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**Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre**  
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*Pastoral, Post-pastoral, and Pastoral Comedy*

In his introduction to the Independent Panel on Forestry's Final Report in July 2012, the Bishop of Liverpool, the Rt Rev James Jones, issued a familiar, pastoral lament: "as a society we have lost sight of the value of trees and woodlands," he said, and thus of our connectedness "with nature, with history and with each other" (5). The threat was not only figurative. Eighteen months previously the UK Coalition government had reneged on its plans to sell a significant portion of publically-owned forest-stock into private hands only after strident and widespread public opposition; and in February 2013 the first evidence of the *chalara fraxinea* fungus was discovered to have affected British Ash trees, leading to ominous forecasts of the loss of up to 80 million specimens. That November Jones intervened again, once more with an appeal to pastoral sensibilities (and temporalities): "You have to take the tree cycle out of the political cycle. The political cycle is three to four years, the tree cycle is 50 to 200 years" (McVeigh, n. pag.).

It would be no exaggeration to say that the greenwood is the *mis-en-scene* of a certain strain of English culture. Shakespeare's Arden and Pope's Windsor Forest, critical sites in the national imaginary (and still influential in the contemporary ideation of Nature), are themselves rooted in the folk *mythos* of Robin Hood and the Green Man. The forest has always been eulogised as it was also utilised, in Shakespeare's day as in our own: Simon Schama observes that, "just at the time when Robin Hood's Sherwood was appearing in children's literature, stage drama, and poetic ballads, the greenwood idyll was disappearing into house beams, dye vats, ship timbers, and iron forges" (154). The greenwood's cultural currency is in its always-incipient loss; as its finite resources were burned or built into the urban landscape, folk memory of an enduring common place of plenty and justice was readily available to counter-balance the entropic process of nation-building. But this festive potential is often subsumed by an anxious sense that entropy has prevailed. "A culture is no better than its woods," declared W.H. Auden in 1952 (206), an implicit judgement expressed more forcefully in W.G. Hoskins' condemnation of the post-1914 English landscape "uglified" by "Demos and Science" (231). Jones' recent appeal (in concert with the call, in the same report, for "a revival of a woodland culture in England" (8)) therefore sits in a long line of petitions to the pastoral as a remedy for perceived contemporary ills.

In popular terms, any bucolic setting which yields a particular sense of retreat can, it seems, be considered 'pastoral.' But the term also has a more complex formal and affective history, at least since writers in the English Renaissance adapted classical pastoral forms for their own purposes. In particular, Shakespearean pastoral comedy gave dramatic form to what had hitherto been a primarily poetic form, and linked classical pastoral, with its emphasis on simplicity and rural place, with the seriousness of purpose found in literary comedy. Works such as *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* engage conventional pastoral settings as temporary arenas for the release of excess social energies and the restoration of order; "a special condition," as Bakhtin puts it, "of the world's revival and renewal" (7). Pastoral *comedy* thus aligns pastoral's more sentimental expressions with both a greenwood exuberance and the harder edge of literary comedy. This dual heritage of comedy and nostalgia persists in contemporary critical approaches to pastoral, which look to either modify it to suit an era of ecological crisis, or disparage it as a dangerous irrelevance.

Jones' appeal to pastoral's history as a mode of political critique is echoed by Terry Gifford, for whom the relevance of the pastoral mode has never been greater, or more immediate: "Now," he says, "we have as much an interest in the welfare of Arden as in that of its exiled inhabitants" (147). Significantly, Gifford's formula extends the time of the carnivalesque to a perennial pastoral; our current ecological vulnerability, he suggests, demands that we recognise that we reside in 'Arden' year-round rather than only during holidays. For Gifford, the comic pastoral cannot be sustained as a holiday mode, something to be 'dipped in to' periodically, yet he judges its symbolic value is great enough to justify retaining it, and the accompanying ideological freight, as a short-hand for ecological connectedness. For others, however, the pastoral mode's dedication of imaginative energy to yearning for past certainties is inappropriate to an age of chronic uncertainty over the future. Lawrence Lerner has affirmed that nostalgia (from *nostos*, to return home; and *algia*, longing) is the basic emotion of pastoral (41); and many environmental thinkers have consequently been critical of the prevalence of the nostalgic, pastoral impulse in ecocriticism, and corresponding efforts to make Nature—posited as pristine and available, the opposite of irredeemably compromised Culture—the fulcrum of ecological thinking. Bruno Latour writes scathingly of the hyperreal blend of "Greek politics, French Cartesianism, and American parks" which constitutes the ideation of 'Nature' in contemporary discourse (5); for Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "nature-nostalgia" describes a fidelity to a comprehensively masculinized and heteronormative space of "intensive moral regulation" (2010, 332; 2005, §14); whereas Timothy Morton dismisses 'Nature' as a conceptual obstacle to more genuinely ecological forms of art and thought" (1). For these and many other environmental critics, nostalgia and the pastoral represent the abdication of an urgent responsibility.

