The Pastoral Imaginary
A Pagan Heritage in a Christian Setting

François Flahault

In springtime, the advertising posters adorning the walls and bus shelters of Western cities display young women in swimsuits for passersby to see. Tourists from Asia or the Middle East are often surprised, shocked even. Would they be less shocked if it were explained to them that these young women are inheritors of the ancient statues of Aphrodite? And that, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Arcadia, whose cheerful landscapes were celebrated by painters and poets, moved to the seaside?

The anthropologist, when working in his “field,” is interested in what seems different from his own culture. I here invite the reader to try the reverse exercise: to look with a fresh eye at the constellation of images belonging to the pastoral or Arcadian genre, generally linked to the “fables” of antiquity. It is a set of stereotypes that has deeply influenced Western culture right up to the present day—yet we are so used to them that we pay them little attention. In order for philosophical thinking to go beyond a sterile rehashing of its own tradition, for

1. Translator’s note: Unless referenced to an English-language publication, all quotations in this article that were originally not written in French have been back-translated from the French language version of this article.
2. “Happy are thou, my son, in knowing only the pastoral divinities.”
it to broaden its horizons and be renewed, we need to stand back and look at Western culture through the eyes of anthropology; we need to unearth prejudices and presuppositions that are, as it were, taken for granted. The book I devoted to the story of Adam and Eve aimed to contribute to this vast area of work, which is still in its infancy (Flahault 2007). The following pages are dedicated to this constellation of Arcadian images, and give scant credit to the doctrine of original sin; their purpose is to continue the original investigation, providing a counterpoint or complement to it.

We must first uncover the features that make up the pastoral imaginary, as well as the way these fit together, and their permanence throughout the centuries. In order to highlight the prejudices that cling to them, I shall compare them with the idealized representations of leisure in cultured Chinese society. We also need to grasp the role played by this pagan heritage in a predominantly Christian setting. Indeed, if Arcadian fictions, like other modes of recreation, enabled the worries and misfortunes of real life to be temporarily forgotten, their specific role was to be an outlet or a refuge that, to a certain extent, allowed people to escape from the stranglehold of dualism—the division between two worlds, earthly and celestial, material and spiritual, tangible and intangible. This dualism that Platonism and Christianity embedded in our culture gives human beings a privileged status. But, at the same time, it imposes on them a very heavy burden. Over the course of the centuries, the peasantry went some way toward easing this psychological burden by taking from Christianity only what suited it, and by combining what it took with ideas and practices that were pre-Christian. The cultured classes more readily assimilated the clergy's message of the debt owed to the Son of God for his death on the cross for the salvation of humanity—a death that weighed more heavily on them. As a consequence of this, the faithful were caught in a sort of double bind: if they tried to sacrifice everything for eternal life, the hold exerted on them by this world and by the flesh meant that they always fell short of the ideal. On the other hand, if, faced with a duty that was beyond their powers, and with truths in which it was difficult to believe, they limited their horizons to life on Earth, then they came up against the disparaging view of doing so that was promulgated by religion. Consequently, they were unable to live their life in this world to the full, with the sense of it being an end in itself. One understands how Montesquieu deplored the “contrast between the commitments of religion and those of the world; something that the ancients,” he added, “did not have.” In his *Thoughts*, he has these striking phrases: “The two worlds. This one spoils the other, and the other spoils this one. Two is too many. There should have been only one” (quoted in Starobinski 1966, 56).

It is in relation to this insoluble dilemma that we should understand the role and place of pastoral fiction in European culture from the Renaissance onward—fiction such as the three works titled *Arcadia*, one by the Italian Sannazaro (1502), another by the Englishman Philip Sidney (1585), and a third by the Spaniard

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Lope de Vega (1598—more than twenty editions over the course of the seventeenth century). In addition to these, canto 9 of *The Lusiads* by the Portuguese poet Camoens (1572), Tasso’s *Aminta* (1573), and *L’Astrée* by the Frenchman Honoré d’Urfé (1607–1617) inspired many other pastoral works. These obviously did not allow a permanent escape from dualism. However, by opening up to reverie an esthetic domain in which neither the rigors of religion, nor reproach, nor the troubles of this world had any place, they at least offered a soothing respite and refuge. They even offered something more than that: since dualism had been established as a truth, it was tempting to think that the fictions that made people forget their insurmountable difficulties also, themselves, pointed toward some truth. It is therefore not surprising that the pastoral imaginary should have been associated sometimes with an anti-Christian bias, sometimes with the romantic dream of reconciliation between earthly and heavenly love, and sometimes with hopes of moral or political regeneration; the soft-hued tints of pastoral reverie thus combined with the vivid colors of revolutionary ideals and Promethean desire. We shall see how, in the eighteenth century, following a temporary alliance between sensual neo-Epicureanism and pastoral imaginary, Rousseauist and then Romantic trends attempted to reconcile this pagan heritage with Christianity. The dream of marrying the tangible world with the absolute followed the same trend as the political utopias and Promethean ambitions belonging to the “time of the prophets.”4 However, this Romantic dream was buoyed up by too strong a desire for completeness, and it would inevitably come up against the impossible. Since it could not be embodied in institutions or made part of daily life, it soon ran out of steam. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, what remained of the pastoral imaginary was therefore put once more at the service of an anti-Christian hedonism, before finally becoming dissolved in the imagery of advertising—this latter inviting us to abandon all ideals and devote ourselves to the role of consumers assigned to us by a world of economic frenzy.

### Polytheism Progressively Dismembered

Since Christianity is a “religion” (a notion that is supposed to be self-explanatory, although very difficult and perhaps impossible to define), we tend to think that what Christianity progressively replaced was also a religion: the Emperor Constantine converted in 312, moving from one religion to another that was more “developed,” more “spiritual”—a monotheism that would inevitably finish by conquering polytheism. This is, broadly speaking, what the evolutionary view of history tells us; a view, it would appear, that is difficult to relinquish (Detienne 2011).

In reality, ancient polytheism did not amount to a religion in the way we understand the term today. It was inseparable from the cultures and societies of which it was a part and obviously, unlike Christianity, did not demand a personal

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4. I have borrowed this expression from Paul Bénichou (1977).
act of faith. Populating the world with numerous divinities was a way of making it habitable and furnishing it. It is thus not surprising that pastoral poetry is crammed with mythology and deities. Polytheism also went hand in hand with cosmology and an anthropology to which Hesiod’s *Theogony* and the work of Homer, among others, testify. There was no need to wait for the Christian era for this cosmology and anthropology to be rejected: half a millennium before Saint Paul established the doctrinal bases of Christianity, an essential part of the “genius of paganism” had already become literally unthinkable for the Greek philosophers. The anthropology that permeates the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had also become incomprehensible in the eyes of the educated elite; this was the reason why the Stoics were determined to make the text say what they wanted to hear (and what it did not say) by bending it to an allegorical reading. The famous statement by Parmenides in *Fragment* 8, “I forbid you to say or even to think that ‘he is’ could possibly stem from nonbeing” (quoted in Dumont 1988, 261), also testifies to an incomprehension and refusal of the cosmology of polytheism; it is addressed to Hesiod, who, inspired by Eastern Mediterranean cosmogonies, talked of an original chaos from which all that is might have emerged by means of differentiation and delimitation. Incidentally, the fact that Parmenides, then Plato, affirmed the prevalence of concepts and their logical connection is not sufficient reason to speak of moving “from myth to reason.” The fact that we no longer understand the Hesiodic conception of being does not prove it is less rational than that of Parmenides, Plato, or even the so-called “materialist” philosophers such as Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius. The fight against certain aspects of polytheism and the slow process of its dismembering thus began more than half a millennium before Christianity carved out a place for itself within the Roman Empire, with its vast stock of creeds. The ground had been prepared by a philosophical monotheism (which did not stop the Greek and Roman elites participating in rites associated with a variety of deities), and also by the importance accorded in ancient philosophy to the notion of truth. The Christians, as we know, fought against polytheism in the name of truth (pagans were subject to persecution, which was particularly violent during Justinian’s reign in the sixth century). Heresies and peasant superstition (“pagan” derives from the word *paganus*, Latin for “peasant”) were similarly judged to be reprehensible, even diabolic. However, this did not prevent the Church taking over many pre-Christian practices and even beliefs.

By the end of the slow process of polytheism’s collapse, there remained only mythological narratives and pastoral literature. Although, as we shall see, the latter implied a conception of the human being that was incompatible with Platonism and Christianity, it was nevertheless not rejected. Considered to be an esthetic

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6. François Dingremont (2012) successfully highlights the extent of this misunderstanding, in relation to the *Odyssey*.
8. Ramsay MacMullen (2011) gives numerous examples of this.
rather than dogmatic inheritance, it was fortunate enough to escape the judgment of being true or false. As Henri-Irénée Marrou, Ramsay MacMullen, and Peter Brown have pointed out, Christian intellectuals and persons of note in late antiquity had often attended “pagan” schools; many of them were keen to preserve some of the pre-Christian literature and philosophy, and even precious sculptures linked to polytheism. To save these works from the condemnation threatening idolatry and false gods, they declared that they were not pagan, only “worldly” or secular. While the world to which the gods belonged was collapsing, the pastoral imaginary, although also part of that world, was nonetheless able to become detached from it, and to be reaccommodated in the esthetic domain where the “pagan” poets (notably Ovid) had already prepared a place for it (Brown 2011).

We like to think that every culture forms a coherent whole. If this were the case, life within that culture would probably be suffocating. Nothing is more contrary to the doctrine of original sin and the ideal of renouncing the flesh (Brown 1995) than the pastoral imaginary and its sensual hedonism. But it is precisely in this that its value lies, allowing it to provide a refuge and haven from the world view that the Church was trying to impose. From the Renaissance onward, pastoralism found a wide blossoming in European culture:

Estheticized paganism, when limited solely to the claim of grace and beauty, is not a dangerous rival to Christian orthodoxies… The demarcation between sacred and profane has its own legitimacy: it is postulated by religious authority itself. In determining its domain of strict jurisdiction, religious authority tolerates the existence of an exterior domain, over which it keeps watch while not subjecting it to the strictest rules (Starobinski 1989, 238–239).

Thus, as Voltaire says in his Apology for the Fable, it was possible to be Christian at Mass and pagan at the opera.

*Vita Rustica*

The Romans distinguished between *vita urbana* and *vita rustica*, city life and country life. The *vita rustica* was less that of the peasantry than that of city dwellers in their country houses.9 Hence, in the poet Martial, for example, we find a literary appreciation of the activities associated with the countryside, in contrast to the pernicious idleness of the town. These “rustic” occupations were not related to business or labor, and so were considered as *otium*, or leisure. Practice of the pastoral literary genre constituted a leisure activity, while at the same time evoking in poetical mode a *vita rustica* close to the ideal life of the gods.

