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Questa rivista adotta un sistema di double blind peer review.

Direttore responsabile
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Rivista quadrimestrale
Anno II n. 5-2018

n. 5-2018

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a cura di Hannah Chapelle Wojciehowski, Vittorio Gallese

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Sent Away from the Garden? The Pastoral Logic of Tasso, Marvell, and Haley

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Abstract

The pastoral genre, in poetry, plays, and paintings, describes and praises an escape to the countryside. The departure from the city or the court to an imagined place of calm and harmony is portrayed as a retreat from conflict and from thinking, and a return to a primitive and peaceful life of the senses. But as soon as the court or city dwellers have relocated, the genre almost immediately turns to a discussion of abstract, usually moralizing, truths that reflect their intellectual sophistication. The pastoral provides cognitive literary historians a clear example of how the genre cooperates with and enacts the most basic cognitive tasks of the imagination, namely the common, everyday ability to toggle between concrete sense data and abstractions. Getting away from thinking, it turns out, gives you important things to think about. This essay discusses the predictive processing hypothesis and suggests that it offers a usefully revisionary way of discussing genres and archetypes. Examples from Tasso's Aminta, *(c. 1573), Marvell's, "The Garden," (c. 1650), and Jennifer Haley's* The Nether *(2013) exemplify both the artists' and the audiences' cognitive flexibility, and the attempts to solve representationally hungry problems by re-representing them.*

Keywords: genre; archive; pastoral; *Aminta*; "The Garden"; *The Nether*; cognitive cultural history; predictive processing hypothesis.

Audiences have been colluding for centuries with the palpable duplicity of pastoral plays and poems. Though set in a forest or countryside, they are of course composed by and for literate elites, that is, for audiences like us who expect them to help us imagine at least marginally illicit pleasures in a setting that conventionally and fictionally legitimates them. The Chorus of Tasso's *Aminta* (probably first performed in 1573) describes an outdoor space of pleasure, of rich sensuality where it is always springtime, as in Ovid's Golden Age. Place and time together offer joyful sweetness, "le liete dolcezze," where whatever pleases is permitted: "s'ei piace ei lice" (1.2.339, 344). Although the transgression is the focal attraction for audiences, the friction between law and pleasure with which pastoral narratives amuse us almost always resolves in favor of civilized restraint.[1] In pastorals from Longus' preadolescent herders in *Daphnis and Chloe* (?late 2nd century c.e.) up to the avatars of juicy young children offered to pedophiles in Jennifer Haley's play of 2013, *The Nether*, the artist, whose métier, after all, is to produce images of pleasure, ultimately finds himself representing major ugliness as well, as he is forced to admit inevitable intrusions into the green world. In the 16th century, the joyful sweetness is disrupted – Tasso is very specific here – by "that vain abstraction, empty word, that erring idol of propriety […] Honor […] which now tyrannizes society."[2] "Honor [...] stopped plain words [...] stole the gifts that Love for us decreed."[3] Honor stops, honor steals, honor rules. Its power is such that even though the ostensible goal of the play's action is the satisfaction of sexual desire, the honor of playwright and audiences seems to have required not only a moral ending, but also visual purity throughout: no events of a sensual nature are acted; all physical acts are reported by non-participants.

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[1] Lisa Sampson provides an up-to-date study of the genre in Pastoral Drama in Early Modern Italy: *The Making of a New Genre* (London: Legenda, 2006).
[2] "Ma sol perché quel vano / nome senza soggetto, / quell'idolo d'errori, idol d'inganno…onor…" (52). All Italian and English citations are from Charles Jernigan and Irene Marchegiani Jones, ed. and trans., *Torquato Tasso, Aminta: A Pastoral Play* (New York: Italica Press, 2000).
[3] "Onor…ai detti il fren ponesti…o Onore,/ che furto sia quel che fu don d'Amore" (54).

