

Kabren Levinson
Race and the Pastoral
Annie Seaton
10.22.09

identifying pastoral

What is “pastoral”? Is it a genre? A category? A lifestyle? Or does “pastoral” refer to a specific text? How do we identify “pastoral” in a text? How do we even notice whether or not a text belongs to a given “genre”?

We can construct definitions of the terms we use to describe the texts we create. Defining works has even become an entire discipline unto itself. Jacques Derrida, in his essay *The Law of Genre*, writes within the genre of genre. In his text, he questions the way we classify texts and he discusses the active role a text can play as part of a genre. Derrida makes claims about how texts participate in categories. He is preoccupied with the function of genre and how categories interact with other categories. David Halperin, on the other hand, a contemporary scholar, engages directly with the pastoral by attempting to offer a clear and concise definition. He, unlike Derrida, does not concern himself with what happens to a text after it is defined and evaluated. Halperin proceeds to create an actual explanation of the pastoral. Both philosophers add to our understandings of the pastoral and are both ultimately concerned about how we comprehend texts, but in they do so in very different ways. While Derrida interacts with genre theory and general understandings of texts and categories, Halperin engages with the pursuit of defining genres and categories. This is only a first step towards answering the questions above.

Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, is not easy to define or classify. It was written at a turning point in the world (the early 1600's) and encompasses what Derrida would call, numerous genres, modes, or categories. His texts presents various political, social, and cultural attitudes towards discovery, slavery, civilization, and the new world.

Shakespeare's play does not fit into a single genre or category. *The Tempest* cannot be described using simple terms. It participates in more than one dialogue, including the pastoral. Shakespeare's pastoral is different from classical examples of the bucolic. His pastoral fluctuates - it is always in the background as an underlying theme, but at times, it takes precedence and the text literally and figuratively enters into a magical realm.

How does a text, in general, engage with the pastoral? How does time and history affect portrayals of the pastoral? How does Shakespeare's *The Tempest* participate in the pastoral? After first considering Derrida's concepts of participation, belonging, genre, and classification of texts, I examine Halperin's clear definition of the pastoral. I then turn to directly investigate Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to analyze the text both in general and in detail, using the established notions of Derrida and Halperin. Finally, I briefly move to consider Aime Cesaire's modern response to Shakespeare. I study the pastoral both in general as a genre and category and in detail as a magical, sexual, powerful, and nature-bound lifestyle.

Derrida examines the philosophy behind definition. He raises questions about the laws of definition and classification of texts. Derrida asserts that texts must possess identifiable traits that bind a work to a specific class. "There should be a trait upon which one could rely in order to decide that a given textual event, a given 'work,' corresponds to a given class (genre, type, mode, form, etc.)" (Derrida 63). Derrida believes that

membership to a class is an essential part to one's understanding of the text, but also to the texts greater role in the world. Derrida continues on to say that genre gives authority to and a sense of belonging to a text. "...then a code should provide an identifiable trait and one which is identifiable to itself, authorizing us to determine, to adjudicate whether a given text belongs to this genre or perhaps to that genre" (Derrida 64). These boundaries help the reader recognize what a certain text is about. Derrida now enters a discussion of the identity of a text by giving a work more power and agency. He addresses work that in a sense, becomes self-aware and considers its own identity. "Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?" (Derrida 64). Derrida examines the role of a text that does not classify itself. He questions its ability to be recognized. In his question, Derrida addresses works that ask questions themselves. What does it mean for a text, particularly one similar to the type Derrida considers, to participate in a genre? "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genre-less text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Derrida 65). Derrida differentiates between participation and belonging by equating the former with a passive work and the latter with an active text. Defining a text is directly related to how a text participates in a given genre.

Halperin engages with texts on a different level. He examines the actual genre and category of "pastoral". After first offering a history and evolution of the bucolic, he offers his four part definition of the pastoral that determines what the pastoral is and how it functions. The first point his definition establishes the pastoral setting, world, and

sphere. “The Latin root of *pastoral* indicates that the subject may pertain to any person whose occupation is the care of grazing animals, and pastoral poets have traditionally included cowherds...in their works” (Halperin 62). Halperin immediately addresses pastoral in relationship to people living in nature with a close connection to animals. Halperin’s pastoral embraces a simple rural lifestyle. People in the pastoral do not live with the stresses of civilized culture - they are more “free.” “This ease and simplicity of life were made into a figure for the classical mean, for moderation of character and station” (Halperin 63). Here, the pastoral lifestyle is easy and without charge. It is rid of the binds and burdens of civilized life. Halperin continues to analyze the pastoral in relationship to culture. He sets the pastoral in direct opposition to the “real” world. “If the great world is seen as exemplifying the corruption of a decadent civilization, a contrast can be furnished by the ‘green world’ pastorals of Shakespeare or the golden age fantasies of other writers” (Halperin 67). The pastoral becomes a magical, sexual, and natural response to modern civilized life. To Halperin, the pastoral is not about “practical achievement. Rather, the pastoral is expressive of natural human wants and needs. “This is the ‘spiritual landscape’ of pastoral identified by Bruno Snell, which offers an ‘escape from life, escape into the realm of feeling and pathos.’” (Halperin 67). The pastoral is not social, for it is about the personal and the individual. As Halperin continues, he addresses the discord between civilization and nature as a conflict between a harsh reality and an artistic heaven. “According to this line of reasoning, it is the mental faculty responsible for fostering the growth of illusions (in particular, illusions of meaning or harmony) that generates the true themes of pastoral” (Halperin 69). To Halperin, magic is truly pastoral. In addition, Halperin constructs a strong division

between what is and what is not real. In other words, the pastoral is also mystical because it is part of the mind. Halperin's pastoral comes alive in art that comments on society.

