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“Poo-tee-weet?” and Other Pastoral Questions

Charles HOLDEFER

- 1 “Listen,” says the narrator at the end of the first chapter of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After much struggle, he has managed to write about his experience of the firebombing of Dresden in World War II. He has finally finished his “war book.” This story, he announces, “ends like this: Poo-tee-weet?” (22). Sure enough, almost two hundred pages later, the last words of the novel are “Poo-tee-weet?” (215).
- 2 Or are these words? What does “Poo-tee-weet?” mean, anyway? Surely Vonnegut is representing a sound, not a part of the lexicon. The context tells us that it’s the sound of a bird, something that the main character of the novel, Billy Pilgrim, hears in the aftermath of the massacre. And for that reason, it does offer a certain kind of sense. It *means* something. In the rubble of a devastated city, “nature” is audible and ostensibly interacting with the protagonist.
- 3 *Slaughterhouse-Five* is usually interpreted, reasonably enough, as a metafictional meditation on time and human violence by a writer trying to come to grips with his war experience.¹ The real-life Vonnegut was a young American GI captured by the Germans; he had the misfortune to be brought to Dresden shortly before its destruction, as well as the bizarre good luck to survive because he and some other prisoners had been herded into an underground slaughterhouse meat locker, *Schlachthof Fünf*, the source of the novel’s title. The fact that the book highlighted a war crime by the victors, and that it was published in 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, influenced the novel’s early reception (Biddle 120); still, the overall tone of the book is less one of protest than of perplexity at human folly, or even resignation, as expressed by the narrator’s repeated refrain at every mention of death: “so it goes.”² Some readers have classified the book as quietistic (Tanner 198; Merrill and Scholl 65-76), though Vonnegut addresses a wide range of concerns in a variety of settings including wartime Germany, Cold War America and also, in a science fiction twist, the Planet of Tralfamadore, to which the protagonist Billy time travels and lives naked under a bubble as a specimen of the human race in an extra-

terrestrial zoo. Billy is not a heroic figure or flattering example of his species but this fact makes him representative, for better or worse, of humanity and, perhaps, the perfect interlocutor for the question: "Poo-tee-weet?"

- 4 It would be misplaced to argue that Vonnegut was primarily interested in pastoral or pastoral sounds. As the preceding description makes clear, other questions were at the forefront, and this conspicuous sonic example is easily understood as a statement about the inadequacy of language in the face of horror. This is the view put forward by the author's fictional persona in the first chapter, in an aside to Seymour Lawrence, who was Vonnegut's real-life publisher. He describes his trouble with writing a "war book":

There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like 'Poo-tee-weet?' (19)

- 5 This statement is likely close to the real author's sensibility, as suggested by the book as a whole. Still, it need not be taken as the last word. Thomas Pughe has underlined the importance of the act of reading in constituting pastoral texts (5) and for *Slaughterhouse-Five*, many readings are possible, especially from a 21st century, post-pastoral perspective, which can interpret a seemingly affectless representation of sound not as a marker of an indecipherable mystery but as an invitation, as a possible opening in the text.
- 6 The orthographic transcription *Poo-tee-weet* is, after all, followed by a question mark. It has entered language and the bird is interacting with its surroundings in Dresden, with Billy Pilgrim, and on another level, with us, the readers. At very least, this example will provide a springboard to consider Kurt Vonnegut alongside other writers who offer illustrative sound samples and to explore some of the issues at stake in regard to pastoral sound in literature. I'll start by addressing the pitfalls of sentimental pastoral, particularly the confusion of sound and sense. Then I'll focus on sound processes in the text, how the tension between sound and meaning is acknowledged and can rely on personification, which, as William Empson observed, locates the general in the particular. Finally, I'll consider the inevitable question of ideological perspectives, and how pastoral sounds in the 21st century might still call us to "come away" by relocating the *locus amoenus* not in a place, but in a state of attentiveness.

