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Pastoral

In BBC 2's long-running television programme *Escape to the Country* Brits tired of urban life look for a new home in the countryside. Key terms in this search are 'period features', such as 'low beams' and 'open fireplaces', 'community' and 'space'. At the same time, most of the show's potential homebuyers explicitly want a rural idyll within commuting distance from London. With its emphasis on the countryside as a better, more traditional and more communal place, the programme showcases the British countryside as a pastoral retreat, which city dwellers can escape to. It is precisely this tension between ideal and reality that is so poignant in a time of climate crisis, and which makes the pastoral narrative so apt. Although less explicitly concerned with climate crisis than, for example, the environmental collapse narrative discussed in the previous chapter, pastoral is no less a narrative of climate crisis. As I'll explore in this chapter, the twenty-first-century pastoral narrative is shaped by developments in and changes to the British countryside that run parallel to the growing awareness of environmental crisis in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The result is a narrative that emphasizes both sides of our contemporary relationship with nature: the dream of ideal nature and living somehow close to it, while never being able to forget the unfeasibility of this dream. In the postmillennial pastoral narrative, this tension is captured in the traditional pastoral movement of retreat and return. Consequently, pastoral opens up the way for engagements with nature that are sensitive to precisely those kinds of issues characterizing contemporary representations of nature, from advertising to film, from literature to other forms of art.

Pastoral's ubiquity in depictions of nature has led it to be criticized by ecocritics and others concerned with representations of nature.¹ The escapism that characterizes the narrative seems out of place in a time of climate crisis,

and its traditional focus on the countryside might no longer suit a rapidly urbanizing Western world. In this chapter, I propose an approach that recognizes pastoral's contested history but is aware of the narrative's ongoing appeal to readers, authors and artists. I focus on pastoral as a means by which twenty-first-century British novels come to terms with contemporary climate crisis. The traditional pastoral movement of retreat and return is central in this respect. In its literal sense and traditional use, retreat is the escape to an idyllic landscape outside of the city and society, while return denotes the necessity for the city dweller – the traditional audience of pastoral and the one who retreats – to go back to the city and society. In a more figurative sense, return can also be that by which the (desire for) retreat is critiqued, for instance, when the narrator or characters of a text expose the artificiality of the retreat. In postmillennial British novels, the desire for (idealized) nature – retreat – goes hand in hand with an awareness of environmental, social and political realities – return – which challenges the idealization that makes popular uses of pastoral so problematic. While the novels I discuss in this chapter may not often explicitly discuss climate crisis, their exploration of retreat and return and the pastoral narrative in general pave the way for a depiction of the non-human natural world that is far from anachronistic.

Terry Gifford terms retreat and return 'the fundamental pastoral movement' (1999: 1). Indeed, the texts that first established pastoral do so by explicitly framing the idealization in terms of a necessary return, either literal or metaphorical. In Theocritus's *Idylls* (third century BC), for instance, the retreat takes the form of childhood memories in the countryside that the speaker tells to his urban, courtly audience, while two centuries later, the idealized countryside of Virgil's *Eclogues* is never far from political turmoil and the threat of eviction. In the English tradition, the pastoral line stretches via Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) and the golden age of pastoral poetry in the Elizabethan age (Payne 2009: 420) to nature poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Along the way, the pastoral narrative develops into 'a description and thence an idealisation of actual English country life and its social and economic relations' (Williams 1973: 26), embodied in, for instance, the country house poem.

Greg Garrard suggests that the Industrial Revolution sees the ultimate end of classical pastoral, when a new form emerges that distorts or mystifies