After having considered the questions of classification and definition, I examine these questions in the context of a primary work, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. I examine his text in two ways: first, by using Derrida's notion of participation and second, by examining *The Tempest* in relationship to Halperin's definition of the pastoral. As I made clear earlier, Shakespeare's text is not one that is easy to define. In Derrida's field of the genre of genre, *The Tempest* truly participates in various categorical dialogues. This is noticeable by plainly considering the times in which Shakespeare wrote this text. The 1600's were a time filled with innovation and confusion. As humans, we were learning more about the nature of ourselves and the world in which we live. Classical pastoral poems, such as Theokritus' *Hylas*, limit themselves in scope. For example, Theokritus does not construct a complete plot of new world discovery, as Shakespeare does. In *The Tempest*, various populations are addressed, including cultured noble figures, forgotten royalty, and third world savages (Alonso, Prospero, and Caliban, respectively). Shakespeare's text shifts dialogues often. While it begins with trouble at sea, it quickly moves ashore to encounter forgotten nobility and natural and wild savages. Shakespeare's confusion is noticeable in his text for it mixes genres.

Even though Shakespeare's text is not easy to comprehend, one can identify and recognize the pastoral in *The Tempest*. Magic, love, sex, poetry, water, and the countryside are all-too present throughout this text. According to Halperin's first notion of the pastoral, Shakespeare's text definitely qualifies. The text begins at sea. "SCENE

I. On a ship at sea: a tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard” (Shakespeare). Even in the stage directions and setting, pastoral ideas are evident. As the ship arrives in a foreign land, the pastoral is again realized in the uncultivated world where the entirety of the play is set. As the play continues, other elements of the pastoral begin to emerge. Relationships become important indicators of power and authority. For example, the relation between Prospero and Ariel demonstrates the conflict between civilization and nature, or the real and the magical. As a cultured individual, Prospero is in control over nature. He uses Ariel, a spirit and nymph, to take advantage of others for Prospero’s own benefit. Using Ariel’s intimate knowledge of the land, Prospero insists that he remain in control. “Pardon, master; I will be correspondent to command And do my spiriting gently” (Shakespeare), Ariel says in response to Prospero’s authority. Ariel submits to his command. This embraces the pastoral by showing an opposition between civilization and nature.

The pastoral becomes even more noticeable towards the end of the play when Shakespeare creates magical realities out of songs sung by the nymphs and epic lines recited by Prospero. Even though no sheep are to be found on the island, Iris enters into a magical and artistic realm. “The turfy mountains, where live nibbling sheep, / And flat meads thatch’d with stover, them to keep; / Thy banks with pioned and twilled brims.../ To make cold nymphs chaste crowns...” (Shakespeare). From this point forth, the play moves in and out of reality, embracing the pastoral world of illusion. The imagery is phenomenal, even though it bears little resemblance of the reality and truth of the island.

“Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
...the great globe itself..." (Shakespeare)

Prospero continues to dwell not in reality, but in the pastoral. The gorgeous imagery in these speeches put forth by a former leader of civilization, or the discord between the civilized world and the uncivilized world becomes even more apparent. Shakespeare has created a truly, but not exclusively, pastoral text. His bucolic manifests itself on various levels including the setting of the play, the often discordant power dynamic between characters, and the confusion between appearance (illusion and magic) and reality (what's actually happening).

Cesaire presents another way of looking at the pastoral in general and Shakespeare's text in particular. Cesaire constructed a response called *A Tempest* similar in style and content to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Even though the both texts strongly resemble one another, Cesaire more directly approaches the ideas of race and the pastoral. In Shakespeare, the power dynamic and issues of authority in relationship to race are present, but are not honestly confronted. Cesaire also interacts with the pastoral from an even more modern standpoint than Shakespeare. Cesaire engages with the pastoral in the context of more modern contemporary power struggles. Instead of examining the philosophy behind classification or pursuing a definition of pastoral, he engages with the bucolic and with Shakespeare by closely deconstructing Shakespeare's text and composing a response similar in theme and genre.

After looking at Shakespeare's text both in general and in detail, it is evidently pastoral. Even though the pastoral is easy to come by in his text and I (obviously) have no problem claiming his text to be so, it is not an easily classifiable text, for it participates in more than one genre, category, and idea. I have attempted to examine to ways of identifying the pastoral in Shakespeare. First, I discussed the question of genre itself and described what and how a text should participate in a category. Then, I looked closely at an actual definition of the pastoral. Instead of then dwelling in the idea of definition, I considered a descriptive and almost too-logical evaluation of the pastoral. Even after finally examining these questions in a primary text and successfully finding the pastoral, the greater questions of genre and definition remain. How can we identify *anything* in a text?

WORKS CITED

Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." Critical Inquiry, On Narrative Vol. 7 (1980).

Halperin, David M. Before pastoral, Theocritus and the ancient tradition of bucolic poetry. New Haven: Yale UP, 1983.

Shakespeare, William. The Tempest.