

Anti-pastoral and Post-pastoral in Contemporary Irish Poetry

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Pastoral is one of the most enduring and versatile modes of literature. It has appeared in varied incarnations since its origins in ancient times and has been accommodated to the demands of various periods ranging from the Renaissance to the present. During its long history it has undergone significant changes concerning both its nature and its relationship with the discourse which gives rise to its appearance. As a result the range of meaning covered by the term pastoral and by its synonyms and mutations is rather broad and is characterised by a considerable degree of ambiguity as occasionally “pastoral”, “bucolic” and “anti-pastoral” are used interchangeably to refer to the same field.

Pastoral is originally and most generally understood to refer to the world of the country and the figure of the shepherd within it. This formal convention, however, is only one possible meaning of the term. Terry Gifford mentions two other uses of the pastoral: one concerns the focus of the work on the country as opposed to the city, whereas the other is already a revised reference as it acknowledges the false idealisation of the rural world involved in the other two uses of the term (cf. Gifford 1-2). This admittance of the idealising dimension of the pastoral as part of the convention gives rise to the possibility of the concept of the anti-pastoral – this involves the explicit revision and reconsideration of the treatment of the rural world. Pastoral and anti-pastoral, however, are closely related to each other, as Jonathan Allison claims, even to the point of being inseparable from each other for certain readers (cf. Allison 42). Still a distinction is made as pastoral is understood as a “poetry of the countryside (however defined)” (Allison 42), either with or without explicit idealisation whereas anti-pastoral subverts this idealising element and calls attention to the inherent limitations of the pastoral tradition itself (ibid). Allison uses Seamus Heaney’s approach to support his point: according to Heaney, “pastoral is a matter of ‘idealised landscape with contented figures,’ but with antipastoral, ‘sweat and pain and deprivation are acknowledged’” (ibid.).

Pastoral and anti-pastoral, however, are not simple and static categories. The broadening of contexts in which pastoral may be read resulting from the changing relationship between readers and nature leads to a reconsideration of the scope of the term. As Gifford notes the basic elements of retreat and return are still major elements of contemporary pastoral (cf. Gifford 148) but it is concerned with the category of the “environment” rather than with the usual “countryside”. This means a shift towards ecocritical readings and “a vision of an integrated natural world that includes the human” (Gifford 148). The term post-pastoral is coined to cover this new approach which acknowledges and incorporates elements of both pastoral and anti-pastoral and puts emphasis on human responsibility for the condition of the environment on the basis of the interconnectedness of the natural and the human worlds.

Ireland has long been associated with the pastoral due to its westernmost peripheral location and its long-standing colonial situation. As a result of the massive changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution in England the virtually untouched landscape and the social composition of Ireland offered the potential contemporary equivalent of the traditional image of Arcadia. The literary revival also had a strongly pastoral basis with its focus on the rural world and the peasant. The revivalist vision, however, had its inherent paradox as the leading literary figures had a rather limited experience of the rural world due to their social situation as representatives of the landowning class. Moreover, the revival already incorporated the anti-pastoral as well, especially in the work of Synge, and the whole poetry of Patrick Kavanagh embodies the close relationship between pastoral and anti-pastoral.

Contemporary Irish poetry still shows a tendency to idealise the countryside yet the present developments point towards growing environmental concerns, ecocritical approaches and the post-pastoral. An important motif of this poetry is the frequent separation of landscape from the rural world as a whole – what would be understood as pastoral in a broader context becomes in a sense a poetry focusing on the natural world. What still preserves the link with the pastoral tradition is the element of retreat and return: the countryside represents the other of the city, the natural world is the contrast to civilisation. Direct experience of the rural world, however, undermines the possibility of idealisation: poets of rural background are too familiar with the toils of this way of life and their approach shows a balance between the pastoral and the anti-pastoral. This balance is observable in relation to another location as well: the suburb, as a modern incarnation of the garden, is a widely accessible field of experience and its neither-city-nor-country status is an almost par excellence basis for the modern approach to pastoral with its anti-pastoral and post-pastoral varieties.

John Montague's upbringing on a farm in County Tyrone provided the poet with abundant direct experience of the rural world. Country locations are described in well-observed details but the reflective distance is kept: the country as Montague knows it never becomes a potential Arcadia. The experience is either stylised to constitute inspiration, as in "The Water Carrier", or presented in its plain harshness as in "Country Matters". For Montague the country cannot function as an ideal repository of renewal for modern man (not even in Ireland) as the natural world retains its darker dimensions and the rural communities are locked in a constrained world of instincts and ignorance with no apparent possibility of progress.

