden shifts in topic and mood; “The remarkably long lines just keep rolling in one after another, nonchalantly bringing more litter onto the shore,” requiring of the reader “a kind of reading more like drifting than swimming” (Reilly, n.p). Though not overtly a “nature” poem, *Flow Chart* resorts continually to images of the natural world, particularly images of water, while constantly undercutting their mimesis, producing a simulacrum of the old Romantic relation between poetic word and natural object: “poetry scarcely drips from vines” (146) while “The breeze that always nurtures us (no matter how dry, how filled with complaints about time and the weather the air) pointed out a way that diverged from the true way without negating it, to arrive at the same results by different spells” (5). The reader dwells in the poem, or more likely in and out of it: one of the not-insignificant characteristics of an ambient poetry like Ashbery’s has to be in the way it resists constant and focused attention but constantly repels the reader out and away from the page up into his or her own thoughts and perceptions, even as its murmurous flux or flow invites the reader back in again to continue the journey. And if the reader cannot choose, any more than Pound could, to make it cohere, there is nevertheless a mood, an elegiac atmosphere (the poem was written in the aftermath of Ashbery’s mother’s death and so constitutes a form of pastoral elegy), that circles back again and again to the circumstances which give rise to poetry itself:

Any day now you must start to dwell in it,
the poetry, and for this, grave preparations must be made, the walks of sand
raked, the rubble wall picked clean of dead vine stems, but what
if poetry were something else entirely, not this purple weather
with the eye of a god attached, that sees
inward and outward? What if it were only a small, other way of living,
like being in the wind? or letting the various settling sounds we hear now
rest and record the effort any creature has put forth to summon its spirits for a
moment and then
fall silent, hoping that enough has happened? (145)

Nature and the poem are equally inauthentic and equally inescapable—as inescapable as the social-historical world that the poem’s “creature,” “hoping that enough has happened,” must return to from the momentary stay of the poem’s pastoral landscape (or flowscape). When the reader is returned, once again, to herself, she may find herself newly attuned to that relationship, dis- or re-oriented from the environment-poem to the poetic ecology in which poems and plants and people are participants—a diverse collective and assemblage, far from the fantasies of transcendent wholeness that characterize traditional pastoral. This poetry, instead, manifests as “a small, other way of living.” In this manner postmodern pastoral attunes its readers to the possibility of what Latour calls “the Republic,” a raucous democracy of human and non-human beings, in which ecology is indistinguishable from politics.

Landscapes of Desire: Outside(r) Pastoral

Ontology is the luxury of the landed. Let’s pretend you had a land. Then you “lost” it. Now fondly describe it. That is pastoral. Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete. Your rhetoric points to frightened obsolescence.... What if for your new suit you chose to parade obsolescence? Make a parallel nation, an anagram of the land. Annex liberty, absorb her, and recode her.

—Lisa Robertson, from “How Pastoral: A Manifesto” (23)

The proto-politics of postmodern pastoral cannot be separated from the history and subject positions of its practitioners. To fully grasp its possibilities, we must also be conscious of feminist pastoral, queer pastoral, black pastoral. Even the Canadian poets in this anthology are positioned by virtue of their marginality to American empire as outsiders, attentive to the ways in which their geography and history have conditioned their sense of what nature is and does. The Canadian poet D.G. Jones has said, in an interview with Philip Lanthier: “Most of us in English Canada tend to see ourselves in terms of land and space while for a long time French Canadians saw themselves in terms of language, word, realities represented by symbols or signs.”¹⁰ That

¹⁰ *The Matrix Interviews*, edited by Robert E.N. Allen and Angela Carr. Montreal: DC Books, 2001: 43.

division usefully repeats, with a difference, the division that the poets of this anthology are keenly conscious of: the pastoral of “land and space” versus what we might call Language pastoral (or “textual ecologies). It then reframes that division in explicitly political terms, fundamental to the problematic project of poetic “nation-making.”

Lisa Robertson has given sustained attention to the pastoral-utopian genre and its vexed relation to questions of politics and gender. In the prologue to her first book, *Xeclogue*, titled “How Pastoral: A Manifesto,” Robertson challenges the “obsolete” genre that a significant portion of her career, as poet and chief representative of the Vancouver-based “Office for Soft Architecture,” has been dedicated to “recoding”: “I’d call pastoral the nation-making genre: within a hothouse language we force the myth of the Land to act as both political resource and mystic origin.” “I needed a genre for the times that I go phantom” (23): Robertson’s writing becomes the ghost in the machine of pastoral, de-hypostasizing feminized abstractions like “Land” and “Liberty” so that they are restored to the always political possibilities of a female subject’s desire.

