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THE PASTORAL VISION OF ERNEST BUCKLER IN *THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY*

I

Traditionally pastoral is associated with classical evocations of the Golden Age of Arcadia, with forests of Arden where man finds "good in everything", with those numberless shepherds and their mates, called Corin, Damon, Phyllis or Clorinda, who throng the world of Renaissance pastoral, and with Judaic-Christian visions of man's pre-lapsarian state, extending from the Book of Genesis to William Golding's *The Inheritors*. From the earliest of the pastoral Idylls of Theocritus to such recent examples as the closing section of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, the pastoral impulse has derived from what Renato Poggioli has defined as "a double longing after innocence and happiness, to be recovered not through conversion or regeneration, but merely through a retreat."[1]

Manifestations of this impulse, particularly in modern literature, may of course be far more various than the traditional associations of pastoral imply.[2] Pastoral may be any form of pleasurably-remembered past juxtaposed against a more complex, less innocent and certainly less pleasant present reality. The pastoral world may be geographically defined, as happens when a rural setting is juxtaposed against an urban and more technologically advanced one. It may be sociologically defined in terms of class structure as William Empson so brilliantly perceived in *Some Versions of Pastoral*.[3] It may be chronologically defined within the life-cycle of the individual by juxtaposing the simplicity and innocence of childhood against the consciousness of complex adult experience. Or it may be defined in moral terms by juxtaposing, for example, communal and non-materialistic values against those of individualism and capitalistic enterprise. Typically the pastoralist possesses a double vision that combines a reverence for the pastoral world with an awareness of its harsher and potentially tragic features. The intelligent pastoralist is aware that Death is one of the inhabitants of Arcadia,[4] and that the mortals who live there may well be ignorant (rather than innocent), coarse and brutish (rather than noble), and frustrated and impatient (rather than calm and contemplative).

Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952) is a fine example of the pastoral impulse, and its meaning is greatly illuminated when viewed within the framework of the pastoral tradition. When the novel is considered in these terms, one is able to perceive the profound manner in which Buckler transforms his geographically-, chronologically- and morally-defined pastoral world into a spiritual landscape itself symbolic of the mind of his semi-autobiographical protagonist, David Canaan.[5]

Buckler's geographic setting is an imaginary part of Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, the fictional Entremont being not unlike Buckler's own Centrelea. Like some special form of latter-day enclosed garden, Entremont (as the name suggests) is bounded by North and South Mountains and for David Canaan, by a river to the north "cut wide by the Fundy tides" (p. 13) and a stream to the south. These natural barriers, which are constantly referred to in the novel, offer David a choice between the world of the Valley and the world beyond, and, as the novel develops, it becomes clear that this choice symbolizes the spiritual dilemma that confronts him throughout the thirty years of his life described in the novel. Cutting into the Valley are the highway and the railway, representative as so frequently in North American pastoral of the encroachments of urbanisation and technological progress and of the means of escape for those for whom the pastoral world no longer has any meaning.[6] To these Buckler adds "The Letter" (the title of Part Two of the novel) by means of which David first communicates with the outside world as represented by Toby, a Halifax boy, member of the same penpal club and a personification of the restless city spirit. Finally, there is the radio with its power to transmute those who live in the Valley not "from the imperfec thing into the real, but veined with the shaly amalgam of replica" (p. 229).

In chronological terms Buckler's pastoral is set in the recent past, presenting an image of rural Nova Scotia prior to the Second World War. I is a world that has now largely disappeared but, as so often in modern pastoral, its disappearance is recent enough for the reader's nostalgia (and eve guilt if he shares the environmentalist's sense of responsibility) to be mad especially acute.[7] As such the externals of the choice that David faces are close to us. We may live in an urbanised environment by choice or necessity, but we remain aware of the garden that has so recently been desecrated. At the same time, Buckler presents his pastoral world as the childhood memory of his literary *persona* David. The Theocritean pastoral pattern, in typically post-Romantic fashion, is transformed into a journey from childhood to maturity and from innocence to experience. In these terms David's choice between Mountain and Valley is a choice between failure (or refusal) to accept himself and full self-recognition.

