

PAUL ALPERS, *What is Pastoral?* Chicago and London: Chicago, 1996, Pp. xiv. + 429. \$14.95 (paper).

What is pastoral? The answer Paul Alpers gives in his title is that it is a dialog between herdsmen, which offers much scope for what Empson characterized as the putting of the complex into the simple. Far too much emphasis, in Mr. Alpers's view, has been put onto the "golden age" aspect of pastoral, and pastoral's own gold has been devalued by the base metal of sloppy or inaccurate use of the term. Pastoral, like many other literary terms, has been over-used. The trouble with linguistic purism is that it can overlimit the signifieds as well as the signifiers, as is witnessed by the silences and absences in this book. There is virtually no sign of eighteenth-century pastoral: next to nothing on Dryden's translation and the Augustan rediscovery of Virgil, no pastoral debate or *Beggar's Opera* (no Scriblerians, indeed), no Thomson, Gray, Crabbe, Goldsmith, to say nothing of the Theocritean pastoral current running through the eighteenth century to (two more absentees) Bloomfield and Clare. Equally notable by its absence from the discussion is anything of the social and political analysis of pastoral which has been developed over the past twenty years by Raymond Williams, John Barrell, Ann Bermingham, Roger Sales, Donna Landry and others—though Barrell and Williams (among others) are subjected to unhelpfully brief negative comments. Mr. Alpers obviously plays to his strengths. But what the silent areas seem to have in common is that they practice or analyze a "golden age" fantasy (or parody of it) in their version of pastoral.

The virtues of Mr. Alpers's approach are two-fold: it allows the development of a sophisticated and (within the limits I have noted) flexible, essentially humanistic model for reading pastoral; and this in turn facilitates a number of valuable single and comparative readings of texts. The book is divided into two parts: a more general and theoretical emphasis, and a critical focus. In Part I Mr. Alpers retheorizes the pastoral mode and its conventions, and in Part II, he reads examples of pastoral from the Renaissance, Romantic and Modern periods. Most often on display throughout the book is the old-fashioned virtue of careful, intelligent close reading, presented in a traditional quote-and-discuss format. The strength of this approach and form is that it enables one (or at least give one the sense of being enabled) to test the critic's readings against one's own responses. By this test the book works well, despite one's reservations about Mr. Alpers's move away from a "golden age" approach to pastoral, and its attendant silences.

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