Queerness and the urban are as closely linked as the former is to “the unnatural” in right-wing ideology; it therefore follows that the paradoxical subgenre of urban pastoral should, for this anthology, be nearly inseparable from a queer or camp sensibility. The poetry of Frank O’Hara is once again exemplary in this regard: his “personal poems” reimagine the streets of Manhattan and the *otium* of the lunch hour as pastoral cruising ground, turning almost everything he sees into an object of delight for the desiring eye:

It’s my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty

glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust. (257)

“A Step Away From Them” is a nearly classical pastoral elegy, in which the poet passes from the delights of the flesh and fields (or in this case, the beauty and warmth of “Puerto / Ricans on the avenue”) to a search for consolation in the face of death: “First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollack. But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” With a seemingly effortless recall of the landscape of same-sex desire evoked by Virgil’s *Eclogues*, O’Hara in his poetry acts as a shepherd-flaneur, and turns New York into a garden of self-fashioning: “My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.”

O’Hara’s compatriots John Ashbery and James Schuyler have their own means of “queering” the pastoral. If O’Hara seems intent on making same-sex desire seem beautiful and “natural,” Ashbery’s queer pastoral is bent toward sublimity and the anxious jouissance of indeterminate subjects and syntaxes, so that the reader is asked to navigate his indeterminate environment of flows. Schuyler’s queer pastoral manifests principally through his painterly details and beautifully modulated tone, which can turn on a dime from archness to abjection. At the same time, like Ashbery, his finest poems skate on the distinction between word and world, so that descriptions of natural objects are never just “natural”:

*if the touch-me-nots
are not in bloom
neither are the chrysanthemums
the bales of pink cotton candy*

in the slanting light
are ornamental cherry trees.
The greens around them, and
the browns, the grays, are the park.

It's. Hmm. No.

Their scallop shell of quiet
is the S.S. *United States*.
It is not so quiet and they
are a medium-size couple who
when they fold each other up
well, thrill. That's their story.

(“Freely Espousing”)

The object of attention in the poem, the “It,” slips and slides, enabling a paratactic blurring of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy, even as the genders of the erotically enfolded “medium-size couple” are left indeterminate. “That’s their story”: the shagginess of the poem’s narrative is the whole point story, by which the *locus amoenus* of Schuyler’s pastoral attracts erotic possibilities of combination to itself.

Another major version of outsider pastoral to consider is black pastoral, a field made more visible by Camille Dungy’s recent anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. African Americans have an especially complex and fraught relation to a Southern pastoral tradition in which black slaves were just another part of the scenery when they were visible at all, their forced labor underwriting a white plantation lifestyle that has loomed large in the American imagination. Even more sinister is the close association between pastoral fantasies of a “pure,” “authentic” American landscape and lynching, as depicted by the song “Strange Fruit,” (originally a poem by the white Marxist songwriter Abel Meeropol), sung so memorably by Billie Holiday:

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Richard Wright wrote searingly of the troubled, subservient relation blacks have had to the American landscape in his book *12 Million Black Voices*:

To paint the picture of how we live on the tobacco, cane, rice, cotton plantations is to compete with mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspapers, the magazines, and even the Church. They have painted one picture: idyllic, romantic; but we live another; full of fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks that sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay. (Dungy 72)

The Great Migration of the early twentieth century from the South to northern cities did much to seal the common association made today between black people and the “urban”; many black writers have understandably worked hard against the tendency to see blacks as “closer to nature”—that is, as objects to be subdued and dominated. As Dungy’s anthology shows there is a rich, varied, and often critical relation between African Americans and nature poetry, with a history ranging back to Phyllis Wheatley, the first black American to publish her poetry. The black poets represented in *The Arcadia Project* understand “nature” both as the real, non-human world and as a complex social discourse that they are called upon to interrogate and revise. As C.S. Giscombe has written, “I tend to ‘read’ cities and locations as though they were poems—ambiguous, contradictory, riddled with echoes of other poems and other places. . . . How might *all* a town’s populations work their way into the big poem, the epic, of a particular location?” (112). Excerpts from his book *Prairie Style* demonstrate Giscombe’s attempt to “read” (or to borrow Jed Rasula’s neologism, *wread*) his native Midwest as the complex collectivity of racial, natural, economic, and literary histories that it is.

Perhaps most strikingly marginal to traditional pastoral—and therefore, most central to a postmodern pastoral committed to blurring and blending the ideological boundary between nature and culture—is what we might call the pastoral of excess, of the sublime or the grotesque.

Traditional pastoral poems are fundamentally Apollonian, even Cartesian; the landscapes they conjure may be tame or rugged, but they are either beautiful in themselves or else function as pressure release valves, sites of difference from civilization and its discontents. Such pastorals refresh, recuperate, return their readers to a fantasy of authenticity, and naturalize (or neuter) desires that otherwise resist social usefulness. Even Thoreau's paeans to "wildness" fall under this traditional pastoral logic: his cry "in Wildness is the preservation of the world" in "Walking" (Bode 609) is fundamentally progressive, and he quotes without irony the idealist philosopher George Berkeley's line, "Westward the star of empire takes its way." Elsewhere in that essay he writes, "I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural" (614). Even the most visionary of writers—and Thoreau was certainly a visionary—cannot escape the conditions of their time.