The Latin *otium*, “rest, idleness, leisure, free time, tranquility,” was the opposite of *negotium*, “occupation, work, business” (the word *negotium* comes from the expression *Mihi neg otium est*: “I haven’t the leisure to,” “I have business”). The ancients, of course, devoted themselves to leisure entertainments: circus games,
theatre, banquets, bathing, festivities, hunting, and so forth. But the more educated also indulged in studious leisure pursuits: the *otium litteratum* praised by Seneca was similar to the Greek *scholè* (usually translated by “leisure,” *scholè* also relates to occupations such as study or scholarly conversation and, by extension, places of study, giving us the French words *école, scolaire*, and *scholastique*, or *school, scholar*, and so on in English). In this way, beneath their rustic appearance, the characters of pastoral literature were satisfying the tastes of a sophisticated elite (Létoublon 2002). The same would be true in the European classical age, when high society became passionately fond of pastoral works. The most famous of these, *L'Astrée*, was set in fifth-century Gaul at the time of the Druids; the characters are descended from courtiers who have renounced vainglory and fled from Roman oppression to dress themselves as shepherds (Van Elslande 1999, 50).

In the contented occupations that they ascribed to the shepherds, the poets of antiquity linked the beauty of the landscape with the beauty of young bodies, with amorous desire, and with the proximity of deities such as Pan, Bacchus, and nymphs. To judge from the descriptions that Homer gives of the cave inhabited by Calypso (the divine nymph in love with Ulysses), the Greeks of the seventh century BC were sensitive to the charms of a chosen landscape:

The cave was sheltered by a verdant copse of alders, aspens, and fragrant cypresses, which was the roosting-place of feathered creatures, horned owls and falcons… Trailing round the very mouth of the cavern, a garden vine ran riot, with great bunches of ripe grapes; while from four separate but neighboring springs four crystal rivulets were trained to run this way and that; and in soft meadows on either side the iris and the parsley flourished. It was indeed a spot where even an immortal visitor must pause to gaze in wonder and delight (Homer 1946, 5.63–74).

These verses offer us the first description and prototype of the *locus amoenus* (“agreeable location”) that is inseparable from the pastoral imaginary. This typical landscape would play as fundamental and durable a role in Western culture as the association of mountains, a waterfall, mist, and pines would in Chinese culture. The Arcadian *locus amoenus* was the abode of nymphs, Pan, and Bacchus, as already mentioned in the fifth century in Sophocles’s *Oedipus King*. The stereotypes of pastoral literature became permanently fixed as early as the third century BC. They remained remarkably stable, contributing to Classical culture, then fifteenth-century European arts, right up to the present day. The association of landscape with the nude, especially the female nude, was an essential feature.

10. In the *Iliad*, the description of Achilles’s shield offers us, among other landscapes, a whole scene portraying the grape harvest; we see a child singing to the accompaniment of a cithara while young people are dancing (Homer 1982, 18.550–558).

11. Italian poetry and theatre paved the way. In the late fifteenth century, the Neapolitan Jacopo Sannazzaro wrote *Arcadia* in Italian. It was a pastoral work in verse and prose that had considerable influence throughout the whole of Europe. The fresco known as *The Allegory of Good Government* (late 1330s) by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, which decorates the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, is probably the first landscape painting (Baridon 2006). But it was not until the seventeenth century that painting saw a revival of the Arcadian idealization of landscape (see the exhibition catalogue *Nature et Idéal* [Loire et al. 2001]).

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In the twentieth century, the pastoral vision of leisure changed its context: from the country, it moved to the seaside. The Roman custom of “taking the waters” had not disappeared. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spas, like Bath in England, seemed to correspond to the idealized landscape traditionally associated with the esthetic of the nude. The practice of taking a vacation (which the nineteenth-century Larousse dictionary defines as a “stay in the country in order to gain refreshment”) then moved progressively toward the coast, and Brighton ended up eclipsing Bath (Porter 2001, 35–42; Rauch 2001, 83ff). Travel to Italy, so prized by the Romantics, gave them the opportunity to dream of antiquity while contemplating the Mediterranean.

While the European cult of nudity was for centuries limited to the representations given in poetry, painting, and sculpture, it now became possible to practice what, until then, had been the privilege of nymphs. In 1824, the Duchess of Berry, daughter-in-law of the French king Charles X, took a dip in the sea at Dieppe, on the northern French coast. In this she was following the fashion started by the English court and aristocracy. A century later, the inhabitants of Antibes in the South of France were still surprised to see Americans plunging into the Mediterranean. In Germany, admiration for Greece revived the cult of the body (Mosse 1997). Thanks to long summer holidays, then paid leave and the rising popularity of camping, men, women, and children came in increasing numbers to bare their bodies and bask by the sea in the warmth of the sun.

Daphnis and Chloe

The best introduction to the pastoral genre is undoubtedly a text that had immense influence, Daphnis and Chloe. Attributed to a certain Longus (of whom nothing is known), this Greek novel was written in the second or third century AD. Although it is a prose work, its every feature is at one with the esthetic world already displayed in the Idylls of Theocritus, a Greek poet of the first half of the third century BC. Two centuries later, the Latin poet Virgil faithfully reproduced this world in his Bucolics (we should remember that, in the early twentieth century, Virgil was still a mandatory passage for students learning Latin). According to Michel Baridon, Longus embraced and combined “all the themes that the artists of the Mediterranean basin had been using for eight centuries” (2006, 189). Thirteen centuries later, in 1559, Jacques Amyot translated the novel into French (Amyot, who was a bishop, also translated Plutarch’s Lives of Illustrious Men and another Greek novel, Theagenes and Chariclea). Amyot’s translation was corrected and completed by Paul Louis Courier in the early twentieth century.

12. Most Greek novels, as stressed by Michel Foucault (2001, 430–431), are composed of journeys, and various trials and tribulations, in spite of which a young man and a young woman preserve their virginity. Daphnis and Chloe does not escape this model, but pastoral poetry and eroticism are at the forefront.
13. The text was expurgated, however: “It will be sufficiently evident, without my saying so,” wrote Father Catrou, a Jesuit, in his 1729 preface to the Poetry of Virgil, “to what extent I have respected modesty and had a care for decency in this new translation.”
century. During the course of this same century, many sculptures and pictures adopted the characters of Daphnis and Chloe as their theme, and Ravel devoted a symphonic ballet to them in 1912.

Here is the plot of Longus's novel:

A young child suckled by a goat is found by a couple of goatherds who adopt him and name him Daphnis. Sometime later, another baby is found in the same vicinity, suckled by a ewe in a cave dedicated to the nymphs, and is adopted by a different couple. This is to be Chloe. The two children wear clothes that betoken high birth. Their adoptive parents carefully preserve these “identifying tokens,” as Amyot’s translation calls them, but they say nothing either to their neighbors or even to Daphnis and Chloe. The two children learn separately how to be shepherds. They then grow into adolescents. They meet, become friends, and grow increasingly fond of one another. Initially tormented by love as by an unknown sickness, they are drawn to one another by a desire that they do not know how to satisfy. A variety of incidents bring the two characters close to danger, separate them temporarily from one another, and delay the outcome for which they both long: a band of pirates arrives, there is a fight with some young men from a neighboring town, envy by a rival, and so forth. During the course of these adventures, Daphnis undergoes sexual initiation by an older woman. In the end, the owner of the land on which the young shepherd lives arrives from the town to inspect it, and it is then that, thanks to the tokens preserved by Daphnis's adoptive father, he recognizes the latter as his son. Another rich citizen turns out to be Chloe’s father. A “pastoral wedding” is celebrated in front of the nymphs' grotto and the young couple is finally united.

What are the specific features of this ideal life of leisure led by Daphnis and Chloe? It is not an idle life; their occupations give it a rhythm that prevents them from becoming bored. The reader finds here all the occupations of the vita rustica; the only proviso being that anything that might render those occupations arduous is eliminated. Guarding the flocks, milking, bringing them back in—all is achieved without effort. Showing the labor of the peasant, as he earned his bread by the sweat of his brow, was out of the question. Shepherds were not laborers; however, they did cultivate vines, since the wine harvest, as Homer showed in his description of Achilles's shield, was a source of joy, and the wine brought them closer to the god Bacchus. Their animals were gentle and submissive—these pleasant shepherds were quite the opposite of the pastors who tend to the governance of men and souls. They had nothing to do with the Good Shepherd of the gospel who brings back the lost sheep (Luke 15), nor with what Michel Foucault called pastoral power (Büttgen 2007).

There is also another reason why pastoral poetry neglects agriculture and emphasizes stockbreeding, and that is the place occupied by love in this poetry.

14. “The illusion and at the same time the pleasure of sheepfolds,” writes Bernard de Fontenelle in his Traité sur la nature de l’églogue (1708), which he subsequently inserted after his Poésies pastorales, “consists in offering up to the gaze only the tranquility of pastoral life, and hiding its meanness; its simplicity is revealed, but its poverty concealed” (quoted in Fontenelle 1818, 59).
“The same love sickness affects both shepherd and flock,” writes Virgil in his third *Eclogue*. However, sexual desire is not considered bestial; on the contrary, it is a primordial cosmic force to which gods and goddesses are as much subject as other sexual beings. Far from being linked to downfall or original sin, desire and the vigor of the bodies that produce it are divine attributes.\(^\text{15}\) The gods, it should be remembered, are not above this world; they are part of it. In complete contradiction with the place assigned by Platonism and Christianity to sexual desire, Eros has equal power over gods, men, and animals.\(^\text{16}\)

Hence, Cupid frequently evokes Pan, the god of shepherds and flocks who is associated with fecundity. Pan reigns over Arcadia, Virgil tells us.\(^\text{17}\) He is also associated with music by virtue of his famous flute,\(^\text{18}\) and music plays a role in the attraction that shepherds and shepherdesses feel for one another:

Daphnis sat down under his favorite oak-tree and played on his pipe, looking awhile at his goats, which, lying at his feet, seemed to be listening to his strains. Chloe, seated near him, was also looking after her sheep, but her eyes were more frequently fixed upon Daphnis. She again thought him handsome as he was playing on his pipe (Longus 1896).

The characters in pastorals are precisely at an age when the innocence of childish loves is starting to give way to the troubling intensity of emerging sexuality. Thus Céladon, the distraught lover of Astrée, is still beardless.\(^\text{19}\) And the dedication to an eclogue by Bernard de Fontenelle in *Poésies pastorales* begins with these two verses:

You with your barely thirteen years,
Display a burgeoning of infinite charms (Fontenelle 1818, 112).