In this article I will investigate the enduring relevance of pastoral comedy and its potential to offer constructive critique of contemporary modes of thinking, writing about, and occupying those spaces marked off as pastoral. The conventional comic mode tends to treat 'nature' as an annex of the social world, organised around the impulse to resolve conflict and restore order. Literary comedy is a mechanism for the resolution of crises and the dispelling of disorder: "a problem-solving story," according to Alexander Leggatt (3). Comedies describe societies in pursuit of conviviality, which either are, or seek to be, comfortable with themselves; yet in an era characterised by potentially insoluble uncertainties, where the problems are of such a sublime manner of difficulty as posed by the current environmental crises, there is doubt whether a literary form which promises harmony and prioritises the status quo remains relevant. According to Lawrence Buell, the pastoral has been an indispensable article of Western culture for over two thousand years (1995, 32); we might ask, therefore, what has changed to make it redundant? Greg Garrard has observed that any notion of "radical pastoral" always remains provisional as the two terms threaten to cancel each other out; but that this provisionality can itself be liberating: "If pastoral can be radical, if it has to be so, it is not as a finished model, exhortation or ideology, but as a questioning, as itself a question" (464-465). With this in mind I am prompted to ask, is it possible to adopt a viable critical position that (as Robert Macfarlane—a writer sometimes accused of trading in nostalgia—has put it) is "cognisant of the dangers, but also the opportunities of nostalgia"? (Stenning, 80)

In what follows, I will read two recent versions of the pastoral—Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009) and Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral* (2013)—as examples of the vitality which literary comic modes can offer to thinking about ecological dilemmas. Both invert and frustrate the conventional pastoral movement, wherein the equalising effects of release, reconciliation, and return are not realised. Rather, each play subjects the pastoral mode to actual or threatened

displacement—in Eccleshare’s play the forest invades the city, whereas Butterworth dramatizes the efforts of civic authority to evict the green man from his wood—and makes this failure the basis of its exploration of the possibilities available in an eco-comic mode; finally, via the presentation of toxicity as a trope to, as Buell puts it, “unsettle[...] received assumptions about the boundaries of nature writing and environmental representation”, (Buell, 1998, 640) each play represents a version of pastoral that is alert and able to give form to the ironies, anxieties, and absurdities that inhere in contemporary environmental discourse.

These pastoral versions are not entirely commensurate with Gifford’s theory of the post-pastoral. Gifford describes a more ecologically-inflected mode, cognisant of natural cycles and of the imbricated relationship between “inner human nature” and “external nature,” and thus more open to play across the boundaries of nature and culture which traditional pastoral purports to police. The post-pastoral is intended as an ethical corrective, assenting with the assertions of ecofeminism and queer theory (e.g. Donna Haraway’s theory of *naturecultures*, the impossibility of dissociating nature and culture) (153-165). These features are all evident to some degree in Butterworth and Eccleshare’s work. The key point of difference, however, is in relation to what Gifford calls the “fundamental” characteristic of post-pastoral: an enduring sense of the sublime; as Gifford has it, “awe in attention to the natural world” (152). A kind of elegiac sublime has been common to much recent British environmental writing about forest spaces. In *Wildwood*, Roger Deakin characterised woods as “the subconscious of the landscape” (“suppressed by motorways and the modern world”) (xii); similarly, Macfarlane argues that we remain haunted by the idea of the “deep wood” (which carries the echo of Edward Thomas’ figuration of the ‘dark forest’ as a site of sylvan psycho-drama) and that woods today retain their otherworldly associations as “place[s] of inbetweenness [and] correspondence, of call and answer” (97, 92). Others have credited trees with shaping humanity’s sense of itself: for Richard Mabey, trees are “one of the benchmarks by which we judge, for better or worse, our standing as a species”; they are indexes of “our paradoxical relations with nature,” each freighted with a “cargo of metaphor” (5-6, 9, 10); and Colin Tudge has gone so far as to assert that ‘humanness’ originated with trees: “The human debt to trees is absolute,” he says, “the only reason we have such dextrous hands and whirling arms”—and thus painters and pianists—“is that our ancestors had spent 80 million years or so [...] in the trees” (5). Each chooses to make awe its dominant affective mode, at the expense of the greenwood’s festive potential. A sense of hush prevails, which leaves little room for the exuberance and inversion that is also a part of pastoral heritage.