1. Pitfalls of sentimental pastoral

- 7 Pastoral sounds in literature can be construed in a variety of ways, and there is always the risk of sentimental pastoral or escapism (Marx 5-11). An overly thematic approach reduces literature to a kind of costume party of rustic dress, baaing sheep and rippling brooks. Throw in a flute, and the pastoral soundscape is complete. Unfortunately, a thematic approach circumscribes the aural *locus amoenus* in the worst sense: it is conceptually parochial and easily slides into caricature.
- 8 More adventurous readers, particularly lovers of literature who delight in their powers of association, aren't immune to the risk of sentimental pastoral, either. In their enthusiasm they can neglect an elementary distinction: namely, that pastoral sounds, in a basic sense, do not exist. To speak of pastoral in literature is to enter a rich historical web of meaning that has been mediated over millennia by language. But sounds alone are not language. A phoneme is not a morpheme. Which is more pastoral: a diphthong or a plosive? Or,

putting phonology aside, a hum or a chirp? Such questions don't really make sense as they reflect a confusion of categories. This observation might sound like belabouring the obvious, but readers (including some very sophisticated readers) are sometimes tempted to blur the boundaries in the service of a desirable ideal, a longed-for linguistic Eden or uncorrupted sound palette. Consider this description by Terry Eagleton of the heyday of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis at Cambridge:

Where the organic society lingered on for the Leavisites was in certain uses of the English language. The language of commercial society was abstract and anaemic: it had lost touch with the living roots of sensuous experience. In really "English" writing, however, language "concretely enacted" such felt experience: true English literature was verbally rich, complex, sensuous and particular, and the best poem, to caricature the case a little, was one which read aloud sounded rather like chewing an apple. [...] It embodied a creative wholeness which had been historically lost, and to read literature was thus to regain vital touch with the roots of one's own being. (36-37)

- 9 Of course, pre-industrial organic society as envisioned by the Leavisites reflects their particular reading of historical context, and the concrete example caricatured by Eagleton is not explicitly about pastoral, but it's possible to see this description as a version of sonic sentimental pastoral, which unrigorously ascribes to sound an idealized set of meanings. A version of pre-commercial Arcadia, we are told, "sounded" (my emphasis). It invites us, in pastoral fashion, to "come away."
- 10 A generation later George Orwell, in "Politics and the English Language," had his own flirtation with sound sentimentalism, observing that "bad writers [...] are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones" (108). What is grand, he believes, is *suspect*, lacking certain vital qualities. Specifically, Orwell argued that good old Anglo-Saxon words were less susceptible to being debased for purposes of obfuscation. Granted, I'm pulling Orwell's complaint out of its context (a discussion of the debasement of thought by totalitarian-influenced language) and his overreaching statement about sound is, in the same essay, counterbalanced by subtle critical reading (e.g., he also puts great emphasis on the importance of image); still, his concern about the corrupting or even sinister uses of what is "euphonious" (112) is more than a riposte against lazy abstractions. It is also nostalgic and implies a certain faith in putative meanings of sound. This example is more general and less explicitly an appeal to pastoral sentiment than the "organic society" of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, but it illustrates, nonetheless, a confusion.
- 11 More recently, ecocriticism has sometimes evinced a suspicion not just of the sound of a certain kind of language but of language itself. In "Regarding Silence: Cross-Cultural Roots of Eco-poetic Meditation," David Gilcrest asks, "What is writing but 'dead ashes' in comparison to life, the natural world?" (22). He writes approvingly of representing "experience of the world unmediated by language" (18), and of "silencing the chatter of language" (19). Our species' linguistic capacity can be construed as a burden to be sloughed off. It becomes an obstacle or an annoying tic: dispensable "chatter." In an ecocritical pastoral context, it would seem, language is of little use for the shepherd.
- 12 How to escape language to this degree remains puzzling (at least to me), but in his essay Gilcrest is responding in part to Leonard Scigaj, who observed, "We cannot limit the other beyond the self in our literary creations to other humans, human institutions, and human culture" (7). And here Scigaj makes a fair point, for it is surely true that humans easily ensnare themselves in their language, if it is only an echo-chamber of species-specific

concerns, a sort of biological inside joke. On the other hand, language isn't *intrinsically* suspect. We need to avoid the pitfall of seeing it as an alienating feature that somehow sets us apart from nature (thus reinforcing and "Us" an "It" dichotomy) instead of locating language *in* nature, as an element of a continuous whole (Holdefer 271).

- 13 Terry Gifford, in reference to Gary Snyder's post-pastoral poetry, has pursued this line of post-pastoral questioning, asking "isn't nature culture and culture nature?" ("Snyder and Post-Pastoral" 82). Quoting Snyder's "By Frazier Creek Falls," he underlines how the land "is all there is, forever / we *are* it / it sings through us—" (*No Nature*, 234). Not only us, of course (this is Scigaj's argument), but a schism between culture and nature is a false problem, and putting this problem behind us is fundamental to post-pastoral thinking. In a later essay, Snyder defends some of the supposedly alienating ingredients of culture:

Consciousness, mind, imagination *and* language are fundamentally wild. 'Wild' as in wild ecosystems — richly interconnected, interdependent, and incredibly complex. Diverse, ancient, and full of information. [...] Is art an imposition of order on chaotic nature, or is art (also read 'language') a matter of discovering the grain of things [...]? The 'art of the wild' is to see art in the context of the process of nature (*A Place in Space* 168).