Chloe, also barely emerging from childhood, is all the more tormented by her attraction for Daphnis because she does not yet know that the feeling she is experiencing is love:

Her heart was a prey to languor, she no longer had control over her eyes… “I am ill but I do not know the nature of my illness; I feel pain, but I am not wounded… Daphnis has robbed me of sleep.” Such were the words she spoke in her suffering, seeking in vain for the name of Love (Longus 1896, 1.1.13–1.1.15).

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15. As shown, among other texts, by the passage from the *Iliad* (Homer 1982, 14.153–188) in which Hera is seen applying scent, adorning herself, and borrowing Aphrodite’s weapons of seduction in order to awaken an irrepressible desire in Zeus.
16. Ovid emphasizes the power of Cupid in *The Metamorphoses* (1922, 5.365–370): “O Cupid! Take up those arms by which thou art victorious over all… The Gods of Heaven are overcome by thee; and Jupiter, and all the Deities that swim the deep.”
17. The *Homeric Hymn* “To Pan” (Evelyn-White 1914) shows us the god of flocks in Arcadia, accompanied by nymphs “singing by some spring of dark water,” charmed by “crocus and sweet-smelling hyacinths” or feeling a “strong melting desire to wed the rich-tressed daughter of Dryops.”
18. Recalled by Schubert (*The Shepherd on the Rock*), Debussy (*Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*), Picasso in the paintings and drawings of his Antibes period, and even by Walt Disney in his *Peter Pan* (1953).
19. The success of *L’Astrée* by Honoré d’Urfé (1610) was not eclipsed until the following century by Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).
This description of burgeoning desire left such a strong mark on European culture that, 1500 years after Longus, it still forms one of the most common refrains in the innumerable pastoral songs left to us by eighteenth-century neo-Epicureanism. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is also inspired by the agitation felt by Daphnis when he depicts Virginia grappling with new emotions. The two children, Paul and Virginia, love one another as brother and sister.

For some time past, however, Virginia had felt her heart agitated by new sensations… She would become all at once gay without cause for joy, and melancholy without any subject for grief… The caresses of her brother excited too much emotion in her agitated heart ([1788] 2013).

Cythera, the island of Aphrodite (Venus for the Romans), was, like Arcadia, a representation of the golden age. The pastoral imaginary closely links bodily beauty—especially the female nude—to the beauty of landscape. Botticelli’s Birth of Venus (around 1485) was the first female nude since the end of antiquity. The painter depicted her with one hand across her breasts, the other hiding her genitals, exactly like Eve being expelled from Paradise in Masaccio’s fresco (1428). It is a gesture of modesty: the second picture is associated with shame, the first with the glorious exuberance of the body.

The erotic power emerging from a beautiful body manifests its cosmic dimension by irradiating the surrounding landscape. In return, the landscape surrounds the desired person with a poetic aura that enhances his or her attraction. There is in this an aim for completeness, but, far from being Christian, it is rooted in the sentient world. Here are two examples of this ancient eroticization of nature that would again animate Romantic poetry. I have borrowed them from Rousseau. Julie writes to Saint-Preux:

20. Like for example, Les Amours de Colin et Colette, to the tune of Où s’en vont ces gais bergers? [Where Are these Merry Shepherds Going?] (Le Petit Chansonnier français 1780, 1:103):
“Colin, à peine seize ans, Aimait déjà Colette; Colette, à peine treize ans, Écoutait la fleurette. Colin sent déjà des feux, En secret il soupire; Colette forme des voeux, Et cache son martyre.”
[“Colin, at scarcely sixteen, Already loved Colette; Colette, at scarcely thirteen, Heard his whisper of sweet nothings. Colin already feels passion, He sighs in secret; Colette makes wishes, And hides her suffering.”]

21. Another song (certainly less famous than Watteau’s two pictures devoted to The Embarkation for Cythera) is L’Isle de Cythère [The Island of Cythera], to the tune of L’Amour, la nuit et le jour [Love, Night, and Day] (Le Petit Chansonnier français 1780, 1:29):
“Point de nouvel édit, Dans l’isle de Cythère: La seule loi qu’on suit, N’ordonne que de faire, L’amour, La nuit et le jour.”
[“No new edict, In the island of Cythera: The only law they follow, Is the order to make Love, Night and day.”]

22. In the Trattato della pittura by Mgr. Agucchi, to which the painters Domenico Zampieri and Annibal Carrache very likely contributed, we find the “founding exposition of the doctrine of ideal beauty and classicism for seventeenth-century artistic thought.” “This prelate,” adds Stéphane Loire, “had a particular interest in the relationship between landscape painting and pastoral literature.” As early as 1602, he explained his conception of the locus amoenus, the place of Arcadian delight, which had come from Latin literature. The painted landscape was supposed to provide the contentment expected from an ideal place of retreat in the country. In addition to Claude Lorrain’s paintings, his many drawings titled “pastoral landscapes” furnish strong evidence of this esthetic (Loire et al. 2011, 21–22).
I have interrupted my letter, to go for a walk in the copses near our house... I chose the places we visited together; I noted the retreats worth pausing at; our hearts poured out in advance in these delicious havens; they added to the pleasure we felt in being together; they in their turn received added enhancement from the fact that two true lovers had been there (Rousseau [1761] 1967, 33).

In his reply to Julie, Saint-Preux expresses the same desire for completeness by evoking in his turn all the reciprocal echoes between the landscape and the living person:

I could not admire a view without hastening to show it to you. All the trees I came across lent you their shade, all the grasses served as your seat. Sometimes sitting beside you, I helped you espy objects; sometimes at your feet, I contemplated one more worthy of a tender gaze... Everything reminded me of you in this peaceful abode (Rousseau [1761] 1967, 49)²³.

This alliance between two sources of esthetic pleasure, the beauty of the body and the beauty of nature, this dialogue from which a specific form of erotic poetry originates, occupy an important place in our culture. For this very reason, we pay scant attention to the poetry of the nude within nature, as if it were quite “natural” and did not give food for thought. Should we not be surprised to see the same painters who have left us religious paintings, with the tragic and suffering figure of Christ, celebrate the erotic poetry of the nude within nature? Look, among other paintings, at Giorgione's Sleeping Venus (1510), Titian’s Le Concert champêtre (probably painted the same year), ²⁴ or indeed Poussin’s Venus Spied on by Shepherds (around 1525) ²⁵ and Watteau’s Nymph and Satyr (around 1713), which echoes a painting of Pompeii devoted to the same theme. This is without mentioning the numerous depictions of Diana, alone or surprised by Acteon. As for Susannah and the Elders, a story borrowed from the Old Testament and not from Ovid, one wonders whether the painters who illustrated it, rather than reproving the voyeurs, did not identify with them.

In many societies, bodies are or were shown naked (to the great displeasure of missionaries). The Greeks and Romans wore clothing: it was their deities who were depicted naked. ²⁶ It would seem that only European culture gave such an

23. The songs in circulation at the time when La Nouvelle Héloïse was written sometimes associated the pleasures of nature with the female sex in a more explicit manner. For example, Le Mont sacré, sung to the tune of Triste raison, j’abjure ton empire [Melancholy Reason, I Renounce Your Dominion] (in Les Goguettes du bon vieux temps 1810, 200): “Sur son penchant, un coteau se partage, Tout préservé de roses à l’entour; Là, dans un temple au milieu d’un bocage, L’on va traiter des mystères d’amour… De ce coteau s’écoule une fontaine, On le cultive, il est ensemencé.” [“On its slope, a hillside divides, Protected all around by roses; There, in a temple inside a copse, We shall enjoy the mysteries of love… From this hillside a fountain flows, We shall tend it, the seed is sown.”]

24. Known as Pastoral in the eighteenth century (and still sometimes as Pastoral Concert in English), this painting was for a long time attributed to Giorgione, and hangs in the Louvre. One cannot help thinking that Manet must have contemplated this picture before painting his Déjeuner sur l’herbe (1863). Corot also painted a Concert champêtre, which can be seen at the Musée Condé in Chantilly. ²⁵. See, for example, the chapter “The Erotic Painter” in Jacques Thuillier (1994, 44–51).

26. At the Bardo museum, in Tunis, one can see Roman mosaics of fully clothed humans with nude deities.
important place to the poetic idealization of the nude within nature. The cultured Chinese or Japanese walks in his garden or imagines himself as a minuscule figure within a landscape painting; in this way he nurtures a feeling of complete participation in the cosmos. But the beauty of the female body is never associated with this; eroticism occupies a different place, linked to sexual games, and is quite distinct from the area of landscape and poetry.

**Book Learning or Spectacle of Nature?**

The relationship between male and female shepherds is presented as a natural one: they do indeed form a little society, but without social organization. There are no institutions, no hierarchy, no power or inequality, and still less oppression. For all that, they do not live an uncivilized life: the feelings they experience and the artistic activities they indulge in show them to be gentle and civilized. Nature and culture are in harmony. Pastoral poetry is obviously a product of culture. And cultural products, to be effective—that is, to sustain the feeling of existing in those who rely on them—must themselves be given a kind of reality: artefacts and works of art are offered up to our senses, societal institutions are part of the shared world inhabited by its members, and the Christian religion proclaims to be the truth. The pastoral imaginary, while informing the way we look at landscape, is nurtured, in return, by the sensory impressions we experience when in contact with that landscape. Thus, pastoral poetry offers the paradox of being a cultural construct that immerses us in a world where nature and culture are one. It invites us to perceive nature as if it had a purpose—the purpose of contributing to our happiness. From the moment belief in this purpose leads us to forget the “as if,” esthetic experience lived in contact with nature seems destined to continue in the form of religious feeling. Kant already shared this belief. “We can regard it as a favor of nature,” he writes in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), “that it has tried to further culture by establishing so many beautiful forms” (Kant 1985, §67.1173.1). Moved by the beauties of nature, our sensibility confirms that “man is the end purpose of creation” (1985, §84, 1239). For Kant, the “spectacle of nature” so dear to the eighteenth century is allied to Christian faith, thus preparing the way for Romanticism in the form that Madame de Staël understood it.

The article “Pastorale” in the *Encyclopédie* states that shepherds “tend to use natural signs rather than established words. To say it is noon, they say: the flock is in the shade of the woods; it is late, the shadows are becoming longer in the valley” (Diderot and d’Alembert 1765, Volume XI). Faithful to the pastoral tradition, Paul and Virginia “experience the hours of the day in the shade of the trees,” as too does the Native American Chactas in Chateaubriand’s *Atala.*


28. Incidentally, Kant’s view of the world (and of Christianity in general) goes beyond the opposition between nature and culture. By attributing this opposition to the Western world, we forget the role assigned by it to the creator God, namely that of establishing a bridge between nature and culture and between physical causality and human finality.
Human relationships are immediate in the etymological sense of the term, which is to say without established social mediation. Shepherds and shepherdesses live, like gods, in a world without the written word. Astrée and Céladon are the exception in addressing letters and poems to one another; but this is because Honoré d’Urfé’s pastoral has also inherited the courtly love tradition. The characters in pastorals of antiquity practice poetry and music without having it in written form, as seen in Virgil’s seventh Bucolic, in which a singing contest takes place between two shepherds (poetry, states the article “Pastorale” in the Encyclopédie, must have been practiced by shepherds themselves well before Theocritus). While indulging in the vita rustica in their country houses, persons of distinction in the Roman Empire would read and write. Their leisure was therefore not of the same nature as that of the shepherds who formed the subject of their reading. For the upper classes, evocations of pastoral life constituted an esthetic world tinged with nostalgia. They dreamt of a simple life immersed in the present, a world lost long ago in which nature and civilization were one: a golden age.

