

PASTORAL CONVENTION IN VERGIL AND KESEY

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The various forms or kinds of genres of literature have various vogues and moments of fashion. Certain genres recur at certain stages of development in a literary tradition. Certain climates of literary activity tend to be fostered from time to time, not always for the most obvious reasons. In this essay it is proposed to draw attention to two similar literary phenomena which it might not occur to most readers to yoke together: Vergil's tenth *Bucolic* and Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Juxtaposing them results from an observation that both rely on the conventions of the same genre for their structural frame. Vergil's poem is a partial pastoral, written during a time of great political upheaval and national conflict. Kesey's book, a product of our own troubled days, is a novel; it too manipulates pastoral conventions, though for different ends from Vergil's.

The pastoral tradition, it may be recalled, was mapped out before the genre itself was consolidated. Writing after the Dark Ages of Greece has displaced the Heroic Age sung of by Homer, Hesiod transmits a grim picture of the ages of the world, in descending order of excellence, and from this world-view of history predicts worsening social conditions. One element which he uses to characterize the degenerate state of mankind is this: sons do not resemble their fathers. Another is the increasing labor necessary to produce a livelihood. Hesiod localizes the golden age in the past, when the child's view of the world prevailed. Then there was no labor, then there was no death. But Hesiod does not merely portray the worsening ages. He also suggests a way out of this descending spiral. He shows how to return to the golden age and how to reintegrate the world's childhood: by good justice, by good civic administration. Then the soil will become fertile, sons will resemble their fathers, and there will be no labor.

According to Hesiod, certain actions bring back the past. According to Ovid, there is no way of escaping from a worsening world, because Ovid maintains that what ended the golden age made a return of it impossible. Ovid marks the end of the golden age by the introduction of the cyclic seasons. When eternal spring gave way to the turning world of four seasons, man had to contrive shelters, because periodically it got cold. These shelters were the prototypes of cities, and in them men learned the rudiments of acquisition and of greed. Labor in the fields went beyond what was needed for sustaining life, and strove to fulfil ambition and avarice. Ovid, unlike Hesiod, offers no escape from this situation, because the pastoral genre, well established by his time, had made its concern precisely this: how to escape from the cyclic world of changing seasons and deteriorating morals into perpetual spring and stable ethics.

Pastoral offers a way to remove oneself from the corrupting world, characterized by cities, where labor and toil accompany and barely alleviate misery. Pastoral suggests a withdrawal from society. It lays down the lines for a radical retreat from society and contents itself with either

a subsistence economy of acorns and water (as in Lucretius' description of early man) or withdraws completely from an evolutionary view of the world and time to a pleasant shore of the past. There the soil spontaneously bears rich produce, without labor. Horace sometimes invoked this kind of pastoral retreat when the political scene was particularly turbulent. Thus pastoral tries to reach the golden age by escaping from time.

Clearly, the genre pastoral did not limit itself in antiquity to a simple mirroring of these concerns, but sometimes pressed the limits of its boundaries in significant directions. So too the concepts and preoccupations of the pastoral when used in other literary forms.

Both Vergil's tenth *Bucolic* and Kesey's novel have "pastoral" settings. Vergil's is situated in Arcadia, where gods, nymphs and vegetation combine to form the classical background to the poem's theme. Kesey's novel is largely set in an Oregon forest, where a bare subsistence existence is wrested by logging. Kesey maintains an incessant intra-referral between the self-sufficient logging family and the town, where a better physical life is led, but meanness and corruption are the result. Kesey's Stamper family leads a life more akin to the pastoral modulations of the *Georgics* than of the *Bucolics* themselves.

Kesey invites the critic to speculate upon the implications of the tension which he depicts between the country and the town by printing as his superscription to the novel *Leadbelly's* lyric: "Sometimes I live in the country, sometimes I live in the town; Sometimes I get a great notion to jump in the river and drown." The living in the novel takes place in both locales, and at the end the protagonist, the Kid, is jumping logs in a ram-paging river, and in a state of mind and equilibrium which hardly precludes his jumping into the river. There seems no other place for him to go.