From the early Greek pastorals through their Italian Renaissance flowering, in Shakespeare's late romances, and again in nineteenth-century romanticism, imaginative works have found the constellation of features of the pastoral tradition to be apt evocations of the ephemeral pleasure of a sunny day, and an escape from the complexity of civil life. The genre is structured by a cognitive toggle between sense imagery and abstract ideas; this formal dialectic is analogous to a crucial aspect of brain function. It seems to be hard for creatures with minds like ours to resist the bubbling up of an abstraction – a general concept or even a moral lesson – from almost any sense encounter. Current neurological descriptions suggest that the distinction between abstract and concrete is not mapped in the physiology of our brains. According to Gallese and Lakoff, "it is mapped within our sensory-motor system."[4] The traditional and heavily-weighted distinction between things and ideas, between bodies and spirit, between abstractions and stuff, is a "meta"-physical distinction, inherited within the western tradition of philosophical argument. The claim of this paper is that the pastoral genre is reused, is resorted to repeatedly, by artists who use it to re-think and to re-represent the relationship between bodies and minds in a way they hope can overcome the unhappy opposition we have inherited within our culture.

The stock-in-trade of artists and poets are visual images, by which they lead their audiences to the pleasures of the green world. But they don't leave them there to enjoy its promised *otium.* Sooner or later they resort to *negotium*, using unpleasant, even ugly, imagery to stage a struggle between gratification of the senses and law. They offer Higher Moral Thought "about man's nature and situation," in the words of Paul Alpers. Artists who choose this genre, he says, take audiences away from cities only to burden their literary shepherds with the work of instructing the exiles: "the herdsman's simplicity is a source of moral authority, and one feels in him a strength in humility."[5] The genre thus recruits the ease with which mammal brains

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[4] Vittorio Gallese & George Lakoff, "The Brain's Concepts. The Role of the Sensory-Motor System in Conceptual Knowledge," *Cognitive Neuropsychology* 22, no. 3/4 (2005): 456.

[5] Alpers, Paul, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 50.

– even uneducated ones – toggle between sense data and abstraction. The artist lures audiences into the beauty and ease of the garden but once there, cannot prevent their attention (or his own) from bouncing back to a moral for the story, namely (for example) the importance of licit and unselfish love as the basis for sexual union, or the vanity of striving for material rewards or honor. Shakespeare is explicitly ironic about this duplicity. His most famous rural moralist is Jaques, in *As You Like It,* who is "full of matter," producing "a thousand similes" to "moralize the spectacle," for example, of exiled courtiers killing deer on the animals' own home turf. (II.i)

Cognitive Fluidity

And I'll do it myself, right here. I take the imagery of pastorals as a basis from which to explore the idea of recurrence with variation found within all literary genres, as their specific features appear and reappear in different times and places. Since Northrop Frye's description of archetypes (*Anatomy of Criticism,* 1957), the recurrence of schemata or image clusters has been understood as evidence for their foundational truth. As I have argued elsewhere (Spolsky, 2001, 2017), however, the recurrence indicates just the opposite. The repeated display of the conflict in pastoral poems, plays, and pictures between sense data and the mind's ability to produce abstractions is evidence that the issue has *not* been sufficiently clarified; that the cluster of images and ideas the genre compacts remains tangled because there is at its center an unsolved problem, a problem that is representationally hungry, maybe even beyond our evolved capacity to represent coherently and satisfactorily. Andy Clark and Josefa Toribio first introduced the term of "representation-hungry problems."[6] I first used the idea of representational hunger as a driver of cultural production in my study of religious imagery and iconoclasm. Clark notes that some

[6] Clark and Toribio. "Doing without Representing?," *Synthese* 101 (1994): 401-31, p. 426.

problems are harder to think through than others; he mentions issues of "absence" and "unruliness" as hungry for more of what representation in images provides.[7] Surely the counterfactuals of the pastoral imagination are just such cases.

The recurrence of literary patterns, on this view, can be accounted for not by the repeated satisfaction they provide but artists' *dis*satisfaction; by their feeling that further thinking is needed. Artists attempt to refigure, to try again and again to re-present the unruly, the difficult issues for which the tradition hasn't yet provided satisfaction: why does bodily happiness continually toggle to abstract thought, to legal prohibition, to death? The challenge remains to find a way of rearranging the familiar features of a genre or archetype, to add new images, to change the emphasis, so as to produce a more satisfying representation. The pastoral motifs don't reappear because they are pleasant, calming, satisfying experiences; they reappear because they have *not* been that. And, as Jennifer Haley's twenty-first century play, discussed below, demonstrates, artists are still trying to understand how or even whether people like us can have the satisfaction of sexual pleasure in a way that is reconcilable with our own standards of morality and law.