In this respect, the European concept of ideal leisure forms a striking contrast to the Chinese one. In that society, the cultured person who indulges in reading, calligraphy, or painting while enjoying the sight of his or her garden does not dream of pastoral love; it is the figure of the hermit that he or she likes to imagine. The surroundings in which the hermit lives—mountains on the sides of which are twisted pine trees and flowing cascades—is certainly an ideal landscape, but not one which necessarily reflects a mythical golden age. And the hermit’s occupations as seen in Chinese paintings (where he is often accompanied by a servant) are not radically different from those of the cultured man. The shepherds of Arcadia, on the other hand, live in a world from which study is banished. They do not even need to cultivate wisdom, since happiness is always theirs to enjoy without effort.

A poem by Ronsard, À son laquais (1550) gives the clearest illustration of the European separation between study and ideal leisure:

J’ai l’esprit tout ennuyé
D’avoir trop estudié
Les Phénomènes d’Arate: 29
Il est temps que je m’esbate;
Et que j’aille aux champs jouer.
Bons dieux! Qui voudrait louer
Ceux qui collés sur un livre
N’ont souci de vivre?
...
Corydon, marche devant,
Sçache où le bon vin se vend:
Fay refreschir ma bouteille,
Cherche une feuilleuse treille
Et des fleurs pour me coucher (Ronsard 1993–1994).

29. Aratos, an astronomer and Greek poet of the third century BC.
[My mind is thoroughly exhausted from too much study of Aratus’s *Phaenomena*; it is time I had some fun, and went out into the fields to play. Good Heavens! Who would want to praise those who, glued to a book, never have any interest in living? … Corydon, go on ahead, find out where good wine is on sale; chill the bottle, look for a leafy arbour and flowers where I can recline (Ronsard 2002, 81).]

A summer picnic composed of fruit follows, and a rest by a stream or “in a wild lair.”

Two centuries later, erotic pastoral songs would take up the thread of Ronsard’s Epicurean poem. With titles such as *L’Épicurien*, *La Loi d’Épicure*, *La Vraie Philosophie*, and *La Meilleure Étude*, they invite us to leave aside the works of Descartes, Newton, and Locke, as well as the sad preoccupation with a future life, to accept the desire that nature has given us and devote ourselves to more carnal pleasures: “Thémire comes to philosophize with me; the Spectacle of Nature to which we lend ourselves in turn is our sole reading; night and day we turn its pages.”

The close and harmonious relationship with nature enjoyed by the characters of pastorals resembled that of the gods as they were depicted in stories told about them in antiquity. Because, outside of the statutory role incumbent on each of them, the gods were free to indulge in amorous pursuits. Their bodies were like ours, but endowed with greater powers and eternal youth. Nothing, therefore, distinguished a goddess from an elegant young woman (and vice versa) (Sissa and Detienne 1989).

The very origin of the character and name of Daphnis testifies to the ancient proximity between men and gods. According to legend, Daphnis was the son of a nymph and a human. Abandoned among the laurels (hence his name, which comes from *daphnè*, “laurel”), he was recovered and fed by nymphs. Always described as young and beautiful, these were comparable to fairies, or *apsaras* in the Indian tradition (the same ones that can be seen dancing on the walls of Angkor Vat). The god Pan having taught him to play the flute, Daphnis—still according to legend—invented the pastoral song. The poet Theocritus had already given the name Daphnis to one of his shepherds, and it can be found later in Virgil. As for Chloe, when Daphnis looks at her, he thinks he sees a nymph. Each of them is seduced by the revealed beauty of the other: the splendor of their nudity puts them on a par with the gods—Aphrodite, for example, or Diana surprised in her bath by the hunter Acteon (see Ovid 1922, 3.138–252); or, again, Poseidon, of whom there exists a wonderful bronze statue from the fifth century BC, showing

30. *La Meilleure Étude*, to the tune of the *Prévôt des Marchants* (*Le Petit chansonnier français* 1780, 2:43). The expression “Spectacle of Nature” is an ironic allusion to the encyclopedia of the Abbé Pluche, *Le Spectacle de la nature* (1732–1742, 9 volumes), which went through numerous republications and was translated into most European languages. Reference to the “two great books,” the Bible and nature, was commonplace.

31. Daphnis and Chloe are reminiscent, too, of the pair of Indian deities Krishna, a radiant adolescent who also plays the flute, and the beautiful Radha, a cowherd.

32. The episode of Diana in her bath depicts the usual features of the pastoral landscape: sacred wood, spring, a pool edged with grass, a grotto, and nymphs surrounding Diana. The scene described by Ovid inspired many painters from the Renaissance onward.
him as a handsome man and entirely naked. The god Pan and the nymphs protect Daphnis and Chloe—as, of course, does the god of Love. However, the gods who govern social order are absent. The exclamation “O Jupiter” appears only once in the story, uttered by a rich citizen visiting the shepherds at the moment when he recognizes Daphnis as his son. And it is precisely this recognition that triggers the young man’s reintegration into his family line of descent and into society. Although Orpheus is not mentioned in Longus’s novel, one cannot help thinking of him when one sees Daphnis’s goats, who, charmed by the sound of his panpipes, obey his wishes according to the tunes he plays.

Thus Daphnis and Chloe are close to the gods and, like them, seem to enjoy perpetual youth. However, they only enjoy such ideal youth during this interlude of their pastoral life—in other words their life as adopted children, without lineage and without social status. They are ephemeral deities, and will once again share the lot of common mortals from the moment they marry and take their place in their lineage, implying they will have children and will die. Sexuality thus appears to be a contradiction inherent in the human condition: it is a divine attribute insofar as it is linked to desire, love, beauty, adornment, the arts, and enjoyment. But it is also what separates men from gods, since as an instrument of reproduction it is linked to the future and to death. These two aspects, in reality linked, are separated in pastoral poetry where only divine eroticism is preserved—a mirage which, today more than ever, is mirrored in advertising and women’s magazines.

Europe Dreams of Eternal Youth while China Dreams of Longevity

The pleasure felt by the reader of *Daphnis and Chloe* comes from the happiness he or she imagines this ideal couple is experiencing—it is a vicarious pleasure. But Daphnis and Chloe do not live in an eternal present; they remain subject to the passing of time, which returns them to their destiny as man and woman. The narrative stops at this point: to continue it would spoil the reader’s dream. In vain does pastoral fiction bridge the gap separating men from the gods; in the end it always returns to reality, and the barriers go up again.

Is Poussin’s famous picture *The Shepherds of Arcadia* calling us back to this ancient wisdom? In it we see the shepherds deciphering the inscription *Et in Arcadia ego*, proposed translations for which have been “I, Death, am also in Arcadia” or “Even in Arcadia, I have had to suffer Death” (Panofsky 1969 and

33. Discovered in the sea off Cape Artemision, this statue is conserved in the Athens archeological museum. A statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius can also be seen in the archeological museum at Vaison-la-Romaine, southern France, showing him entirely naked, like a god.

34. “Having succeeded, on the one hand, in separating seduction from reproduction and, on the other, separating, capturing, and freezing female beauty into images, the West frantically works at eliminating all stages of a woman’s journey through life, except the one when, already fully formed, beautiful, and desirable, she is not yet a mother” (Huston 2012, 155).
Weisbach 1995, 506–512). Panofsky sees in it a partial Christianization of this pagan territory: Arcadia resembles the Garden of Eden, and it cannot escape the consequences of original sin.

As we have seen, the gods of antiquity are sexual beings like humans, at the same time as enjoying eternal youth: the pastoral dream is therefore a dream of budding sexuality experienced in a perpetual present. In this, too, the contrast with China is striking, first of all because popular Chinese tales are wary of the dream of love; the most seductive partner might well be a fox woman, a phantom whose bewitching embraces inevitably lead to the lover’s downfall. Moreover, and especially, the cultured person passionately interested in Taoism does not dream of eternal youth, but of longevity, which is quite different. He does not dream of idyllic loves, but the peacefulness of a hermitage. The eight immortals who have achieved this ideal are therefore not young men of dazzling nudity: they are people of mature years or even old people who, through piety and virtue, have achieved eternal life. Nourished by clouds, they can occasionally be seen astride a crane, the symbol of longevity. The ideogram that reads as xian and means “immortal” is composed of two characters, “man” and “mountain.” In other words, “man who lives as a hermit on the mountain.” The Chinese garden, the setting for a true practice of leisure, does not reflect a sort of Arcadia, but instead the hermitage (Pimpaneau 2000). As André-Georges Haudricourt has stressed, China prioritized the agricultural model at the expense of the pastoral model. The image of perfection is therefore the cultivated plant, a form of fulfilment that is foreign to the difference between the sexes and their union.

This, at least, is the case among the educated; for the peasants of ancient China, as for the Greeks, sexuality could also become elevated and take on religious overtones associated with the fertility of nature. In the same way as one of Theocritus’s *Idylls* shows us two shepherds in competition, taking turns to improvise songs about love and desire, peasant spring festivals in ancient China gathered men and women together for alternating songs and for sexual union (Granet 1980, 17–21).

As we know, the educated Chinese distanced themselves from popular forms of religion, to the extent of renouncing any anthropomorphic deity and forgetting myths. Cultured Europeans were careful not to do this, since their esthetic and literary development was based on mythology, and their religious thinking on Bible stories.

The Chinese sage, by contrast, was, one might say, more down to earth than is acceptable to our own conceptions of saintliness and philosophical wisdom.

35. Erwin Panofsky reminds us that the phrase *Et in Arcadia ego* appeared for the first time in a picture by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (known as Guercino) painted in 1621–1623, shortly before Poussin arrived in Rome. The picture shows two shepherds meditating before a skull and crossbones set on a block of stone in the foreground. “I am there, even in Arcadia:” it is the skull speaking. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss’s “En regardant Poussin” (1993, 18–22) and Jacques Thuillier (1994, 19).
36. “Guercino’s picture is a medieval memento mori in humanist guise,” he writes (Panofsky 1969, 292).
37. Examples of these countless tales of fox women can be found in Songling (1986) and Dars (1986).
Since the distinction between this world and a world beyond our senses was foreign to him, he could seek wisdom by cultivating a balance with the sentient world, in other words by cultivating concepts rather than a form of sensibility.

