2.5 Pastoral, Post-/Modernism, and the Works of John Banville

On sharkskin legs, the lamb gambles with
our gullibility,
floating in formaldehyde, fleecing us for all
its worth.
Brassed off, the art historian turns away.
Rustic simplicity
parodied in woolly counterpoint has no
place on his Earth. — Elizabeth Kay

Pastoral and Post-/modernism

Our retreat into the literary history of the pastoral has culminated in one over‐
bearing conclusion: pastoral is as significant as ever, and the pastoral mode and
post-/modernism are historically intertwined and exhibit a multitude of parallels. The most prevalent of these is that of cultural and literary secularization,
which shapes both in various ways: where pastoral has undergone a develop‐
ment towards it, postmodernism is defined by it, and is exercising it still. The
response to the postmodernist exorcism of subservience to extra-personal met‐
anarratives, however, has been deeply ambivalent: uncertainty and the menace
of meaninglessness threaten to usurp the celebration of autonomy, and the “re‐
lease from systematisation and order” is perceived as sliding too readily “into a
nostalgic lamentation for lost certainty and a fear of relativistic anarchy” (Wor‐
thington, “A Devious Narrative” 4).

Pastoral too, can be perceived as having come close to a similar dialectic. The
demise of the pastoral of form and convention, on the one hand, has allowed it
to be recognised as a mode, liberating it from the mentality it had been designed
to cultivate and express. Literary treatments of this ‘secularised pastoral,’ on the
other hand, call for a re-evaluation of the semantic field in which the constructs
of Arcadia have hitherto been embedded. Critics such as Alpers, Buell, Lawson
and Gifford speak “in favour of a more knowing,” albeit more inclusive, “adver‐
sarial sense of ‘environment’ rather than ‘nature’” (Gifford, Pastoral 174). This
revision is necessary, they argue, in order to save pastoral from being associated
with a form of nostalgia or deferment, whence it could ‘fall back’ into modernist
scepticism, which not few critics somewhat derogatorily refer to as ‘sentimental
pastoral’.

Such an approach is itself a deferment, however, as it ignores issues para‐
mount to the critical reception of the pastoral mode today. For one may confi‐
dently declare pastoral dead after Hardy, but if our lives now lack a separation between urban and rural existence, other dialectical caesurae and interdependencies have taken its place. Certain scholars of literature have recognised this, whence their studies by-pass questions of form and mode in order to directly analyse pastoral as a vehicle for the expression of tensions and ambiguous sentiments. Renato Poggioli, for example, begins his study of pastoral by speaking of its “psychological root,” specifically as “a double longing after innocence and happiness,” which can only be regained by means of “a retreat” (The Oaten Flute 1). Although Poggioli’s study at first glance promises much, it ultimately delivers too little by way of refined literary criticism. Though his relation of seemingly disparate elements, such as aspects of the “psychological” within the pastoral, is in many ways a first, the resulting reading of the mode is, to say the least, incomplete. Indeed, further reading of The Oaten Flute throws into sharp relief several limitations in both Poggioli’s critical approach and argumentation.

Poggioli’s collection of essays, for one, offers next to no critical basis on which to ground its analysis of the pastoral mode. In terms of evaluation it offers even less; the introduction offers all but an aphoristic admonishment that pastoral is inherently vested in limitations, which on its own is too damning of the mode: “Man has walked farther under the burden of Christ’s cross than with the help of the shepherd’s rod” (The Oaten Flute 2). Poggioli then goes on to categorise the mode in an index of feelings, and a shallow one at that; he introduces the pastorals of friendship, melancholy, innocence, happiness, mirth, the self, solitude and love, where one half expresses emotions directly and the other half associates with feelings innately: “Shakespeare, for instance, identified the pastoral of solitude with the pastoral of melancholy, and saw in both the opposite of the pastoral of happiness and love” (The Oaten Flute 22). This exclusive focus on feelings produces a disagreeably reductive reading of pastoral. The result is a pastoral of sentimentality, the vaporous nature of which Poggioli warns against in his introduction specifically: “the pastoral ideal shifts on the quicksands of wishful thought” (The Oaten Flute 2). Poggioli then tries (but fails) to justify his sentimental treatment of the pastoral mode by referring to Friedrich Schiller’s conceptions of sentimental poetry, because he sees Schiller placing the pastoralist among the sentimental poets (The Oaten Flute 4).

In an attempt to make more of Poggioli’s own naïveté, Frederick Garber takes up this reference to Schiller’s terminology, on another line of thought. Garber places much emphasis on how Schiller in fact prefigures Poggioli, whereby he “slip[s] quickly past the difficulties of free-floating emotionalism” dogging the latter. To do this, Garber takes up Schiller’s concept of Empfindungsweise, which he translates variously as “modes of feeling” or “modes of perception,” and then
as “modes of feeling as modes of perception,” (Garber, "Pastoral Spaces" 437) attributing to it a particular relevance for his own reading.