The most substantial presentation of the rural world is offered in the collection *The Rough Field*. The northern landscape with its glacial origin and memorials is significantly at odds with the presumed idyllic Arcadian setting, and the local communities are characterised by deprivation and awkwardness rather than by the presumed qualities of the idealising and patronising vision of the revival. The poem "Like Dolmens Round My Childhood..." provides an illustration of this society, and although Montague allows some sympathy for the described characters, the whole picture remains rather bleak:

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared at her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of fear and local feud. (Montague 13)

The landscape is likewise devoid of magic: even if the fading light in the frame of the return journey of *The Rough Field* could provide for a different perspective on the well-known features, the account remains honest and disillusioned without a hint of the pastoral:

No Wordsworthian dream enchants me here
With glint of glacial corrie, totemic mountain,
But merging low hills and gravel streams,
Oozy blackness of bog-banks, tough upland grass;
Rough Field in the Gaelic and rightly named
As setting for a mode of life that passes on:
Harsh landscape that haunts me,
Well and stone, in the bleak moors of dream,
With all my circling a failure to return. (Montague 9)

The closing section of the collection focuses once again on the rural world in its familiar form for the poet and the account becomes even darker. The old form of country life with all its deprivation is an unlikely raw material for the pastoral

but some form of nostalgia prompts the poet to regard this world as one of rituals. Montague, however, once again tilts the balance back to honesty as “Our finally lost dream of man at home / in a rural setting” (Montague 81) is understood as an artistic tradition only, supported by the telling position of the line break. The conclusion involves the sense of loss in the form of the inevitable passing of time and the subsequent impossibility of returning to the past. On another level it is the loss of distinctiveness that comes to be lamented: the most salient change observed by the poet is the appearance of the uniform countryside of contemporary agricultural practice, a ubiquity of the modern world resulting from the human reconfiguration of the environment which ultimately leads to a post-pastoral position for the observer.

Seamus Heaney was also brought up on a Northern farm endowing the poet with an intimate knowledge of country life. The poems of his first collection, *Death of a Naturalist*, already embody a complex and balanced approach to the rural world as Heaney delights in the pleasures of the rituals of the country but hardships and threatening natural forces beyond human control are also noted. There is a palpable sense of dignity in such actions as the father’s digging, churning of butter or potato gathering yet at the same time the very act of recording these actions is at once an acknowledgment of the mechanical and monotonous nature of farm life. The natural world is likewise ambivalent as the miraculous transformation of tadpoles to frogs ultimately becomes something menacing or as the ripening of blackberries gives way to fermentation, keeping the experience of nature at a safe distance from the sublime.

Heaney’s later poems dealing with the world of the country do not depart significantly from the early ones: occasionally the rural world gives rise to revelatory moments but it is never idealised. The “Glanmore Sonnets” (in the volume *Field Work*), written on the occasion of the poet’s self-chosen retreat to a small and isolated farmhouse in County Wicklow, provide a good example for this: the location with its tranquil setting gives inspiration, almost in a Wordsworthian manner, but the invasion of the human(ised) space of the farm by various animals and the necessity of dealing with the chores of farm life work against the potential stylisation of experience. Nevertheless it is apropos the poet’s Wicklow residence that he introduces a difference between pastoral and rural on the basis of “notions of a beautified landscape” versus “the unselfconscious face of raggle-taggle farmland.” (q. E. Longley 91)

Heaney later returned to the Wicklow farm in the sequence “Glanmore Revisited” (in *Seeing Things*). Elements and tiny episodes of life are addressed in that particular farm at a certain time, and there is a principally aesthetic scope and focus for these poems, with conscious literary parallels and allusions, which eventually point towards an ingenious post-pastoral perspective rather than an attempt to romanticise the country. The collection *Electric Light* includes some deliberate attempts at the pastoral in the form of eclogues and a translation from Virgil (“Bann Valley Eclogue”,

“Glanmore Eclogue” and “Virgil: Eclogue IX”, respectively). Yet there is perhaps a too self-conscious insistence on the orientation of the poems which results in an artificial image of the country, and this provides justification for Heaney’s earlier approach of anti-pastoral and post-pastoral in his treatment of the country.

