

A PAGE ON LOCUS AMOENUS, PERMITTING SHAME, ERROR AND GUILT, MYSELF THE SINGLE SOURCE

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Latin. Right? Happy Place. A pleasant place, a propitious place for happiness, luck, creativity, abundance of spirit to take hold. Does everyone have one? The locus amoenus is one of the early conventions of the pastoral mode, which is the oldest minor genre in poetry and lyric writing, and maybe the most mutable. In a certain light, Gwendolyn Brooks's urban Bronzeville poems from the Sixties were pastorals: linked persona poems whose dropped-in-on scenes together made up a village, a community; and in another light so is Rufus Wainwright's cover of The Beatles' "This Boy": nostalgic, plaintive, performing and lamenting the fungibility of men as love partners. "This Boy": it's the one that begins "That boy... isn't good for you." (He sings it with Sean Lennon, the slight one, at cross purposes.) Most commonly now we think of the pastoral as nature poetry or soft-focused naturalist writing, potentially embarrassing for its unproblematized birdsong and lilting reverie on the wonders of streams. But nature itself was in the work of Theocritus and later Virgil only a kind of stage, a theater for the idyll or eclogue or scene to begin. The poem or songful story would be spoken by a shepherd—that is, by a young man who was amative and uninhibited, rascally, gracefully intelligent, highly literate, musical, fit, unself-conscious, curly-haired and beautiful, *and* the capable herder of livestock meanwhile. The early urban poet's ideal of the rural shepherd, goatherd, neatherd or swain was implausible, a fantasy: that's who *spoke* the poem, which could be a number of things but was often an extrapolation of a detail in a myth known well by listeners. The listeners too were a fixed premise: fellow shepherds and lyrists who were sometimes involved by name in the poem. What was it like for Herakles to leave his men and search frantically for his young, barefoot lover who had been drowned by river nymphs attracted to his beauty? Well, before I tell you, I must have led my sheep to pasture and found some shade, confident of their containment. It must be noontime, which is the most sempiternal of hours in the day. The sweet competitiveness of other shepherds who know my reputation as a poet and lover must be about me, electric. And, I must be in the right place. A clearing or a glade, a

hillside outcropping of rounded rock one happens upon, with the long golden hair of the grasses matted and soft. The locus amoenus.

It is a reasonable question to ask whether the poet is different from the person who writes the poems and pays the Comcast bill late again and gets balsamic dressing on the side and snaps at the customer service person at Uhaul headquarters. The philosopher and poet Allen Grossman makes the distinction between them and further suggests—best as I could tell and as well as I recall—that the poet (I believe he says the “poet in time”) is contingent on the poem, is made the poet by the poem, each poem. A sort of separation happens perhaps. I think Grossman divides him up further and identifies, third, the lyric speaker as the default voice itself in a lyric poem, which in fact we do recognize immediately in poetry, the voice that is more overheard than heard. *Often I am permitted to return to a meadow.* If that spoken line were piped in through an intercom, you would still know right away it was poetry. *This is someone unnamed saying something to someone unnamed, either in a particular context or in the realm of forms, I am not him, and I want you to hear it.* Come into earshot. In what kind of place is all the hearing overhearing? The kind of place where all the looking is onlooking. The *locus amoenus*.

So, am I in a voice in a poem; or am I in a place from which I’ve prepared to speak; or have I situated someone other there, a figure, a projection, to speak, so to speak? More than a decade ago, after giving a reading, reading some of the early poems that went into my first book, I remember clearly a particular consternation someone felt and related to me. It seems it was the following day. It was someone not especially familiar with poetry but someone who knew me well; I can’t remember who. It’s the kind of experience that repeats a half dozen times, in dreams too, until you sort of equip yourself for it. There is a question that is embarrassing, kind of flooring in its reasonableness. The question is easy but the answer is hard. (Isn’t it always, about identity?) The person asks, maybe even works up the nerve to challenge, “But why does what you write not sound like how you talk?”

Why is poetry pretentious? Is that the question? Certainly to answer “Well, there I was speaking as my representative shepherd” doesn’t help the cause. There are all kinds of ways to answer the

question, including to define poetry as another art that pulls attention to the medium, language, defamiliarizing it from its usual invisible, directly communicative and expository functions, thereby discovering it afresh, activating and liberating it. But it is in usual, directly communicative and expository language that this explanation is offered, and seems paltry, and even if one cuts to the chase and says, "You don't tell a dancer *that's not how you normally move,*" the defensiveness concedes the point. What was the point?

Think about pointing for a moment. Imagine there were but one person in a group who points, who understands pointing as an act that might send the gaze of others in a direction he indicates with his outstretched arm and indicating finger. But with each demonstration, all the others keep their eyes on him, even and especially on his extremity which repeatedly extends and goes rigid and to which he seems to want to draw attention. For these others, it is a kind of dance to do. There is no casting from the body with any part of the body something as divorced and immaterial as someone else's attention. He introduces pointing again and again, but it doesn't take. He makes strange asides like, It's as though to indicate had never been a transitive verb. (Note to Rufus Wainwright: a "Me and My Arrow" duet with one of Harry Nilsson's sons.) It doesn't send.

So, you know, pointing is a construct. The child looking not past the pointer finger proves it. The self is a construct. Often I am permitted to return to a meadow. Poetry is a construct. When you say your poem it somehow isn't the person I know speaking.

No one writing a poem, achieving pleasure in discovery of intention and pattern and melody and association and parallels and syntactic and other tensions, is trying to be someone else. But once made, the poem so made registers as speech. And that speech is always, rather mysteriously, someone else's. Someone with givens, in a world. Theocritus may have been the first to find an exterior figure for this transformation, particularizing the givens of that speaker, and of the milieu for poems. These givens are representative pretenses of poetry still.

The last of the things I like that Allen Grossman says in his famous

and pretentious *Summa Lyrica*, or maybe he's quoting someone, is that in the social realm of speech we face one another, asking and answering and remarking and informing, in exchange. But in the realm of speech a poem opens onto, we all face forward. We look on. We are positioned toward the speech differently than as we stood in the world a moment before, the world we came to the poem in. It is not meant for us exactly, this speech. It's in the locative case. Not a word of it, but the condition of the speech itself: it points us elsewhere if we listen. We listen in. The doings there are ongoing. What is that place? The one behind the construct of the idyll.

