

The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland

William Barillas

Ohio State University Press (Feb 20, 2006)

Unknown \$39.95 (272pp)

978-0-8214-1660-0

The idea of a pastoral golden age is as old as the oldest Western literature. The literature of the American heartland, the Midwest, while lacking the distinguished inheritance of New England, the bohemian glamour of the West Coast, or the tragic dimension of the South, nevertheless expresses a mature pastoral tradition found in many writers. A Midwesterner and assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, the author defines the subject of Midwestern pastoral to be a “middle ground located geographically between the Ohio valley, the Great Plains, and the Great Lakes, and figuratively, between wildness and domesticity, aesthetics and practicality.”

Here, Barillas traces the development of the pastoral genre through the work of five major authors—novelist Willa Cather, proto-environmentalist Aldo Leopold, poets Theodore Roethke and James Wright, and versatile man of letters Jim Harrison—in addition to briefer treatments of other writers and artists.

The Midwestern pastoral tradition, in Barillas's view, owes its primary intellectual debts to Jefferson's “yeoman farmer” and the Romantic emphasis on the individual. While the writers examined here express different “versions” of pastoral, all five generally cohere to a pastoral framework that includes a spiritual sense of place, a respect for labor and community, and a marked contrast between rural and urban. With this in mind, Barillas sets out “to relate these writers to their local geographies and to explain the terms by which they counter the placelessness, despair, and abstraction of much mainstream literature and literary theory.”

Barillas interestingly connects the broken humanity of these writers to a broken landscape poisoned by greed and neglect and the site of the extermination of Native Americans and buffalo. Cather omits from her Midwestern narratives the entire existence of the Native Americans displaced to make possible the immigrant farmer experience she chronicles. Leopold was a compromiser, a realist who wrote for the farmers and hunters other environmentalists often view as a scourge. Roethke's songs of lament for the Midwestern aesthetic are weighed against the poet's shallow egotism and yearning for fame. The working-class Wright struggled with mental illness rooted, Barillas contends, in the fouled terrain of his home. Harrison's work swings between a Zen appreciation of the humblest natural locations and a derivative, Hemingwayesque male posturing.

Pastoral is an implicitly elegiac mode, but these Midwestern pastorals articulate an affirmative vision of the world that rejects high modernist abstraction in favor of identification with one place, one land, and one ethos of connectedness, respect, and balance. Barillas concludes: “We have in the region's literature a vision of a land full of natural resources—fields, forests, rivers, and lakes—which can bring people cultural as well as economic rewards if they learn, as have many writers and artists, to love Midwestern places for their intrinsic beauty and spiritual worth.”

VINCE BREWTON (August 7, 2006)

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