The playwrights working with the pastoral genre over the centuries provide a peek at an imagined Golden Age in its changing forms, but then admit that we can't stay there, any more than we can stay in the theater, although recent technology seems to be bringing audiences closer to this possibility. There are and always will be laws; but the genre, within the protection of the theater, keeps trying to suggest a better way to live without or just within the law. Tasso's shepherd, Aminta, loves the chaste Silvia, and it's not hard to imagine what illicit pleasures are hoped for. She, however, is a chaste acolyte of Diana. Two cynical elders suggest he surprise her bathing, where, if she should continue to resist his honest appeal, he might just overpower her. I suppose if there really were no laws in the Garden, then he could indeed have his pleasure, but of course the play's audiences will not have shed

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[7] Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1997), 167.

their ideas about what is permissible as they entered. They are surely assuming that she must agree to what he wants. The adventures Tasso produces out of the conflict of desire and law over five acts include the interference of a satyr, who also, of course, lusts after Silvia.

Having agreed to the risky plan, Aminta arrives at the spring to discover the satyr already there. He has stripped and bound Silvia to a tree so that he can force his vicious will upon her. Aminta frees Silvia, taking an action more ethical than he had intended. Does she intuit this, when without so much as a thank you, she runs away from him? Subsequently, each of them finds or hears evidence that seems to testify to the other's death. Having found her bloody scarf, and concluding in error that Silvia is dead, Aminta throws himself off a cliff. Branches break his fall, however, so that he survives, injured. Silvia, hearing of his leap, assumes the worst and seeks to find and bury him: "yet still I know/ that my hand's act, will be/ an act of love to him,/ for I am sure he loves/ me, as he, dying, showed."[8] But just in time, "a sad 'alas' escaped and shook his chest. But that 'alas,' which left his heart so bitterly, was met within the soul of his dear Silvia, and gathered up by her sweet lips, and there all suddenly all grieving was assuaged."[9] Her sighs and tears revive him and change her: "she screamed and beat her lovely breast, and fell upon his body lying there and brought them face to face and mouth to mouth."[10] Thus it seems that the misunderstanding – the forced entry of the idea of death – breaks a barrier and allows the lovers to be united in mutual desire, all based explicitly on Silvia's translation of sense data. His suicidal leap, and then the sigh showing him to be alive are turned from bodily into emotional, even moral knowledge: into a recognition of and then appreciation for the suffering Aminta has undergone for love. The proximity of death

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[8] Jernigan and Jones, 157. "…pure/ so che gli sarà cara/ l'opra di questa mano;/ che so certo ch'ei m'ama/ come mostrò morendo."

[9] Ibid., 173. "Un doloroso ohimè/ spinse dal petto interno;/ ma quell'ohimè, ch'amaro/ così dal cor partissi,/ s'incontrò ne lo spirto/ de la sua cara Silvia, e fu raccolto/ da la soave bocca: e tutto quivi/ subito raddolcissi."

[10] Ibid., 171. "Gridando e percotendosi il bel petto,/ lasciò cadersi in su 'l giacente corpo:/ e giunse viso a viso e bocca a bocca."

has turned into a moral: *carpe diem*. All concerned are reminded to take advantage of the brief span of life, to pay attention to the requirements of living flesh. Again, it is the shepherds, even without Latin, who know how to produce moral meaning.

Tasso represents Silvia's conversion – the accession of love – in images of and as a result of bodily closeness. Crucial knowledge is achieved by actual bodies, or at least is reported as such. The poet has expressed the shepherd's love as pain, in the courtly language of the genre at this time; Silvia has been cruel, but now has come to pity him. A woman's pity seems to be the required ingredient that allows her to express regret for her cruel ways – "crudeltate" – which she admits she had considered a virtuous chastity (4.1.116). Dafne, her older companion, interprets Silvia's tears of pity as tears of love. Pity, figured as her wanting to bury Aminta with her own hands, calls our attention to another of the representationally hungry issues that the genre struggles with, and that is the presence of death in the green world of springtime fertility and growth. The shepherds know that death and birth are both parts of natural life, but the city folk, it seems, have to learn this. Why are Silvia's hands used only in connection with the death of the beloved? Is this a happy conclusion? Charles Jernigan and Irene Marchegiani Jones, co-editors of the dual-lingual edition, might well be referring to most pastoral works when they say of *Aminta*: "the genre and tone are difficult to pin down because they keep shifting and on some occasions are tragic and comic, high and low at the same time."[11]

