

# Electric light: The Pastoral Tradition

By

Atheer Jabbar Muhsin

## ***Electric light: The Pastoral Tradition***

**Abstract:** This paper articulates the pastoral flavor in Heaney's techno-named collection ***Electric Light*** (2001). Ironically enough, instead of revealing the effect of the mechanization of light, ***Electric Light*** devotes itself to pastoralism altogether. Due to the storming technological developments occurring in our present century, the romanticized nature is pushed to the background. This, however, does not mean that modern poets neglect exploiting elements of nature in their poetry, especially the pastoral ones. Such is the case, modern poets try their best to use nature, particularly the rural elements, in spite of their antiromanticism, though against the modern climate of thought. Heaney, through his Irish tradition, utilizes the rural elements in his poetry, chief among which is technologized collection ***Electric Light***.

### **1. Pastoralism: an Introduction**

Etymologically, the word pastoral is derived from the Latin word "Pastore" which means "Shepherd." Its origin is connected to the works of the Greek poet "Theocritus" who celebrates the country life of the shepherds in Sicily, specially his bucolic poems. As a term, the Pastoralism describes the loves, sorrows and musical shepherds in idealized rustic age (Baldic, 2001). It is related to the country life in a romantic and



idealized form . Hence, it does with the shepherds in their rural living in contest with piping.

As an ancient form, the history of Pastoral verse is extensive; whose origin stems from the works of Theocritus, the Greek poet, and Virgil, coming from the songs of shepherds at those times. The Idylls written by the Greek poet Theocritus in the first half of the third century BC, two and a half centuries before Virgil (O'Donoghue, 2009), are picturing the manifestation of country life of the shepherds in Sicily. "In the first century B.C., Virgil began writing poetry that showed his sophisticated friends and himself as simple shepherds entertaining the pastoral life that was foreign to them" ( Longley,2000 ). In early and at the end of the fourth or beginning of the fifth century, there is The 'Ecloga Theoduli' written by Chaucer in the **House of Fame** that seems to be a work of an Athenian writer, which is ascribed to various dates ranging from the fifth to the eighth centuries. In its main characteristic, it remains close to its Vergilian model, the "eclogue participated in general the rise of allegory which marked the later middle ages." (Taylor, 1999). In the Elizabethan poetry, poets adopt pastoral elements and begin writing much literature in this convention. Those poets keep praising the natural rural life that pastoralism revealed. The mostly read and highly regarded works in pastoral poetry are written by Marlowe. His poem **"The Passionate Shepherd to His Love"** is constructed around a seductive plea to the girl of his dreams to live with him and share his love. In Marlowe's poem, the shepherd engages in romantic, though innocent, love affairs thus his pastoral was conventional, using artificial language of shepherds who speak the courtly language of aristocrats. He, however, twists the rules by "introducing sexuality, creating his own pastoral tradition." (Greg,2004).

The artistic concept which serves to stimulate seventeenth century initiative toward native poetry of the land is that of land itself. The idea of natural landscape imported into England from the continent helps to "redirect encomiastic conventions of Elizabethan pastoral towards a coherent movement of rural panegyric." James Turner accentuates this statement saying:

There is an increasing readiness to discover pleasant pictures in the nature; in the seventeenth century this impulse takes an organized form. Contemporary landscape began to be constructed according to clearly-defined principles, guided by a body of theory whose be traced in literature as much as in art. (Turner, 1979:10)