Counter to this tendency would be a Dionysian pastoral of excess and expenditure, a direct challenge to the carefully groomed boundary between culture and nature, individual and collective, policed by traditional pastoral poems. A postmodern pastoral of excess refuses even Thoreauvian notions of preservation and redemption: this is the pastoral of negative affects like the abject and incalculable ones like *jouissance* and the sublime. This is the zone of what Joyelle McSweeney has brilliantly termed *necropastoral*, which reimagines nature poetry as a zombie genre, lurching on in spite of the manifest death of nature under postmodern conditions, leaving a trail of crumbled ideology in its wake:

A key factor of the necropastoral for me is not just the way it manifests the infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral—ie the most celebrity resident of Arcadia is Death—but also its activity, its networking, its paradoxical proliferation, its self-digestive activity, its eructations, its necroticness, its hunger and its hole making, which configures a burgeoning textual tissue defined by holes, a tissue thus as absent as it is present, and therefore not absent, not present—protoplasmic, spectral. (n.p.)

Necropastoral entangles the reader in what Timothy Morton has described as the dark side of ecology, what he calls “the mesh”: “a vast, sprawling mesh of interconnection without a definite center or edge. It is radical intimacy, coexistence with other beings, sentient and otherwise—and how can we so clearly tell the difference?” (*Ecological Thought* 8). What is human, what is animal, what is dead, what is alive? Necropastoral is the limit case of pastoral, its degree zero, by which poets like McSweeney seek to de-nature and de-purify the pastoral poem, so that everywhere and nowhere becomes not *locus amoenus* but *locus solus*, the only possible place of the present, from which we must venture clear-eyed and free from nostalgia, so that pastoral becomes indistinguishable from the wilderness of now.

The End of Pastoral

The Arcadia Project is scheduled for publication in 2012, a date that has been the object of much hysterical speculation regarding Mayan prophecies about the end of the world. From the perspective of this anthology, as noted earlier, “the world,” as humanist or technological “enframing” (Martin Heidegger’s *Gestell*: a way of looking or understanding that is also a demand, a challenging, domination) has already ended, is no longer possible. As Charles Olson once remarked, “Man must rediscover the earth or leave it.” Postmodern pastoral dwells in that fatal boundary between rediscovery and departure.

The pastoral dream of harmony with the environment, of rest from labor, of a return to Eden, is predicated on the fundamental alienation of human beings from the natural world. From the strife and corruption of the urban everyday, from the turmoil of the city, from the hell of modernity glimpsed by Blake as “every charter’d street” and “dark Satanic Mills”—throughout the long tradition of pastoral, poets have created visions of gardens and wildernesses to which

readers might repair for refuge. But a refuge is not home. Sooner or later we must turn away from these visions, whether pastoral or anti-pastoral, and return to the compromised cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural counties where modern life actually takes place.

If pastoral has an end—in the double sense of termination and goal—it must be the end of environmentalism. The very word “environment,” with its attendant hints of degradation and entropy, carries with it the notion of something we as humans and individuals might somehow separate from, stand aloof from, manipulate and defer with the Archimedean lever of technology. As well separate ourselves from death—but that of course is the hygienic dream of modernity in its most American form. As John Cage reminds us, “life without death is no longer life but / only self-preservation” (“Lecture on Something,” 134). The inscription on the tomb in the famous painting by Poussin, attributed to death—“I too am in Arcadia”—is a statement of the pastoral’s limitation, but also of its immanent promise: to return us to life, refreshed, prepared to renew the struggle, without losing sight of the fact of limitation: of self, of the body, of bioregions, of the earth itself.

Possibilities. Beyond pastoral—for Virgil as well as for us—lies the georgic: the poem of and as production in complex interrelation with nature, which sees no daylight between human life rightly lived and care for the land. In more contemporary terms we might speak of eco-economy, the theory of steady-state economics which rejects capitalism’s ethos of permanent growth in favor of seeing economics as one subsystem of the larger ecosystem, whose larger goal is sustainability (in a very different sense than the buzzphrase “sustainable growth,” an oxymoron with more than a touch of pastoral ideology at its core). And beyond georgic is epic, the poetry of nation building. Might not a paradoxical “epic pastoral” become possible, in which “nation” is reimagined as a *polis* in which women and immigrants and gays and animals and

plants and bioregions are all represented politically, as contenders and subjects? And might such a pastoral of “nation-making” open a path beyond the State, hold open place as a space of contention, refuse technological fixes and New Age cure-alls, re-mark and reconcile us to our woundedness, to living in history?

Beyond the comforts of pastoral, of that which subdues the excesses of wilderness and civilization, a wilder poetry is possible.

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