ating an Arcadian space-time of wish-fulfilment islanded from conflict, crisis and uncertainty. On the other hand, the return, equally inescapable, acts upon said audience and forces, through the artificial lens of the Arcadia created, an exploration, a re-evaluation of the self-same tensions, struggles and ambiguities that govern the target audience’s present.

We see this dialectic played out, perhaps for the first time, in *As You Like It*. Uncertainties abound, from the beginning of the play, as three groups of courtiers are exiled to an Arden of generosity, first, and of harsh economic realities, second. Corin the shepherd, for example, has to admit that he is “shepherd to another man,” does “not shear the fleeces that [he] graze[s],” and that his master’s “cote, his flocks and bounds of feed / Are now on sale” (*As You Like It* 2.4.74–80). In stark contrast, when Orlando stumbles upon the Duke Senior’s invitation for food, he is eloquent in his defence:

**Orlando**

Speak you so gently? Pardon me, I pray you.
I thought that all things had been savage here,
And therefore put I on the countenance
Of stern commandment.

(*As You Like It* 2.7.107–110)

These contrasts serve a dual function, though criticism has focused primarily on the first. The Forest of Arden runs both concurrent with and contrary to the pastoral settings and conventions of Elizabethan England; it is at once an idyll removed from the realities of the court and a testing ground for previously accepted Elizabethan social codes, issues of love, gender and identity. As such, *As You Like It*’s pastoral setting holds up a mirror to the political power relations and to the cultural conventions of its age. For, by the end of the play, each character has not only discovered who they are and returns to court married to their ‘true love,’ but each returns also reconciled with their true self.

**The Relative Nature of Pastoral**

As for contemporary pastorals, many critics believe pastoral to be dead after Hardy, because the ‘nature’ of pastoral no longer relies on the traditional inter-

---

pretation of pastoral nature, and because the fundamental distance between
town and country, between urban and rural, has been eroded away by modern
technologies and urbanisation. Perhaps none state this more clearly than Barrel

The separation of life in the town and in the country that the pastoral demands is now
almost devoid of any meaning. It is difficult to pretend that the English countryside
is now anything more than an extension of the town; that the industrial and techno‐
logical processes of urban production differ at all significantly from those of the ‘Fac‐
tory-Farm’; that the function of the modern farm-manager is essentially any different
from that of his urban counterpart; that the Pastoral has not become in fact just another
trip, another Sunday afternoon drive. (Barrell and Bull, *The Penguin Book of English
Pastoral Verse* 433)

It is indeed difficult to pretend that the pastoral as defined by Barrell and Bull
is still being written in the Ireland and Britain of today. The editors go further
to suggest that pastoral as envisioned through these traditional dichotomies
persists only “in the Third World, or in North America perhaps – where there
are still occasional frontiers to confront the regulating effect of urban develop‐

The situation (and thus the presumed death of pastoral) is compounded by
the fact that, all over the world, the idea of wilderness and of a rural human
existence sympathetic to nature is continuously threatened by urban develop‐
ment. As Bill McKibben argues in *The End of Nature*, “We have changed the
atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather, […] and by changing the
weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial” (*The End of
Nature* 54). Although pastoral has always been an artificial mode, it is thus dif‐
ficult to sustain a tradional pastoral vision, because there is no such nature, by
humans untouched, no ‘original’ to modify into the pastoral purpose, which,
after all, is to reflect human concerns. Pastoral is nothing if it cannot look to
nature in order to understand human nature and our place within the world.
Pastoral cannot be called pastoral if it cannot reclaim that distance between itself
and reality, between natural and human existence.

An understanding of pastoral as propagated by Barell and Bull, thus relies on
the distinction between the non-human and the human, between the urban and
the rural. Modern and contemporary pastoral is marked by an imaginatively
more productive perspective, as propounded by John Gray: “Cities are no more
artificial than the hives of bees. The internet is as natural as a spider’s web”
(Gray, *Straw Dogs* 16). What the pastoral mode relies upon, then, is not just a
distinction or dichotomy between two oppositions, but a relativistic duality of presence and absence. As Iain Twiddy astutely observes:

The parameters of the desirable and the immutable create a large imaginative range, in which pastoral may be rural or urban. It can be as simple as life rather than death. It can be the past: two days ago, a holiday last year in France, a less industrialized century." (Twiddy, Pastoral Elegy 3)

This is to say, then, that the pastoral is not characterized by absolute dichotomies, but by dualities that express themselves within the mode in relative terms – relative to the author and the target audience.

Perhaps this is best observed in the many transformations that pastoral space and time have undergone in literature: Ovid’s Metamorphoses paint a Golden Age different from Theocritus, Virgil or all their descendants, and each is imbued with characteristics contemporary to the author’s own time and place. The pastoral landscapes mapped out by Jonson, Pope, Wordsworth or Hardy find little resonance in Irving’s “sleepy hollow” (1844) or Thoreau’s frontiered wilderness, and yet each has been variously called and analysed as pastoral:

For some, [...] ideal nature is clearly the pristine wilderness [...] for others ideal nature is the pastoral countryside or the small town, while others would celebrate the suburb or even the city as the natural home of humankind. It hardly needs saying that nothing in physical nature can help us adjudicate among these different visions, for in all cases nature merely serves as the mirror onto which societies project the ideal reflections they wish to see. (Cronon, Uncommon Ground 36)

It is precisely this relativism that has contributed greatly to pastoral’s range and flexibility, simultaneously creating a constitutional openness within the mode that is not always unproblematic or easy to understand. In all cases, however, pastoral is but a “mirror onto which [authors] project the ideal reflections [of society] they wish to see” (Cronon 36).

Pastoral’s relativistic nature, moreover, highlights the artificiality that is so fundamental to the mode, and the dialectic between reality and the pastoral text is part and parcel of this relativism, itself a fictional construction capable of reshaping nature in(to) art. To make poetic is to pastoralize, ultimately, and a crucial aspect in the development of the pastoral mode is the ever-shifting relationship between the mode’s poetically imagined enclosures and the reality of the world exterior to it. An inherent distance is created between the poet and his efforts to imagine it, so that the description itself becomes a self-conscious artifice. Thus, pastoral implicitly suggests that its paradise is beyond the reach even of poetry. As W.H. Auden writes, “Every good poem is very nearly a