- 14 To Snyder's claim about seeing art in this context, we can readily add the possibility of *hearing* it. And how do we hear it? This invites the question of sound processes in a text, which I'll illustrate with a selection of writers who preceded Kurt Vonnegut. What are some of the modes which go beyond sentimental pastoral?

2. Sound processes

- 15 How, beyond some of the ways that I've just criticized as too limited, can we hear pastoral in a literary text? How is the distinction between sound and meaning negotiated in a pastoral setting? In many examples that avoid sentimental pastoralism, I would argue, the tension between sound and meaning figures conspicuously in the text and is acknowledged. Rather than remaining submerged and unexamined, the tension is brought to the surface. This happens both in narration and within the fundamental unit of the word. There are countless precursors to Vonnegut's "*Poo-tee-weet?*", among them examples by William Blake, James Joyce and Allen Ginsberg.
- 16 For instance, Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* describes a process, which emerges from the narration of an encounter experienced by the Piper:

Piping down the valleys wild,
Piping songs of pleasant glee,
On a cloud I saw a child,
And he laughing said to me:
"Pipe a song about a Lamb!"
So I piped with merry cheer
"Piper, pipe that song again;"
So I piped: he wept to hear.
"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
Sing thy songs of happy cheer!"
So I sung the same again,
While he wept with joy to hear.
"Piper, sit thee down and write
In a book, that all may read."

So he vanished from my sight,
 And I plucked a hollow reed,
 And I made a rural pen,
 And I stained the water clear,
 And I wrote my happy songs
 Every child may joy to hear. (19)

- 17 This poem has been exhaustively commented on from multiple perspectives, including, of course, pastoral (Gleckner 89; Hirsch 27-30); moreover, it's worth underlining that Blakean innocence exists in a fallen world (Dike 353-375) and is not to be confused with mere escapism or sentimental pastoral. For my purposes, in regard to sound, the text tells the story of a process toward literature. There is a movement here from piping to singing to writing. That is, from simple sound (stanza one) to sound "about a lamb" (stanza two, in which the distinction between sound and meaning is problematically blurred) to vocalized language (stanza three) to written text (stanzas four and five).
- 18 The narrative depicts a continuum of distinct modes which are all, nonetheless, aural. Interestingly, the final example of written language is not for silent reading, but is something that "Every child may joy to *hear*" (my emphasis). Differences in gradation are not submerged or taken for granted. They are, in fact, central to the poem.
- 19 Or consider this excerpt from "The Ecchoing Green," also from *Innocence*:
- The skylark and thrush,
 The birds of the bush,
 Sing louder around,
 To the bells' cheerful sound [...] (20-21)
- 20 Note here the degree of cooperation: the birds sing in accompaniment to the bells; there is an interaction with the human presence of a collaborative sort.³ Rather than being merely naïve, it can also be read as compatible with the post-pastoral motif of collapsing the human/nature divide. Like other facets of Blakean innocence, it belies its surface simplicity. The same is true of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. "Poo-tee-weet?" can be interpreted in a number of ways (e.g., is the bird asking Billy, "Are you OK?" or is it sharing his bewilderment at the destruction and saying, in effect, "What the fuck?")—but in either case, a connection is formed between the bird and Billy. Pastorally speaking, the sound could also be heard as a call to "come away."
- 21 Elsewhere in *Innocence*, in "Laughing Song," the inanimate trappings of a pastoral setting (woods, stream, air, meadows etc.) are personified as laughing; the *locus amoenus* is given a voice. A grasshopper and some birds laugh, too, and join with humans, "To sing the sweet chorus of Ha, Ha, He" (28). In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson underlined the considerable power of personification, when "the general is given a sort of sacred local habitation in the particular" (81). In these examples, the particularization is also sonic, an audible rendering of the complex into the simple.
- 22 The above cases rely on narration, an unfolding process. Sometimes, though, pastoral sounds enact the tension between sound and meaning even more locally, within a single word.⁴ For instance, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus thinks,
- [...] cricket was coming [...] And from here and from there came the sounds of the cricket bats through the soft grey air. They said: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops in a fountain slowly falling in the brimming pool. (41)
- 23 Personification (cricket bats "said") and onomatopoeia ("pick, pack, pock, puck") combine to evoke an aural atmosphere redolent of a *locus amoenus*. The simile of "drops in a fountain" complements the sound with an image. Literature is full of such examples but,