‘social and environmental history, whilst at the same time providing a locus, legitimated by tradition, for the feelings of loss and alienation from nature to be produced by the Industrial Revolution’ (2011: 44).² What is understood as ‘pastoral’ in popular discourse today is a direct consequence of this shift. No longer is the pastoral tied to the dimension of retreat or work, nor does it comment on contemporary political, social and economic circumstances. Instead, the pastoral has become synonymous with an idealization of nature that pays little attention to actual environmental circumstances. While an idealistic narrative no longer befits contemporary environmental circumstances – if it ever did at all – many critics of pastoral gloss over the other half of pastoral, the return. Yet, it is the return that holds the narrative’s potential in uniting the contemporary contrasting impulse of a desire for (unspoilt) nature on the one hand and a deep-seated awareness of its loss due to environmental crisis, urbanization and other developments on the other. Both Garrard’s and Dana Phillips’s critique rests on a view of pastoral that emphasizes retreat, and neglects return. Consequently, in his analysis of the narrative Garrard argues that ‘[a]t the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies’ (2011: 63). Phillips dismisses pastoral for expressing a view of nature that emphasizes stability rather than flux; for its use and abuse in service of class and race; and especially for its ‘tendency to transmogrify and to splinter into different versions’ (2003: 17). Pastoral, he concludes, is unsuitable to confronting environmental crisis since ‘the context of this crisis is largely an urban one’ (Phillips 2003: 146). Strikingly, Phillips here seems to be unaware of the urban origins of pastoral: Theocritus composed his *Idylls* for an urban audience, and the city and court are the audience in classical and English pastoral, from Virgil to the country house pastorals of Pope and Jonson. Philips may have found support for his argument that pastoral has taken too many different forms in Paul Alpers’s discussion of the narrative and his suggestion that ‘[i]t sometimes seems as if there are as many versions of pastoral as there are critics who write about it’ (1982: 437). Alpers also illustrates another reason why contemporary ecocritics might be wary of engaging with the pastoral when he writes that the narrative isn’t about the landscape at all, but about the people in it – shepherds – while the ecocritical project is about decentring the human in favour of the natural (1982: 459).³ Yet, it is precisely

pastoral's 'tendency to transmogrify' – to change and adapt – as Phillips puts it, that makes the narrative so useful in a contemporary context, as it both expresses desire for retreat as well as an awareness of historical, cultural, social, economic and environmental realities that make return necessary and inevitable.⁴ Those critiquing pastoral, including Garrard and Phillips but also Ursula Heise and Timothy Morton,⁵ instead argue that 'ancient tropes' such as pastoral may 'have the advantage of deep roots in our culture, but the liability of anachronism in the postmodern era' (Garrard 2011: 202), and should therefore be replaced by other, more suitable, narratives such as 'the human animal and the whole Earth' (Garrard 2011: 202).⁶ This sentiment is supported by the silence on pastoral in influential works published in the early 2010s that barely or not at all mention the narrative, such as Timothy Clark's *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (2011) and *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015) as well as *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014), edited by Garrard. A notable exception is *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (2014), edited by Louise Westling, which includes a chapter on pastoral by Gifford that emphasizes contemporary uses of pastoral.

Only a handful of critics have sought to explore pastoral in terms of contemporary circumstances and environmental crisis since the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁷ While those critiquing pastoral tend to define the narrative as, in Leo Marx's words, an 'inchoate longing for a more "natural" environment' at work '[w]herever people turn away from the land' (1964: 5), those who explore the possibilities of pastoral tend to focus on what he terms 'the complex pastoral'. Complex pastoral is shaped by the disturbance of the pastoral idyll, either by an actual machine such as a train or an airplane or more figuratively by a reference to death (1964: 26). In his work on what he calls 'post-pastoral' Gifford similarly proposes an understanding of pastoral that relies on retreat and the inevitable return.⁸ It is this understanding of Marx's complex pastoral that enables contemporary and more productive usages of pastoral. Post-pastoral refers to works that raise, and to a certain extent answer, six questions, ranging from 'Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?' to 'How should we address the ecofeminist insight that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other, the less powerful?' (Gifford 2014: 27).

Gifford's concept explicitly engages with the criticism of Garrard and Phillips. The post-pastoral does not seek an image of stable harmony between humans and nature, but rather 'a dynamic self-adjusting accommodation' to what the ecologist Daniel Botkin has termed 'discordant harmonies' (Gifford 2014: 28).⁹ Developed originally in respect to the poetry of Ted Hughes, over the years Gifford has foregrounded the post-pastoral dimension in works from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* to postcolonial women's poetry.¹⁰ Yet, while Gifford's work on post-pastoral no doubt forms the most significant contribution to a contemporary reengagement with pastoral, I will not be using it in my readings of the novels in this chapter. The concept falls prey, as Gifford acknowledges, to what he terms the 'prefix-pastoral': the many forms of 'new' pastoral emerging over the past decades (2014: 29). While 'urban pastoral', 'radical pastoral' (Garrard 1996), 'narco-pastoral' (Goldberg 2016), 'postmodern pastoral', 'gay pastoral' and other pastorals point to a welcome resurgence of the narrative,¹¹ such terms run the risk of leading to splintering rather than emphasizing the kind of historical continuity that the reconceptualization of retreat and return in postmillennial British fictions demonstrates.