It is therefore not surprising that Chinese gardens should have inspired European elites at a time when they themselves were cultivating the esthetic experience of harmony between the soul and the spectacle of nature. English-style gardens took the description of Chinese gardens as their model, while adding allusions to antiquity. “If ever I work for my happiness,” wrote Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, “I want to make a garden as the Chinese do” ([1773] 1984, letter 14).38

Golden Age or Barbarity?

As we have seen, pastoral poetry celebrates a golden age when humanity enjoyed a fulfilment nowadays denied it. The Greek golden age thus has a paradisiac character; even so, the Greeks did not forget that fulfilment went hand in hand with a dangerous lack of limits. The golden age therefore has its downside: without social organization, human coexistence is compromised. Situated at the boundaries of cultivated land, the pastoral space is close to areas of wildness (Georgoudi 1981). In a study devoted to the god Pan, Philippe Borgeaud (1979) emphasizes the affinities between Arcadia and aprehuman barbarity. This is why we find the Cyclops Polyphemus there. His single eye announces him: there is no room for two, since he is ignorant of dikè (justice). Ulysses and his companions learn this at their cost: his hospitality cannot be counted upon—he is an ogre.39 From the third century BC, pastoral poetry introduces the character of Polyphemus. The eleventh Idyll of Theocritus shows him yearning for the nymph Galatea—a text imitated by Ovid (“Acis and Galatea” in the Metamorphoses [13.750–897])40 and praised by Chateaubriand in his Génie du christianisme. The picture by Claude Lorrain, Acis and Galatea (1657), in the museum of Dresden, shows the two lovers embracing in the foreground; but, in the distance, we can also make out the silhouette of Polyphemus guarding his sheep on a hill.41 In The Adolescent, a novel by Dostoevsky, the main character expresses his admiration for this picture, calling it The Golden Age, and rightly so. The love of the shepherd Acis and the nymph is nevertheless destined to end tragically, since Polyphemus crushes Acis under a heavy rock. The ideal life of leisure expressed in pastoral poetry obviously fulfils a desire for unalloyed happiness. But is it possible to have the good without the bad, to enjoy fulfilment without descending into limitlessness and destruction?

38. In his Elective Affinities (1809), Goethe depicts the creation of an English garden.
39. See The Odyssey (book 9), which highlights the savagery of the Cyclops's presocial world, while at the same time discreetly indicating the features linking him to the golden age. On the ambiguity of the golden age, I am indebted to the teaching of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet.
40. Two centuries later, in his Images, Philostratus describes a picture showing Acis and Galatea.
41. In 1678, Marc-Antoine Charpentier composed an opera entitled Sur les amours d’Acis et Galatée. Lully did the same in 1686, and Handel in 1708. Many baroque operas have a pastoral as their libretto. The most famous is probably Il Pastor fido, for which Handel composed the music in several stages, from 1712 to 1734.
The Greeks understood that it was impossible, and this is why they associated the golden age with its other side—with barbarity, which borders on chaos.

The pagan moral is this: the ideal of perfection that was the end result of true leisure, meaning freedom from worldly demands, is inaccessible. The seductive prospect of happiness held out by an embellished vision of the golden age can only be enjoyed in fiction, in the world of pretend. We must therefore know how to make do with imaginary perfection and imperfect true happiness.

This lesson emerges clearly from the original myth of Pan’s pipe as told in Daphnis and Chloe—a story that has not both esthetic value and philosophical significance. The god Pan is charmed by the beauty of a young shepherdess, Syrinx. But she is disgusted by his goat’s body and rejects his advances. Pan pursues her, so she throws herself into a marsh, where she is turned into reeds. And it is from these reeds that Pan makes his pipe, “by joining together reeds of unequal length, seeing that their love had been neither reciprocal nor equal.” There can be no better way of expressing how the metamorphosis performed by culture transforms the pain of discord experienced in everyday life into the pleasures of harmony. It is the remedy, or rather the palliative, since it is not within the power of art to end the discord to which reality exposes us. Longus borrows his story from Ovid (“Syrinx,” in Metamorphoses [1.691–705]). In this, Pan is charmed by the sounds escaping from the reeds immediately following Syrinx’s disappearance, and Ovid (1922, 1.689–712) puts the following words into his mouth: “Forever this discovery shall remain a sweet communion binding thee to me.” Pan, it would seem, renounces his prey and henceforth will content himself with mediation by means of an art.

Longus’s novel returns to this theme. A little later, we see Daphnis and Chloe miming the story of Pan and Syrinx in order to entertain the company. Chloe hides; Daphnis then borrows a panpipe, and calls out to Chloe with a melodious tune. Hearing the young man’s virtuosity, the pipe’s owner (himself an excellent musician) offers Pan his instrument. Where Pan had failed because of his goat-like appearance, Daphnis, thanks to his art, succeeds. As a cultural artefact, the novel of Daphnis and Chloe plays the same role as Pan’s pipe: the fiction offers a semblance of what we aspire to, in the same way as the pipe and its melodious notes are produced in place of an impossible sexual union. The pastoral and, within this, the original myth of the panpipe speak to us of human desire, of the fulfilment to which it aspires, and the impossibility of achieving it. At the same time, it invites us to be satisfied with the cultural constructs that stand in their place. It is important to emphasize this, for precisely this wisdom was refused by the edifying pastorals of the late eighteenth century, and then by Romanticism.

42. The scene was painted by Poussin in a picture called Pan and Syrinx, which is in the museum of Dresden.

43. Donald Winnicott would certainly have subscribed to this view: the transitional space brings about cultural mediations that foster a relational well-being; this latter occurs in place of a fusion that has had to be renounced. The Jivaro peoples tell a story that might have figured in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, since its logic is reminiscent of the original myth of the panpipe: two young women searching for a husband find only one man who is repugnant and another who is deformed. Discouraged by these impossible unions,
The mistrust of desire and fulfilment on the part of the ancients did not therefore spare their pastoral dream. It was, ultimately, the reason why the love of Daphnis and Chloe had to become part of the social order: their “pastoral wedding,” with which the story ends, is a marriage that takes place according to conventional procedure, a marriage of two young people who have regained their place in the family lineage.

When the Pastoral Aims at Edification

The opposition between the virtues of a frugal life and the degrading excesses of extravagance was already commonplace in antiquity. The simplicity of rustic life was also advocated by Christianity. The pastoral genre was occasionally used, notably in Elizabethan England and under James I, sometimes to criticize court corruption in a concealed manner, and sometimes by the royal power to present itself as an ally of the people (Forain 2003). However, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that the pastoral imaginary aimed to be not only pleasing, but truly edifying. Esthetics began to be combined with morality, and fiction with a discourse of truth. It was a mixture that, as we shall soon see, turned out to be problematic and clearly less commendable than it claimed to be.

In *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau, through the intermediary of Saint-Preux, paints an idyllic picture of the peasants in the Haut-Valais canton of Switzerland (a picture that echoes the primitivism advocated in his *Discours sur l’origine de l’inégalité*):

I would have spent the whole of my journey enchanted by the landscape, if I had not felt a yet sweeter enchantment in my dealings with its inhabitants… Money is very scarce in the Haut-Valais; but that is why the inhabitants are at ease; foodstuffs are abundant despite no commerce with the outside, no consumption of luxuries inside; and the alpine farmer, whose labor is his pleasure, becoming no less hard working for that ([1761] 1967, 46–47).

These people are egalitarian and hospitable, existing “to live, not to gain or excel.” In the Appendix, a fictional dialogue added to the novel, Rousseau puts these words into his speaker’s mouth:

I know there is no question of creating another Daphnis or Sylvandre, nor shepherds of Arcadia or Lignon,… nor any other similar Romantic figures who can only exist in books; it is about showing those who are well to do that rustic life and agriculture have...
pleasures of which they can know nothing;... that a man of merit who would like to retire to the country with his family, and become his own farmer, could have as pleasant a life there as any spent among the amusements of the town ([1761] 1967, 579).

And how much more virtuous! Even if the characters of pastorals exist only in books, the celebration of the “noble savage” and of simple souls derives from these.

In his *Idylls* (which appeared between 1756 and 1772), the Swiss German Salomon Gessner also depicts virtuous shepherds (the Swiss Alps were thought at the time to be the embodiment of Arcadia). Under the influence of Gessner and Rousseau, in *L’Ami des enfants* (1782–1783) Arnaud Berquin (the first French author to specialize in literature for young people)\(^47\) celebrates the authenticity of young country people, whose contrast with corrupt town aristocrats is seen to their advantage. In a one-act drama by Berquin, *L’Éducation à la mode*, Mr. Verteuil (an obvious name) visits the children he is tutoring and “notices a drawing hanging on the wall, showing a young shepherdess being surprised by a faun as she sleeps.” It is the work of young Léonore, accomplished with the help of her painting master. “I think,” says Mr. Verteuil, “that he might have done even better to choose some mark of kindness, a virtuous action, which would have benefited his soul while perfecting his talent” (Berquin 1796, 53–54).

Salomon Gessner himself was the forerunner of the *Völkisch* movement. As George Mosse has shown in *Les Racines intellectuelles du Troisième Reich* (2008, in particular 71ff), the *Völkisch* idealization of rustic simplicity (of which Heidegger was a self-confessed enthusiast) played an important role in Germany. This is why, in the early twentieth century, the highly successful *Wandervögel* youth movement “associated rambles through the countryside with revolution, and the act of identifying with nature was considered a way of overturning the established order” (Mosse 291). In France, a similar type of idealization permeated counterrevolutionary regionalism in the Romantic period, with its taste for popular poetry and folklore; then there was the “national revolution” of the Vichy régime and its promotion of a return to the land (which would have a second wind in the aftermath of May 1968). The peasants of the Haut-Valais, whom Rousseau contrasted with inauthentic and corrupt Parisian high society, also inspired Tolstoy (among many others). In *War and Peace*, Pierre Bezukhov shares the artificial life of the salon with other members of the aristocracy. But he is dissatisfied and seeking his path in life. In the end, it is the simple peasant Platon Karataev who shows him by example (the forename given him by Tolstoy perhaps implying he is a fount of wisdom). With a few adjustments, this extolling of the Russian people was taken over by Soviet propaganda:

The literature that called itself “realist” was as convention-ridden as the bucolic romances of the eighteenth century. The collective farmers, workers and peasant women of Soviet literature seemed close kin... to those curly-headed shepherdesses in

\(^47\) If one discounts Fénelon, whose *Aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse* (1699) had a wide influence on eighteenth-century educational literature.
woodland glades, playing on reed pipes and dancing, surrounded by little white lambs with pretty blue ribbons (Grossman 2010]).

