2.4 Otherwhile and Elsewhere: Pastoral Space and Time

If we reject the present, we must choose between an Arcadian retrospect and a Utopian prospect. The spatial and the temporal distances may prolong one another, as they do in exotic imaginings that took place far away and long ago. […] Both the expectation of an afterlife and, on a more worldly plane, the resolve to build a heaven on earth through social planning share a common expectancy, which might be viewed as chiliasm or millennialism […] These are the possibilities that lie open to the visionary, whose area of speculation is bounded only by what a German scholar calls wish-space (Wunschraum) and wish-time (Wunschzeit). — Harry Levin, “The Golden Age”

Virgil’s Arcadia and the Golden Age

After Theocritus, we turn to the next great literary contributor to the pastoral mode, Virgil, for whom the Idylls provided a model upon which he based his earliest known works, the Eclogues. Although the motif of the shepherd’s love returns, Virgil included a number of innovations which would decisively influence later authors of pastoral, widening the mode’s functional vocabulary considerably in the process. Specifically, Virgil transferred his own herdsmen to Arcadia, constructing for pastoral its very own time and space. Yet Virgil did not place his shepherds in the geographically eponymous Arcadia, the central alpine region of the Peloponnesus, encompassed on all sides by mountains, but in an Arcadia of his own artifice, “a poetic landscape whose woods and mountains were haunted by the Olympian Immortals” (Loughrey 1984: 9). The Arcadia of Virgil’s Eclogues was “an imaginary topography where the currents of myth and empirical reality flow into one another and gods mingled freely with men” (Snell, “The Discovery of a Spiritual Landscape” 281).

Virgil’s relocation of Theocritus’ shepherds from Syracuse to Arcadia was also motivated by social and political changes Sicily had undergone when it became a Roman province:
Sicily had become a Roman province, and her shepherds had entered the service of the big Roman landlords. In this new capacity they had also made their way into Roman literature; witness Lucilius’ satire on his trip to Sicily. But they could no longer be mistaken for the shepherds of song and love. Thus Virgil needed a new home for his herdsmen, a land far distant from the sordid realities of the present. Because, too, pastoral poetry did not mean to him what it had meant to Theocritus, he needed a far-away land overlaid with the golden haze of unreality. (Snell, “The Discovery of a Spiritual Landscape” 282)

Using Arcadia as a new home for the shepherds allowed Virgil to create a distance between reality and “unreality”; where Theocritus had provided a realistic, albeit ironic and humorous description of Sicily’s herdsmen, “Virgil regarded the life of the Theocritean shepherds as a sublime and inspired existence” (Snell 282). Corydon and Alexis, the love-entangled protagonists of Theocritus’ first pastoral poem had, to Virgil and his audience, an exotic ring to them, and thus echoed the mythical heroes the Roman poet had elsewhere borrowed from Greek poetry (Snell 283). It comes as no surprise, then, that from Virgil onwards, pastoral became preoccupied with such and similar tensions of reality and the imaginary. Additionally, it is by virtue of this first and decisive dichotomy that pastoral also becomes “self-conscious of its own aesthetic nature, concerned far more with exploring the meaning of its conventions than in depicting any actual countryside” (Loughrey, The Pastoral Mode 9).

Pastoral now became strongly involved with the classical myth of the Golden Age as “a far-away land overlaid with the golden haze of unreality” (Snell 282); the mode began to express an elegiac lament for a lost world of innocence and plenty. Conceived as a locus at the dawn of time, when Saturn and Aestraea ruled in the Garden of the Hesperides, the season of the Golden Age was spring perpetual, rendering clothes superfluous in a nature so fertile that it provided food and sustenance without toil. Ovid, in his Metamorphoses, provides one of the most famous renderings of this Golden Age:

The golden age was first; when Man yet new,
No rule but uncorrupted reason knew:
And, with a native bent, did good pursue. […]
And happy mortals, unconcern’d for more,
Confin’d their wishes to their native shore.
No walls were yet; nor fence, nor mote, nor mound,
Nor drum was heard, nor trumpet’s angry sound:
Nor swords were forg’d; but void of care and crime,
The soft creation slept away their time.
The teeming Earth, yet guiltless of the plough,
And unprovok’d, did fruitful stores allow:
Content with food, which Nature freely bred,
On wildings and on strawberries they fed;
Cornels and bramble-berries gave the rest,
And falling acorns furnish’d out a feast.