This protagonist, the Kid, is an intruder from New England who comes motivated by love to join the life in the logging region. He comes also to seduce his half-brother's wife for revenge. Just so Gallus, in Vergil, is an intruder, a love-sick soldier and hunter, who comes dying to Arcadia. The reception which each is accorded is, however, different, as different as the tone, ethos and scope of the two works.

The novel does not restrict itself to working out the implications of the pastoral conflict; it also introduces Oedipal, sexual, and cultural strife in bewildering abundance. Nevertheless, the pastoral themes stand out clearly as the articulating members of this huge novel when they are placed upon the background of Vergil's poem.

In Vergil, Gallus, the intruder from another genre, another way of life, the elegy, is bewept by all the figures of the pastoral landscape except the *Naiades*, nymphs who inhabit streams. The sweet spring *Arethusa* is invoked as a muse in the poem's first line. The river figures as the leit-motif of Kesey's work. It is the river that the Kid's half-brother and antagonist swims in order to discover his own wife in bed with the Kid. It is the river which drowns Joe Ben, the visionary whose every sentence prophesies a golden age in the immediate future. It is the river that will claim the lives of both Hank and the Kid. The river does not lament Gallus, nor does it further sympathize with the Kid in his scheme to re-

venge himself for his half-brother's cuckolding his father with his step-mother. Unlike Gallus, the Kid gains no sympathy from either his new landscape or its inhabitants. But he keeps trying.

In both Vergil and Kesey, a lady withdraws from the scene and causes the hero longing, despair, and finally some form of death. Lycoris is travelling in the snowy mountains; Viv is travelling away from Oregon on a Greyhound bus, to escape a world which her brother-in-law, Joe Ben, cannot successfully characterize as benevolent and full of promise of the golden age. Her husband, Hank, cannot re-integrate his world of self-dependency and irresponsibility. Nor can his ever-backward looking father Henry make sense of his present world in terms of the past which he has seen, a past which is no golden age for him, but only his incessant conversational topic. Henry is father to both the Kid and Hank. Hank rejects the town, makes war on the townsfolk and also the Kid, and is finally bested. His principal aim is to work in the pastoral setting – in other words, to introduce the ethos of the *Georgics* – and to resist the town as an element which, like the Kid's education, corrupts and disrupts, and overturns the family which clings to the soil and the forest for sustenance.

Into this world of work and labor comes the Kid, a pastoral figure whose idealism is only intermittently set forth in self-mocking letters to a fellow graduate-student at Yale. By the end of the book, he wishes to be assimilated to his pastoral-georgic setting, and finally dies of love within it, even though the woman whom he loves has fled. The Kid, an artist in self-knowledge, does not do what Joe Ben does; he does not put the golden age in the future by divine intervention. This would be the action of the total pastoral ideal. Neither does he represent Hank, who puts the golden age aside and, true proletarian reformer, tries to work only for himself and his family, by exiling himself and his family from the city and working himself to death. Rather, the Kid's vengeful idealism, like Gallus's, meets with some sympathy and attention, but remains essentially unlike Gallus's; that is, alienated from the setting into which he works himself in order to die.

It would be useless and tedious to discuss other parallels. Obviously the range of points which Kesey is making is not the same that Vergil made. What is important is that Kesey is employing modes of the pastoral and is making his impact through them. Having the tenth *Bucolic* in mind makes a critic more receptive to Kesey's techniques, and makes the novel's tone and its concept of nature participating in the lives of unhappy men, exiles from town and native habitat and true self-understanding, more susceptible to mature criticism.

