The Machine in the Garden

TECHNOLOGY
AND THE PASTORAL IDEAL
IN AMERICA

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Titz pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination. The reason is clear enough. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent! Inevitably the European mind was dazzled by the prospect. With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society. In both forms—one literary and the other in essence political—the ideal has figured in the American view of life which is, in the widest sense, the subject of this book.
My purpose is to describe and evaluate the uses of the pastoral ideal in the interpretation of American experience. I shall be tracing its adaptation to the conditions of life in the New World, its emergence as a distinctively American theory of society, and its subsequent transformation under the impact of industrialism. This is not meant to be a comprehensive survey. If I were telling the story in all its significant detail, chronologically, I should have to begin at the moment the idea of America entered the mind of Europe and come down to the present—to, say, the death of Robert Frost in 1963. But I have chosen not to attempt anything so ambitious. Instead, I propose to concentrate upon selected examples, "some versions," as William Empson might put it, of American pastoralism. Nor have I confined myself to the riches, most coherent literary materials. At points I shall consider examples which have little or no intrinsic literary value. In fact, this is not, strictly speaking, a book about literature; it is about the region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination—
we may call them "cultural symbols"—meet. To appreciate the significance and power of our American fables it is necessary to understand the interplay between the literary imagination and what happens outside literature, in the general culture. My special concern is to show how the pastoral ideal has been incorporated in a powerful metaphor of contradiction—a way of ordering meaning and value that clarifies our situation today.

The notion that pastoralism remains a significant force in American life calls for an explanation. At first thought the relevance of the ancient ideal to our concerns in the second half of the twentieth century is bound to seem obscure. What possible bearing can the urge to idealize a simple, rural environment have upon the lives men lead in an intricately organized, urban, industrial, nuclear-armed society? The answer to this central question must start with the distinction between two kinds of pastoralism—one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex.

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The first, or sentimental kind is difficult to define or even to locate because it is an expression less of thought than of feeling. It is widely diffused in our culture, insinuating itself into many kinds of behavior. An obvious example is the current "flight from the city." An inchoate longing for a more "natural" environment enters into the contemplative attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs). Wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work. We see it in our politics, in the "localism" invoked to oppose an adequate national system of education, in the power of the farm bloc in Congress, in the special economic favor shown to "farming" through government subsidies, and in state electoral systems that allow the rural population to retain a share of political power grossly out of proportion to its size. It manifests itself in our leisure-time activities, in the piety toward the out-of-doors expressed in the wilderness cult, and in our devotion to camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking, gardening, and so on. But there is no need to multiply examples; anyone who knows America today will think of many others.

Nowhere is the ill-defined feeling for "nature" more
influential than in the realm of imaginative expression. There can be little doubt that it affects the nation's taste in serious literature, reinforcing the legitimate respect enjoyed by such writers as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and Robert Frost. But on the lower plane of our collective fantasy life the power of this sentiment is even more obvious. The mass media cater to a mawkish taste for retreat into the primitive or rural felicity exemplified by TV westerns and Norman Rockwell magazine covers. Perhaps the most convincing testimony to the continuing appeal of the bucolic is supplied by advertising copywriters; a favorite strategy, validated by marketing research, assumes that Americans are most likely to buy the cigarettes, beer, and automobiles they can associate with a rustic setting.

No single motive can account for these disparate phenomena. Yet each does express something of the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence "closer to nature," that is the psychic root of all pastoralism—genuine and spurious. That such desires are not peculiar to Americans goes without saying; but our experience as a nation unquestionably has invested them with peculiar intensity. The soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of the once dominant image of an undefined, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness.

In recent years several discerning, politically liberal historians of American thought have traced the gradual attenuation, in our public life, of the ideas once embodied in this cherished image. I am thinking especially of the work of Richard Hofstadter, Marvin Meyers, and Henry Nash Smith. These writers have not been concerned, to be sure, with the relation between this body of thought and pastoralism as a literary mode. Nor for that matter do they often invoke the word "pastoral." But whether they refer to "agrarianism" (the usual term), or to the hold of "rural values" upon the national consciousness (Hofstadter), or to the "agrarian myth" (Hofstadter), or to the "Old Republican idyll" (Meyers), or to the "myth of the garden" (Smith), they all seem to agree that for some time now this tendency to idealize rural ways has been an impediment to clarity of thought and, from their point of view, to social progress. Anyone who shares their assumptions is likely to find this judgment highly persuasive. They demonstrate that in public discourse, at least, this ideal has appeared with increasing frequency in the service of a reactionary or false ideology, thereby helping to mask the real problems of an industrial civilization.5

When seen by critics of "mass culture," moreover, the popular kind of American pastoralism assumes an equally pernicious, if slightly different, aspect. Then it looks like a native variant of that international form of "primivism" to which Ortega y Gasset, among others, began calling attention years ago. In The Revolt of the Masses (1930) Ortega uses the term to describe the outlook of a new kind of man, "a Naturmensch rising up in the midst of a civilised world":

The world is a civilised one, its inhabitant is not: he does not see the civilisation of the world around him, but he uses it as if it were a natural force. The new man wants his motor-car and enjoys it, but he believes that it is the spontaneous fruit of an Edenic tree. In the depths of his soul he is unaware of the artificial, almost incredible, character of civilisation, and does not extend
his enthusiasm for the instruments to the principles which make them possible.