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.89–91, 102–113)

The keeping of flocks was deemed to be the original employ of humankind, and thus the life and denizenship of the Golden Age was increasingly equated with the shepherds of Arcadia. As René Rapin eloquently observes:

Pastorals were the invention of the simplicity of innocence of [the] Golden age, if there was ever any such, or certainly of that time which succeeded the beginning of the world: For though the Golden Age must be acknowledged to be only in the fabulous times, yet ’tis certain that they manners of the first men were so plan and simple, that we may easily derive both the innocent employment of shepherds, and pastorals from them. (Creech, *Rapin’s Discourse of Pastoral* 14–15)

This encouraged poets to develop escapist elements as further central motifs of the mode (Loughrey, *The Pastoral Mode* 10). The geographical distance created by Virgil’s Arcadia between reality and imagination was now accompanied by a chronological distancing that created a space of wish-fulfilment, an always already elsewhere between a happier, idealised past and a problematic, conflicted present. Significant to the development of the pastoral is the way in which the idealised country values and harking back to the Golden Age is explicitly contrasted with urban life. This contrast is best evidenced in Virgil’s *Georgics*:

But happy too is he who knows the gods
Of the countryside, knows Pan and old Silvanus
And the sister nymphs. Neither the people’s gift,
The faces, nor the purple robes of kings,
Nor treacherous feuds of brother against brother
Disturb him, not the Danube plotting raids
Of Dacian tribesmen, nor the affairs of Rome
And crumbling kingdoms, nor the grievous sight
Of poor to pity and rich to envy.
The fruit of his boughs, the crops of his fields, produce
Willingly of their own accord, he gathers.

(Virgil, *Georgics* 2.493–514)
The afore-mentioned distance created by the Golden Age is thus reinforced by Virgil in this dichotomy between the urban life of toil and political instability and the idealised existence in the country. As Gifford observed, “The *Georgics* are not pastoral, taken as a whole. [...] But they reveal the process by which a natural enjoyment of working in harmony with the seasons can become, in the pastoral, an idealisation of stability that provides an implicit criticism of turbulent city affairs” (Gifford, *Pastoral* 20). Furthermore, Virgil relied on his audience knowing of the nature and artifice of the Arcadia he had created in his *Eclogues*, in order that, by contrast, it would create the desired distance necessary to initiate a kind of escape to the past.

The myth of the Golden Age represents “a connection between the spatial and the temporal concepts, between the ideal landscape – Arcady, Sicily, or wherever else – and the ideal epoch, whenever that may have been or might be” (Levin, “The Golden Age” 6). It is the ultimate recollection that looks back towards time immemorial and aims to restore an innocence by later ages blighted. The “pastoral’s celebration of retreat [...] is its strength and its inherent weakness,” for “when retreat is an end in itself, pastoral is merely escapist” and there can be little diversity in such a mode (Gifford, *Pastoral* 47). Nonetheless, out of this interplay of space and time in the myth of the Golden Age, out of pastoral’s dynamic of retreat and return, the mode has borne a series of recurrent motifs, themes and modalities that have remained relevant to literature throughout.

As a prototypical space-time for the ontogenesis of human civilization, the Golden Age has, for example, become more and more embroiled with the joys of childhood, the attendant motifs of innocence, and the impulse for nostalgia. Kenneth Grahame, in his novel *The Golden Age* (1950), refers to his adults as the Olympians, implying that children are the true Saturnians, re-enacting the infantile fantasies of the human race. As Novalis said: “Wo Kinder sind, da ist ein Goldenes Zeitalter” [Where children are, there is a Golden Age] (Novalis qtd. in Richter, *Das Fremde Kind* 21). The child, one can argue, has replaced the shepherd in many instances of modern pastoral literature, and in contemporary pastoral novels in particular.