Gifford’s post-pastoral cannot accommodate the comic, and for good reason; as Freud observed in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, the comic involves “the degradation of the sublime” (196). Rather than post-pastoral, Eccleshare and Butterworth’s plays present what I call *toxic pastoral*: versions of pastoral in which former pastoral certainties are *degraded*, permitting an engagement with and celebration of the ambivalence in human interactions with the more-than-human world. Toxic pastoral foregrounds the ‘impure’ and symbiotic rather than the ‘pure’, separated (albeit mutually-reinforcing) civic and rural spaces of conventional pastoral. Like Buell’s “toxic discourse”, toxic pastoral insists upon the interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values, and expounds a more “biotically imbricated” and “elastic” version of pastoral (1998, 648, 657). However, unlike Buell’s concept, which is based on the mobilisation of non-elite activists opposed to corporate pollution and invokes a self-conscious localism, the toxic pastoral of Eccleshare and Butterworth’s plays evokes toxicity as a trope (the hyper-growth of a biotic world newly and suddenly dangerous to humans in *Pastoral*; the “Bucolic Alcoholic Frolic” orchestrated

by Rooster Byron in *Jerusalem* (78)) to question the availability of local space and the assumed authenticity associated with it.

*'Laughter sticks in the throat': Thomas Eccleshare's Pastoral and comic failure*

In Thomas Eccleshare's *Pastoral*, ecological exuberance has reached endemic, even catastrophic proportions. The play depicts a kind of comic eco-apocalypse in which, via an unexplained acceleration in growth rates, the biotic world has overrun the boundaries of urban space. The residents of a block of flats have failed to escape the city in time, and become trapped in the flat of an elderly woman, Moll, while hostile fauna invade the high street and an enormous oak tree erupts through the floorboards of Moll's living room (in which the entire drama is set). This leads to closely-aligned moments of neo-bucolic beauty ("Ash and oak saplings over bluebells and wood sorrel. The pavement outside Nandos has cracked open and there's a brook. Heron's, kingfishers and ragged pondweed") and grotesque, comic threat ("A spider! As big as my hand!"; "It has flesh on its legs!"), a formal tension which is central to the play's restless, manic effect (34). It is also an environment increasingly beset by rumours of toxicity. Near the start of the play we're told of fruit falling apart with "worms and maggots"; a bear reportedly killed by Hardy and Manz is inedible, "poisoned [...by] the berries it was eating"; the group discover that, in order to pass through a barrier erected "to stop the seed spreading any further", they must be "decontaminated" (32, 64, 62).

*Pastoral* teems in other ways too: it is an extraordinary mash-up of genres and intertexts. These include nods to Samuel Beckett (in the key conceit that the stranded characters are all 'waiting for the Ocado man', around the oak which sprouts in Moll's living room) and Harold Pinter (in the naming of the characters Moll, Hardy, and Manz, and the intimations of their shared criminal past); to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (in the rapid descent into savage behaviour) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (echoing Marlow's assertion that "this also has been one of the dark places of the earth"). There are deliberate references to the emphasis on deep, local knowledge found in much 'new nature writing' (made pointedly ironic in the mouths of Hardy and Manz, who identify erupting plant species with the same precision with which they name-check high street chain stores); also to the contemporary cinematic genre of eco-apocalypse, and its antecedents in the post-war 'eco-sci-fi' of J.G. Ballard, John Wyndham, and John Christopher. Perhaps the strongest echo here is of the pessimism of Christopher's 1956 novel *The Death of Grass*, although removed to a world of hyper-growth reminiscent of the (literally) green world of mega-flora in Brian Aldiss' *Hothouse* from 1962.

The range and diversity of references come thickly and fast (like the foliage), as does the satirical commentary on contemporary environmental discourse. In the accelerated disaster, which sees Moll's flat converted to dense forest in the space of a few scenes, we can detect an ironic comment on the apocalyptic teleology of tipping points and temperature rises, and environmentalism's urgent exhortations ('time's running out'): "Everything teeming with life," as Hardy puts it in an ironic inversion of ecocidal narratives (33). The characters' helpless stasis, unable to provide for themselves in an environment dominated by newly-resurgent nature, contrasts with the play's hyperactive range of reference in an ironic comment on our failure to adapt to the challenges posed by anthropogenic climate change. In these terms, Eccleshare's play would seem to conform to Nicole Seymour's calls for an "irreverent ecocriticism": a turn to the comic and absurd as "the most appropriate stances for our age" (57, 63). However, whereas Seymour's argument is based in the parallels between literary comedy and ecology pursued by Joseph Meeker in his pioneering study, *The Comedy Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre*

of *Survival*, *Pastoral* presents a far more sceptical vision of adaptation as a plausible response to ecological threat.