Although also an example of 'prefix-pastoral', Heather Sullivan's 'dark pastoral' is closest to my use of pastoral in this chapter. Rather than either embracing or rejecting it, she proposes a 'dark form' of the narrative that emphasizes that, problematic though it may be, the pastoral 'remains the dominant vision of nature in much of our modern techno-industrial culture' (2014: 86). Drawing on Morton's concept of 'dark ecology', Sullivan's dark pastoral shows how pastoral dichotomies are blurred or bridged by environmental crisis: 'The dark pastoral provides ecocriticism with specific representational frames that make sense of the Anthropocene's paradoxes by refusing to separate our green dreams from the material manifestations of the new toxic nature' (2016: 57). Dark pastoral surfaces in works as early as Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea* (1797) and as recent as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). In the same special issue of *Green Letters* in which Sullivan's discussion of Goethe and Atwood appears,¹² Deborah Lilley provides an analysis of the pastoral in two contemporary British novels: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007). While Lilley does not make explicit reference to retreat and return – which forms the core of my argument in this chapter – her premise is similar to mine. Pastoral, she argues, both idealizes

and scrutinizes and, through its critical edge, resists 'simple idealisations of nature, or simplifications of the complex human-natural worlds that their environments represent' (2016: 68).

While my understanding of the pastoral narrative in this chapter overlaps to some extent with Gifford's, Sullivan's and Lilley's work,¹³ I have deliberately not chosen a new term for the pastoral narrative that emerges in postmillennial British fiction. Rather, I use the same term to refer to Virgil's *Eclogues* and to Graham Swift's 2011 novel *Wish You Were Here*. Not only does this provide a simplification of the many different terms often confusedly used in pastoral scholarship, it also emphasizes the narrative's historical continuity as well as its expansiveness and ability to adapt. Indeed, the term 'pastoral' fits as easily with the classics as it does with twenty-first-century British novels. The scale of contemporary environmental crisis may be unprecedented in human memory, but pastoral narratives have always been used to come to terms with troubling political, social or environmental times. As Guy Lee notes, Virgil's poem responds to political turmoil: 'The *Eclogues* spring from the troubled times that followed the murder of Julius Caesar in March 44BC, years when Italy was torn by civil war and the Mediterranean world split between contending Roman factions' (1984: 19). Precisely this tension between (idealized) nature and socio-economic and political circumstances makes the pastoral so suited to twenty-first-century realities.¹⁴

In what follows I explore three dimensions of the twenty-first-century pastoral narrative, as represented in Gerard Woodward's *August* (2001), Ross Raisin's *God's Own Country* (2008) and Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here* (2011). My discussion will foreground the reconfiguration of the pastoral narrative in the twenty-first century as a response to developments running parallel to climate crisis. The chapter continues the concern with narrative form that I sketched in the introduction to this book, as well as the emphasis on narrativity and storytelling that is central to Chapter 1. The three dimensions I focus on in particular are the importance of time to the pastoral narrative, the contemporary British countryside as a site of aesthetics rather than production and, finally, what I call 'pastoral traces' as a way of bringing the pastoral return into the retreat and vice versa, particularly through the use of narrative technique.

Pastoral time

Particularly through its associations with the Garden of Eden and the Golden Age, (popular) pastoral is often associated with the past, with loss and nostalgia. What Williams calls an 'escalator movement' is characteristic of much pastoral discourse: the retreat of pastoral, and the dream of a better, unspoilt nature, is often located just over the historic horizon (1973: 9). The search for a lost 'Old England,' he argues, is an inherent part of much British writing about nature and the countryside. This 'Old England' resurfaces in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* (1770) as much as in Julian Barnes's 1998 novel *England, England*. But looking back to the past in both these works – and in others like them – is not merely a matter of falling prey to nostalgia or escapism. Rather, the pastoral retreat typically serves to critique the present or urban reality: in Goldsmith's poem the enclosure movement, in *England, England*, commodification. Time and temporal markers in a narrative consequently become instruments of critique every bit as much, if not more, than escape, as I will discuss in this section. The seeming absence of time also recurs in pastoral texts, especially in Renaissance poetry and drama. As Jay L. Halio suggests about Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1603), timelessness is a 'convention of the pastoral' that contrasts the forest of Arden favourably to 'the time-consciousness of court and city life' (1962: 197). The pastoral of seventeenth-century carpe diem poems is similarly tied in with timelessness. In Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd to His Love' (1599), for instance, the shepherd's attempt to convince his love to come live with him relies primarily on idyllic nature being outside of time and immune to change – a fact that Raleigh used to satirize the poem in his 'The Nymph's Reply' (1600).