Thus, “[d]istant time has succeeded distant place as the great focus of pastoral interest, and the golden pastures of Arcadia have yielded to the golden time of childhood” (Marinelli, *Pastoral* 76). It is an essentially Romantic innovation, this emphasis on childhood, and it is based on the notion that the vision of the child is unadulterated, and in its clarity and innocence, is superior to that of the adult man. The motif of the innocence of childhood, more often than not, is “a projection of the author’s imaginings about that earlier state of life, and they are
bound to be coloured by his experience and by his nostalgia” (Marinelli, *Pastoral* 78).

**Pastoral and Nostalgia**

Nostalgia, indeed, is that aspect of pastoral, in which the mode’s collusion with a space-time of desire for a re-instated, balanced identity becomes most apparent. Essentially a looking back, a longing for what one no longer has, nostalgia is neither simply a symptom of pastoral nor does it make pastoral into something exclusively escapist. It is difficult, if not futile, to argue against pastoral as a discourse of retreat; the idealised countryside of the pastoral text is, after all, an Arcadia that uses language to construct a world different from what is perceived to be real. This retreat, however, may function simply as an escape from the complexities of urban life, society, and even the reality of the present, or it may be used as a means to explore possible futures (Gifford, *Pastoral* 46). Harry Levin, more eloquently than any other critic to date, has formulated nostalgia’s force of influence on the poetic voice’s perception of itself within the space-time of Arcadia as follows:

> Nostalgia for a happier day would be a sterile emotion, if it merely sighed for what was not; encouraged by the rotation of the seasons, it is transfigured into a hope for recurrence, [...] and hence [moves] from retrospection to prophecy. [...] If our longing to escape – or more positively, to better our condition – has any goal, however dimly envisioned, it must be located elsewhere or otherwhile. Standing here and wishing to be there, we are given a choice, at least by imagination; we may opt for some distant part of the world, a terrestrial paradise, or for an otherworld, a celestial paradise. (Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age* 9)

There is a psychological difference, therefore, between what W.H. Auden terms “the backward-looking Arcadian” and “the Utopian dreamer.” For the Arcadian is fully aware of the wishful thinking that has constructed their Golden World as a past idyll, in which the contradictions of the present either have been negated or have not yet arisen. The future-oriented “Utopian,” on the other hand, believes that theirs is a paradise which remains to be realised, and which requires actions that are necessary elements of that dream (Auden, “Arcadia and Utopia” 90). It is with a clear awareness of this fundamental psychological difference that Thomas More defined his own ‘Utopia’:

> *Utopia*, our name for the best-known model of all model commonwealths, means nowhere. Its namers, Sir Thomas More, intended a pun in Greek on *Eutopia*, the good place, that happy realm which never existed on land or sea or in the air. In much the
same fashion, taking up a hint from Charles Renouvier, we might speak of *Uchronia* or *Euchronia* to signify either never or the good time. (Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age* 8)

Interestingly, nostalgia has the means to meld the ‘uchronian’ glance of the utopian with the ‘euchronistic’ glance of the golden-age pastoralist. For nostalgia is not simply a feeling that urges one to look back at a void, an absence of something or someone, an elsewhere or an-other. Nostalgia is more than a feeling, it is an impulse, a thrust that involves an act, and what nostalgia acts out, or causes to be enacted, is the *nostos*, the act of return. The desire to return home, moreover, is brought about by *algos*, or extreme pain, grief, and distress.