Schiller’s *Empfindungsweise*, according to Garber, affects pastoral by means of a reciprocal or “mutual conditioning” that is in turn effected in the “sentimental state” of the mode’s *Innenraum* or “inner topography”. In other words, the pastoral becomes a mode of perception for “that landscape of uncrossable gaps, that unsettling spatiality, which gives the sentimental state its tone and determines its existential status”. Schiller’s arguments and terminology support this ‘spatial pastoral,’ moreover, because he sees the purpose of the idyll as a means “to represent man in a state of harmony and peace with himself and his surroundings, separated out from the artificial relations” or “künstlichen Verhältnissen”. Schiller thereby puts away pastoral in the tradition of sentimental poetry. His terminology stands in stark contrast to such a conclusion, however. The concept of Empfindungsweise prefigures the pastoral as a mode able to express and perceive a particular perspective on human experience where the concept of Innenraum constitutes an “inner topography,” a subtext that constructs within the mode a narrative other (Garber, “Pastoral Spaces” 438).

The ambiguities of pastoral, to put it another way, play against each other in a tense dialectic that has no precise counterpart in the mode’s historical form, but must instead seek a way of expression as something other. For though the conventional pastoral finds stability in the formal expression of the bucolic condition, this stasis and stability—as the pastoral’s development in literature shows—is only temporary. The tense dialectic inherent to pastoral prevails, ever conditioned by the plethora of ambiguities that govern its content, tonality and its expression in language and narrative. Taken together, these engender the mode with a subtext that carries with it always the potential to rise up to the surface and undermine the assertions of the bucolic ideal, its very presence, with lamentations for loss and an irremediable absence (Garber, "Pastoral Spaces" 439–40).

Garber’s essay, if not new, represents a much needed stepping stone towards reading the pastoral mode within post-/modern and contemporary discourse. Its critical approach re-situates pastoral as a mode that, when expressed in narrative, is concerned with the dialectics of presence and absence, of being-in-the-world, and what Jacques Lacan calls the process of identification of the self through “an-other” (Homer, *Jacques Lacan* 25). The pastoral mode, it thus becomes clear, identifies strongly with the post-/modernist concerns of subject and subjectivity. Or, to put it more precisely, the pastoral mode is not only prescient of the post-/modernist transcendental philosophy of the ego, it also anticipates the post-/modern prioritisation of language as a narrative mode.
that uses the linguistic landscapes and the constructs of Arcadia as its artifice of expression, to mediate between (and meditate on) the intersubjective consciousness of the self.

Both pastoral and postmodernism facilitated the rise to supremacy of the individual in literature. Pastoral, on the one hand, was ever sentient of the crisis of the “sundered self” (Lawson, “On Modern Pastoral” 41); indeed, one could say the pastoral mode itself, throughout literary history, has been engaged in a socio-cultural process of identification and reification, the very process and concerns the mode has been used to express. Postmodernism, on the other hand, represents the apotheosis of subjectivity in literature and cultural theory. It is consilient with pastoral because, in utilising language and narrative as a “kind of fictional liberation movement” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 4), it turns the pastoral mode, that has up to now expressed a public crisis of identity (by way of social, political, and ecocriticism), into one that can also express the most private identity crises. Moreover, post-/modernism has helped raise the bucolic tradition to a mode that can express a pastoral crisis of intersubjectivity, language, and self. It is the subtext, the narrative landscape of pastoral that allows it to become such a modulor for the acrobatics of post-/modern literature which gives such primacy to the crisis of identity and self-consciousness. This subtext, as Garber expounds, is what constitutes pastoral’s “inner geography, ... a space of gaps and lacunae” (Garber, “Pastoral Spaces” 443).

**Post-/Modernism, Nostalgia, and Identity Discourse**

Furthermore, postmodernism is consequential because the term has become “the code-name for the crisis of confidence in Western conceptual systems;” this “crisis of confidence” goes well beyond any empirical or social self to include the transcendental self (Holstein & Gubrium, *The Self We Live By* 56). Postmodernism is at sharp odds with any overarching cultural sensibilities as regards the way we perceive ourselves:

Postmodernism is born out of the uprising of the marginalised, the evolution in communication technology, the fissures of a global multinational hypercapitalism, and our sense of the limits of Enlightenment rationality, all creating a conjunction that shifts our sense of who we are and what is possible. (Lather, “Postmodernism, Post-Structuralism” 102)

