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 overbearing 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 development towards it, postmodernism is defined by it, and is exercising it still. The response to the postmodernist exorcism of subservience to extra-personal metanarratives, however, has been deeply ambivalent: uncertainty and the menace of meaninglessness threaten to usurp the celebration of autonomy, and the “release from systematisation and order” is perceived as sliding too readily “into a nostalgic lamentation for lost certainty and a fear of relativistic anarchy” (Worthington, “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, “adversarial 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 paramount 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](#2) 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](#2)). 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 transcendent philosophy of the ego, it also anticipates the post-/modern prioritisation of language as a narrative mode