“Evolution itself is a gigantic comic drama,” according to Meeker, and Man, “an adaptive animal” (33, 39). The opportunistic, resourceful aspects of literary comedy thus present the ideal model for an ecological literary mode; a mode which will, in Seymour’s words, allow us “to feel uncertain in uncertain times” (69). Yet the object of criticism in *Pastoral* is precisely the failure to adapt: no single intertext is permitted space to settle before it is pushed aside by another, and the characters singularly fail to adapt to their new circumstances. Unable to light a fire or to catch anything greater than a hedgehog, they quickly descend (in the play’s most darkly comic scene) to cannibalising the Ocado man. *Pastoral* is thus a play in which the fundamental mechanism of the pastoral mode is frustrated. It bursts the “pastoral impulse towards containment” (Ettin, 12), depicting an environment in which successful adaptation is impossible.

Eccleshare’s play is closer to Isabel Galleymore’s theory of eco-comedy than to Seymour’s. Galleymore argues for a comic version of Timothy Morton’s dark ecology, proposing a “comic mode based on incongruity” which “retains Morton’s principle of undigested loss in the sense that it does not provide relief” (162). The key element of Galleymore’s environmental comic mode is its refusal to facilitate the release of contained energy; instead, “the laugh gets caught in our throat” (155). Eccleshare dramatizes this constricted, stalled laughter in various ways: figuratively, where moments of comedy coexist with horror or moral debasement; and literally, in Moll’s repeated, failed attempts to tell a joke she has been working on:

MOLL: I’m working on a joke.

I’ve got the punchline, it’s just a matter of working out the first bit. Well, not so much the punchline, but I know what I want to be the butt. The butt of the joke, I’ve got those all worked out. Hen nights. I’ve been thinking of one of those, ‘such and such walked into a bar’ formats.

A group of whales walk into a bar. (*Beat*) It’s a hen night.

Or, hang on. Seven drunk gorillas walk into a bar. (*Beat*) It’s a hen night. Hm.

A number of drunk...A number of...

Needs work.

Knock knock. Who’s there? Slags. Slags who? (*Pause*) Just some slags on a hen night. Are at the front door (29).

The repetition of ‘hen night’ here reinforces the sense that the barriers between human and animal behaviours are porous, a point reinforced by the group’s descent into cannibalism and the building sense of recognition in the behaviour of increasingly audacious animal life. Recognition is, counter-intuitively, central to Galleymore’s eco-comedy of incongruity. She cites Fredric Bogel’s observation that satire operates on the basis of the satirist’s identification with the satiric object—where it is “not alien enough”. Eco-satire therefore yields a sense of difference shadowed by a “potentially compromising similarity” (Bogel, in Galleymore, 154); with the result, Galleymore states, that our sense of security is “compromised by the overwhelming fear that environmental loss will ultimately mean the loss of ourselves” (155). Instead, the joke fails; the laugh catches in the throat, denying the release of excess (abject) comic energy. Rather it remains *inside*, an unexpelled toxicity within the body.

The toxic pastoral depicts a necessary failure. Whereas (as Northrop Frye has said), conventional literary comedy makes possible “the integration of society” (43), in the face of proliferating uncertainties surrounding climate change and its possible consequences, the restitution of former certainties would seem a nostalgic, even dangerous fallacy. As Latour, Morton, and Haraway have each indicated, the urgency of the current ecological crises is such that human society should not seek out further integration with itself, but with the strange, sometimes monstrous, more-than-human world. Old pastoral sensibilities and divisions are part of the problem, these critics would suggest; what is required is greater attention and openness to the profoundly imbricated relationship between nature and culture. When Eccleshare finally allows Moll to successfully tell her joke, it only reinforces the prevalence of *naturecultures*:

MOLL: Got it. Ahem.

What’s the difference between a hen night and a trip to the zoo?

Well one’s full of loud, hairy animals being poked in public by men in uniform.

And the other has a gift shop (66).

Moll employs a very standard joke formula of misplaced recognition, and inversion. The effect is to restate her cynicism towards contemporary social excesses, but it is also significant that in expressing this she makes reference to a space in which the ambivalence of the separation between nature and culture is exposed and performed. The zoo, as Umberto Eco observes in *Travels in Hyperreality*, is a deeply ambiguous formation—both a pastiche of natural habitats and theme parks; “islands of simulacrum,” according to Stephen Spote (21)—which raises suspicions regarding the privileging of authenticity in ecological discourse: “What is the truth of ecology?” as Eco puts it (126-127). Thus Moll’s last joke, in drawing attention to the artificiality of the boundaries separating nature and culture, allows the release of laughter only where it affirms the degradation of the pastoral as a “sequestered and protected” space (Ettin, 11).

