Pastoral’s Dialectics and Dichotomies

Duality, ambiguity and the consequent dialectics, whether between town and country, idealisation and realism, celebration and regret, or retreat and return, are fundamental to pastoral. The nature of the mode is such that it has been marked by tension and ambivalence from the beginning: already in its earliest forms, it was written for an ‘urban’ audience as a testing ground for hitherto concepts of town and country, the life of the court and the life of the shepherd, and various other contexts of retreat and return (Gifford, *Pastoral* 15–16). Naturally, tension feeds on ambiguity, and the *Idylls* of Theocritus readily testify to this symbiotic relationship. Whether in an Arcadian society of peace and plenty or in a secluded place of enclosed quiet, any pastoral scene is also likely to be exposed to various opposites, including invasive industrialisation, death, unrequited love, unjust property division, or simply opposing ideas of beauty and perfection.

Indeed, pastoral is a mode of dichotomies that structures and expresses itself dialectically, and throughout its development in literature, the resultant dualities have manifested themselves differently, exhibiting various dialectical potentials. Harold Toliver provides a first table of such juxtapositions for several of pastoral’s most ostentatious “contrasts,” in his *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (1984), starting with ‘nature’ and ‘society,’ and concluding with ‘nature’ and ‘celestial paradise’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>freedom</td>
<td>constriction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organism</td>
<td>mechanical formality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>democracy</td>
<td>hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plainness and honesty</td>
<td>masked artificiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>innocence, simplicity</td>
<td>experience, complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barbaric violence</td>
<td>cultured order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*When opposed to art, nature becomes something quite different:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Art</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rough, inchoate</td>
<td>ordered, ornate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open, indefinite</td>
<td>timeless, permanent, enclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>existential, immediate</td>
<td>artificial, imitative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Divided against itself, it becomes:

**Idyllic Nature**  **Anti-Pastoral Nature**

- vernal or cyclical
- humanised
- place of love and renewal
- wintry
- indifferent or cruel
- place of unrequited love, age

Or finally, if divided into levels:

**Nature**  **Celestial Paradise**

- temporal garden or Gorden Age
- lesser gods (Venus, Pan, Cupid)
- shepherds and rustics
- mechanical or botanical nature
- apocalyptic sacred place
- Hebraic or Christian God
- angels
- sublime nature

(Toliver, “Pastoral Contrasts” 11)

Toliver argues that “such contrasts permeate the pastoral tradition from Theocritus to the eighteenth century” (“Pastoral Contrasts” 2), and although the nature of pastoral is such that any one or several of these dichotomies may be expressed in any given example of the mode, Toliver’s concept is too susceptible to criticism. First, Toliver fails to provide specific examples to illustrate the validity of his table of “contrasts.” Second, the table’s juxtapositioning of “nature” variously to “society,” “art,” “itself” and as “divided into levels” is an over-simplification; pastoral’s dichotomies are, after all, expressed dialectically, whereby each ‘contrast,’ by virtue of antithesis, creates something new, explaining much of the mode’s inventiveness and longevity. Lastly, Toliver’s table [of contrasts] does not take into account that the mode also utilizes dichotomies that have little or nothing to do with a traditional understanding of “nature.” Binary oppositions proliferate in the pastoral, after all, including, but not restricted to, the following:

- town, city, court
- urban citizens
- negotium (work, duty)
- art, ornament, artificiality
- literacy, reading, intellect
- farm, countryside, forest
- rural shepherds
- otium (leisure, rest)
- nature, natural beauty
- creativity, song, dance
ambition, disappointment  contentment, happiness
order, prohibition, predictability  disorder, license, spontaneity
crime, corruption, war  innocence, tranquility, peace
restraint, respectability  freedom, fecundity, sexuality
sophistication  simplicity
conflict, crisis  escape, exploration
adulthood, ageing  childhood, youth
winter, autumn  spring, summer
machine, technology, future  garden, wilderness, past
mortality, loss, death  immortality, rebirth, memory

Any analysis of how certain dichotomies modulate pastoral must also take into account that the mode’s binary nature is often expressed as part and parcel of the dynamic of retreat and return. In other words, what happens in Arcadia cannot stay in Arcadia: “there must in some sense be a return […] to a context in which the results of the journey are to be understood” (Gifford, Pastoral 81). Even in the purely escapist pastorals that convince the reader to resist return, in an attempt to perennially extend their elaborately constructed retreat – such as in the Georgian poetry of the First World War, the retreat is expressed intrinsically within the text in the address to an ‘urban,’ ‘courtly’ or otherwise removed audience:

[W]hether the author’s choice of Arcadia is classical Greece, the only-just-disappeared Golden Age, the present Golden Age, a utopian future, an Alpine summit, Antarctica, Arden or the garden, that choice will be made with its contemporary audience in mind. The discourse of retreat will exploit the location in order to speak to the cultural context of its readership. If the pastoral is successful, the audience will know that what is perceived to be happening in Arcadia has relevance for them in their own time and (urban place), with its own anxieties and tensions. (Gifford, Pastoral 81–82)

The dynamic of retreat and return which makes up the pastoral sojourn, moreover, affects the mode itself dialectically: on the one hand, the retreat acts upon the reader as a force that drives an implicit desire to escape the present by cre-