of course, pastoral needs a context—at least *some* framing narration will remain necessary, if only to set up the concentrated example. The indifferent devices of personification and onomatopoeia do not suffice in themselves (cricket bats or drops in a fountain do not literally “say” anything), a fact which is abundantly clear a few pages later, when Joyce uses similar techniques to describe the sounds of the pandybat and the cane used to beat the schoolboys. Stephen muses: “There were different kinds of pains for all the different sounds” (45). Clongowes Wood College is not the most pastoral of places, to put it mildly, but this example of a negative contrast effectively highlights the power of Stephen’s yearning for a sonic respite *somewhere else*, a restorative experience, which Stephen projects onto the sounds of the cricket bats saying: “pick, pack, pock, puck.”

- 24 Or, in a rather different context, consider this long-breath line from Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*: “I saw the best minds of my generation [...] who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars rattling through snow towards lonesome farms in grandfather night” (9, 11). As a foundational text of Beat literature, this poem has been widely commented upon, but once again I’ll limit my remarks to the idea of pastoral sound. On the face of it, a connection isn’t obvious—a “howl” is a far cry from Blake’s sing-along birds. But the gulf is really not so great. First, on a personal and idiosyncratic level, Ginsberg claimed to have experienced an auditory hallucination of William Blake’s voice in an East Harlem apartment in 1948, and for the rest of his life considered the moment as crucial to his development as a poet (Caveny 54). Secondly, it is possible to read *Howl* in a larger context of a North American pastoral of movement,⁵ where the shepherd is a Dharma bum and the *locus amoenus* is the open road. (In this particular example, it’s riding the rails.) Lastly, with regard to form, in addition to the unfurling Whitmanian long line and the image of lighting cigarettes, there is the conspicuous repetition of “boxcars boxcars boxcars.” As Michael Robbins has observed, although this could be another image, with “repeated words resembling the seemingly identical cars flashing by” (2014), it could also be an aural allusion. Perhaps Ginsberg is using onomatopoeia to heighten the sense of place, notably the “racketing” sound of the railway car (“boxcars boxcars boxcars,” my emphasis) travelling across a dark, vast continent. Considered in this manner, these boxcars mark more than just one more locale for “beat” counter-culture (this poem enumerates many examples, e.g., “negro streets” [9]; “Mexico [...] Tangiers [...] “the total animal soup of time,” [15, 16]). It is also where the individual can escape the pressures of civilization: it is a place of retreat, of renewal. These are all fundamental ingredients of pastoral—here not only seen but *heard*.

3. Ideological perspectives

- 25 In the above examples, literature simultaneously attests to the desire to blur distinctions between sound and meaning while respecting the fact that these distinctions exist. So where does that leave the reader? Beyond the question of how pastoral sounds are represented, there is the larger question of what they might have to tell us, not only about the text but about ourselves. Interpretation is problematic, but so is a formalist reading that limits itself to the mere description of processes.
- 26 Pastoral sounds align with no particular camp, ideologically speaking. For Leo Marx, pastoral is a dialectical mode of perception (43-44); Lawrence Buell has underlined how pastoral works as a cycle which is both institutional and counterinstitutional, available for “centripetal” consensualism or “centrifugal” opposition (50). In a sense pastoral

belongs to everyone, which is another way of saying that it belongs to no one. Its longevity, surely, is rooted in this versatility. Moreover, it shows no signs of going away. Terry Gifford has pointed to how the impulse for retreat and return persists and will still inform post-pastoral writing (*Pastoral* 174). Included in this prospect, of course, are pastoral sounds. Just as a sheep is a shared pastoral symbol for the Old Testament psalmist, Virgil, Blake and Monty Python, and a sheep's meaning gets negotiated in different ways, the same ought to be true of the sound of a sheep or of one of its pastoral stand-ins (birds, cricket bats, boxcars, etc.).