Moll’s references to a hen party foreshadow the play’s end, in which the failure of the pastoral mode becomes most apparent. As Moll and 11 year old Arthur (whose name conjures ironic, mythic resonances of a king who ruled “When England was all covered in woods and forests” (45)) are left stranded in the flat, deemed too “frail” to withstand the demanding decontamination process, a deranged Bride arrives, now separated from her hen party. Arthur responds with an incongruous mix of naivety and lasciviousness (assuming she is “a real princess” he also notes approvingly that she “looks like a porn star” (70)), and the play ends with the Bride hallucinating her wedding speech:

We will wake up tomorrow next to each other and our lives will never be the same. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. The world seems fresh, full and alive.

Birds are singing, the sun is shining. And we have a whole new future ahead of us (70-71).

*Pastoral* ends on a point of refusal, denying the reconciliation typically signified in literary comedy by marriage. The harmony offered by literary comedy is, it would seem, an illusion, polluted by a redolent irony. Despite this, the play does not qualify as anti-pastoral. Eccleshare’s play does not simply dismiss the pastoral as a delusion. Rather, his interest is in re-animating its ironic potential. Ettin has acknowledged that pastoral is an ironic form; its “impulse towards containment involves holding contraries together in apparent unity” (12);

*Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre*

and Bronislaw Szerszynski has argued that, while irony is a symptom of current unsustainability (for instance, in the disconnect between private beliefs and public behaviours), when posited as an “ironic world-relation,” a simultaneously self-distancing and self-reflexive stance towards the world of public meanings, irony can also figure as a cure (340, 350). The play’s many incongruities—the suburban landscape subsumed by hyper-abundant vegetation, King Arthur as shop-lifting pre-teen—conjure a heavily ironized space in which the boundaries formerly regulated by pastoral break down. Crucially, Moll and Arthur *remain in the forest*: a final statement to the effect that, like it or not, we are permanent residents of Arden; not the simplified, pure space of release, but a place in which the divisions of nature and culture collapse into the shifting ambivalences of *naturecultures*.

*Pastoral* represents a version of pastoral in which, rather than the restoration of greenworld ordinances, an ironic nostalgia addresses the absurdities inherent in environmental discourse. In this sense, the play realizes a tendency latent within all nostalgic pastoral. As Linda Hutcheon has observed, nostalgia’s power “comes in part from its structural doubling-up of two different times, an inadequate present and an idealized past,” in a manner similar to the rubbing together of two meanings to create irony. (21) For Buell, pastoral offers not only the regressive move of a “willed amnesia” but also the possibility of alternative environmental values: it is this “double-edged character” of the pastoral mode which Eccleshare looks to (1995, 49-50, 51). This doubleness, and the counter-intuitive opportunities it presents for environmental discourse, is even more forcefully a concern in Butterworth’s *Jerusalem*.

*Toxic Green Man: Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem and ironic nostalgia*

Set on 23<sup>rd</sup> April (dually significant, as St George’s Day and Shakespeare’s birthday), *Jerusalem* dramatizes efforts by the Kennet and Avon Council to evict the intransigent Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron from the wood where he lives and exerts a charismatic, Pied Piper-like hold over the local youth (he consistently calls his young followers, ‘rats’). Rooster refuses to adhere to the eviction notice, and the play builds through various scenes alternating pathos with the carnivalesque, ending on the cusp of a final conflict between Rooster and riot police intent on ‘cleansing’ the forest. It was not the first time Butterworth had been drawn to ‘the country’. He made his name in 1995 with *Mojo*, a Pinter-esque, 1950s gangland tale, and although he followed this with two plays with rural settings—*The Night Heron* in 2002 and *The Winterling* in 2006—Pinter’s influence remained significant: Michael Billington called *The Winterling*, “*Mojo* with mud on its boots.” (n. pag.). *Jerusalem* was a departure; in as much as that the rural *mis-en-scene* is much more than mere setting, but a central preoccupation.

Critical readings of the play have tended to foreground its darker aspects. Julia Boll sees Rooster as a version of Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*, embodying “the blessed and impure,” and inviting “the attraction and revulsion associated with Freudian taboo” (n. pag.); for Anna Harpin the play’s Shakespearean allusions “activate a tragic gaze” on Rooster as the residue of a dying folk culture (69). Neither reading considers the play as comedy yet, like *Pastoral*, *Jerusalem* is deeply concerned with the comic mode, or more precisely with the possibilities activated in the failure of its mechanism. But whereas Eccleshare addressed the mechanism and sensibility of the pastoral mode in general, Butterworth focuses in particular on its *festive* possibilities.