The beguiling imaginary world of the edifying pastoral is still a long way from the Manichean opposition between town and country that would radicalize the Khmer Rouge. It nonetheless cultivates the utopia of perfection while failing to recognize its potentially destructive character. Chateaubriand testifies to this in his ironic description of 1792 Paris in Mémoires d’outre-tombe:

While tragedy made the streets run red with blood, pastorals flourished in the theater; the only matter was innocent shepherds and virginal shepherdesses: fields, streams, meadows, sheep, doves, golden age beneath the thatch, all came alive again to the yearning sounds of the pipe before the cooing Tircis... The members of the National Convention... sang of nature, peace, pity, kindness, candor, and the domestic virtues; these blessed philanthropists showed extreme sensibility in having their neighbors’ throats cut, for the greater happiness of the human species (1973, 1:344).

Arcadia, as the Greeks knew, had its downside—the inhuman world of the Cyclops. Chateaubriand too seems to have understood that the idyllic dream and the project of revolutionary regeneration both proceed from excessive unmitigated—not to say totalitarian—desire.

A Christian Pastoral, Paul and Virginia

However, when the pastoral dream, instead of espousing the revolutionary ideal, allied itself with Christianity, Chateaubriand professed quite another opinion.

“My pastoral” is how Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, a disciple and friend of Rousseau (and, like him, a reader of Robinson Crusoe) describes Paul and Virginia in his “Preamble” (Saint-Pierre [1788] 1966, 28, 45). In the Génie du christianisme, Chateaubriand quotes a passage from the Idylls of Theocritus—the amorous speech that Polyphemus addresses to the nymph Galatea—and praises it ([1802] 1993, part 2, book 3, chap. 6). But this is so that he can better emphasize, in the following chapter, the superiority of Paul and Virginia, a work that, he says, owes its excellence to religion:

There is no doubt that the charm of Paul and Virginia consists in a certain melancholy spirit, which shines through the work, and which one might compare with that uniform brilliance poured by the moon on a solitude adorned with flowers. Whoever has reflected on the Gospel must admit that its divine precepts have precisely this sad and tender character... Its eclogue is so touching only because it shows two exiled Christian families, living under the Lord’s gaze, between his word in the Bible and his works in the desert.

Published on the eve of the French Revolution, this story met with enormous success, both in France and abroad. Engravings, statuettes, toiles de Jouy, wallpapers, snuffboxes and other knickknacks depicted the image of the two
children. Lamartine, Balzac, the Goncourt brothers, Sainte-Beuve, Flaubert, and Maupassant all loved this exotic pastoral novel (d’Alméras 1937, chap. 7).

Here is the plot:

Madame de la Tour is a young widow who has been disinherited by her family, who disapproved of her marriage to a simple bourgeois. Having taken refuge in an isolated spot on Mauritius, she meets Marguerite, a peasant girl who has been seduced and abandoned by a gentleman; the girl has settled there in order to raise Paul, the offspring of this union. Madame de la Tour, meanwhile, gives birth to Virginia. The two children are the living image of the Gemini, and love one another as brother and sister. Untainted by prejudice, this classless little society leads a chaste and harmonious rustic life in the midst of nature’s beauties. The two children stand out for their acts of kindness. But Virginia becomes a young woman. The two mothers are alarmed: how can they separate their two children while they are not of an age to marry? A letter arrives just in time: Madame de la Tour’s aunt intends to leave her fortune to Virginia, but the young girl must go to France to receive an education worthy of her rank. Heartbroken by the separation, Paul waits sadly for his “sister’s” return. The little company receives a letter from Virginia now and then. A solitary neighbor, who is the narrator, makes himself Paul’s mentor, giving him endless talks on virtue and the corruption of society. Finally, a ship is sighted, and Virginia's return is announced! But a hurricane is unleashed, creating enormous waves and causing the vessel to strike the rocks. Paul helplessly watches the shipwreck. Virginia’s body is found on the shore. Paul will die of grief, swiftly followed by Marguerite and Madame de la Tour.

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre intended his story to rival *Daphnis and Chloe*. He took inspiration from it, but he also stood apart from it in several ways: by creating an exotic setting for his own pastoral; by Christianizing the pagan idyll; by contrasting the virtuous model of rustic life with the corruption of society (repeating a theme already widely used in the seventeenth century [Beugnot 1996, 144–147; Van Elslande 1999, 56]); and by giving his pastoral a tragic ending characteristic of Romantic love, as Rousseau had done before him in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).

It is not merely the virtue of the characters in *Paul and Virginia* which aims to be edifying; it is also their attachment to the absolute. But the absolute that Christianity postpones until the next world, these pre-Romantic authors expected to enjoy in this one. According to Van Elslande, the seventeenth-century pastorals already allowed the most sacred aims and most worldly desires to be identified with one another… Feeling the most violent of earthly attachments and abandoning oneself to

48. The book was also widely distributed among the poorer classes. In 1854, Charles Nisard, in his *Histoire des livres populaires ou de la littérature de colportage*, numbered *Paul and Virginia* among the most widely available novels. Illustrations accompanied by captions, printed by the Pellerin print works, were still being sold by peddlers in the 1870s.
the most fervent devotions end by merging together. It is therefore not surprising that the great druid encourages Céladon to erect a temple in which to adore Astrée and Tautatès both at once (1999, 191–192).

In the classical age, the expression “supreme bliss” denoted sovereign good, either religious or philosophical; it subsequently referred to earthly love, which suddenly was in keeping with a religious view! In his Mémoires d'outre-tombe, Chateaubriand testifies to this highly unorthodox combination:

What is missing in love is for it to last, in order to be both Eden before the fall and an endless Hosanna. If you can arrange things so that beauty remains, youth endures, and the heart does not weary, you will recreate Heaven. So much is love the supreme bliss that it is pursued by the dream of lasting forever (1973, 1:429).

Chateaubriand wrote these lines about the love he felt for a young Englishwoman, the memory of which, he adds a little later (1973, 1:461), helped him to write Génie du christianisme! In the circumstances, it is not surprising that his apology for religion caused him to receive “a heap of scented notes” from many female readers (1973, 1:510).50

Paul Bénichou judged correctly that for Romanticism (and the Counterrevolution) it was a question of combining sensibility with religion, and reducing the opposition between Heaven and Earth by linking desire for the next world with amorous desire—“the infinite, sensibility’s final objective” he notes in relation to Génie du christianisme (Bénichou 1973, 141 and 145). He observes the same “alliance between Heaven and earthly loves” in Lamartine, particularly “in the poem L’isolement, where the lost beloved and sovereign good are somehow merged” (Bénichou 1973, 175). It is the same in Atala and René by Chateaubriand. The German romantics too harbored this dream of a fusion between earthly love and the infinite (Friedrich de La Motte-Fouqué, for example, in Undine) as did the Danish writer, Hans Christian Andersen, many of whose tales (The Little Mermaid, among others) are bathed in that melancholy where the dream of earthly love is part of a heavenly vision. “Did Romanticism not begin as a desire to reconcile the irreconcilable, that is to say as an immanent conception of being and of man with the theological idea of ontological completeness (divine life as eternal life)?” writes Jean-Marie Schaeffer, who emphasizes in passing “the self-destructive logic of the desire for completeness” (1999, 28).

Christian doctrine demands that we choose between the two sorts of “supreme bliss”: carnal or celestial. Romanticism refuses this alternative; it has to have both. But how is it possible to gain Heaven, and at the same time maintain carnal love at its peak, absolute and sublime, without succumbing to relativism (marriage, social life, the prosaic, the succession of generations)? The only solution is the death of the lovers (or at least one of them). This is why, while Daphnis and Chloe

49. In Spinoza’s Ethics ([1677] 1964, 140), for example, proposition 49, scholium.
50. However, Chateaubriand resisted temptation: “the idea of sensual pleasure occurring through the medium of Religion revolted my sincerity.”
Naufrage et mort de Virginie

Image of Épinal, “Colportage, Vosges, 1874”
closes, in accordance with pagan wisdom, by reentering the world of society, *Paul and Virginia* ends in tragedy. A Christian tragedy, since Virginia, as we shall see, dies like a saint. A Romantic tragedy, too, since Paul dies for love of her.

“The copse, flowers, and streams were enough for the pagan poets,” writes Madame de Staël; “the solitude of the forests, the limitless ocean, the starry sky are hardly enough to express the eternal and infinite with which Christian souls are filled” ([1800] 1959, 183–184). *Paul and Virginia* fulfils this dual demand. The first part of the narrative offers a picture of innocence in an Arcadian and Edenic setting:

Thus grew these children of nature... Still in the morning of life, they had all its blooming freshness: and surely such in the garden of Eden appeared our first parents, when coming from the hands of God, they first saw, and approached each other, and conversed together, like brother and sister (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [1788] 2013).

So the copse, flowers and streams were enough for them. They knew the happiness advocated by Lévesque de Pouilly in his *Théorie des sentiments agréables* (1736): it was the neo-Epicurean happiness of “the person who, limiting his desires to the sphere of real needs and goods that are within his reach, makes this enclosure something of a refuge against anxiety and sorrow.” For, he adds, “as soon as the heart goes beyond this line marked out by nature, it becomes lost in an immense field, where it searches in vain for boundaries that will halt and immobilize the violence of its movements” (quoted in Ehrard 1970, 344–345).

### The Dream of Fulfilment in Love, and Incest

In *Paul and Virginia*, going beyond this “line marked out by nature” is a direct consequence of puberty. Unfortunately, our biological nature does not coincide with the conception of nature as an ideal order. In pagan pastorals, the awakening of sexuality does not involve such distress; it does not open up the abyss. In the pagan world, sexual pleasure is in no way confused with the agonizing excess of limitless pleasure. “Biting the apple” is not a transgression punished by the gods, but a happiness in which they delight and which they have given to humans to share. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Romanticism borrow from paganism its acclaim for amorous desire; but, unlike paganism, they elevate this desire to the level of the absolute, so that its fulfilment becomes both impossible and forbidden. Romantic love, in short, can only be fulfilled by not being fulfilled. It means heartbreak with no way out, and turns the idyllic narrative into tragedy, and the beautiful into the sublime.

What happens when Virginia feels “her restlessness and disquietude were much increased?”