Texts with pastoral motifs are never pure expressions of happiness or sadness – not Virgil's Eclogues nor later pastoral elegies, such as Milton's "Lycidas" of 1637 or Shelley's "Adonais" of 1821. In Shakespeare's late plays there are marriages in the end, but after years of sorrow. In Arcadia, death is as reliable a plot component as sheep and sexual frustration. What remains in all versions is the problem of how to manage a life that sufficiently recognizes and satisfies the body's demands for happiness while acknowledging the impossibility of avoiding abstract meaning – some version of honor or grace,

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[11] Ibid., 157.

Fig. 1: Guercino, c. 1618-22 in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome. Picture from Wikipedia Commons. Note the inscription on the stone under the skull: ET IN ARCADIA EGO.

or, of recognizing, at an even higher level of generalization, the link between birth and death.

It is the body that inevitably leads the brain to what is surely – at least in the short term – a saving, salutary, generalization. Short term, that is, because the process is a loop, and the generalization is promptly and inevitably adjusted by recourse to bodily experience. The pastoral genre may be as unquenchable as it is because it knows how to display a toggle between our human appreciation of the special intelligence of the body and the equally pleasing rewards that the appreciation itself produces, namely a participation in abstract systems of moral and aesthetic judgment. These latter are then again modified and adjusted according to the body's experience.

In early modern pastoral texts the pleasure of the countryside always needed to be argued because a stay in the countryside and an immersion in sensual pleasure was not, for protagonists or for audiences, the unmarked case. City and court, even with their restraints, were clearly their first choice. The green world affords only a temporary holiday though always an instructive one. Imagery and plot, however, do not have to focus on only the sexual comforts of the green world. Andrew Marvell's poem "The Garden" (1650-52) begins by questioning the conventional and mistaken elevation of honor in civic society, and finds other pleasures outdoors.

How vainly men themselves amaze
To win the palm, the oak, or bays;
And their uncessant labours see
Crowned from some single herb or tree,
Whose short and narrow-vergèd Shade
Does prudently their toils upbraid;
While all flowers and all trees do close
To weave the Garlands of repose!

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
And Innocence thy sister dear?
Mistaken long, I sought you then
In busy companies of men.
Your sacred plants, if here below,
Only among the plants will grow.
Society is all but rude,
To this delicious solitude.
* * * * * *
What wondrous life in this I lead!
Ripe apples drop about my head;
The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine, and curious peach,
Into my hands themselves do reach;
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,
Ensnared with flowers, I fall on Grass.

As in Tasso's text, Marvell's description of the pleasures of the green world, his attempt to convince himself and his audiences of the pleasures away from the struggles of the city, cannot stay in the moment of release; his images turn rapidly into moral abstractions. "The Mind" quickly slips ideas behind or alongside sense images:

> Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less,
> Withdraws into its happiness:
> The mind, that ocean where each kind
> Does straight its own resemblance find;
> Yet it creates, transcending these,
> Far other worlds, and other seas;
> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.[12]

The mind transcends by withdrawing, and nothing remains of the sense pleasures except a green shade. Frank Kermode, in 1952, pointing to this reversal, called the poem an anti-pastoral, noting that it fails to achieve the escape, the innocent simplicity it praises at the start. Citing different sources, Geoffrey Hartman, in 1970, agreed that the poem fails to remain at peace with the sensual pleasures it offers; it can't help converting its sense images to symbols. This toggle is true of many non-pastoral texts as well: most lyric poems manifest this basic aspect of brain function, making clear that the concrete imagery of poetry in all genres is turned easily into ideas and ideals. It is normal brain function that encourages this. Terence Cave's breakthrough was crucial. In his 1988 study, *Recognitions*, he describes a specific and recurrent rhetorical trope, *anagnorisis*, that resolves the plot complications of pastoral romances, allowing the lovers to be united, but at the same time keeps the story from ending on a note of pure sensuality. Think of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, or Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *Cymbeline*: after evils and errors, mistaken identities, intended and unintended de-

[12] Stephen Greenblatt, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed, (New York: Norton, 2006), 1711.