Rooted in the saturnalia of popular theatre and holiday traditions, C.L. Barber’s theory of festive comedy is based in a pattern of inversion, statement and counterstatement, “a basic movement,” he says, “which can be summarized in the formula, through release to

*Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre*



clarification” (4). Release entails the granting of a temporary license to engage in misrule, a warrant to turn the existing order on its head. Central to this process is the Lord of Misrule, a holiday ‘green king’ who leads the revels, challenges the everyday order of things, and by whose inevitable deposition clarification of “the relation between man and ‘nature’” can be achieved without compromising the authority of the real sovereign (8. See also 24-35). Butterworth’s play is replete with festive allusions: in addition to the heavy symbolism of the date, which is also the occasion of the annual Flintock Fair, there are frequent references to the English folk corpus—St George, Titania, Jack-of-Green, Woden, William Blake—alongside more regionally-specific cultural references (the characters periodically sing snatches of the ‘Morning Song’ and the ‘Day Song’ traditionally recited during the ‘Obby ‘Oss festival, a May Holiday celebrated throughout the West Country). Most significantly there is Rooster Byron himself, a riotous mix of Falstaff, Caliban, and *genius loci*. Rooster is especially given to the kind of counter-statement of authority –“Hark ye, Johnny Byron has spoken”—typical of the festive Lord of Misrule; exhorting his followers to “Make merry [...] until the whole plain of Wiltshire dances to the tune of our misrule” (29, 52). Butterworth’s stage directions stipulate a proscenium decorated with “half-and half creatures”; and describe Rooster as moving with the “balance of a dancer, or animal” (5, 9). He is, as Auden says of Caliban in *The Sea and The Mirror*, “the begged question” of the play (149); and that question turns most forcefully on the kind of Green Man he represents.

According to Kathleen Basford, the Green Man is a powerfully ambivalent figure, as evocative of “the horrors of the *silva daemonium*” as the renewal of spring (19). Similarly, Rooster’s quasi-mythic status is repeatedly affirmed: his prodigious consumption of drugs and alcohol; his miraculous conception on the tip of a bullet, and resurrection after failing to clear twenty eighteen-wheelers; and his claim, echoing the vegetable god of J.G. Fraser, that “There’s Byron boys buried all over this land, lying in the ground as fresh as the day they was planted” (49). Yet he also has a more sinister side. At the play’s end it is revealed that Rooster has been harbouring the missing fifteen-year-old May Queen Phaedre Cox in his trailer; and Linda Fawcett, the Council representative who serves Rooster’s eviction notice, interrupts one of his self-aggrandizing speeches (“This is Rooster’s Wood. I’m Rooster Byron. I’m—”) with the curt, “You deal drugs to minors” (97). Rooster represents a *toxic* Green Man, one who yields narcotic rather than vegetable excess; whose “bounty is [...] free booze, bangers, draw, whizz and whatnot” (50). Notably, his eviction notice is served for contravening “The Public Health Act of 1878, and the Pollution Control and Local Government Order 1974” (7). Rather than depicting a holiday space designated for the *release* of excess social energies and subsequent *clarification* of man’s relationship with the natural world, (Barber, 4) *Jerusalem* dramatizes an effort to evict the Green Man and order the holiday space (Fawcett’s colleague, Parsons, remarks, “I’ll say this. It’s a lovely spot.” (8)). In an ironic inversion of conventional pastoral’s capacity to ‘suspend’ time, *Jerusalem* gives us a time-limited pastoral, counting down to the final confrontation.

As the play’s “begged question”, the toxic Green Man poses another crucial question to those who are trying to evict him: “What the fuck do you think an English forest is for?”<sup>1</sup> (98) and it is via this probing into the constitution of what David Matless has called the “moral landscape” that the play intervenes most forcefully in environmental debates. As Matless says, “the question of what landscape ‘is’ or ‘means’ can always be subsumed in the question of how it works; as a vehicle of social and self identity, as a site for the claiming of a cultural

<sup>1</sup> Mark Rylance has said that, similarly, for him the question posed by Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’ is, “what is the real purpose of this land?” (Butterworth, Rylance, Riedel, and Haskins, n. pag.).

authority, as a generator of profit, as a space for different kinds of living” (1998, 47, 12). Like *Pastoral, Jerusalem* queries the limits and enduring relevance of pastoral sensibilities to living in the fractured, uncertain contemporary moment, urging the expansion of its possibilities. Rooster’s revolt is, we might say, against what Foucault called “the right disposition of things” (93. See also Luke, 57-81), contesting the notion that access to the heritage of landscape is conditional on the distinction between the citizen and what Matless calls the “urban cultural grotesque” of the anti-citizen (1997, 143).