The moral pattern of life in Buckler's Valley derives from a fundamental sense of community, manifested in such communal rituals as the annual tending of the graveyard (ch. XII), the building of a church (p. 30), care of the bereaved (p. 42 ff.), quilting parties (p. 57), breaking out the roads (p. 74), dancing (p. 80) and house-warming (p. 157). Coupled with this is the reverence accorded to the family unit, the metaphoric heart of which for the Canaan family is the kitchen, "the one small corner safe from the sweat of the fields and the fret of the seasons" and "the witness to everything in their lives" (p. 23). It is a life of slow thoughts, few words and, for the Canaan family, minimal material concern (p. 125). In the Valley, man lives in harmony with nature and feels himself part of an eternal historical process. Joseph, who is David's father and largely embodies the pastoral virtues in the novel, says at one point, for example: "My land fits me loose and easy, like my old clothes. That rock there is one my father rolled out, and my son's sons will look at these rocks I am rolling out today. Someone of my own name will always live in my house" (p. 157).

The positive attributes of Buckler's pastoral world are relatively clear. The true complexity of the novel, however, rests with the manner in which Buckler invests his *persona* with the double vision one finds in almost all the more perceptive pastoralists. David indeed possesses a reverence and adulation for the world in which he is brought up. In fact, at times, it is possible to argue, as Warren Talman has done, that David's vision is distorted by an excess of reverence that causes him to invest such figures as his father with qualities that run contrary to the reader's more objective perceptions.[8] On the other hand, David, sensitive and complex in his responses, a person of quick thoughts ("Smart bugger. Smart as hell" p. 284), realizes that life in the Valley at times can be characterised by brutish sensibility, lack of communication between those who love each other most, and general self-perpetuating mindlessness: "What was the good of learning here? All they thought about was liftin' and luggin'. They thought if anyone was smart it was like being half foolish. You had to cripple every damn thought you had, every damn thing you did, so they wouldn't look at you funny" (p. 163). Far from being an eternal refuge from the historical process, the Valley, David realises, is about to become the victim of the forces of technology (p. 229). Furthermore, it has always been subject to time, which can bring death and (more terrible) can sever the bonds between human beings, leaving moral and emotional wounds that cannot be healed: "He tried to pretend that, by sheer will, he could reach back through the transparent (but so maddeningly impenetrable) partition of time, to switch the course of their actions at some place or other" (p. 148). David also suffers the intense frustration of the educated man who looks at the world he loves and, without being able to do anything to help, can see where a little "physics" whether applied to moving a heavy rock or cutting down a tall tree would prevent needless expense of sweat or (in the case of David's father) loss of life.

Standing at the centre of the novel David must choose between the pastoral world of the Valley, in which to stay could paradoxically lead to spiritual imprisonment, and the more intense inner adventure offered by his own complex sensibility and advanced education. A choice in this latter direction would lead symbolically towards the Mountain to the south of David's home, but a major part of the price of such a choice would be isolation and alienation from family and community. Throughout the novel we expect David to opt for some form of voluntary exile rather in the manner of Stephen Dedalus with whom he has so much in common. We expect too the familiar pattern of pastoral to assert itself by a final swing of the protagonist away from the pastoral world, which represents (like Eden) only a temporary domicile in life's larger pattern, towards the complexities and sophistication of life in an urban and technological culture. However, David makes if anything a tougher decision: he elects to live in the Valley. Here more than anywhere else, Buckler (perhaps recreating his own experiences) makes a striking departure from the traditional formula of pastoral. David's choice represents a triumph, and his eventual climb to the summit of the Mountain provides the looked-for symbolic demonstration of his coming to terms with himself and his heritage. For this reason the closing pages of the novel are worth considering in some detail, for within them Buckler has not only shown the climax of his protagonist's spiritual development but has done this by providing an unexpected variation upon traditional pastoral pattern.

