

2015

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Recommended Citation

Laroche, Rebecca. A Return to the Landscape [Book Review]. *Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2015, pp. 499-502. doi: 10.13110/criticism.57.3.0499

A RETURN TO THE LANDSCAPE

Rebecca Laroche

What Else Is Pastoral? Renaissance Literature and the Environment by Ken Hiltner. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. Pp. 189. \$48.95 cloth.

From his monograph's title, we know that Ken Hiltner responds directly to the critical paradigms of the 1980s and 1990s set forth by Paul Alpers and Annabel Patterson that present pastoral as a political genre focused largely on court corruption and dissent. For those of us who were in graduate school in that time and in the decade after, the hold of these paradigms was tight, and Hiltner's focus on the environment that is pastoral is in many ways a relief. His basic premise is that the changes that transpired from the expansion of the city, the increased use of coal, and the filling of the wetlands meant that the landscape was seen with new eyes. As a result, he argues, pastoral actually had to do with the landscape it described, and his argument resonates deeply as we are brought out of the nethersphere of the enclosed court and made to see the countryside once again. It is the sense of return, however, that Hiltner has not quite fully fleshed out, as he responds to a specific decade of criticism without providing a sense of its precursors and the decades since.

Hiltner's initiating insight is that, from its inception, the pastoral mode was about marking a shifting relationship to the environment. From the ancients onward, he demonstrates, authors depicted the pastoral landscape in response to its passing, whether in Virgil's loss of his personal agrarian ideal or

John Stow's record of the exploding dimensions of London. His deft handling of texts in the original languages and extensive engagement of the early-twentieth-century historical work of London reveal a scholar thoroughly embedded with his materials.

The monograph is divided into two parts. The first is purely literary historical as we reexamine defining works of the pastoral canon: Virgil's first eclogue, the English country-house poems (giving equal space to Aemilia Lanier as to Ben Jonson and Andrew Marvell), and English reworkings of Horace's second epode. Before this survey, however, this section begins with an engagement with Plato and an articulation of the "gestural strategies" used by authors in "representing nature," as that representation could be "more than a little daunting" (23). That is, rather than describe the landscape in minute, sensorial detail as later writers would, the early moderns nod to the left and right—as if proto-tour guides—at a well-known landscape that is in danger of moving into oblivion. These gestural strategies are then what ties the first section to the second, which—through variously engaging the works of John Taylor the Water Poet, Sir John Denham, Andrew Marvell, and Edmund Spenser—delineates three environmental upheavals—the air pollution of London, the draining of

the fens, and the colonization of Ireland—that occasion passionate, sometimes disturbing writings. The last of these, a kind of coda to this analysis, points to the movement out of the pastoral (and with it the gestural) and into the georgic. In the end, though, the "gestural" provides only a loose tie that virtually disappears in the final chapter, leaving one with a sense of two projects taken on with different motivations and methods—one literary historical, one ecological. In the former, the author seems fully unswerving; in the latter, Hiltner gestures to the environmental project that underpins his work without fully committing to the conversation he enters.

In the face of the current critical output, one can certainly understand adopting this strategy. As a result of simple nods to ecological criticism, his prose stays unbrambled by theoretical digressions and scholarly surveys. After all, Hiltner does not set out to engage the present critical landscape, but rather to resurrect and reorient an approach from the last century. Again, as Hiltner's title indicates, the study stems from the work of Patterson and Alpers that showed the political mechanisms within the pastoral genre. In the virtual omission of the 15–20 years of critical discussion since, however, the case for such an intervention seems less than convincing; at the

very least, we need evidence that Patterson and Alpers have been as dominant in the twenty-first century as Hiltner would have us believe. Similar arguments were made about the sonnets, for example, during the same time period, but sonnet criticism has certainly moved on from these assertions (sonnets were, after all, about eros), the point being that Alpers and Patterson were writing in response to a dominant paradigm that focused on the idealized landscape rather than the political arena, and criticism had yet to acknowledge the political valences.

In this sense, Hiltner's critical perspective is a kind of return; this is not the first entry on landscape in the conversation about early modernity—nor is it likely to be the last. Indeed, Keith Thomas and Joan Thirsk, contemporaries of Alpers and Patterson, are as important to this study as those critics Hiltner directly engages. What is more, extensive work on early modern London and on changing ecologies in the last decade (witness the widespread analysis of the “little Ice Age” and of deforestation) shows a clear awareness of the environment in the discussion of early modern literature—an awareness that Hiltner's bibliography only slightly reflects: two studies of seventeenth-century literature and an entry on “Environmentalism and Ecocriticism” in an Oxford guide

are not sufficient in capturing the current energy around ecomotivated readings. The explosion of the ecostudies in the twenty-first century begs more than generalizations such as “second-wave environmental critics often see texts that romanticize untouched environments as offering little insight into our present crisis” (3). A gestural criticism is only satisfying if the critical landscape is fully realized in the mind of the reader, at least in substantial asides, footnotes, and a fuller (not merely select) bibliography.

While often beautiful in its analysis, this study is less the paradigm shift it presents itself as being and more a seismic record of the shift that has already come. Thus, the return Hiltner most precipitates is a return to deep literary history in the context of ecological inquiry—one that shows the continuities between an engagement with Latin and Greek sources and a concern for the living environment. Perhaps, in this, there is nostalgia for the literary scholarship of yore, but Hiltner's readings help us to see that there is no pure return. In this moment of our profound realization of our environmental losses, we cannot see previous critical paradigms as we did before. We now see literature as previous articulations of such loss ripe with the language of our own resistance and the genres of necessary protest.

Rebecca Laroche is a professor of English at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. She has published on Shakespeare, early modern women's writing, medical history, and ecofeminism. In 2009, her monograph Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550–1650 was published with Ashgate. In 2011, she was the guest curator

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