ception, the happy endings always result from a sudden recognition by means of a timely coincidence. Sadness is turned to joy, but, Cave points to the price paid: "the commonly accepted coordinates of knowledge have gone awry."[13] Throughout the story, readers have been trying to figure out what needs to be learned or understood, and wondering how the characters in the story will come to understand what they need to know. Then someone comes in with a token: a ring, a royal garment, gold coins, a scroll with an oracle written on it. These *objects* speak, and what they say, according to Cave, is the special message of the pastoral: forget figuring things out – your ratiocination is unnecessary. We are all in the hands of the gods who order the world, which is just as well, since we are apparently ill-equipped to understand it. This is a deeply skeptical message. And as Cave was the first to notice, it is also a cognitive message, an epistemology rejecting itself. It plays right into the pastoral loop: your brain helps you see that it's less help than you thought.

But not quite: trying again to get it right via the predictive processing hypothesis

As if I were myself composing a pastoral – should this essay be printed in green ink? – I turn now to an emerging cognitive hypothesis that allows us to accept the uncertainty of our human capacities for understanding, as Cave did, without the tragic implications. I now introduce the *predictive processing hypothesis* because it allows us to frame our agile ability to toggle between concrete and abstract within a description of the larger process by which the cognizer moves incrementally toward greater security and satisfaction. The hypothesis is attractive to literary historians because it fits with our sense that genres have both stability and flexibility. As I have argued elsewhere, artists' intentions and audiences' judgments about genres interact adaptively with their contexts. But the predictive processing hypothesis makes a further advance in displaying how it is that although our brains in-

[13] Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 488.

deed depend heavily on context as they work at cultural construction, success is not guaranteed. The hypothesis affords a neurological account of the uncertainty and inevitable risk of error inherent in human thinking and communication. It provides the biological underpinning for a phenomenon that literary and cultural theorists have been describing for years, and also supports the claim that works of imagination allow and encourage the recalibration, rethinking, and rearranging of familiar patterns so that new understanding becomes available. It describes how what at first looks like a tragedy might turn out to have a comic ending.

In *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (2016), Clark argues the hypothesis in detail, describing the evolved dynamic of thinking as powered by error messages in neural networks that prompt and produce correction. He summarizes the empirical work that studies the neural system monitoring its own uncertainty, keeping continuously up to date by prompting revision and correction. On this view, the brain uses its sense perception mechanisms not, as once might have been said, to collect and store information, but by matching moment-by-moment input against what is already available in memory. Incoming sense data is checked against past experience which functions as a prediction or guess about what must now be dealt with, acted upon. But since past experience is always, by definition, obsolescent, the process of matching usually produces an error message. That error message stimulates a revision which is then again sent forward for assessment. Speed being of the essence, both operations move as little information as possible, repeating the shuttle until a satisfactory representation emerges; satisfaction, here, is whatever is likely to produce appropriate action. What drives the system toward success is the generation of conflict between what is expected and what is encountered, and crucially, in Clark's language, the surprise of the mis-matches.

We cheer from the sidelines as the received view of the brain as a collector of incoming information is replaced by a dynamic in which recourse to experience produces recalibration. Although cognition cannot but be biased toward the familiar – what else have we got? – as the deconstructionists called the "always already," memory is not the brain's only resource. Not waiting for all precincts to report, the system produces patterns that are guesses, penciled in, as it were. Bits

of information from interconnected areas come together according to the need signaled by error messages. And here's where the analogy to philosophical skepticism appears: success is not measured by accurate representation, but by the affordance of effective action. The overall picture of a brain as an embodied biological agent that acts fast, looping among old patterns and new information, making minute adjustments until a satisfactory fit between interpretation and action is found is not far from experienced readers' sense of how we understand texts as they unfold. Because the process of adjusting past and present starts from a new, unplanned, and arbitrary set of circumstances, and continues only until a satisfactory, *a good enough* situation appears, indeterminacy, imperfection, and risk are built-ins, as with other aspects of evolution, such as the origins of change in random mutation. The processes seem, at least so far, to be keeping the species alive.

