

Post-pastoral?

Representations of Nature in John Burnside's Fiction

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In his recent memoir, *A Lie About my Father*, John Burnside aptly illustrates the importance of relationships between humans and nature in his fiction by writing that “every time a human being encounters an animal, or a bird, he learns something new, or remembers something old that he has forgotten” (7). This is also illustrated in his fiction in which the relationship between humans and nature play a key role. These characteristics do not only invite an ecocritical approach to Burnside's works, but also – as I will demonstrate in this paper – a reading of his novels as examples of post-pastoral literature, as coined and defined by Terry Gifford. In the following paper, I will elaborate on the six questions asked by post-pastoral literature and employ these to demonstrate that *The Locust Room* and *The Devil's Footprints* are examples of post-pastoral writing before discussing post-pastoral's merits as a mode of critical analysis. I will conclude this paper by arguing that although Gifford implies that post-pastoral has replaced pastoral, pastoral is still a viable alternative to post-pastoral writing.

Post-pastoral was born out of the need for a term which describes literature that is aware of current environmental knowledge and distances itself from pastoral. Hence Gifford coined the term post-pastoral which refers to “literature that is aware of the anti-pastoral and of the conventional illusions upon which Arcadia is premised, but which finds a language to outflank those dangers with a vision of accommodated humans, at home in the very world

they thought themselves alienated from by their possession of language” (149).

Post-pastoral literature asks the following six questions:

1. “can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” (Gifford, *Muir* 31);
2. “what are the implications of recognizing that we are part of ... [a] creative-destructive process?” (Gifford, *Muir* 32);
3. “if the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature in the ebbs and flows of growth and decay, how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?” (Gifford, *Muir* 32);
4. “if nature is culture, is culture nature?” (Gifford, *Muir* 34);
5. “ [can] our distinctively human consciousness ... be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (Gifford, *Muir* 34);
6. “how should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?” (Gifford, *Muir* 35).

As my time is limited, I will refrain from discussing all six questions in detail and instead focus on the three questions that are most applicable to *The Locust Room* and *The Devil’s Footprints*.

In both works, solitude and separateness play a key role. In fact, in *The Devil’s Footprints*, the main character, Michael, remembers that one of his father’s sayings was “To be separate, to be apart, is to be whole again” (13). Likewise, Paul’s father in *The Locust Room* is a man who can only be himself when he is alone, surrounded by nature. Both characters, then, illustrate the

third question asked by post-pastoral literature: “if the processes of our inner nature echo those in outer nature ... how can we learn to understand the inner by being closer to the outer?” (Muir 32). Eventually, while working at a zoology field station, Paul begins to experience the solitude that his father desired as well. Inspired by his colleague Tony’s fondness for the locust room, Paul starts to spend most of his time there watching the locusts shed their skins. The silence he learns to appreciate there prepares him for a key encounter with an animal towards the end of the novel. During a visit to his mother, Paul encounters a fox on a country lane. This is the trigger that helps him to understand what lies at the core of men such as his father and Tony: they understand that they can only become themselves by being alone.

More significantly, however, this encounter enables Paul to understand his own place in the world. He begins to experience a deeply felt sense of connectedness to nature as he realizes that “there was nothing to which he could truthfully say he belonged, other than to this world of silence and light, and this dangerous nostalgia for the other animals” (*The Locust Room* 275). This deeper connection with and sense of belonging to the natural world exemplify the fifth question asked by post-pastoral literature: how can “our distinctively human consciousness ... be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (Muir 34).

This question is also asked in *The Devil’s Footprints*. The title of this novel refers to a myth in which the devil comes to the fictional town of Coldhaven on the east coast of Scotland at night and leaves his footprints in the snow. Returning home after a journey by foot across Scotland, Michael sees marks in the snow in Coldhaven similar to those left by the devil in the

myth. Discovering these marks helps him to understand that the damaged relationship between humans and their natural environment lies at the root of this myth. Michael believes that the nature god, Pan, was renamed the Devil because the priests did not want to share their world with the animals. Perhaps, Michael suggests, they had even loved the earth, but after its spirit touched them and filled them with terror they had begun to fear it. The appearance of the Devil, then, signals a disruption of the relationship between humans and nature. However, in the novel Michael's encounter with the Devil – the spirit of the land – helps him to heal his own relationship with nature.

The final question I will explore is Gifford's sixth question: "how should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?" (*Muir* 35). The Cambridge rapist, who attacked, raped and wounded women in their rooms and bed-sits in 1975, plays an important role in *The Locust Room*. In the novel this cruelty done by a human being to other humans is juxtaposed with several instances of cruelty to animals. For example, at the field station, Paul discovers a shed filled with rabbits, pinned to the boards on which they sit by leather straps. Immediately, he links this scene to his earlier find of the cages in his housemate Steve's room, filled with dead and dying animals. Both these scenes – the experiment and Steve's room – are, as Paul says, "part of the same human story, the same ugly continuum. These animals ... all these animals were objects, nothing but things to be used, whether for pleasure or profit, as the need or whim arose" (193).

Earlier in *The Locust Room*, Paul had recalled a time during his childhood when he took eggs from nests with his friends. Similarly, in *The*

Devil's Footprints, Michael remembers his bully, Malcolm, taking a chick out of a nest and crushing it underfoot. This event is juxtaposed with Malcolm's death. He dies when Michael lures him to the old limeroom, pushes him into one of the pits of water – knowing Malcolm cannot swim – and walks away while Malcolm drowns.

As the preceding discussion has demonstrated, both *The Locust Room* and *The Devil's Footprints* can be classified as post-pastoral writing.