While the pastoral poetry is concern with nature and description of the landscape, Romanticism also celebrates the beauty of farms, rural fields, and natural scenes with the spiritual atmosphere it provides. Romantic poets regard nature as a place of spirituality, contemplation and renewal. As such, the nineteenth century pastorals continue to be seen as a "mood and not as a genre," (Gifford, 2001) seen especially in the work of Mathew Arnold's *Thyrsis* (1867), which is no more than a lament of the death of his fellow poet Arthur Hugh. Although pastoral works are written from the point of view of a shepherd, they are always penned by highly sophisticated urban poets. In modern times, the use of the pastoral is relatively different from that of the ancient times. Modern poets use the pastoral with its principle idea to "contradict the simple and pure life of the country with that of the man made of the city (Potts, 2011), though

they adopt the pastoral originated by Theocritus and his followers. The language of pastoral poetry is one that extols the lovely and uncomplicated nature of country life. Its roots are ancient, and its popularity has been long lasting, its impact has reverberated throughout the generations. In his study, *Some Version of Pastoral*, William Empson described the pragmatic instrumental value of pastoral, saying it to be:-

a way of putting the complex into simple . . . a beautiful  
relation between rich and poor [and made] .....simple  
people express strong feelings ..... in learned and  
fashionable language" (Empson, 2005)

Looking at the bucolic rural description of themes, the modern pastoral contains contemporary views and new themes like wars, the loss of childhood, memory, political ideals, the destruction of the environment and so on. These themes, one has to confirm, can be covered by modern pastoral poetry in general and pastoral elegy in particular. As a genre of poetry, the pastoral is generally seen through the modern age, as a very ancient genre of poetry whose overall theme is the deterioration of city life . Moreover it deals with the loves and lives of shepherds and shepherdesses, and other such country folk, who live far from towns, and spend their lives singing, sometimes mourning the loss of a sheep or a fellow shepherd or a love affair that has gone wrong. Often the shepherd is a poet; his songs become his poetry. Pastoral verses continued to be popular in English literature throughout the ages. As for its limitations, it includes a wide range of themes and topics, chiefly among them are the simplicity of country life; the purity of natural country life; the value of poetry; the lost memory of childhood; longing to nature and the life of country; feminizing the natural lands and considering or describing women in a courtly love manner, revealing

them as remote goddesses; lamenting the death of dear persons or friends. Another important type of the pastoral poems is the elegy. It is a pensive sad poem of mourning, wherein the poet often mourns one person. Related concerns in pastoral works are the tensions between nature and art, the real and the ideal, the actual and the mythical.

## 2. Pastoralism in Electric Light

Published in 2001, Seamus Heaney's new collection of poetry *Electric Light* constitutes the work of a master poet meditating on the origins and inevitable ending of his life and art. Like most of Heaney's books, it amalgamates numerous genres: eclogue, elegy, epigram, meditation, lyric, and more. Moreover it includes translations of Virgil and Pushkin, and memorial poems for the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert and Robert Fitzgerald, the American translation of Homer and Virgil. The book begins with light nature poems. Heaney sees and celebrates nature as a sort of language. The landscape of Northern Ireland, his birthplace, is moving because it is imprinted by human life, its meanings handed down from one generation to the next through or alongside horrible violence. His work also engages with the traditional genres of lyric and pastoral poetry which is integral part of Heaney's canon.

*Electric Light*, consists of many themes exploring number of them that Heaney has not dealt with before: the rural landscape, Irish identity and history, and poetry. The poems, throughout the collection, show a poet in his later years looking back at his past and his origins. Those origins include his rural past and the use of classical forms and translation of classical writers.

"*At Toombridge*", the first poem of the collection, completely devotes itself to pastoral elements. Thus it is, in one sense a dramatization of the course which juxtaposes Heaney in the pastoral conventions of Virgil. It

delineates the way Heaney found himself a position in the Irish Landscape, in the Irish History. It begins thus:

Where the flat water  
Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh,  
As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth  
And fallen shining to the continuous  
Present of the Bann.  
Where the checkpoint used to be

( ll . 1-5 )