Butterworth seems at odds with his critics regarding *Jerusalem*’s nostalgic effect. Whereas Benedict Nightingale, writing in *The Times*, called it “a bold, ebullient and often hilarious State-of-England or (almost) State-of-Old-England play,” (n. pag.) Butterworth, has argued that the play “wants change to happen.” (Butterworth, Mansoor, and Healey, n. pag.) In truth, the play inspires what Linda Hutcheon has called postmodern nostalgia, in which nostalgia is both “exploited, *and* ironized,” a move that is both “an ironizing of nostalgia itself, of the very urge to look backward for authenticity, and, at the same moment, a sometimes shameless invoking of the visceral power that attends the fulfilment of that urge” (23). *Jerusalem* both appeals to and exposes the fallacy of nostalgia for the greenworld as the basis for an environmentally-conscious culture. An ambivalence towards cultural heritage runs through the entire play. This is evident in, for instance, the invocation of ‘Obby ‘Oss festival motifs. The ‘Obby ‘Oss festival is a May Day ceremony which celebrates the rebirth of summer, versions of which are to be seen from Padstow in Cornwall to Salisbury in Wiltshire. According to Patrick Laviolette, they are closely linked to the same question of what the place is for, acting as “regional vigils” in which local identities are “commemorated, celebrated or mourned” (224). In *Jerusalem*, when snatches of the ritual ‘Morning Song’ (“With merry ring, adieu the spring, / For summer is a-come unto the day”) and ‘Day Song’ (“Oh, where is St George? / Oh, where is he-o?”) are sung by Rooster’s revellers (10, 23. See also Spooner, 34-38), the effect sits ambivalently between irony and authenticity, signifying both the dilution of ritual and suggesting at the same time its enduring festive potency.

Svetlana Boym has defined two variants of nostalgia: *restorative* nostalgia which coerces nostalgia’s utopian aspect to support nationalist myth-making; and *reflective* nostalgia, a more “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary” mode which is alert to fallibility and multiplicity (41, 49-50). While evidently not straightforward restorative nostalgia, in a move akin to Szerszynski’s “ironic world-relation,” (in which “ironic self-distancing from the shared world of public meanings [...] is followed by the return gesture of re-entering it with a new sense of reflexivity,” 350) *Jerusalem*’s reflective approach nonetheless relies in part on (and requires the audience to invest in) memories of the greenwood as a corrective to contemporary problems. Butterworth depicts a rural culture under threat from late capitalist commodification. Wesley, a pub landlord, is compelled by his brewery to participate in a Morris dance at the Flintock fair, which also (in an ironic reference to Tolkien’s anti-industrialism) features a *Lord of the Rings* float. At times this sense of cultural deracination is redeemed by the play’s comic energies, such as Rooster’s “rural display” (involving amphetamines and slaughtering a live pig at a Kiddies’ Fun Day), representing a belligerent challenge to the sanitised spectacle of commodified greenwood misrule.

Butterworth’s negotiation of nostalgia is trickiest in relation to the more recent past, however. The play opens with a scene that is redolent of the material culture of what Paul Gilroy calls “postimperial melancholia” (98): Rooster’s trailer is decorated with an eclectic postimperial paraphernalia: old Wessex flag, a railway sign reading ‘Waterloo’, and an air-raid siren, and furnished with an “old American-style fridge” and “four red Coca-Cola plastic chairs,”

*Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre*

signifying the competing influence of the glorious past and diminished present (6). Rooster himself (whose full name, John Winston Byron, identifies him as a kind of ‘spirit of England’) first appears wearing Second World War flying goggles, and later sports a Great War-era German helmet. As a play about local identity (Harpin rightly observes that Jerusalem is a play about “what ‘here’ might mean” (65)), the ironic connotations do not quite tell the whole story. However, rather than simply allow this ambivalence to yield a “morbid preoccupation with heritage”, as Gilroy puts it, the evocation of postimperial melancholia forms the basis of an interrogation of the dynamic of citizen and anti-citizen in the moral landscape, and thus of the limit at which contemporary environmental discourse runs into discourses of national identity.

As many critics have noted, rural space has frequently been made into a kind of racialised pastoral, signifying an exclusive notion of national identity. For Julian Agyeman and Rachel Spooner the rural represents a “culturally contested and sanitised landscape” (197); for Sarah King it has been “historically and culturally constructed as a white coded space” (n. pag.). Richard Dyer has argued that ‘whiteness’ itself is a cultural construct, a signifier of citizenship in the moral landscape, which can be conferred or denied to certain groups (45); the fact that Rooster is frequently, and pejoratively, addressed as a “gypsy” serves to highlight how he does not fit within the “hyper-whitened space” of the English countryside (Neal, 445). David Sibley has identified Travellers as among a cluster of abject others who, at various times, have been seen to threaten rural homogeneity. Rooster’s Traveller heritage thus gives a further emphasis to his ‘toxic’ status, as one who has “defiled rural space” disrupting the pastorally-inflected sense of division between the “pure, homogeneous countryside” and the “heterogeneous and disordered city” (220). Sibley identifies a further ambivalence, however, in the tension between the romantic place occupied by Travellers in ideations of the English countryside, and their otherness (magnified by the unsettling presence of settled, ‘urban’ Travellers). Similarly, as both the invasive other and the *genius loci*, Rooster exposes this binary framing of the rural as a fallacy by referencing a more ancient and heterogeneous cultural presence. Just as Davey’s (one of Rooster’s retinue of revellers) job as slaughterman doesn’t fit with aestheticized rural ideals any more than his hedonistic weekend lifestyle, Rooster’s ambivalent presence questions what Vron Ware has called the assumption of a “seamless continuity rel[iant] on an Arcadian view of the relationship between the English and their living environment” (208).