II

The final chapter of *The Mountain and the Valley*, which is entitled "Epilogue—The Mountain", deals with the momentous spiritual crisis and accompanying revelation which David experiences as, for the first time in his life, he climbs to the very top of the South Mountain. Throughout the novel the Mountain has had a special meaning for David: "Everyone has one place that seems like his own, one place he wants to take his friend. With David it was the mountain" (p. 144). In the opening lines of the novel we learn that as far back as childhood, "whenever anger had dishevelled him, or confusion, or the tick, tick, tick, of emptiness . . . , he had sought the log road that went to the top of the mountain" (p. 13), and later we hear of his plans to build a camp at the top of the mountain and write a book there (p. 150). The earliest memory David recalls in the novel concerns his childhood excitement over a proposed expedition up the mountain, an expedition that never gets beyond the barrier of the stream where David's father, brother and himself meet some men bearing news of the drowning of two neighbours (p. 29). At nineteen David has still not been to the top (p. 174), and the symbolic implication of this is emphasized when David's twin sister Anna and his city friend climb there, and Buckler remarks of Anna that "It seemed as if this minute on the top of the mountain they'd been climbing to was the peak of her whole life" (p. 269). Indirectly we are thus prepared for the climax in David's spiritual development that occurs when he too finally breaks from the Valley and reaches the top.

As David begins to walk towards the Mountain, Buckler makes clear that what we are about to witness is a spiritual journey, the externals of landscape being a manifestation of the state of David's inner consciousness (as indeed they have been throughout the novel):

> . . . the sensations of his own flesh had become outside. The inside was nothing but one great white naked eye of self-consciousness, with only its own looking to look at. The frozen landscape made no echo inside him. There was no tendril of interaction.
>
> And then (in the reverse of what happens when you stare at a pattern of lines until suddenly the pattern moves off the page and cleaves to your retina), as he looked at the frozen landscape it was as if the outline of the frozen landscape *became* his consciousness: that inside and outside were not two things, but one—the bare shape of what his eyes saw. (p. 281)

In something close to mystical trance, David loses consciousness of his own body ("walking became almost effortless, as if his flesh had levitated" p. 282) and feels himself to be in alsolute isolation (pp. 286, 289). Now at last his sense of temporal progression, which has so distinguished his sensibility from that of his rural neighbours throughout the novel, is overcome in a transcendent fusion of past and present: "It was as if time were not a movement now, but flat, like space. Things past or future were not downstream or upstream on a one-way river, but in rooms. They were all on the same level" (p. 287).[9] The brook symbolically behind him, David is transplanted to another time—a time which permits a new beginning, something which he has hitherto felt to be impossible:

> It is not a *memory* of that time: there is no echo quality to it. It is something that deliberate memory (with the changed perspective of the years between changing the very object it lights) cannot achieve at all. It is not a returning: you are there for the first time, immediately. No one has been away, nothing has changed—the time or the place or the faces. The years between have been shed. There is an original glow on the faces like on the objects of home. It is like a flash of immortality: nothing behind you is sealed, you can live it again. You can begin again. . . .[10] (p. 289)

Incidents and thoughts from the past flash through his mind and he climbs higher. What he describes as "voices" swarm about him, becoming increasingly insistent until they are unbearable and force David to scream for them to stop:

> Suddenly there were all the voices of all things everywhere at all times as they *might* have been. If the wind had been exactly that infinitesimal way different sometime. . . . If somewhere some face had smiled a hair's breadth differently. . . . If only one thought had shaped itself exactly that little way other than the way it did. . . . Then all the rest of it. . . . He heard the crushing screaming challenge of the infinite permutations of the possible . . . the billion raised to the billionth power. . . .
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> He screamed, "Stop, stop. . . ." (p. 297)

David's arrival at the top of the Mountain coincides with this climax and a further "translation" occurs as the voices are "soaked up at once. Not in a vanishing, but as the piercing clamor of nerves in fever is soaked up in sleep" (p. 298). Like the epiphany experienced by Stephen Dedalus on the sea-shore in *Portrait of the Artist*, David's "translation" is accompanied by a sense of his destiny as a writer, and indeed we realize during these closing pages that the book David would have written has indeed been written, for it is the one just read.[11] David's spiritual fulfilment complete, he looks symbolically back over the Mountain at the road leading up from the Valley and is aware that there is "nothing left on the road to go back for now. The sweating and straining and fearful caution as you eased the patched-up runner over the cradle hills, and the sharp watch on the sun that threatened to take all the snow, were all of yesterday . . ." (p. 299).