The beauty of nature, through the image of the "flat water", mirrors the calmness and flatness of Lough Neagh, showing the qualities of the river Bann in the first line of the poem. The soft movement of water "pouring over the weir out" recalls the quiet transition from one certain point to another place to meet the antique banks of the river (Frazier, 2001). The fascinating movement of the water reflects the musical sounds which played by nature creating a great influence on the poet's mind which helps to recreate rural scenes that amalgamate the nature of pastoral land that Heaney is longing for in his homeland Ireland ( *Hammer*, 2001). The flatness of the quiet water goes parallel with wonderfulness of the land. The color of water of the Bann is linked with the shining beams of the sun light. The calmness of water, flatness of edge of earth, and the bright color of sun shine which are representations of the rural description of landscape, again a representation of longing to the homeland. Heaney is artistically successful in picturing a connection of the past to the present:

Came pouring over the weir out of Lough Neagh  
As if it had reached an edge of the flat earth



And fallen shining to the continuous  
Present of the Bann.

( ll.2-5)

Really, it is the continuous presence of the Bann river, yearning to the past is another pastoral hint. Past is significant in reshaping of present time. The past includes time and place which Heaney put together as well. The second part of the poem takes the reader into a journey of locations (*Where the checkpoint used to be./ Where the rebel boy was hanged in 98*), it is another perspective of place. The place where the checkpoint is, ( where a rebel boy was hanged in 1798), as an event reminders of the troubles in Ireland, lamenting the death of the rebel. Remembering a past event gives the poem an echoing Elegiac tone.

Despite the "Negative ion" is a scientific abstraction which is artistically valueless; but the negative prescription still represents the necessity of poetry which in opposition could create positive value, the values and scenes which participate in recreating past/present poetry that is helpful and refreshing the nation's memory.

"Perch", another poem of *Electric Light*, portrays the world of nature in certain place (of Childhood) in Ireland. Thematically, it revolves around the wonderful and constant balance in nature, beside the appreciation of the beauty of the location where the river Bann is. The perch (fish) in the freshwater, the earth and water, the landscape and the trees on the banks of the river are visualized precisely. As a portrait of nature, "perch" is view from earlier life" I saw"; "we called them grunt" and present a scene of fish that is characterized by slim, very sharp and remarkable body; the "alder-dapple" trees which look like "waver" on both banks; the picture of the Bann flows smoothly with clear vision of water; the fishes

under the water and on the roof " Guzzling the current"; the portrayal of

the river as an environment "Finland" either the place of separation far from the homeland or it is strongly populated with perches. Glorification of the homeland or nature is recurrent all over the poem. Heaney's depiction of the Bann as having glorified body is highly nostalgic, longing to home and yearning to one's nationality of land. The river itself is named "Bann" which is in Gaelic stands for "white." White connotes, peace, freshness, good and more, these qualities are attributed to the river as part of the homeland, which grant peace to its citizens and represents the lost homeland as a whole.

"Vergil Eclogue IX", the fifth poem of the collection, is Heaney's translation of the ninth eclogue of Vergil. It concentrates on nature, the value of poetry and the imagination, following its talent under proper conditions. Overtly enough the power of the linking of personal memory, history and myth constitutes Heaney's fellowship, a fellowship that also casts further back to Virgil, whose "Eclogue IX" Heaney inventively translates here. It reveals the impossibility of creation when the external world's circumstances are awry (Putnam, 2010). At a time when the pastoral land is under threat, and the speakers are only capable of remembering the past memory of creation. In this case, they aren't able to sing a new song and recite fresh poetry. Therefore, the tone of the poem is highly sad and melancholic, it could be read as a remarkable example of imaginations.

The things that we have lived to see.... The last thing  
You could've *imagined* happening has happened  
An outsider lands and says that he has the rights  
To our bit of ground. " Out, old hands," he says,  
(ll.2-5)