51. This is the reason why Rousseau was keen to delay as long as possible the effects of puberty on Émile. Life in society being, in a way, a consequence of original sin, the child of nature is protected against society for as long as he remains under the age of puberty.
She bent her way, by the light of the moon, towards her fountain... She flung herself into the basin... She saw in the water, upon her naked arms and bosom, the reflection of the two cocoa trees which were planted at her own and her brother's birth, and which interwove above her head their green branches and young fruit. She thought of Paul's friendship, sweeter than the odour of the blossoms, purer than the waters of the fountain, stronger than the intertwining palm-tree, and she sighed. Reflecting on the hour of the night, and the profound solitude, her imagination became disturbed (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [1788] 2013).

This passage is the only one where Virginia's body is mentioned. And Paul is once again presented as her brother! While the mothers of the two children "talked of their marriage" when "they were yet in their cradles," they made no objection when "the first names they learned to give each other were those of brother and sister" (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [1788] 2013). This does indeed go beyond the boundaries and takes the rejection of society's "prejudices" a little far. Confronted with the imminent realization of what they have encouraged, the two mothers conceal their uneasiness under commendable pretexts. The message that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre explicitly addresses to the reader is well known: evil comes from corrupt society, and it is because of society that Paul and Virginia are driven out of paradise. But he does not manage to completely hide the truth at the heart of his exotic Arcadia, and that is the incestuous desire inevitably fueled by the fantasy of absolute love. Frankly, the pagans were right: the golden age was also the age of Polyphemus the cannibal; for incest, like cannibalism, transgresses that order which guarantees there is a place for everyone and that these places remain distinct. It is a basic ordering of humanity, but an order that is maintained at the cost of accepting death and the succession of the generations.

Incestuous desire is, therefore, the real serpent causing Paul and Virginia to be hounded from their paradise. The idea that amorous desire, taken to extremes, is revealed to be incestuous is not only Freudian—it had already appeared in the sermons of St. Francis de Sales. Carnal man, he writes in his *Treatise on the Love of God*, "wants to fully enjoy the object of his passion and indulge it avidly;" his example (borrowed from the Bible) is Amnon, who, prey to an irresistible desire for his half sister Tamar, rapes her (Sales [1616] 1747, 1:91–2 and 1:94). For it to be absolutely necessary to divert desire from the object it instinctively aspires to, and replace it by God, this desire needs to be both transgressive (thus...
inevitably leading to sin and perdition) and limitless (so mobilizing an energy that can be redirected toward the divine infinite). Sexual enjoyment—the forbidden fruit—is ultimately the negative side of sovereign good (Flahault 2007, 60ff).

The love of Paul for Virginia is as extreme as that of Amnon for Tamar. But, of course, Paul does not carry out the act; virtue is safe. In the same way, in Chateaubriand’s René (Atala and René figured in the first edition of Génie du christianisme), René calls out “with all the force of [his] desires [to] the ideal object of a future passion.” Now, his sister Amélie is the only person he has ever loved in the world (“all my feelings came to merge in her”). And Amélie, for her part, harbors a guilty passion for her brother. To escape from this, she has to die to the world; so she withdraws into a convent and dies there in the odor of sanctity. “For the most violent loves,” writes Chateaubriand (1978), religion “substitutes a sort of burning chastity.” It is the same ambiguous substitution that is involved in Atala. The Native American Chactas passionately loves the beautiful Atala, who is Indian through her mother and Christian. He is loved in return, but Atala has made a vow to keep her virginity. Enlightened by a holy hermit who has taken the young people in, Chactas is prepared to convert. But Atala, torn between the oath binding her and the desire to give in to Chactas, sees no other way out but death. She poisons herself, and the story ends with her funeral.55

But let us return to Paul and Virginia and reread the scene of the shipwreck. We see there how Virginia regains paradise—a heavenly paradise this time. Paul, together with the narrator and a crowd gathered on the shore, sees the vessel dashed against the nearby rocks, its moorings broken by the hurricane. Paul attempts in vain to reach the ship. Virginia can be seen on the afterdeck, stretching out her arms toward Paul, while the sailors have already flung themselves into the water,

except one, who still remained upon the deck, and who was naked, and strong as Hercules. This man approached Virginia with respect, and, kneeling at her feet, attempted to force her to throw off her clothes; but she repulsed him with modesty, and turned away her head... But at that moment a mountain billow, of enormous magnitude... menaced the shattered vessel, towards which it rolled bellowing, with its black sides and foaming head. At this terrible sight the sailor flung himself into the sea; and Virginia, seeing death inevitable, crossed her hands upon her breast, and raising upwards her serene and beauteous eyes, seemed an angel prepared to take her flight to Heaven (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [1788] 2013).

With Virginia’s puberty has been revealed the threat of excessive fulfilment; hence the necessity of escaping the agonizing guilt now attached to anything to do with sexuality. This means that revealing her body, which should have been her salvation, appears to her, on the contrary, to lead to perdition. The naked Hercules who attempts to tear off her clothing is the serpent approaching Eve again. But she resists him and, by the sacrifice of her life, sublimates the

55. The picture by Girodet, showing The Funeral of Atala, can be seen in the Louvre.

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too-violent love uniting her with her brother. Thus she fulfils the virginal destiny allotted to her by her name.

The pattern on the dress that Virginia should have removed to save herself from drowning is the reversed reflection of a scene that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre had read about in the first pages of *L’Astrée*. Céladon, rejected by Astrée (who believes herself betrayed by her lover), plunges into a river and disappears. As a result, Astrée too flings herself into the water. But, filled with air, her dress buoyed her up like a float so that, thanks to this, she is helped to the bank and saved. Virginia’s drowning thus reverses the scene. First because her dress, instead of holding her up, is thought to make her heavier, and so she needs to remove it to escape drowning (let us not forget that she is wearing the clothes befitting her status in France, and not the simple cotton skirt she wore in childhood). And second, because in *L’Astrée* the desperate lovers escape death: they find one another in this world and not in Heaven, as would be the case for Paul and Virginia (and before them Julie and Saint-Preux).

By setting up the little group formed by Paul, Virginia, and their two mothers as a model for living, it is not only society’s faults that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is rejecting; it is society itself. It is the world, as Christianity understands this word (Paul, explains Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, bears the name of an early Christian hermit). As we have seen, Paul and Virginia cannot relinquish the love that unites them, since this love is at the heart of the fulfilment fantasy that the story tries to arouse in its readers and that—as the author notes with satisfaction in the *Appendix*—moves them to tears. But they cannot fulfil it in this world, either; that would mean descending into the mediocrity of social existence. Or, through the physical union of a brother and sister, it would mean succumbing to that self-same perverted depravity against which the author is claiming to react by showing that “our happiness consists in living according to nature and to virtue” ([1788] 1966, 177). Incest must therefore remain an unconfessed and unconfessable motive of his pastoral, the obscure and unhealthy complement to the sickly-sweet nonsense which extends across every page. The readers addressed by Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre dream, writes Robert Mauzi, “of feeling both satisfied and justified… They demand to win on both fronts” (Mauzi

56. “Virginia,” writes the author in the *Appendix* he added to his pastoral, “that sublime victim of modesty” ([1788] 1966, 187). In the article “Sublime,” which appears in the *Supplement to the Encyclopédie*, Marmontel mentions by way of example “the account of a terrible shipwreck.” In vain does Bernardin de Saint-Pierre attribute his heroine’s modesty to her sublime morality—the scene appears no less artificial and ridiculous.

57. “No, I am not leaving you,” writes Julie in the letter she leaves before dying, “I shall await you. The virtue which separates us on Earth will unite us in our eternal home. I die with this sweet expectation: only too happy to buy, at the cost of my life, the right to love you forever without crime” (Rousseau [1761] 1967, 566). This is probably what Virginia would have said to Paul had she been able to speak to him before dying.

58. “These children of nature, their innocence, their loves, and their misfortunes, have led people beyond the oceans to tears” (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre [1788] 1966, 189; “tears,” 178 and 179).
From Romantic Religiosity to Sexual Liberation

Antiquity and the classical age classed the pastoral as fiction (an illusion and not a depiction of reality, Fontenelle reminds us), thus refusing to see in it a model that would be appropriate to imitate in real life. By aiming to be edifying, *Paul and Virginia* combines the fictional register with the desire for good feelings. You don’t make literature with good feelings, said Gide (although he used and abused these in *The Pastoral Symphony*). Good literature respects the truth of human existence, while both assuming its fictional character and expressing very real aspects of life. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre does neither: he takes his desires for realities and invites his readers to share his illusion. What is, in fact, this “nature” constantly evoked in *Paul and Virginia* and so many other eighteenth-century works? “The real and the ideal, the fact and the right,” replies Jean Ehrard (1970, 423). One would like to believe that nature as it is in reality, and man as he is in truth, are automatically in harmony with that nature dreamed of by culture in the pastoral genre, with that cultural cocoon where we seek refuge in order to enjoy happiness and beauty. The painful discordances that destroy human relationships could be harmoniously resolved only if, enlightened as to our true nature and to the artificiality of society as it is, we were to commit ourselves to regeneration. Robert Mauzi judges this utopia severely: “A dream of a golden age grafted onto social conformity,” “an image of Arcadia organized to the advantage of order” (Mauzi 1960, 607). Or rather, to the advantage of a new order, a revolution, from the moment this illusion is combined with the Promethean one of a regenerated society and a new person (Flahault 2008).

Once it became edifying, the pastoral distilled a moral poison, as we have seen. Without saying and without knowing, it idealized a transgressive desire for fulfillment (a refusal to accept the human condition and “make do with” the ingrained disparity between human beings), seducing its readers by plunging them into a consoling illusion whose chimerical and harmful character they could not perceive. Unlike *Paul and Virginia, Daphnis and Chloe* in no way claims to deliver an edifying message. And yet, paradoxically, this pagan novel conceals a wisdom that Christianized Europe, by according it merely esthetic interest, has reduced to silence. Let us listen once more to Pan’s pipe, or rather the myth that recounts its origin, telling us that only the mediation of human cultures, only art, make-believe, and fiction accepted as such can be in perfect harmony. Certainly it is desirable to manage the discord that belongs to reality; but wanting to abolish it proves to be impossible and disastrous.

In order to restore Christianity, that pillar of social order that the Enlightenment and the Revolution claimed to have overthrown, it had to be made attractive; and for that, as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and Chateaubriand had shown by example, Arcadia had to be combined with the sovereign good. Since this program itself

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involved the celebration of simple souls and a certain primitivism, it could and should be shown how oral “pagan” poetry, which was supposed to reflect the naïve souls of the people, naturally lent itself to having Christianity grafted onto it—especially the oral poetry of northern Europe, in which the Romantics saw sublimities that accorded with their religious sentiments. The evolutionist view of human history allowed Voltairean or materialist minds to present the “departure from religion” as progress. This evolutionist view was also claimed by their opponents, but in order to assert the superiority of monotheism over polytheisms and consider the latter as a stage obscurely preparing the way for Christianity.