There are instances in Heaney’s poetry when the natural world demonstrates special powers of providing revelations and privileged moments of insight. Unlike details of rural life, the landscape receives an apparently more romanticising treatment on such occasions, as happens in the poem “The Peninsula” (in the collection *Door into the Dark*) or the much later poem “Ballynahinch Lake” (from the volume *Electric Light*). There is, however, an explicit insistence on the status of the observers as visitors only, of not belonging to these particular places, which gives the impression of them only being gifted a rare vision on account of an elsewhere of different perception mechanism and routines.

Michael Longley could easily and readily be associated with the pastoral tradition on account of his frequent use of the West in his poetry. Though residing and anchored in Belfast, Longley is notable for a significant number of poems that focus on the West of Ireland, more particularly County Mayo, which functions as some sort of a second home for the poet. This approach suggests a proper pastoral stance as the dialectic of rural and urban, country and city is present from the outset. There is, however, a double perspective at work as Robert Welch notes:

The west in Longley is linked to the puritan attitude to landscape, which has two aspects. On the one hand there is the ‘good place’, the locus amoenus where human and natural worlds are in accord [...]. On the other hand there is the sense that landscapes, even beautiful ones, may be false, lures to trap the sensitive mind, weakly seeking rest, relief from tension. (Welch 58)

The accord of the pastoral is complemented and balanced by the suspicion that forms a link with the anti-pastoral. Indeed, Longley turns his attention principally to the landscape: in his poems of a western setting human civilisation makes only sporadic appearances, it is the natural world that is foregrounded with its sublime powers and phenomena.

The short poem “The West” illustrates best Longley’s particular image of the countryside. The simple cottage with its frugal details is a place of reception and contemplation as the speaker’s main activities are confined to listening and watching. The place is finally referred to as a “home from home” (Longley 94), making explicit the presence of another place in relation to which this one is described. Though the status of the cottage is elevated to a kind of home, the speaker’s action of listening for “news from home” (ibid) insists on a primary centre of gravity elsewhere.

In Eavan Boland's poetry the West appears not as an ideal pastoral location but as a place with unfavourable conditions. In the poem "On Holiday" neither the exterior nor the interior world of the destination is welcoming – strong winds, salt, damp sheets and superstitions are the principal experience of the chosen place. In "White Hawthorn in the West of Ireland" the speaker's desire is to become at one with the wild flowers but it is frustrated by local superstition and the clash of the pastoral with popular belief ends with the supremacy of the latter.

Boland's favourite location, however, is not the unadulterated countryside but the suburb. This choice is already indicative of an anti-pastoral approach but it is in concord with the overall pattern of development of pastoral in a European context: as Donna L. Potts explains, the shift from classical to Christian imagery in the pastoral brought about the frequent use of the garden as the setting for pastoral poems (cf. Potts 2). The suburb is the modern incarnation of the garden with a strong implication of the neo-classicist idea of "nature methodised" further domesticated and brought within the confines of the urban world. By its transitory location between country and city, however, the suburb still retains something of its relation with nature and this in-between world becomes the ground on which pastoral and anti-pastoral meet and clash.

"Suburban Woman" sets up the location as one of virulent conflicts of various types. The vocabulary of conflict and violence dominates the poem, and domestic life is seen as sacrifice rather than a repository of peace and harmony. The only occasion for some kind of idealisation comes towards the end of the day with the fading of light and its intimation of possible vision yet this moment passes too and even though conflict comes to an end with the day, there is the awareness of its reopening as the cycle resumes on the following day. "Ode to Suburbia", despite its title, darkens the picture even further by addressing the suburb as an "ugly sister" (Boland 66). The domestic world becomes even more claustrophobic and the deceptive plainness of the suburb functions as a seductive power which works on the expense of nature proper – instead of enhancing the pastoral potential of the garden the suburban section of domesticated nature is the perfect anti-pastoral, exactly due to its human element.

Boland's reconsideration of the pastoral takes an even more explicit form in the poem "The New Pastoral." The central figure is a suburban woman whose awareness of her position as a "displaced person / in a pastoral chaos" (Boland 113) opens the tradition for negotiation. The speaker's experience as a modern suburban woman contrasts with that of idealised pastoral characters, yet once the difference is acknowledged the possibility of happiness appears in the

context of the modern suburban world, which is paradoxically reminiscent of the pastoral tradition itself as a tentative parallel is found between the routines of the present and the rituals of the past:

I could be happy here,
I could be something more than a refugee

were it not for this lamb unsuckled, for the nonstop
switch and tick
telling me

there was a past,
there was a pastoral,
and these chance sights

what are they all
but amnesias of a rite

I danced once on a frieze? (Boland 113-114)

The paradox remains unresolved at the end as the tension between the temporal implications of “amnesia” and the timeless suggestions of the “frieze” indicate. The urge for a revision and reconsideration of the tradition, however, is clearly stated by the self-conscious position of the speaker with an insistence on the acknowledging of the false premise at the basis of pastoral idealisation.