Ortega’s caricature points to the shallow, not to say per-
verse, conception of reality inherent in our sentimental
pastoralism. If his industrial Naturnerzicht bears a strik-
ing resemblance to many Americans we should not be
entirely surprised. After all, what modern nation has had
a history as encouraging to the illusion that its material
well-being is, in Ortega’s phrase, “the spontaneous fruit
of an Edenic tree”?\(^3\)

The same phenomenon aroused Sigmund Freud’s inter-
est. In his General Introduction to Psychoanalysis (1920),
he takes up the nostalgic feeling we often attach to the
unspoiled landscape as an illustration of our chronic yearn-
ing to enjoy “freedom from the grip of the external
world.” To Freud this impulse is the very epitome of
fantasy-making:

The creation of the mental domain of phantasy has a
complete counterpart in the establishment of “reserva-
tions” and “nature-parks” in places where the intrusions
of agriculture, traffic, or industry threaten to change
... the earth rapidly into something unrecognizable.
The “reservation” is to maintain the old condition of
things which has been regretfully sacrificed to necessity
everywhere else; these everywhere may grow and spread
as it pleases, including what is useless and even what is
harmful. The mental realm of phantasy is also such a
reservation reclaimed from the encroaches of the reality-
principle.

Freud comes back to this subject later in Civilization and
Its Discontents (1929). He admits that he is puzzled by
what he calls the “amazing” tendency of presumably civil-
ilized men to idealize simple and often primitive conditions

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of life. What puzzles him most is the implication that
mankind would be happier if our complex, technical order
could somehow be abandoned. “How has it come about,”
he asks, “that so many people have adopted this strange
attitude of hostility to civilization?”\(^4\)

Freud’s answer — an avowedly speculative one — is that
such attitudes are the product of profound, long-standing
discontent. He interprets them as signs of widespread
frustration and repression. Although he assumes that every
social order rests upon the denial of powerful instinctual
needs, we are allowed to infer that today’s advanced society
may be similarly repressive. Can it be that our institu-
tions and cultural standards are enforcing an increasingly
painful, almost unbearable degree of privation of instinct?
If so, this might well explain the addiction of modern
man to puerile fantasies. In the light of these conjectures,
the sentiments we have considered take on a pathological
coloring, as if symptomatic of a collective neurosis.

Aided by the insights of Freud, Ortega, and the his-
torians, we may begin to characterize the dominant motive
back of this curious state of mind. Evidently it is generated
by an urge to withdraw from civilization’s growing power
and complexity. What is attractive in pastoralism is the
felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape,
a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Move-
ment toward such a symbiotic landscape also may be under-
stood as movement away from an “artificial” world, a
world identified with “art,” using this word in its broadest
sense to mean the disciplined habits of mind or arts devel-
oped by organized communities. In other words, this im-
pulse gives rise to a symbolic motion away from centers
of civilization toward their opposite, nature, away from
sophistication toward simplicity, or, to introduce the cardi-
nal metaphor of the literary mode, away from the city toward the country. When this impulse is unchecked, the result is a simple-minded wishfulness, a romantic perversion of thought and feeling.

If this more popular kind of pastoralism were the only kind evident in America today, we should have every reason to conclude that it is merely another of our many vehicles of escape from reality — one of those collective mental activities which can be taken seriously only for diagnostic purposes. When we turn from the general to the "high" literary culture, however, we are struck at once by the omnipresence of the same motive. One has only to consider the titles which first come to mind from the classical canon of our literature — the American books admired most nowadays — to recognize that the theme of withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is central to a remarkably large number of them. Again and again, the imagination of our most regarded writers — one thinks of Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Frost, Hemingway — has been set in motion by this impulse. But while the starting point of their work and of sentimental pastoralism may be the same, the results could hardly be more different.

How shall we define that difference? The work of serious writers is different, clearly, in most of the ways that works of art differ from the flow of casual, undisciplined expression that makes up the general culture. In fact the question, might easily be put aside, as it often is, simply by assuming that "literature" embodies a more sensitive and precise, a "higher," mode of perception. To do that, however, is to miss a chance of defining the complex relations between serious literature and the larger body of meanings and values, the general culture, which envelops

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it. An initial receptivity to the pastoral impulse is one way in which our best writers have grounded their work in the common life. But how, then, are we to explain the fact that the same impulse generates such wholly different states of mind? While in the culture at large it is the starting point for infantile wish-fulfilment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia, and a naive, anachronistic primitivism, yet it also is the source of writing that is invaluable for its power to enrich and clarify our experience. Where, then, shall we locate the point of divergence between these two modes of consciousness?

Rather than attempt to answer the question in general terms, I want to describe an event which points to an answer. Although it is an episode in the life of a writer who was to become famous, it is in other respects a typical and indeed commonplace event of the time. No doubt most of the writer's contemporaries, whether literary men or not, had similar experiences. Yet in retrospect we can see that this ordinary experience, partly because of its typicality, was one of those inconspicuous moments of discovery that has proven to be decisive in the record of our culture. What the writer discovers, though he by no means recognizes its importance, is a metaphor; he seize upon the symbolic property or meaning in the event itself — its capacity to express much of what he thinks and feels about his situation.

On the morning of July 27, 1844, Nathaniel Hawthorne sat down in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts, to await (as he put it) "such little events as may happen." His purpose, so far as we can tell, was chiefly literary,