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 millenialism [...] 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 herdsmen 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 blemished. 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