One of the major arguments of Génie du christianisme thus met with huge success: the primitive nature of the common people is instinctively poetic and religious; Christianity is the most poetic religion; it therefore follows that, like the Indian Chactas in Atala, the virtuous masses are naturally inclined to receive the Gospel message. Into the paintings of bucolic landscapes was slipped the outline of a bell tower or a monk at prayer next to a dolmen (Cariou 2011). As we have seen, the Rousseauist pastorals of the late eighteenth century had paved the way for this new religiosity, which not only met the needs of the Counterrevolution; it also suited, more broadly speaking, liberals like Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël. “Myth,” notes Jean Starobinski, “which in the early eighteenth century was a pure worldly ornament, became sacred par excellence” (1989, 260). In the wake of the German Romantics and their taste for the Märchen, the work of the Dane Hans Christian Andersen is full of naïve, simple souls, “popular poetry,” and the Christian sublime. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folklorists also helped give credence to this Romantic vision—among others, Hersart de La Villemarqué, Émile Souvestre and Anatole le Braz.

In his introduction to Barzaz Breiz, La Villemarqué compares the Breton singer-poet to Virgil’s shepherds. He considers the poetic verbal sparring of Theocritus’s shepherds to be the first stirrings of the oral or popular poetry that he himself liked to collect. Does this poetry not, still now, sometimes take “the form of the Anacreontic ode, most often that of the idyll or the eclogue?” “The principle of all popular poetry,” writes La Villemarqué, “is the human soul in its ignorance, its good faith, and its natural candor.” These are all qualities which form a link between paganism and Christianity:

We will still be able to find here and there a few Druidic elements surviving among Breton poetry, but it will now be Christian. The song of the sorceress seems to be the ring attaching her to the ancient Celtic order of poets, marking the transition from

59. The first president of the Celtic Academy (founded in 1805), referring to the bards, talks of “those majestic songs that led our fathers to victory, those sublime hymns… whose effect was like that of thunder or raging seas” (quoted in Postic 2011, 213).
60. It would seem that Chateaubriand and his successors had forgotten the clergy’s constant complaints about peasants bogged down in their “superstitions,” on whom Christian preaching ran like water off a duck’s back. The monk Martin de Braga voiced similar complaints in his sixth-century De Correctione rusticorum. In the twentieth century, a country priest, Bernard Alexandre, showed Le Horsain (2005) greater understanding of his flock’s paganism.
the ancient doctrines to the new teaching. Christian poetry itself could not entirely
elude the action of the past. Like the bishops of Gaul, these Christian druids, as Joseph
de Maistre calls them, preserved, according to the expression of this same philoso-
pher, a certain ancient root that was good; in the same way as they as they grafted
faith in Christ onto the oak of the Druids and did not fell all these sacred trees”
(La Villemarqué 1981). 61

This dream of harmonious reconciliation between Christianity and paganism
could not avoid coming up against reality. It would be too simple to say that
modernity is characterized by the triumph of the sentient world over the other
world. It is nonetheless true that in the late nineteenth century, minds as different
from one another as Nietzsche, Gauguin, Pierre Louÿs, or, a little later, D. H.
Lawrence, came to assert a form of paganism and to reject the Christian grafting.

In his Breton period, Paul Gauguin was still influenced by Romantic imagery
(a wild and primitive Brittany, both pagan and naively Christian). 62 Canvases like
The Vision after the Sermon or Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (1888) and The Yellow
Christ (1889) provide evidence of this. But then, in Tahiti, attracted by a sinless
sexuality, and fascinated by the Maori culture, deities, and myths, Gauguin took
a permanent stand against the colonial regime and missionary activity, just as
Victor Segalen would do later (Gauguin [1892] 2001). 63 During the last years of
his life, when he had settled on one of the Marquesas Islands, Gauguin named
his house La Maison du jouir (House of Pleasure). It was not by chance that he
gave two of his canvases, one painted in 1893 and the other in 1898, the title of
Tahitian Pastoral.

D. H. Lawrence’s famous novel Lady Chatterley’s Lover (1928) brought him
before the courts in a trial for obscenity. After World War I, Lawrence started
what he called his “savage pilgrimage,” living for several years in Mexico, where he
became interested in ancient native deities. For him too, contesting the Victorian
ordering of society and rehabilitating sexuality and “primitive” religions all went
together.

Thirty or so years later, sexual liberation had already found an advocate in
the person of Pierre Louÿs. In the preface to his novel Aphrodite (1896), Louys,
like Nietzsche, champions a Dionysian Greece. The view of ancient morality
put about by modern educators is, he says, “a deception.” In reality, if ancient

61. As regards Völkisch beliefs, George Mosse also emphasizes “the moving simplicity of the peasants”
and their integrity. “Völkisch thought,” he writes, “associated glorification of the peasant with simple reli-
gion that came from the heart” (2008, 72–73). In France as in Germany, the middle classes ardently
wished for the good common people to avoid the “dangerous classes” (the workers) and identify with the
reassuring model being held up to it by this same bourgeoisie. La Villemarqué’s reference to Joseph de
Maistre is significant, as confirmed by the final words of his Introduction: “No! King Arthur is not dead.”
Louis XVI had been decapitated, but royalty had not had its last word!

62. A view which still pertains in a contemporary biography: “Brittany,” writes Assia Kantor-
Goukovskàia, “a fragment of the old Celtic world, preserving epic poetry, its traditions, and its beliefs,…
its archaism, its Christian monuments tinged with paganism” (1988, 20).

63. All the information given in Noa-Noa comes from this notebook. Gauguin obtained it from J. A.
Moerenhout’s book, Voyages aux îles du Grand Océan, published in Paris in 1832. Leconte de Lisle’s was
also inspired by it in his Poèmes barbares.
morality deserves to be taken as a model, it is because it was able “to proclaim the right of all men to search for individual happiness within the limits imposed by the similar right of others, and to declare that there is nothing more sacred under the sun than physical love.” Since we have not known “that exhilarating youth of the earth, which we call the life of antiquity,” let us relive the time “when the most sensual love, the divine love... was without blemish, without shame, without sin.” Let us forget “eighteen barbaric, hypocritical, and ugly centuries” and consecrate “with enthusiasm on the altars of true faith,” our “hearts that are still drawn by the immortal Aphrodite” (Louys [1896] 1966, 10 and 12). As we can see, Pierre Louÿs’s preface constitutes a real hedonistic and anti-Christian manifesto, anticipating the sexual liberation brought about by the contraceptive pill (marketed in the United States in 1960 and authorized in France in 1967), as well as the positions defended today by Michel Onfray (2011).

In short, the pastoral imaginary, having been used by the Romantics in an attempt to reconcile sensibility with Christianity, was turned against the latter in the name of a revolt against the repressive hypocrisy of the middle classes and a call for sexual liberation. Subsequently—the only fragment to survive from polytheism, which had long since been destroyed—the Arcadian dream was put at the service of consumerism and economic growth, and has now been dissolved in the advertising that is all around us, with its celebration of youthful bodies.

❖

The Renaissance did not rediscover the cosmology and anthropology linked to polytheism, since these had, for the most part, become unfamiliar to the philosophers of antiquity. The Renaissance associated ancient culture with an elevation of the vita activa at the expense of the vita contemplativa. Rich and cultured Italians (among them several popes) proved determined not to let themselves be confined by the demands of religion. “There was in this,” writes Alberto Tenenti, “a sort of ideological revenge by secular society against the traditional claims of clerics and, in particular, of monks, whose way of life was deemed to be perfect” (in Cloulas 1990, 340). It was doubtless a healthy reaction, and one that, still today, most of us would support. However, it is one that prevents us seeing that by reducing paganism to a hedonistic reaction suitable for furthering the secular battle, a very impoverished view of it has survived; a view that, furthermore, is unwittingly dependent upon the religious influence to which it is opposed. It is all the more regrettable because the confidence placed by Western thinking in the conception of man and of society inherited from the Enlightenment—as if that conception now constituted a limit that cannot be exceeded—should now appear to be rather presumptuous. Really, we need a second Renaissance. In order to revitalize philosophical thinking, we need to rediscover pagan ideas about the human condition and take them seriously. In addition, the social sciences and philosophy, rather than priding themselves on their so-called independence with regard to Christianity, should stand back and consider it carefully; because it is polytheisms, and subsequently monotheisms
that, for millennia and millions of people, have provided the answers to such
fundamental philosophical questions as, “Who are we?” “What should we do?”
and “What can we hope for?”

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ABSTRACT/RÉSUMÉ

François Flahault, The Pastoral Imagination: A Pagan Legacy in a Christian Milieu. — Although a part of ancient polytheism, the pastoral imaginary, due to its esthetic value, was allowed to survive during the Christian era. Torn between the contradictory requirements of this world and the religious one, one could enjoy the dreamed comfort of a perceptible ideal. So familiar are its stereotypes that one tends to underestimate its lasting influence on Western culture and its body image. The shepherds of Arcadia, in close relations with divinities, convey an attractive image of youth, beauty, and sexual love. The specificity of these representations contrasts with Chinese images of the immortals, who look like elderly and studious hermits. Compared to Daphnis and Chloe and L’Astrée, Paul and Virginia offers another revealing contrast. Whereas the pagan pastoral is no more than a source of esthetic pleasure, the story told by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre tries to provide an edifying lesson: his exotic pastoral is linked to a Romantic version of the suprasocial and antisexual Christian ideal. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, the idealized vision of sexual freedom provided by the pastoral imaginary prevailed and was turned against religion.

François Flahault, L’imaginaire pastoral : un héritage païen en milieu chrétien. — Bien qu’étant lié à l’ancien polythéisme, l’imaginaire pastoral, à cause de sa valeur esthétique, a pu survivre durant l’ère chrétienne. Aux esprits écartelés entre les exigences contradictoires de ce monde et de la religion, il a offert le réconfort rêvé d’un idéal sensible. Ses stéréotypes sont si familiers que l’on tend à sous-évaluer l’influence durable qu’il a eue sur la culture occidentale et sur l’image que celle-ci donne du corps. Les bergers d’Arcadie, vivant en contact avec les dieux, proposent une image attrayante de loisir, de jeunesse, de beauté et d’érotisme. La singularité de ces représentations apparaît manifeste lorsqu’on les confronte à celles des Immortels chinois, ermites âgés et studieux. Comparé à Daphnis et Chloé et à L’Astrée, Paul et Virginie offre un autre contraste révélateur : là où les pastorales païennes n’offraient rien de plus qu’un plaisir esthétique, le récit de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre prétend, en outre, être moralement édifiant : sa pastorale exotique est liée à la version romantique de l’idéal chrétien supra social et puritain. Cependant, à la fin du XIXᵉ siècle, la vision idéalisée de la liberté sexuelle associée à l’imaginaire pastoral triompha et se retourna contre la religion.