The central problem of the novel is that the Kid does not resemble Henry, his old father, who is Hank's father, who does resemble him. The family, prisoners of a style of life, is deteriorating, finding it hard to wrest a living from the land, suffering opposition by the townsfolk. A search for self-identity, which transforms itself into a search for love, destroys the pastoral life. Vergil does not destroy however. He only withdraws at the end of his poem (and his genre) in order to take up a new form of literature. He progresses to the world of the turning seasons, and

weaves the Georgics' themes around them. Kesey begins his novel at this point in the progressive acclimatization of the pastoral to the everyday world. But like Vergil, he brings in an intruder, who signals the end of a form of life and a form of literature. Gallus' mistress withdrew from his company and he dies. The Kid's mother, and his half-brother's wife, also withdrew and he assimilates himself and does not let his brother be a logging hero alone. He too will be talked of in these woods by the loggers in time to come. Kesey's hero re-integrates neither his own world, nor the world which he succeeds in entering and undoing, nor himself. Perhaps these are the modern limits of the use of Vergil's phrase, so often misunderstood: *omnia vincit amor, et nos cedamus amori*.

Kesey offers no way out. His novel admits of no escape once one sets himself against an evolved social framework, represented by the logging union here. The pastoral world or georgic world is a source of delight only intermittently for the characters, who do not share Joe Ben's religious certainty about the coming of the golden age. Hank lives and dies in the pastoral world, but on the way to Joe Ben's funeral he sees it in a moment of epiphany as unusable by man:

Hank, being driven to his brother's funeral, watches the scenery sweep past the moving car. "I just sit there in a kind of daze, looking out through the flicker of ditch willows zipping past along the road and enjoying the scenery. Maybe I was seeing things so clear because it was the first time in I don't know how many years I'd rode this stretch without having to do the driving. Maybe that's it. All I know is everything was shining like a new dime. There's rusty screen-topped cones of sawdust-burners vomiting sparks and blue smoke; widow's lace fern waving around the mailboxes; busy glisten of little breezes blowing across the standing water . . . swoop of powerlines . . . spearmint bush so bright and new I smell them as we pass . . . squirrels hustling around . . . then more rusty burners. Leaves, bright, waxy, green-scrubbed, sort of. Prised light where the sun comes through the drops hanging off the leaves, shattered and pure and bright.

I put my face closer to the little window so I could see more. There was the sky, the little clouds, then the treetops running into the steep sloped-off canyon down to the railroad embankment, then there's a wide drainage ditch between the road and the track. This ditch is a mangle of scrubby little Himalaya vines; Himalaya blackberry got a pretty good flavor but loaded with seeds big enough to knock a tooth out. All the leaves had been whipped off the vines by that last big storm, and the vines look like a king-sized roll of steel wool. I bounce along, looking at them vines, thinking to myself if a fellow was big enough he'd just grab him a handful of that and scrub the world to a fare-thee-well, get shut of them clouds, really brighten things up . . . This notion slid into a kind of open-eyed dream, I take a giant fistful of steel wool and go at it, working like a nigger. I can't stop somehow. I finish with the sky and go at the beach. Then the town, then the hills. I'm panting and sweating and scrubbing like a nigger! I step back and take a look: but instead of things getting brighter and clearer this time, it's just made them duller. Like it kind of faded the color out. I grab up the roll and tear into it again, and when I'm finished this time it's even more faded than before. So this time I really work it over. I scrub everything, the world and sky and my eyes and the sun and everything, and finally fall back, wore clean out. I take a look and it's bright all right, like a movie-show screen when the film breaks

and you got nothing to look at up there but the bright white light. Everything else is gone. I throw away the steel wool; it's fine to brighten things up with once in a while, but too much of it, man, can rub everything away."

The pastoral ideal has had in recent times rarely so thorough an exploration. Kesey sees it as no longer viable. His *Cuckoo's Nest* was a kind of purely fantastic pastoral retreat in an insane asylum. *Great Notion* has mixed the pastoral with the georgic. Is an *Aeneid* possible these days? Kesey contrasts work and love as ways out of the deteriorating world of political upheaval and great conflict, after the age of the hero is over. He also contrasts work and love as ways of stabilizing ethics and of achieving family resemblance. Neither works. His novel is grimmer when seen in the light of pastoral conventions.

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