Postmodernists differ in how radically they articulate this crisis of confidence, especially in their responses to the question of the existence of the self. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium distinguish between “affirmative”
(moderate) and “sceptical” (radical) postmodernists, providing an inclusive yet crisp disambiguation. Affirmatives seek to sustain the notion of reality as something socially constructed, yet evidentiary that includes an experiencing, if equally constructed, self. In this sense, the postmodern condition multiplies and hybridises our identities, resulting in “a polysemic self, a self refracted, but not displaced, by all manner of signification” (Gubrium and Holstein, *The Self We Live By* 57). The self of everyday life is hereby affirmed, not eliminated. In conjunction with this, postmodern commentators such as Kenneth Gergen (*The Saturated Self* 1991) and Noram Denzin (*Images of Postmodern Society* 1991), speak of a world exploding with images and representations of who we are that skews our sense of self (*The Self We Live By* 58).

In contrast, “sceptical” or “radical” postmodernists altogether mistrust modern reality, the reality of the self in particular. For such postmodernists the real is just another myth of Western rationality. Jean Baudrillard speaks of a “hyperreality” where the self is no more than an image for conveying identity that exists in a myriad gallery of others (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 1983). Any conceptual anchors are hoisted as this “reality” removes the self from its traditional moorings, disabling it as an agent of experience altogether. The postmodern thus conditions a world in which objects do not exist distinct or separate from their representation (Gubrium and Holstein, *The Self We Live By* 57).

Depending on which path is or is not taken, the self walks through different stories to different endings. According to Holstein and Gubrium, the postmodern self has two options: The first option entails a range of reactions which correlate with the affirmative/sceptical distinction. Those postmodernists who choose to “react” attempt to “reaffirm familiar renditions of identity, entrenching in ‘tried and true’ versions of the social self formulated by the early pragmatists,” a narrative or plot that formulates a strategy for the social self to “withstand the current siege, adapting to postmodern (or late modern times) ... but remaining essentially in tact as it has been known for decades.” Other ‘reactionary’ thinkers, more sceptical, “dismiss the self as an empirical reality, effectively putting an end to its narrative by catapulting it into an altogether different universe” (*The Self We Live By* 57).

The second option desires to transform the crisis of confidence rather than simply relegating it or capitulating to it: “Acknowledging the hard, complex times that confront the social self, this transformation reconceptualises the self as a form of working subjectivity” (*The Self We Live by* 57) The attendant panel of postmodernists, including such commentators as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault, thereby formulate “a self that not only is a polysemic product of experience, but is also a by-product of practices
that diversely construct it in response to varied senses of what it could be, or need be” (*The Self We Live By* 57).

Now to close the circle of argument by relating the two options of the postmodern self to the pastoral mode and its subtexts of nostalgia and identity discourse. As previously discussed, nostalgia is a prevalent impulse that engenders the pastoral mode with a crisis of authenticity, reality and self. It has also been pointed out that pastoral may either use nostalgia as a vehicle to simply escape from this crisis, or as a vessel with which to explore it. Indeed, this is not dissimilar to the postmodernist self that can either capitulate to the crisis of confidence or use it as a catalyst for metamorphosis and development. At the core of both the pastoral of nostalgia and the postmodern debate of self, in sum, is a crisis of identity as expressed within a narrative’s text, space and time.

Indeed, both the pastoral and the postmodern use a continuum of spatial and temporal imagery in their incessant survey of the self, in search of a voice to express themselves within own narratives. “I am therefore I think”: John Banville’s Cartesian inversion (*Birchwood* 3) aptly illustrates both the single most prominent feature of his writing and the singular postmodern obsession with thinking and narrating the self. The technologies of self construction are not only constituted in language, as Madan Sarup succinctly infers, but also within the space and time of the resulting narrative: “We apprehend identity not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time” (*Sarup, Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* 15). The narratology of the self – to invoke Banville’s inversion again – preconditions a modern voice (text, story, narrative) of the modern individual, thrust into a space (I am) they must make sense of (I think). And it is the pastoral mode, in conjunction with its subtext of nostalgia, its narrative topography, and its constructions of Arcadia that offers the linguistic, spatial and temporal technologies which allow this process of identification to move and progress towards that which is desired.

Nostalgia provides a first and relentless impulse within pastoral that creates a crisis of perceived time discordant to the hitherto experienced self in that time. This causes the self to act, to act out nostalgia, more precisely, and to try and unify the past and the desired future with the present. This reification of one’s experience of time is in turn a necessary part of the process of identification: “The impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self. [...] The nostalgic impulse is an important agent in adjustment to crisis; it is a social emollient and reinforces public [as well as private] identity when confidence is weakened or threatened” (*Sarup, Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* 97).

Since it is always in the process of emerging, moreover, the present is by definition always uncertain, and thus it is only through recollections of past