Generally, the poem is a dialogue between Lycidas and Moeris, expressing a doubt about the poets' inability to respond to a devastating force which threatens the homeland, that is violence and loss at the same time. Heaney uses various concepts to reveal the problem of the poet's social and political responsibility. Thus, the dialogue brings forth many other characters to the scene, like Menalcas, a magician and singer, who might be able to save the world; Julius Caesar enter into the poem through mentioning the comet that was supposedly sighted at his funeral. In Heaney's case the "troubles" in Northern Ireland—to poetry of overtly political significance. (Triggs, 1992). Moreover, in the Eclogue Heaney is of the idea that poetry loses its ability to create and recover the lost past and the land as well, therefore it is pessimistic; lamenting the inability to sing a song. Lycidas opened the poem with location inquiry. Hearing the news of a new outsider, who seized the land. Thereafter, Lycidas tells Moeris of Menalcas' power which could regain the lost home by his magical songs, in a situation that is critical and violent is feared to destroy the landscape. Unfortunately, songs and tunes can no more hold out against brute force. Accordingly, the power of poetry is no longer at hand which Menalcas' music and songs which are considered as having no power of rebirth and renewal. The songs were earlier "To grow wilder flowers and grass and shade the wells"(ll.24) are missing now and it is hard to remember at such a hard time of great danger. At certain point of failure where poetry could not be remembered, God of inspiration is possible resort:

Your cows in clover thrive with canted teat  
And tightening udders. The Pierian Muses  
Made me a poet too. I too have songs."



Calling the Muse which may help in achieving a new poetry and fresh verse. The role of poetry is again a vital mark. The poet could be as important as many other heroes in the country. Likewise Heaney is foreshadowing the political troubles of Ireland and his failure of getting a new sight to help his lost home. Reinforcing the value of poetry and its importance to nation, Heaney involves another two names of contemporary poets ( Varius and Cinna ) who can estimate the value of Lycidas as had been called bard by the country people . Then Lycidas give his position among the great poet of his own time" I'm a squawking goose among sweet-throated swans."(ll.45) The process of remembering is seen behaving negatively, it does not provide any support to the poet, it fails and let him down. May be this was the cause that urge Lycidas of recalling the Muses to assist in refreshing the mind as well as rescues the lost land:

**POET:** Bann Valley Muses, gives us a song worth singing,

Something that rises like the curtain in

Those words *And it can't pass or In the beginning.*

Help me to please my hedge-schoolmaster Virgil

And the child that's due. Maybe, heavens, sing

Better times for her and her generation.

( ll. 1-6 )

As the title reveals, the poem conjures up a world where military might and the politics of power are imposing their presence on the pastoral landscape. In this world, these powers are threatening the poets, their isolated setting, and their own inventiveness, Bernard O'Donoghue support this statement saying:

It is surely not being over-fanciful to see several recurrent Heaney themes in



this poem, despite the apparently artless tone. It is not so much its broadly  
post-colonial *themes of land confiscation*, though of course they too have a  
resonance in the Irish context. The more weighty connection is with the  
relative strength of artistic and secular authority: whether poetry is effective

*in a world where military force holds sway.* (O'Donoghue, 2009.112)

At the beginning of the course of the dialogue, Lycidas starts portraying how beautiful their land is, pointing out "hill go doubling back"(ll. 10) and the "Old scraggy-headed beech trees."(ll.10) This provides the poem with a natural view of the scene, hills are embracing the horizon. The beauty of the landscape is continued, showing the clarity and quietness of the sky "One night when the sky was clear." The fresh breeze equippes the speaker with a wide access to the past memories , giving him peace of mind which is a suitable environment for composing poetry and reflecting on the glorious past that is the base for the present situation" and every breeze/Has calmed and quieted. The landscape is often prominent in the poetry of this period, so much so that the Romantics, especially perhaps Wordsworth, are often described as 'nature poets'(2000).The quietness of the mind which is formed by the beauty of nature are crucial to the memory in rendering the past and remembering songs. Songs are significant in healing the wounds caused by the destruction of nature. This calmness is nothing but continuation to

that of nature:

I'm quiet because I'm trying to piece together  
As best I can a song I think you'd know:  
"Galatea," in the sea and the waves that keeps  
you spellbound?  
Here earth break out in wildflowers, she rills and  
rolls  
The steam in the waterweed, here poplars bend  
Where the bank is undermined and vines in  
thickets  
Are meshing shade with light. Come here to me.