A protagonist in desire of *nostos* is not where they want to be, does not have what they want, and is not at home with the self. It is no coincidence that the opening lines of Book One of *The Odyssey* speak of *algea* and *noston*, the many pains Odysseus “suffered […] by sea while trying to save his own life and bring his men safely home” (Homer, *The Odyssey* 1.4–5). There is also another sense in which *The Odyssey* exemplifies the meaning of nostalgia – its principles and roots in the pastoral mode in particular. For the pastoral poetic is perhaps further removed from Ulysses’ epic struggles than any other mode imaginable. Yet, with regard to the discourse of return so quintessential to pastoral, it shares with Homer not only the return home, but through this nostalgia also that device of retreat which betokens both with the ability to glance at matters greater than a voyage by sea or a poetic counterfeit of the idyllic country life.

Nostalgia, then, as a device and a discourse saturated in the pain of longing and the attendant (re-)enactment of *nostos*, is driven towards a point of origin, situated both in a space and a time where the protagonist used to ‘be.’ Pastoral also always points to something that is elsewhere, at a condition of absence that comes into being in its narrative forms, fictions, and the linguistic landscapes that construct the artifice of Arcadia. Nostalgia thus conditions pastoral with a subtext of crisis, a crisis of identity, authenticity and memory best encapsulated by the mode’s own epitaph: *Et in Arcadia Ego*.

**Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Death, Elegy, and Memory**

*Et in Arcadia Ego*: no other phrase is more readily associated with the pastoral mode, nor more easily misinterpreted. It permeates the literature of the pastoral mode in many forms: in numerous quotations and misquotations and in just as various translations and mistranslations. Ambiguity is immanent in the Latin wording; where William Faulkner rearranges the inscription to read “Et ego in Arcadia” (*The Sound and the Fury* 41), Lady Croom of Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*...
famously (mis)translates the Latin into: “Now I am in Arcadia!” (12). Who or
what exactly, then, is the “I” in ‘And I too am / was in Arcadia?’

Tracing the etymology of the phrase is best done through art, for *Et in Arcadia Ego* first appears in Giovanni Francesco Guercino’s *The Arcadian Shepherds* (see Appendix, Fig. 2). Here, the phrase is spoken by a lugubriously Christian
death’s-head, asserting, with a detectable degree of Counter-Reformational
piety, the omnipresence of death. The skull serves as a *memento mori* for two
young, shocked shepherds, spellbound by this symbolic yet certain presence of
death, even in the ideal, pastoral world of Arcadia. Additionally, Guercino
adorned his skull with a fly and a mouse: the former is an age-old symbol of
death and decay, and the latter, voraciously gnawing at the skull, is a “very
well-known symbol for all-devouring time” (Panofsky, “*Et in Arcadia Ego*” 297).
As Panofsky argues, “According to the rules of Latin grammar the ‘et’ in this
epigrammatic and elliptical sentence can refer only to ‘in Arcadia’ so that the
sentence must be supposed to be pronounced by Death in person: ‘Even in Ar‐
cady, ‘ says he, ‘there am I!’” (Panofksy “The *Tomb in Arcady* at the ‘Fin-de-Siècle’”
298).

If Guercino pictures *Et in Arcadia Ego* through glasses darkly, two paintings
by Nicolas Poussin show the Latin phrase in an altered light. The first *Et in
Arcadia Ego* (See Appendix, Fig. 3) by the French master still leans heavily on
Guercino: the two young shepherds, here accompanied by Alpheius, Arcadia’s
river god and a shepherdess, approach the scene from the left (much like the
original) and are once again arrested by a skull placed upon a curvilinear sar‐
cophagus inscribed with *Et in Arcadia Ego*. The skull, however, is much smaller
here (and thus less distinguishable). Nevertheless, “the picture still conveys,
though far less obtrusively than Guercino’s, a moral or admonitory message”
(Panofsky, “The *Tomb in Arcady*” 312).