Granting a central position to mismatches and surprise, the predictive processing hypothesis offers just the space cognitive literary theory has been hoping to find within which we can locate the work of fictions and works of imagination in all media. "Perception," on this view, in Clark's words "at least, as it occurs in creatures like us – is co-emergent with something functionally akin to imagination."[14] It deals opportunistically with just what our best artists supply – the unexpected. On this hypothesis, visual images and narratives, songs and statues, moving pictures or modern dances, as they arrive from unpredictable and unstable combinations of material and imagined sources, cannot, prima facie, be detached from the body's ongoing work of homeostasis for survival and flourishing. Not only do fictions not corrupt the cognitive system, as has in some quarters been supposed, but the distinction between works of imagination and any other unfamiliar stimulus is minimized as well, both categories having the potential to be disruptive and also informative. Surprise generates adaptation, and surprise, in fiction, can be produced by play,

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[14] Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 94.

which itself allows breaking away from established patterns, trying out new ones. Here, then, is a rewrite of the hypothesis in terms suitable to literary study: every correction the body makes in order to match up whatever past experience has come forward to deal with the present, offers a new pattern, that is, a new or revised abstraction as part of an ongoing negotiation, an exploration of the question of how much of the past is useful. How little do I need from memory to move on with something new? Whatever representation works is good enough as a temporary resting (or testing) place, a useful compromise, an accomplishment of the brain, that will itself be stored and elaborated further.

The challenge for cognitive literary scholars as they hypothesize the different ways in which people connect stored information and patterns of imagery to the novel representations they encounter is to recognize evidence of usable disruption. As being hungry doesn't guarantee the availability of healthy food, so it isn't the case that we automatically make useful intelligence out of fiction. That we even do so reliably is doubtful, though it seems that growing children are usually guided in their learning of the social contracts that produce satisfaction from fictions within their local cultural world. A set of contracts of fictional genres – both the forms of works of the imagination and also their functional genres - enable the distinguishing, for example, of tragedies from comedies. A culture's functional genres, learned in context, will, on this model, suggest meaningful category distinctions, but individual artists and audiences remain free to decide which categorization satisfies best in current circumstances.

Other cognitive areas of investigation and possible connections

Further research may eventually connect the predictive processing hypothesis to what has been called the default mode of brain function, and both to a literary theoretical perspective. We'd again be looking for functional interruption. Imaging studies have shown that brains spend as much time as they can, when not interrupted, precisely on the task of patching and connecting; on the task of building advantageous networks among what's already in there and what's new. This

rearranging and reconnecting is hypothesized to be the constant job of the default network when it is not required to attend to externally imposed tasks. This kind of unconstrained processing might turn out to be the area in which new connections and revised categorizations are produced. Perhaps the artist who turns to the pastoral genre recognizes that at least for a short while the genre affords the state of relaxation that can be not only restorative but creative as well – the literary equivalent, perhaps, of the default mode as the time and space to think, connect, repair. Might then a work of art be, or evoke, or take advantage of, this default state?

Another possibly relevant area of current cognitive research investigates how judgments of reliability are made. How does the brain, working to settle into a satisfactory representation, decide that a categorization or configuration is good enough to act upon? And how is this related to the question of how the brain judges the reliability of a complex representation? Is this activity different from basic (or enhanced?) categorization, that is, deciding how to judge and deal with a text or any part of it as fiction or non-fiction? As offensive? Boring? There is plenty of work to be done, furthermore, in aligning the hypotheses of brain-imaging studies and the concepts and vocabularies of literary and art historians, as I have done here, suggesting that the predictive processing hypothesis supports my claim that archetypes recur because they haven't been satisfactorily resolved. Might there, then, still be a role for the pastoral genre? Can it be fruitfully reused?

Jennifer Haley's The Nether

A recent and surprising recurrence of pastoral appears in a play written by the American playwright, Jennifer Haley. *The Nether* (2013) displays the enduring conflict between pleasure and law explicitly. Is the internet, it asks, an acceptable *locus amoenus*? An intimate place of delight? In *The Nether*, the pastoral reappears within a story concerned with one of the most painful topics in the social context of the play's composition, and one that seems far from its Greek origins, namely pedophilia and internet child pornography. Haley is again asking what pleasures are or should be legitimate, legal, and whether there

