The Pastoral of Form, Genre and Mode

To place side by side Theocritus’ poems, Shakespeare’s plays and Banville’s novels is also to admit that pastoral is neither a genre, nor formally restricted to its traditional beginnings. It is perhaps more fruitful to consider pastoral neither as a historical form nor as a literary genre, but as a mode that sheds light on the very same discourse threatening to eclipse it. Such a shift of the pastoral, away from an oversimple yet overreaching attempt at definition, to a critically informed and consistent terminology, presupposes two steps. First, pastoral needs to put at a distance its historical definition based exclusively on form, genre or literary ideals, and move towards a definition based on what it can do as a mode. Second, it is vital to develop a coherent terminology in order to close the gap between the pastoral mode and contemporary literature, and thereby to develop a new chapter of criticism and analysis that uses the pastoral mode as a lens through which to view post-/modern fictions.

Let us first move away from pastoral as a genre. Presently, genre is often conceived as a “more or less arbitrary form of classification, whose justification is [its] convenience in discussing literatures” (Abrams, *A Glossary* 116). Some critics, in an attempt to provide a more crisp and tangible definition of the term, have applied Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’ to genre instead. The generically grouped family of works constitutive of genre, that is, share no essential defining features, but only a family of resemblances. Each member, moreover, “shares some of these resemblances with some, but not all, of the other members of the genre” (Ginzburg, “Family Resemblances” 541). Therefore, if genre is to be defined by a set of formal relationships and structural principles that govern a taxonomy of literary kinds based on certain combinations of narratives and their attendant tonalities, pastoral is not a genre in the sense that comedy and tragedy have been so classified. Pastoral, after all, can hold together tragedy, comedy and many other typical genres, and it does so without resorting exclusively to a family of forms and resemblances.

Faced with these pressing difficulties, critics such as Northrop Frye have come close to abandoning the concept of genre altogether. His *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) talks mostly of modes instead, arguing that genre is at its most useful when highlighting affinities that might otherwise go unnoticed (245). To comb through the *Anatomy* for a viable definition of mode is to search in vain, however, as even Frye’s glossary entry struggles to satisfy: “A conventional power of action assumed about the chief characters in fictional literature, or the corresponding attitude assumed by the poet toward the audience in thematic literature” (333). Frye’s scheme of five “thematic modes” (49) convinces nonetheless through his extensive use of examples. As Paul Alpers points out in “Mode
in Narrative Poetry,” Frye never elucidates his reasons for using the term, however (27).

Alpers reiterates this criticism in What is Pastoral? (1997) and points out that though the term is in ordinary use today, it remains ordinarily undefined. He proposes a more precise definition of mode that simultaneously corrects Frye’s formalist separation of mythos (plot) and dianoia (thought). In addition, Alpers argues that the acts of the audience are an enhancing dynamic that cannot be left out:

[M]ode is the literary manifestation, in a given work, not of its attitudes in a loose sense, but of its assumptions about man’s nature and situation. This definition in turn provides a critical question we implicitly put to any work we interpret: what notions of human strength, possibilities, pleasures, dilemmas, etc. are manifested in the represented realities and the emphases, devices, organisation, effects, etc. of this work? (Alpers, What is Pastoral? 50)

Given the difficulties with pastoral, its tendency that is, to appear in many literary kinds and still be called something ‘pastoral,’ Alpers’ definition spotlights an interplay among the various elements of a work that is essential to its unity, regardless of the specificities of the kind. Alpers is not the first, however, to highlight how mode interacts with genre, a point that remains to be clarified in order to better understand the nature of pastoral. We must therefore turn to the essays of Angus Fletcher and Alastair Fowler.

Angus Fletcher achieves what Frye did not, namely a justification for the latter’s use of modes as categories. Frye’s use of the term in his scheme of five thematic modes “is appropriate,” Fletcher argues, “because in each of the five the hero is a protagonist with a given strength relative to his world, and as such each hero […] is a modulor for verbal architectonics; man is the measure, the modus of myth” (“Utopian History and the Anatomy of Criticism” 34–5). Fletcher’s sublime “verbal architectonics” have equally subliminal implications for pastoral as a mode. If a mode manifests itself in the protagonists as something ‘modulor,’ it turns itself, quintessentially, into something highly flexible and personal, and as such suddenly becomes reconcilable with all texts and literatures. The modulor, as developed by Le Corbusier, functions as a visual bridge between two incompatible scales, t150

he imperial and the metric system.1 Accordingly, Fowler uses the modulor as a metaphor to show how modes can function like the modulor, capable of

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building a literary bridge between seemingly incompatible literary genres, ideologies and forms. Though structurally dependent on many literary kinds, Fowler argues that the mode is simultaneously “able to enter into new com-promixtures and to continue in combination with kinds still evolving” (Fowler, Kinds of Literature 167). Indeed, one could extend Fowler’s argument to the pastoral mode, and I would like to argue that, in order to develop a new, flexible, yet reliable definition of the pastoral mode, it is particularly fitting (and necessary) to view it as a modulor. The true value of the pastoral mode for contemporary and post-/modern literature is precisely in this modulor quality, which consists in its ability to break old moulds, and to do something new with established conventions and forms of expression. In the light of this adaptability, we can convincingly speak of pastoral as a mode without having to exclude texts or literature it effects or is affected by. As Annabel Patterson argues with a certain prescience in Pastoral and Ideology (1987):

It is not what pastoral is that should matter to us. On that, agreement is impossible, and its discussion inevitably leads to the narrowing strictures of normative criticism, statements of what constitutes the “genuine” or the “true” to the exclusion of exemplars that the critic regards as “perverse.” What can be described and, at least in terms of coverage, with some neutrality, is what pastoral since Virgil can do and has always done; or rather, to put the agency back where it belongs – how writers, artists, and intellectuals of all persuasions have used pastoral for a range of functions and intentions that the Eclogues first articulated. (Patterson 7)

More than as a mode, we can dwell on pastoral as a new-found modulor for contemporary and post-/modern literature itself. Just as Le Corbusier introduced the mathematical modulor as a scale of visual measures that would unite two virtually incompatible systems – the Anglo-Saxon foot and inch and the French Metric system – I would like to propose that the pastoral mode possesses qualities that enable it to function as a literary modulor, and whereby it can build a bridge of compatibility between the seemingly old-fashioned, outdated version of itself, and postmodern, contemporary fictions. After all, a consistent vocabulary should form the basis of any definition; as Kenneth Burke argues in A Grammar of Motives, we seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are selections of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality. Insofar as the vocabulary meets the needs of reflection, we can say that it has the necessary scope. In its selectivity, it is a reduction. Its scope and reduction become a deflection when the given