- 27 It should also be clear that if "Poo-tee-weet?" is a pastoral sound, it's not because it can make a claim to being more "natural" than other sounds. It is certainly not more natural than the screeches of birds fighting over corpses in a bombed-out city. Moreover, if nature is culture and culture nature, the bird's sound is not more natural than the symphonies of Wagner and Strauss that were performed at Dresden's Semperoper Opera House. Or, to press the point, the bird's sound is not more natural than the detonating Allied bombs that destroyed the Semperoper Opera House.
- 28 What makes "Poo-tee-weet?" pastoral is its ability to conjure up an aural *locus amoenus* where sounds resemble the language of our desire. In Leo Marx's famous description of the train whistle interrupting Nathaniel Hawthorne's reverie in *The Machine in the Garden*, he emphasizes how Hawthorne's "chief concern is the landscape of the psyche. The inner, not the outer world, is what interests him most [...] When he seizes on the auditory image of the train it is because it serves this purpose" (28, my emphasis). Marx further describes Hawthorne's inner landscape as "a cocoon of freedom [...] a shrine to the pleasure principle" (28). "Poo-tee-weet?" can thus be read as a wistful auditory gesture towards that special place. As a pastoral sound, it simultaneously announces itself as a sound while offering its listener a welcome meaning. Nature tells us what we want to hear.
- 29 Of course, from a post-pastoral perspective, this brings risks, because it suggests that the conversation in nature is about us. It can turn our surroundings into an infantile projection of our wishes and, in effect, make the world a sort of petting zoo⁶ or, more precisely, a mellow radio station that plays tunes to match our mood. In 1935 William Empson memorably described pastoral as the "process of putting the complex into the simple" (22); from a post-pastoral perspective, it is tempting to take that formulation a step further, and say that it attempts to squeeze the complex into the simplistic.
- 30 On the other hand, before dismissing pastoral sound (and, along with it, pastoral in general), one can also notice its interest not only for understanding modes of thinking from the past but also for informing conversations in the future. It is not excessively naïve or didactic to hope that after all these efforts and apparent missteps, we have learned something. An attempt to engage with non-human nature can be challenging in a welcome sense. It can help break down the Us/It dichotomy and lead us to experience art, as Snyder claimed, "in the process of the context of nature" (*A Place in Space* 168). Terry Gifford, with reference to Wendy Wheeler and Patrick Murphy, has referred more generally to a "dialogic listening mode" which is informed by a sense of ecological purpose as applied to everyday life. He points to "the question of the quality or effectiveness of both our understanding and our response, and how these are to be judged" ("Five Modes of 'Listening Deeply'" 17).
- 31 This question is far-reaching, because it encapsulates a rich triad: the aesthetic ("quality"); the practical ("effectiveness"); and the moral ("judged"), all filtered through the limitations of the human subject's understanding and response. For its scope, the

question goes beyond a hypothetical "eco-friendly" political agenda or a presumed "eco-aware" artistic code (though it would certainly include such pursuits). Above all, Gifford's question makes it clear that dialogic listening is not mere wish fulfilment or a pastorally-inspired retreat from responsibility. Quite the contrary. The triad enlists human listeners on multiple fronts and keeps them very much in the thick of things. The lure to "come away" invites a movement not to a place (the garden, the piper's valley, et al.) or to a time (lost Arcadia, etc.) but to a *state of attentiveness*. This state is a locus in its own right, and it participates in the world.

- 32 If humans are capable of moving beyond the narcissistic (or, if that is conceptually impossible, of at least channelling comparatively more *constructive* versions of our narcissism, along the lines of the aforementioned triad), then something good can come of the conversation with birds, cricket bats and boxcars. We can inhabit the world less myopically, less deafly, and, perhaps, more wisely.

4. Conclusion

- 33 In one of the most un-pastoral books ever written, Joseph Conrad's narrator Charlie Marlow describes taking his steamboat up a river into the wild jungles of Congo (another machine in another kind of garden) and he observes, "We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there" (340).⁷ Sound is central to human experience and it exerts an irresistible attraction as we attempt to make sense of the world. Pastoral meanings rank among the most enticing.
- 34 In *Armageddon in Retrospect*, a nonfiction account of his experience at Dresden written decades after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut describes how he and other Allied prisoners were put to work exhuming bodies after the destruction. It's a dreadful task in dire circumstances, "a ghoulish mission" (2008), and in his account Vonnegut makes only a few auditory references, for instance to the sound of falling plaster and later, to sirens and to the drone of B-17 aircraft. He does not mention birds. Whether or not birds were present, historically speaking, isn't the most pertinent question; but it would seem that "Poo-tee-weet?" was, for this writer, an artful projection, something he needed to assert in his re-imagining of Billy Pilgrim's survival.
- 35 The transition from sound to sense will inevitably involve ambiguities, but language itself isn't an alienating feature, a one-way ticket out of the garden. Rather, it's just something our species does, sometimes aloud. Projecting it onto other species or other aspects of the natural world risks indulging in sentimental pastoral, but it's not necessarily misguided because it also expresses a desire to connect. It can be an opening to other, perhaps better, possibilities. Language can be used to accommodate ourselves to our perch on this planet.