can be an escape from law. The green world and the temptation to escape to it is now provided by advances in the electronic technology of internet interface, and in concert with the creative work of playwriting, together offer a designer environment through which unrestrained pleasure is available. As the curtain rises, there is nothing green in sight; nothing even hinting of a pastoral. The scene is an institutionally dull interrogation room in a police station. Two characters sit opposite each other at a small table, equally and entirely uncolorful, evoking the familiar genre of the police procedural. The two figures are Sims, "a successful businessman," and Morris, "a young female detective." The stage backdrop is covered with black and white computer code. Sims, it soon appears, leads two lives. The one being investigated by the detective is the businessman who has built an internet site called "The Hideaway," an alternative reality offering sexual pleasure, at a date somewhere in the near future. The web, now called the Nether, has grown in realism, power, and influence so that it is equivalent to the world in which the theater audience lives. As we later learn, people can travel between the two or even choose to live entirely in the Nether. Although the opening scene might suggest an investigation of white collar crime, Morris tells Sims that the charges against him are "Solicitation. Rape. Sodomy. Murder."[15] His defense is that the activity at The Hideaway, for all that the technology makes it seem real, is not embodied, not real. There cannot be any actual damage, only pleasure. All the horrid crimes she names are illusions, and the young children who seem to be abused reappear instantly, still smiling.

The question that interests Haley about The Hideaway is what happens to the people who log into it. No one arrests children or adults for killing character icons in video games in 2017. But technology, by the time of the play, has vastly improved the pretense. A third character, an undercover agent sent by Morris to infiltrate the site and investigate Sims' alleged crimes, was (re)created "from a set of prescribed 'looks'" (13). Before he was sent to the Hideaway he had to "pass a draconian manners tutorial" (13) to purge his speech and body language of twen-

[15] Jennifer Hayley, *The Nether* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 12. All further page references are in the text.

ty-first-century give-aways. His report is our first hint of a green world. In a genre reversal, the green enters a black world rather than the snake being discovered in the garden. Here it is, as read by Morris to Sims:

> I enter the Hideaway. The first thing I experience is the trees. The flickering light and soft sound as they sway in the sun and wind is almost overwhelming. They surround a beautifully rendered 1880s Gothic Revival with a squeak in the top porch step. I ring the doorbell. I can actually feel my hand sweat, clutching my carpetbag, I peek through a window and spy figures in the foyer – an impeccably dressed man stroking the face of one of the children – a little girl – (13).

Here, Sims interrupts with the denial at the center of the play's interest: "They. Are not. Children." The inspector answers: "I guess that depends on context, Mr Sims. Or should I call you – Papa?" (13). Papa, it turns out, is the role Sims himself plays at The Hideaway. He stars in his own creation as the children's father, renting them out to online visitors, and, as is hinted by the report of his stroking the child's cheek – both loving and taking advantage of them as he pleases. Another character – a client (a user? an abuser?) named Doyle is also investigated, in hopes that he will provide evidence against Sims. Doyle, like Sims, has been leading a double life – one online and one off. His wife does not know about his travels to the Hideaway, or his relationship with the lovely little girl named Iris. The online world, we come to understand, provides him with a full gamut of pleasure. He can do whatever he likes with or to the little girl, all the while allowed to believe he is indulging in childish fun. Having shown one of her visitors how to play jacks, she moves on with the program. She stands and raises her dress, pulling it off over her head. She offers her visitor an axe, encouraging him to use it. The shocking appearance of this prop, like the satyr in *Aminta*, breaks the illusion, raises the stakes for the audience. And as in the classical pastoral, as Sampson notes, the emergence of "egocentricity and violence, pervert[s] the golden age of ideal love as a freely given gift, to one of theft and rape."[16] Iris assures her

[16] Sampson, 79.

visitor that his violence will have no consequences beyond his enjoyment: "It's okay, Mr. Woodnut. I always resurrect" (50).

In the theater, as the pastoral stage set descends from the fly loft, a collective oooh is heard from the audience. For those who recognize them, the meta-communicative genre features come fully to the fore and are engaged, retained: the pastoral fantasy, as in an impressionist painting, being immediately appreciated. In their sensuous enjoyment of the scene, the audience cannot help but become complicit, even if they have never actually logged onto a child porn site.

Fig. 2: Stage set for *The Nether* at the Royal Court Theatre and Headlong, designed by Es Devlin. 17 July-9 August 2014. Jeremy Herrin, Director. Cast in photo: Zoe Brough, Stanley Townsend. Photo by Johan Persson.