Nevertheless, the question remains what post-pastoral theory's contribution to ecocriticism is and whether it reveals elements which have been previously neglected by ecocriticism. Post-pastoral theory results out of a critique of traditional pastoral and anti-pastoral, but it can also offer a critique of what Gifford calls "naïve and escapist 'realist' literature" (Muir 173). Furthermore, post-pastoral challenges ecocriticism to move beyond the so-called "praise-song school" of criticism and nature writing and provides "a more coherent practice" than ecocriticism. However, Gifford appears to ignore the movement that has been expanding the boundaries of ecocriticism by studying texts that can be classified neither as traditional pastoral nor as nature writing. Quite independent of post-pastoral, this movement – perhaps represented best by the 2001 anthology *Beyond Nature Writing* – is gaining in force and changing the face of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the six criteria make post-pastoral a more coherent practice than ecocriticism, which is – as many critics have pointed out – often hard to summarize because of the diversity of influences that went into its making.

A comparison between post-pastoralist theory and ecocriticism reveals that the aims of and questions asked by these theories are nearly identical.

Post-pastoral theory is defined by the six questions of post-pastoralism, which I referred to earlier. Furthermore, post-pastoral aims to create connections between for example science and arts and arts and activism. Its ultimate purpose, according to Gifford, is to function “as a tool for making better choices ... for the survival of our species in its ... home” (*Muir* 176).

Ecocriticism has been defined as being committed to activism, pluralism and interconnectedness; as taking an earth-centred approach to literary-studies and challenging anthropocentric stances to literary studies; and as seeking responses to the environmental crisis in texts. These aims are also voiced by Cheryll Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Some of the questions asked by ecocritics are “How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?” (xviii-xix). These aims and questions of ecocriticism, then, reveal that it is concerned in the broadest sense with the relations between humans and their physical environment. Also, as has been frequently pointed out by many ecocritics, activism and interconnectedness play a vital role within this theory. Similarly, activism and interconnectedness are key elements of post-pastoral. Furthermore, post-pastoral also seeks to heal the separation between human and their natural environment. These similarities can hardly be called surprising, especially since Gifford in *Reconnecting with John Muir* defines post-pastoral as being part of the larger practice of ecocriticism. I’d like to suggest that Gifford does not so much propose a new theory – albeit

part of ecocriticism – but a refinement or redefinition of ecocriticism itself. As a theory in itself, then, post-pastoral reveals few insights that justify its existence as a separate theory. Nevertheless, post-pastoral might provide the impetus needed by ecocriticism to develop the methodology it lacks today.

One of post-pastoral's aims is to critique pastoral. In fact, post-pastoral in itself is – as Gifford writes – a reinvention of pastoral. However, hereby he appears to disregard pastoral's importance in contemporary literature. In the final part of this paper I want to argue that a critical re-examination of pastoral will reveal that although it is often deemed naïve escapism unsuitable for the twenty-first century, this mode of writing is far from becoming irrelevant.

One of the key objections voiced by Gifford and others is that pastoral is no longer a viable mode of literary writing because its idealization of nature ignores current environmental conditions. Nonetheless, the environmental crisis can be said to have brought forth new versions of pastoral, as Leo Marx has observed as well. In fact, pastoral's historical tendency to evolve and splinter into different versions enables it to respond to both changing perceptions of nature and changing environmental conditions.

A second objection to pastoral is that it has become a contested term as a result of its abuse in service of class, imperialist and metropolitan interests. However, this abuse cannot lead us to dismiss the fact that pastoral can be successfully employed in service of a political movement: the environmental movement. Indeed, political elements have been a characteristic of pastoral since Virgil used it to refer to the expropriation of small landowners (including Virgil himself) by the Roman government (see

Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* 20). Even an idealized representation of nature, then, can be employed to increase environmental awareness.

A reading of *The Locust Room*, then, will reveal several pastoral elements that critically examine – rather than idealise – the relationship between humans and nature. An apt example of this is Paul's encounter with the fox. His newfound sense of belonging – which Paul refers to as a kind of nostalgia – should not be mistaken for naïve escapism. Rather, it is an instance in which the pastoral element of retreat and return is employed to call attention to the disturbed relationship between humans and their natural environment elsewhere in the novel. Examples of this disturbed relationship are numerous, ranging from Paul and his friends robbing eggs from nests to the dead and dying hamsters in Steve's room. Therefore, although pastoral's idealisation of nature may appear inappropriate in a time of environmental crisis, it can in fact increase environmental awareness because it is juxtaposed with other elements in the novel. Moreover, the descriptions of the laboratory animals at the field station can be aptly used for the political ends of the environmental movement.

I want to conclude this paper, then, by briefly summarizing my main arguments. Post-pastoral is a viable addition to previous modes of writing, as my discussion of *The Locust Room* and *The Devil's Footprints* as examples of post-pastoral literature has demonstrated. Nevertheless, post-pastoral theory reveals few elements that an ecocritical approach would not bring to the fore as well. Therefore, I suggest that Gifford has not defined a new theory, but instead offers criteria that contribute to further refining and redefining ecocriticism. Whereas, post-pastoral literature is a useful contribution to other

modes of writing, pastoral – which it is said to replace – should not be dismissed. As my brief discussion of *The Locust Room* as a pastoral text has demonstrated, contemporary pastoral retains some of its characteristic elements (such as retreat and return; the tension between the country and the city, nonhuman and human; a critique of society and social institutions) and combines it with environmental knowledge. Therefore, I want to suggest that the role of pastoral in contemporary literature should not be ignored but that it deserves further research.