( ll.46 –53)

The last lines of 'Virgil: Eclogue IX' are gestures towards the failure of a new poetic appeal to the governor. Moeris says to Lycidas, 'That's enough of that, young fellow. We've a job to do. / When the real singer comes, we'll sing in earnest' . The lines refer to "the return of the master Menalcas, or to Varus, the governor who has renewed the decision to confiscate the farm"(Twiddy, 2005). The landscape is well shaped by the creativity of the poet. Rural scenes are the Muses " The Pierian muses" of the power to recall and redeem the past as well as a reminder of the lost songs which goes in line with the lost homeland. Nature is similar to the magic songs of Menalcas through which he would save the landscape. A dialogue with Virgil, "Bann Valley Eclogue" stresses the rural atmosphere of the Irish scene, starting with the description of the poet's childhood in Derry Farm. Being one of the longest poems in Virgilian pastoral, it examines in Gerald Mangan words ( 2001), " the celebration of childbirth with Messianic overtones, in which the doom-laden atmosphere of the recent solar eclipse eloquent vision of peace and plenty":



Banns stream will overflow, the old markings  
Will avail no more to keep east bank from west.  
The valley will be washed like the new baby.

(ll. 16-18 )

Apparently "the new baby" is the poet himself or, to put it in another way, his new born poem. It is so because Heaney reaches the point of nominating the poet as "the unacknowledged priest of mankind; but his long absorption in his craft has clearly developed habits of thought which reify language, in a sacramental sense." Showing the role of the poet as the priest of humanity, Heaney does not hesitate to point out some religious overtone:

POET: Why do I remember St. Patrick's mornings,  
Being sent by my mother to the railway line  
For the little trefoil, untouchable almost, the  
shamrock  
With its twining, binding, creepery, tough, thin  
roots

(ll. 31-36)

Mixing "the railway lines" with "the creeping thin roots," Heaney is bemoaning the death of pastoralism caused by the spread of industrialism, that is why he so often, commemorate the death of Scottish poets. (Mangan, 2001) accentuate this truism saying:

Norman MacCaig, come forth from the deer of Magdalen /  
Those startlers standing still in fritillary land . . . . ; and they  
appear amid a clutch of requiems that give the collection an  
increasingly bookish and valedictory tone.

No less significant are pastoral poem Heaney's "Glanmore Eclogues". Using the dialogue between Myles and Poet, he shows pastoralism through the apotheostization of women in a way similar to courtly manner of the cavalier poets, giving woman the power of life changer, having the ability to turn life from bad to good. He himself states that:

A woman change my life. Call her Augusta  
Because we arrive in August, and from now on  
This month's baled hay and blackberries and combines  
Will spell Augusta's bounty. (ll. 4-7)

Though changer of life Augusta is, she at the same time brings about separation between man and his own loving country "Outsiders own the country nowadays." Accused of being none-conformist, Augusta, however, is the poet's "tenant/ And that's enough. She has every right." Overtly, living with Augusta means everything since she in his own words "has every right." By the close of the poem, the poet moves us to the summer green fields where life seems to be simple and loving dominated by the signing cuckoo:

Early summer, cuckoo cuckoos,  
Welcome, summer is what he sings.  
Heather breathes on soft bog-pillows.  
Bog-cotton bows to moorland wind.

ll. 41-44 )

The problems of the past seem to be forgotten compared with the beauty and the sweetness of nature. The imaginative sight, though

suggesting grief reveals a consolation concentrated in natural figure, the child making readers, thus forget the dead man of the poem. (Twiddy, 2005:8) support this claim when he states:

The sweetness of nature bestows itself upon the dead man, no matter how terrible his death had been. Nature thus joins with man as the principal mourner, and in such a way that, whether you hated your living enemy or not, you could respect his dead by bringing his and yours together in an elegiac image of nature.