The refreshing play of light and green, and its existence as an escape, in clear contrast to the controlling "police state," is as fully present here as in *As You Like It.* In the Hideaway, time and consequence are suspended, identities based on social status don't exist, the life of the senses can be fully enjoyed at leisure. Sims shares his green world, as does Haley, and whether or not the audience recognizes the fictional genre, all can enjoy the representation of a hideaway in the woods on a day when sun dapples the bright green leaves. Papa and

Iris, in Fig. 2, are enjoying a typical pastoral pleasure; they are having a picnic.

As the predictive processing hypothesis would describe the cognitive work of audiences, those who recognize the artistic genre can immediately begin cooperating, reopening, within the pleasurable visual world, the old questions of the power and legitimacy of fantasy. And, as the hypothesis also tells us, their past experience will be inadequate. But don't forget, they have also already activated the ligaments of the genre of police drama. Just as the Renaissance pastorals regularly involved masks or genre-reversing disguises that provide additional freedoms and/ or transgressions, here too, it eventually becomes clear that each of the major characters is able to hide duplicitously in the alternative reality of the Nether. Analogous to the computer game-player who chooses and temporarily becomes an online avatar, not only Sims and Doyle, but also the police investigator (him or herself), it turns out, leads and is hiding an alternate online life. What's more, each of the characters' own past within a parent-child relationship is relevant. The plot becomes intricate in ways we needn't follow, but I have introduced it here to show that the power of the pastoral contract is still accessible in a renewed combination. I would claim, further, that it is precisely the pastoral that is needed – no other genre would do – because the issue is whether the imagination, in this case evoked not by poem, painting, or stage drama, but via internet child pornography, can provide a cure – a pastoral cure. And if the answer is yes, should the internet activity of a pedophile be encouraged rather than forbidden? Should it be understood to be a licit pleasure? On stage, the argument is put into the mouth of Sims, early on:

> Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse determent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I loved him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this – not all of us see this – but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor's children and my brother's children and the children I won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I've created a place where I can be my fucking self! (19).

The author of *The Nether* seems to want us to agree (or maybe just consider agreeing) that imagination as provoked by internet images just as by any other art medium is not only not dangerous, but can even provide a healing environment. We are enchanted by the green world even as we are still trying to work out just how the rape, sodomy and murder the police inspector has referred to early on are realized, before, that is, we actually recognize that the crimes named will all be part of the hyperreal, and that the illness that needs the pastoral cure here is pedophilia. We agree to what seems like the innocent pleasure of the green world well before we see the lovely little girl lift her dress, or hear her offering an axe. The author has entrapped us, indeed, by a prediction error, as Aminta was trapped by agreeing to spy on Silvia in her bath, while we are still in the presence of the happy, the comic version of pastoral. But in this play, the focus switches toward the confusions between reality and life in the netherworld of internet fantasy at a time at which technology has advanced to permit the characters at the imaginary Hideaway both a growing awareness of their double life and also to permit users, if they wish, the ability to check out, as it were, of one's actual world and decide to live permanently in the *nether*. Is it this easy to subvert the law?

For all its artificiality, the pastoral genre has repeatedly asked its audiences to imagine what it might be like to live, like Robin Hood and his merry men, outside the law. Describing the cultural history of the mid-sixteenth century during which the Italian pastoral plays emerged, Sampson forefronts the old controversy raised anew by the Council of Trent (1545-63) about whether poetry must teach as well as delight. She cites Battista Guarini's recognition that although the Biblical patriarchs, from Adam through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, lived a pastoral existence, the ideal republic was only achieved after Moses received and instituted the law.[17] The genre most successfully recreates a discussion of its serious issues when its audiences have earlier experience with the genre; then it affords the rethinking of representationally hungry issues. The motor of the genre is the same as the motor of the toggle

[17] Ibid., 146.

between concrete sense perceptions and categories or abstractions, and that is the looping of error-correcting brain processes.

The predictive processing hypothesis has allowed us to amplify the articulation of an inherited literary-historical understanding of both archetype and genre. From this new perspective, we can understand either of them as a template that guides cognition by triangulation. Both the author who provides the trigger clues and the audiences who have the cultural experience, each individually evoking a version of a schema labeled pastoral, initiate the predictive processing work of guessing and correcting. But even satisfying corrections age, and the work has to be redone; if the pastoral recurs it is because we still need it. As the dilemma played out in *The Nether* shows, even those who describe themselves as convinced materialists might consider that that reality (or not) of internet avatars such as the child victims at The Hideaway may reopen some old questions.

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