Any traces of Guercino’s influence or of the death-head as moralistic *memento
mori* have all but disappeared from Poussin’s second *Et in Arcadia Ego* (see Ap‐
pendix, Fig. 4). Its three young men and one young woman, easily recognisable
as Arcadian shepherds, “are no longer surprised and arrested in their movement
but symmetrically poised in calm, reflective attitudes, pointing at or pondering
over the enigmatical inscription” (Panofsky, “The *Tomb in Arcady*” 6). The
death’s head has been omitted completely. The contemplative absorption with
which Poussin replaces the shepherds’ dramatic encounter with Death and the
absence of the skull made it increasingly difficult for contemporary interpreters
to stay linguistically true to *Et in Arcadia Ego*’s Latin grammar. André Félibien,
Poussin’s biographer and well acquainted with him, took the first step towards
“bad Latinity and good artistic analysis” by attributing it not to Death, but to
the tomb’s occupant: “Par cette inscription on a voulu marquer que celui qui est dans cette sépolture a vécu en Arcadie et que la Mort se rencontre parmi les plus grandes félicitez” (1740, qtd. in Panofsky, “The Tomb in Arcady” 301). From then on, the process of *Et in Arcadia Ego*’s re-interpretation reached its artistically logical conclusion with surprising speed: Félibien had not bothered with the *Et*, he simply left it out, as did Richard Wilson in his *Ego Fui in Arcadia* (1755), and thus the phrase slipped into its ubiquitously proverbial usage on the Continent. In his *Pervonte* (1778), Chr. M. Wieland translates it variously into “Auch ich lebt’ in Arcadia’” or “’Du arme Vastola. Auch du warst in Arcadia’” (211); Goethe famously used it as a motto for his *Italienische Reise* (1786): “Auch ich in Arkadian,” and Schiller even paraphrased it into “Auch ich war in Arkadien geboren” (Resignation, 1835, qtd. in Panofsky, “The Tomb in Arcady” 303).

As this brief overview of its etymology shows, it is not what *Et in Arcadia Ego* translates to that should matter to us, but how it has been variously interpreted and represented in artistic and literary texts. Notably, although the original notions of Death and *memento mori* have had to give way to a wistfully elegiac and nostalgic epitaph for a pastoral idyll once enjoyed and then lost, *Et in Arcadia Ego* can simultaneously embody all or none of these ‘original’ associations. What *Et in Arcadia Ego* shows, however, is that, love and death have been closely intertwined in myth and literature since antiquity. The psychoanalyst Rollo May, in a chapter of his *Love and Will* entitled “Love and Death,” explains that mythology is the gauge of the extent to which love and death are related in the human psyche, and thus to the process of identification:

> [D]eath is always in the shadow of the delight of love. [...] When we love, we give up the centre of ourselves. We are thrown from our previous state of existence into a void; and though we hope to attain a new world, a new existence, we can never be sure. [...] The World is annihilated; how can we know whether it is ever built up again. We give, and give up, our own centre; how shall we know that we will get it back?”

(May, *Love and Will* 101, italics my own)

Love and death are essential ingredients to the pastoral, whether expressed through the existential psychology at the heart of every myth, or as the elegiac nostalgia that characterises many a pastoral’s retreat and return.14 As the struggle for love is a struggle against death, so the pastoral mode’s retreat is a struggle against the *memento mori* that *Et in Arcadia Ego* represents. This interrelation of love and death makes the pastoral mode and the elegy frequent

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cohabitants of one and the same literary landscape. Karen Weisman’s introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (2010) uncannily echoes many of the tropes of pastoral’s *Et in Arcada Ego*:

> When taken in the more contemporary sense as the framing of loss, elegy can be pulled between the worlds of the living and the dead, between the present life of sorrow and the vanished past of putative greater joy. Between the extremes of life and death, joy and sorrow, the receding past and the swiftly moving present, falls the elegy as we know it today. (Weisman, “Introduction” 1)

Where elegy is “the framing of loss,” the pastoral mode expresses a yearning for what is always already elsewhere; both elegy and pastoral test “the limits of our expressive resources precisely at the very moment in which we confront our mortality,” thus throwing into sharp relief “the inefficacy of language precisely when we need it most.” Much like pastoral, elegy “inhabits a world of contradiction” for which “an implicit self-reflexivity is inevitable” (Weisman, “Introduction” 1).