As I have indicated, though, this ironized nostalgia exists in the play alongside a more earnest appeal to the past. While Butterworth insists upon the heterogeneity of the countryside (as it were, putting the complex into the simple), his play also retains a sense of the numinous in the more-than-human world, and the cultural resources which draw upon this. Rooster’s charisma is not only attributed to hedonism:

JOHNNY: [...] Look in my eyes. (*Beat.*) Dawn. Look in my eyes. Look at me.  
*She does.*  
 What do you see?  
 DAWN: Black.  
 JOHNNY: Keep looking. Look in my eyes. Deeper. Now I’m going to show you something. Are you ready?  
*She is. Silence.*  
 Did you see that? Did you see it? (*Pause.*) Did you see it, Dawn?  
*Pause. She starts to shake.*

DAWN: Yes (70-71).

For all his buffoonish tall-tale-telling Rooster represents the sacred element of the comic mode. Like Falstaff, he is ultimately (perpetually) abandoned by those who follow him; yet while the play does build to a moment of quasi-ritual sacrifice (as Boll has outlined), crucially, as with *Pastoral*, Rooster and the audience remain in the wood. Order is not restored, rather the play ends poised between Rooster's (very likely violent) eviction and his victory over the forces of governmentality.

The origins of this moment are in his claim, earlier in the play, to have met the giant who built Stonehenge. This most evocative of pre-historic sites has a complex role as a signifier of English culture (it is no accident that, given its concerns with the question of how landscape works, the play fetishizes 'Englishness' over Britishness). For Barbara Bender, it signifies the commodification of heritage (266-267); Simon Smiles has identified it, in the context of the competing impulses of 1930s modernism and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, as a "key battleground between two registers of understanding what England or Britain might mean" (210); and Alexandra Harris, writing of the deployment of landscape to buttress emotional investment in the war effort (the 1939-1945 *Recording Britain* project), has called Stonehenge a potent signifier of both strength and vulnerability (211). Rooster's simultaneously bathetic and romantic story (he claims to have met the giant "Just off the A14 outside Upavon," and discussed the prospects for a dry summer (57)) draws on a similarly complex symbolism, expressing a tension between the re- and de-mystification of the urbanised landscape. It also, however, comes to signify the source of his resistance to the normative narratives of place represented by his eviction notice, expressed in a closing speech of astonishing power:

Surrender South Wiltshire! You are outnumbered. I have you surrounded. For at my back is every Byron boy that e'er was born an Englishman. And behind them bay the drunken devil's army and we are numberless. Rise up! Rise up, Cormoran. Woden. Jack-of-Green. Jack-in-Irons. Thunderdell. Búri, Blunderbore, Gog and Magog, Galligantus, Vili and Vé, Yggdrasil, Brutus of Albion. Come, you drunken spirits. Come, you battalions. You fields of ghosts who walk these green plains still. Come, you giants! (108-109)

The speech culminates with Rooster frantically banging the giant's drum, ending on a final stage direction of pregnant possibility: "*Relentlessly he beats the drum. Faster. Faster. Staring out. He pounds on and on until the final blow rings out and...*" (109). Like *Pastoral*, *Jerusalem* refuses to activate the conventional comic reconciliation, preferring to end on a moment teetering between collapse and conquest. This failure of the comic mechanism does not, as with *Pastoral*, signify a move to the anti-pastoral but rather the play's final urging of the enduring relevance and value of comic modes in an era of profound uncertainty. Release may not give way to clarification, after Barber's model, but nonetheless Rooster's final stand demonstrates the play's "realization of a power of life larger than the individual, crescent both in men and in their green surroundings" (Barber, 24). By developing a comic mode predicated on the failure to achieve reconciliation, both Butterworth and Eccleshare demonstrate that among the opportunities of (ironic) nostalgia is the chance to develop a more inclusive and expansive environmental discourse, and to find in toxicity a more appropriate metaphor for an age of chronic ecological uncertainty.

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