The tension between the temporal and the timeless allows another significant revision for Boland in her reconsideration of the pastoral, that of the move from myth to history. While myth includes the divine and suggests the illusion of the suspension of time, history is purely human, with a conceivable temporal dimension. The association of the pastoral with myth and the timeless falsifies human experience as it proposes to overlook and bypass the temporal frame of human life, consequently the anti-pastoral provides a more honest and truthful representation of the human world. This is given ample illustration in the poem “Time and Violence” as it allows two regular literary characters to express their own experience of being timeless and idealised. The early spring evening is contemplated by an ageing woman in a suburban setting when a shepherdess and a mermaid are spotted yet neither of them fully comply with

their usual representations as both are bruised by the tradition of which they form a part. While the two figures are slowly disappearing a voice addresses the contemplating speaker:

*This is what language did to us. Here
is the wound, the silence, the wretchedness
of tides and hillsides and stars where*

*we languish in a grammar of sighs,
in the high-minded search for euphony,
in the midnight rhetoric of poesie.*

*We cannot sweat here. Our skin is icy.
We cannot breed here. Our wombs are empty.
Help us to escape youth and beauty.*

*Write us out of the poem. Make us human
in cadences of change and mortal pain
and words we can grow old and die in. (Boland 238-9)*

The wish of the two characters represents a clear-cut refusal of the Keatsean tradition and is all the more authentic-looking as it is attributed to representatives of the tradition itself. The paradox of the tension between the timeless and the temporal is made explicit as the aesthetisation of the characters deprives them of fundamental human experience in favour of a timeless world which is regarded as an idealised one yet for the characters themselves it is an act of confinement rather than liberation. Language is understood as a prison and the discourse of the pastoral becomes its own antithesis, which opens the direction towards the post-pastoral by the recognition that consciousness involves conscience as well – the artistic representation of the characters is an act of limiting their freedom and thus a form of exploitation.

Contemporary Irish versions of the pastoral engage in a dialogue with the tradition. Poets tend to focus on the appeal of the landscape and the natural world rather than that of the human communities of the locations, it is rather the environment (however broadly understood) than the pastoral country that is represented. The poets with the most direct experience of the rural world, Montague and Heaney attempt to approach old forms of rural life as dignified by rituals yet both of them admit, in their own different ways, the deprivation and hardships of rural life as lived experience. This shows an acknowledgement of the falsification of experience involved in artistic idealisation and opens the way for the anti-pastoral to convey those details that constitute the real nature of rural life.

The anti-pastoral becomes the most salient in Boland's poetry. The usually idealised West is demystified in her treatment but it is in her poems focusing on the suburb that the most important contribution to the anti-pastoral is made. The modern incarnation of the garden becomes almost totally deprived of the earlier pastoral dimensions and the human transformation of the natural world into domestic space creates a claustrophobic place with seemingly endless routines and conflicts, which offers no ground for idealisation. Boland's other significant act is the deliberate choice of history over myth which revises another aspect of the tradition to provide a nearly complete reassessment of the experience associated with the pastoral.

The critical observation of the anti-pastoral replaces the idealisation of the pastoral yet there is no complete break with the tradition as occasional allusions and the incorporation of special moments indicate the power of appeal of the pastoral proper. This eventually points towards a digestion of the tradition and of its critique as well: with increasing frequency the post-pastoral takes over from one or the other tradition. The appreciation of the natural world remains an important aspect of this approach but there is an acknowledgment of the simultaneous presence and consequent balance of constructive and destructive powers in nature. The recognition of the interconnectedness of the human and the natural world is another important element of the post-pastoral – the traditional opposition of nature and culture is replaced by the understanding of the mutual shaping powers of both. In the end it is the Romantic aspiration of demonstrating the harmony between man and nature what the post-pastoral seeks to reformulate by employing a more self-conscious and more honest approach to what is traditionally understood as the scope of the pastoral.

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