

**THE FEELING FOR NATURE  
IN ENGLISH PASTORAL  
POETRY. A THESIS**

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The Feeling for Nature in English Pastoral Poetry. A Thesis by J. Ingram Bryan

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The Feeling for Nature in  
English Pastoral Poetry

BY

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A THESIS

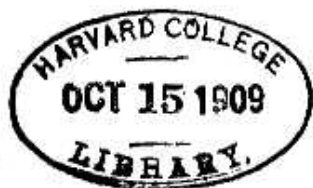
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## CHAPTER I

### THE NATURE OF PASTORAL POETRY

**T**HERE are doubtless many lovers of literature to whom the attempt to discover a feeling for nature in Pastoral Poetry, will seem a hopeless endeavor. In the history of imaginative and emotive verse, the pastoral somehow appears to have been looked upon as a mode of writing quite incapable of any genuine sympathy with the real things of life, least of all with nature herself, the subject of the pastoral being seldom alluded to, save as a synonym for cold and affected conventionality. Yet some of the greatest poets essayed this mode, and in the shepherd's garb, failed not to make "the too much loved earth more lovely." \*

Whether the poet be able so to project himself into nature, as to cause her to interpret herself to him, must assuredly depend more upon the genius of the artist himself, than upon the mode of his expression. The pastoral poet, not less than any poet, must in some way discover that quality interwoven with the essential texture of creation, which we call beauty, for only as he does so, is he true to nature and to poetry. We venture, therefore, upon the 'a priori' statement that all verse not founded on nature lacks the quality of poetry, and becomes only a convenient way of talking nonsense.

It is undoubtedly true that in the days of its greatest popularity, under the auspices of syncophants and courtiers, the pastoral often became either diluted into the ridiculously fanciful, if not the

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\* "Apology for Poetry" by Sir Phillip Sidney.

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absurdly impossible, but this defection in deference to the glamor of courts, was a negation of its birth-right, and never the prevailing note of the great pastoralists whose magnificent outbursts of rural song, charged with all the tender beauties of nature and alive with the delicate emotions of rustic love, pipe melodiously down the orchestras of time. An instrument that has discoursed such eloquent music, and to whose sweet piping even princes among the poets have attuned their ears, must surely have possessed some virtue capable of stealing an echo from nature's heart.

It is important to inquire at the outset, what is meant by the term "pastoral" as applied to poetry, and to grasp as far as possible the essential features that distinguish it from other types of literature. Satisfactory definitions are always difficult to frame, and in matters of art, often impossible. Pastoral poetry in particular, is one of those elusive phenomena that cannot be defined in terms which would satisfy a logician. It were as easy to describe a mass of cloud and shower moving down a mountainous coastline and over an arm of the sea, lit up where the sun breaks through, by a wonderful and delicate inweaving of the subtlest harmonies of color. Equally subtle are the effects upon which the pastoral depends; and we must not insist upon a faultless definition of it, any more than upon a faultless example of the pastoral itself. Poetry so capable of being charged with nature's sweetness, cannot be caught, penned up and numbered like a flock of sheep; it has a habit of breaking bounds and may be found in any guise of poetry or even prose.\*

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\* "Elizabethan Lyrics," by F. E. Schelling, *Litt. D.*, P. 52.

If the word "pastoral" be a generic term denoting a literary mode and not a special literary form, its comprehensive possibilities for an appreciation of nature are at once evident, and to inquire how far the poets have succeeded in using their opportunity, is our present task. It is upon the results of this inquiry that our definition of the pastoral must be based, rather than upon any preconceived theory as to what they ought to have done.

Among the Greeks where the star of pastoral song first arose, the term idyl which was the earliest literary form to exhibit the pastoral motive, sufficiently explains what they conceived to be its nature. The idyl of the Alexandrians is a little picture of rustic or town life, made up of legends of the gods, or passages from personal experience, the poem flowing in a somewhat reflective strain. In the idyls of the Greeks we hear nature speaking with a human voice conveying impressions of rustic emotion and environment, and in a delicate, simple, but none the less poetic manner.

In the Latin eclogue which was an attempt at imitating the Greek idyl, we note the germs of Grecian idealization beginning to develop but no evidence of ability to maintain the Greek appreciation of nature. Virgil, the first among the Romans to try this kind of poetry, departed from the original intent of the idyl, and was not entirely successful in reproducing the sweet simplicity and delicate sentiment of Theocritus. In the days of later Italy when artistically the pastoral reached a high degree of literary culture in the hands of Boccaccio, Guarini and Tasso, it still remained as artificial in its conception as in the days when Virgil used it to cover the experiences of his fictitious beings, or to paint the cold conceits of an imperious age. Though popular