David's experience is followed by his death. Snow falls and his body becomes indistinguishable from the log beside him. He becomes one with nature in a way that his father never perhaps achieved. At the same time a train thunders through the valley, reminding us of the pastoral drama that we have witnessed in the earlier sections of the novel. On a previous occasion the passing of a train left David frustrated and angry ("and the train of your own life went by and left you standing there in the field" p. 277), but now the sound is irrelevant, for the conflict within David between life in the Valley and life beyond has been resolved. David's inner destiny is complete; his search for self over. His death, startling as it may seem in the pattern of pastoral, is not in any sense representative of failure, like that, say, of Gerald Crich (also in the snow) in Lawrence's *Women in Love*. Instead it represents the paradoxical triumph of "ripeness is all".

As David lies in the snow, a partridge flies up into the air. Like the train, the bird takes the easier path that David might have followed and falls "swiftly in one straight movement, as if burdened with the weight of its own flight: down between the trees, down, swoopingly, directly, intensely, exactly down over the far side of the mountain" (p. 302). Buckler's novel is thus a pastoral in which the hero, in contradiction of all traditional patterns, never passes beyond the boundaries of the pastoral world in which he finds himself. The achievement of Buckler's hero is to unite within his own consciousness the double vision of the pastoralist and to testify in his life to the equal claims of the values of Mountain and Valley. When David finally does climb the Mountain, it is not in negation of his experience in the Valley but to unify that experience within the single, all-embracing and god-like vision of the artist he has finally become:

> As he thought of telling these things exactly, all the voices came close about him. They weren't swarming now. He went out into them until there was no inside left. He saw at last how you could *become* the thing you told. (p. 298)

NOTES

1. "The Oaten Flute", *HLB*, 11 (1957), 147.
2. Among writers who have sought to broaden the traditional concepts of pastoral are: William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935); Laurence Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia* (London: Chatto &

Windus, 1972); John F. Lynen, *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970); Renato Poggioli, "The Oaten Flute", *HLB*, 11 (1957), 147-84); "The Pastoral of the Self", *Daedalus*, 88 (1959), 686-99; "Naboth's Vineyard: Or the Pastoral Vision of the Social Order", *JHI*, 24 (1963), 3-24; and Harold E. Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1971). All quotations from Buckler's novel will be from the New Canadian Library edition (Toronto & Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1961).

3. *Cf.* Toliver, pp. 8-11.
4. On this matter, see Erwin Panofsky's "Et in Arcadia Ego: On the Cenception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau", in *Philosophy and History*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton (1936; rpt. New York: Harper, 1963), pp. 223-54.
5. To some extent, of course, the landscapes of pastoral are all of a spiritual nature and this has been recognized by more perceptive critics. Bruno Snell's chapter on Virgil in *The Discovery of Mind*: *The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford, Blackwell, 1953) is a model piece of criticism in this respect.
6. For a thorough discussion of the symbolic role of the railway in North American pastoral, see Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, pp. 3-33. D. O. Spettigue in "The Way It Was", *Canadian Literature*, 32 (1967), alludes to the train as "the means to escape into the larger world" and compares (p. 47) Buckler's symbolic use of it to the role of the train in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* and *The Well*.
7. Lerner identifies nostalgia as the basic emotion of pastoral, pp. 41-62.
8. "Wolf in the Snow" in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel (Chicago Press, 1971), p. 238.
9. Both Pastoral and Utopian visions, as Lerner and others have remarked, are ways of refusing history (Lerner, p. 72).
10. As if to enforce the significance of David's transcendence over the forces of time, Buckler later interposes a brief picture of Ellen (David's grandmother) down in the Valley finishing a rug made from pieces of the clothes of the various members of the Canaan family. Symbolically the rug represents a triumph over time as past and present are woven into the one unified fabric. She has been gradually filling in the concentric circles of the rug's pattern from the outside towards the middle. The final centre-piece is made from white lace immediately adjacent to a piece of scarlet from a cloak of David's. The white links with the snow covering David at the end of the novel and with the "great white naked eye of self-consciousness" (p. 281) within David himself. The completion of the rug is thus indicative of David's own fulfilment.
11. Gregory M. Cook, "Ernest Buckler: His Creed and Craft", Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Acadia 1967, p. 172.