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NOTES

1. The merits of a metafictional approach to history stirred debate from the time of the book's release. An early unattributed 1969 review in the *New York Times* viewed it in a positive light. See "Books of the Times: At Last, Kurt Vonnegut's Famous Dresden Book," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1969. In contrast, Joyce Carol Oates considered this manner of writing about history fundamentally flawed. See Oates, "Fiction Chronicle," *The Hudson Review*, 22:3 (1969): 535-36.

2. Vonnegut's narrator, citing David Irving, refers to 135,000 dead in the bombing of Dresden. Later historians have revised this figure and now refer to 25,000 to 40,000 dead, while Irving has been discredited as a pseudo-historian and Nazi sympathizer. At the time Vonnegut was writing the novel, however, these facts about Irving had not yet emerged. For a discussion of the historiography, see Ann Rigney, "All This Happened, More or Less: What a Novelist Made of the Bombing of Dresden," *History and Theory* 48.2 (2009): 5-24.

3. This collaboration goes a step further in personification than, say, the well-known example of birds in Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to his Love" (1599), whose birds perform "madrigals" in response to the sound of rivers.

4. This idea recalls Alexander Pope’s notion from *An Essay on Criticism, Part Two* that “The Sound must seem an Echo of the Sense.” Note, however, that this is not the same thing as elevating sound to the level of sense, an idea which was rejected in the first part of this discussion.
 5. See Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd’s “The Pasture and the Freeway in Thomas Pynchon’s California,” in *Poetics and Politics of Place in Pastoral*, Eds. Thomas Pughe, Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd, Charles Holdefer. Bern: Peter Lang: 2016, 155-167.
 6. Another occurrence of “Poo-tee-weet?” is found midway in the novel shortly after Billy, under the influence of morphine, dreams of friendly giraffes in a garden. The giraffes accept Billy and even kiss him (99-100).
 7. Granted, Marlow elsewhere refers to a variety of sounds: human screeches, the steamboat whistle, etc. But silence is depicted as unnerving, even menacing. There is a hunger to hear *something*.
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ABSTRACTS

The idea of pastoral sounds in literature brings with it a particular set of problems. Beyond the straightforward (and fairly reductive) consideration of sounds associated with the shepherd’s life—that is, a thematic sample—what makes a sound “pastoral?” If an aural *locus amoenus* exists, how is it encoded? With reference to Kurt Vonnegut, William Blake, Allen Ginsberg and others, this paper will underline the elementary but crucial distinction between sound and meaning and how the representation of sound can point toward pastoral meanings. It will argue that “pastoral sound” often appears as a sub-category of personification. In such cases, nature not only has something to tell us but, seductively, it speaks our language, and tells us something we want to hear. This perception runs the risk of indulging in sentimental pastoral but it also can be part of a “dialogic listening mode” and serve as an opening to a more nuanced appreciation of our species’ place in nature.

Envisager l’existence de sons pastoraux dans la littérature soulève des problèmes spécifiques. Il ne s’agit pas, en effet, de réduire le sujet à une approche thématique en considérant un échantillon de sons associés à la vie pastorale, mais de s’interroger sur ce qui constitue un « son pastoral ». S’il existe un *locus amoenus* aural, quelles sont les modalités de son encodage ? En s’appuyant, entre autres, sur des œuvres de Kurt Vonnegut, William Blake et Allan Ginsberg, cet article souligne la distinction élémentaire mais cruciale entre le son et le sens, et la capacité de la représentation du son à suggérer des significations pastorales. L’article montrera que le « son pastoral » se présente souvent comme une sous-catégorie de la personnification. La nature a, dans ce cas, non seulement quelque chose à nous dire mais, de façon séduisante, elle parle *notre* langue et nous dit quelque chose que nous voulons entendre. Cette perception peut entraîner le risque de se complaire dans la pastorale sentimentale, mais peut aussi être constitutive d’un « mode d’écoute dialogique » et déboucher sur une appréciation plus nuancée de la place de notre espèce dans la nature.

INDEX

Keywords: pastoral, sound, Vonnegut, locus amoenus, personification, Slaughterhouse-Five

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