Elegizing nature, Heaney puts himself at the "Frontier pastoral" (Frawley 146). He does so in two senses: the border issue (the issue of his nation) and the hybrid of the pastoral. Stanca (2010, 115) examines Heaney's immersion in different sects such as the geographical, the political, the historical, and the cultural, placing him thus as being standing "on the borders between different places, cultures, traditions and languages." Heaney himself emphasizes his pastoral background and his being on the border:

I grew up between the predominantly Protestant and loyalist village of Castledawson and the generally Catholic and nationalist district of Bellaghy. In a house situated between the railway and a road. Between the old sounds of trotting horse and the newer sounds of a shunting engine. ( *Keepers* 50)

Such a fluctuation between the rural and the urban really forms his poem title "Electric Light." Through the last poem of the collection which wins The Nobel Prize of Literature, Heaney discovers electric light in England. He is guided to the "magic" by the Sybil figure whose "smashed thumb-nail was dark-streaked with candle-grease":

Rucked quartz, a littered Cumae.

In the first house where I saw electric light

She sat with her fur- lined felt slippers unzipped,  
Year in, year out, in the same chair, and whispered  
In a voice that at its loudest did nothing else  
But whisper, we were both desperate

( ll. 4-9 )

As the lines above show the poet and Cumae are "desperate". The reason for their grief is nothing but electric light itself, accusing this light of bringing destruction caused by the spread of industrialization that leads to the mechanization of life and the dehumanization of man. Their weeping "under the clothes, under the waste of light" ( ll. 11) refers to their urbanization a condition they strongly reject. Immersed in the same condition the speaker of the poem asks:

What ails you, for God's sake?"Urgent, sibilant  
Ails far off and old, Scare some cavern waters  
Lapping a boatslip. Her helplessness no help.

(ll. 13-15)

Helpless though they are, the poet and Cumae search for a remedy if not a Savior, to go out their desperate situation. As the case is with the Greek poets, they try to find in poetry a loop hole to escape the aridity of their present life.

Of poetry itself. Backs of houses  
Like the back of hers, meat-safes and mangles  
In the railway-facing yards of fleeting England,  
Then fields of grain like the field of the Cloth of Gold.  
To sothwark too I came, from tube-mouth into sunlight,  
Moyola-breath by Thames's "straung stronde."





( ll. 24–

29 )

Grief, pain, sorrow, and the feelings of loss are thematically the essence of Heaney's poem, This respect is asserted by Lenore Smith When she said

Thus Heaney uses rich and vivid metaphor , alliteration and contemporary language to convey feeling of grief and despair and their subsidiary emotions of apathy, in a way to engage modern readers. (Smith, 2005: 77)

Sense of sorrowful emotions , grief of loss, the fear of unknown future, seeking for source of hope to help the poet of self-find, self – assertion and place regain go in line with longing to the rural home land either confiscated by stranger or destroyed by the wide-spread of urbanization of the modern industrial world. Heaney is of the idea that poetry, the muse and myth, can help him and his readers as well at least psychologically to provide peace of mind, tranquility and could form a redeemer from the dilemmas he and others are immersed in.

**Conclusion:** It is apparent that ancient issues and the contemporary subject matters are interwoven carefully by the powerful craft of Heaneys imaginations. He discloses pastoralism through the technologized and urbanized *Electric Light*. This, of course, is done through th celebrating Ireland in terms of its rural concept of beauty linking them to the political Irish troubles of freedom and liberation of the homeland. The beauty of nature, rural fields, rivers and trees provide an entertainment to the poet and readers as well, and this is one of the aspects which serves

pleasure that poetry fist into, and that dominants the horoscope of Heaney's poetry. Magical ancient world is in encounter with the recent moments. Ancient and modern, modern and contemporary all strongly exist in Heaney's imagination that is manifested through the poems examined in this paper. Imaginations give aid to the poet in reshaping home identity for the displaced nationality facing strangers in contemporary times seen through his escape to ancient poetic figures through elegizing them.