Not surprisingly, then, the pastoral elegy covers a large scope of literature. Traditionally, “the subject matter of elegy ranged from funeral lamentation to political satire to chagrin d’amour” (Watterson, “Nation and History” 138); modern iterations include not only texts that lament a human loss, but also those that mourn an ever-endangered environment. In “The Dark Ecology of Elegy,” Timothy Morton argues in dialectical tautologies such as, “If ecology is often elegiac, elegy is also ecological,” or “Elegy works as much against ecology as for it, despite the overwhelmingly environmental quality of elegiac tropes” (Morton, “The Dark Ecology of Elegy” 251, 256). Iain Twiddy’s study of *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* even postulates that “pastoral elegy” exists in “three main forms.” In the first – “artificial pastoral elegy” – nature mourns human death, and the dead are “transformed” into a permanent existence or landscape. In “non-pastoral” or “natural” elegy, the role of nature is such that it is neither benevolent nor cruel, and neither is there a “pre-eminent place in nature for humanity. Consolation in a “natural elegy” may instead be derived simply from “the dispassionate changes endemic in natural processes.” The third form, “anti-pastoral” elegy, “differs from non-pastoral elegy, since [...] the former suggests a poetics of undermining in which pastoral conventions are deployed or alluded to, in order to suggest or declare the limitations of those conventions, or their downright falsity” (Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy* 4).

To delve deeper into such and other vague definitions of the ‘pastoral elegy’ is to come to a critical cul-de-sac, however. While it cannot be denied that the pastoral and the elegy exhibit a multitude of parallels, it would be misguided to
give this interrelation its own explicit category in modern literature. “For all intents and purposes,” William C. Waterson notes, “‘pastoral elegy’ is an academic category invented by scholars seeking to establish a link between Theocritus’ first ‘Idyll’ (Thyrsis’ lament for Daphnis) and all subsequent mourning poems set in the locus amoenus or green world” (Watterson, “Nation and History” 139). Examples of pastoral elegy abound, nevertheless, especially in the early seventeenth century. In 1614, Drummond of Hawthornden published his collection Poems: Amorous, Funeral, Divine, Pastoral in Sonnets, Songs, Sextains, Madrigals. In Song One, a shepherd mourns the death of a nymph at the site of her tomb. And William Alexander’s ‘A Pastoral Elegy on the Death of Sir Anthony Alexander’ bears more than a passing resemblance to Milton’s ‘Lycidas,’ often taken as the prototypical pastoral elegy of its time.

Despite the proliferation of the pastoral elegy in seventeenth-century English literature, studies that focus on the pastoral elegy appear to neglect a crucial difference between the two modes: while elegy sets out to explicitly mourn a loss, pastoral does not, even if Et in Arcadia Ego can function as a memento for an idyll once enjoyed and then lost, and even if the mourning for a loss may be lived out in a pastoral sojourn. Where pastoral is about the past and foregrounds a reality in which all art is about the past, elegy is about the past, but foregrounds that past so as to create a reality in which the mourner(s) may accept their future. Rather, pastoral is often elegiac because, as the dialectical nature of the mode has shown us, it is characterized not by absolute contrasts, but by heterotopia that are governed relativistically by a multitude of contrasts.

The nature of pastoral’s relativism is particularly well expressed in the elegiac iteration of the mode because the elegy, as a poetics of loss, relies on the relative distance between the space-time of that loss and the Arcadian space-time in which its life is relived or re-imagined. “As the presentation and representation of the mourning process,” moreover, “elegy must record change, must demonstrate a progression away from the dead.” Elegy thus “requires a space for communion, a space for memory, and in the production of the memorial image, a space to create consolation” (Twiddy, Pastoral Elegy 31), and it is in pastoral’s Arcadia that writers often find both such a space and such a time. Et in Arcadia Ego thereby becomes a space-time wherein the author or the mourner may contemplate and learn to accept the nature and inevitability of death. Pastoral is so well suited to this task, moreover, because the mourner can create a heterotopia of memory and time according to their own “memorial image” and as a mirror of their own, personalized Arcadia.