Yet, in order for the pastoral narrative to provide a productive engagement with the non-human natural world, the pastoral escape or retreat has to be embedded in a critique of contemporary society, politics or environment. *August, God's Own Country* and *Wish You Were Here* all present a pastoral retreat that is temporally and often spatially remote. Flashbacks and temporal markers ensure that the pastoral narrative in these works provide a reflection on contemporary developments, especially those that affect the environment. As such, the pastoral narrative offers a space in which to explore the tension

between the idealization of nature on the one hand and environmental realities on the other, a tension that seems more pressing than ever in a time of climate crisis. Spatial and temporal distance are central to especially *August* and *Wish You Were Here*, and to a lesser extent *God's Own Country*. In *August* the spatial contrast is achieved through the juxtaposition of Wales – where the Joneses go on holiday – and London, where they live. Swift's *Wish You Were Here* holds a spatial cue in its title: the phrase 'wish you were here' denotes a pleasant, even idyllic, space reminiscent of vacations. The 'here' in the title refers to Dorset, from which the main character Jack sends a postcard to his future wife Ellie, as well as to the caravan park the couple runs on the Isle of Wight and even the airfield where Jack – without Ellie – travels to receive the body of his brother Tom. *God's Own Country* is most cynical about the possibilities of pastoral and most explicitly explores the contrast between an agricultural production landscape and an aesthetic landscape – it is also the one to hold the clearest spatial marker of the three works. While the phrase is used by 'towns', as the protagonist Sam calls them, 'god's own country' creates an idyllic picture of the countryside that is immediately destabilized and deconstructed in the novel. Although space is a significant part of pastoral, then, my focus here will be on its temporal dimension as the primary force shaping the pastoral narrative.¹⁵ Consequently, this chapter forms a counterpart to Chapter 1 in which time is central to imaginations of environmental collapse. The novels explored in that chapter use temporal markers to create an eerie sense of proximity between the initial readers' world and environmental collapse, while the pastoral narrative draws on the past in order to critique the present. At the same time, as I discussed in relation to *The Carhullan Army*, the familiar pastoral landscape is often used to create a contrast with the landscape of environmental collapse, by which (loss of) the past becomes a marker of futurity.

Time is central to narration: narrative is, in H. Porter Abbott's words, 'the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time' (2008: 3). Certain events in a narrative gain importance when more attention is devoted to them – and when it takes the reader more time to read them. In order to make sense of events, we often relate them to something that came before – a potential cause – and something that happens afterwards: an effect. Time and what may be called temporal mapping hence help make sense of the world and events unfolding in it. Temporal cues also establish the context

of narratives and as such enable readers to place events and make sense of them: references to war as they appear in *Wish You Were Here*, for instance, have different connotations from similar references in *August* when the reader knows that the former novel is set in the early twenty-first century, and the latter at the time of the Cold War. In Swift's novel, especially, temporal cues abound: the narrative mentions 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and foot-and-mouth epidemics in Britain. 2001 is mentioned as the year for both the time when 'a couple of planes had flown into a couple of big towers' as well as when Tom watched 'cattle burning on the telly' (Swift 2011: 203). The intradiegetic narrative is set in November, a month that is furthermore significant because of the Remembrance Day commemorations Jack always attended with his father and brother, as well as being the month in which his brother Tom ran away from home to join the army.

Through duration in particular the past is emphasized in *Wish You Were Here*. The time period the novel spans, nearly thirty years, is much longer than the period of time in the intradiegetic narrative: a few hours. Moreover, time passes much faster in the flashbacks than it does in the narrative present. Analepsis – flashback – is central to the depiction of the pastoral landscape in *Wish You Were Here*: a landscape overlaid with memories of problematic family relations and agricultural decline. The novel is set on one day, during a few hours in November, when the protagonist, Jack Luxton, sits on his bed with a gun, contemplating suicide. Very little happens on the intradiegetic level of the novel: eventually Jack's wife Ellie, with whom he had a row, returns and he puts away the gun. Most of the narrative takes place on the metadiegetic level through various flashbacks: to Jack's childhood and the stories his mother used to tell, to his mother's death, his brother running away from home, his father's suicide and the blossoming relationship between Jack and the girl next door, Ellie. These personal narratives are interspersed with other flashbacks of the BSE and foot-and-mouth epidemics in Britain, and the decline of the family farm. After selling both their farms, Jack and Ellie take over a camping site on the Isle of Wight. He recalls not hearing from his brother Tom until a few weeks before the events in the intradiegetic narrative, when he receives a letter telling him that Tom has died in combat in Afghanistan. Some of the flashbacks are devoted to Jack travelling to the airbase to receive Tom's body

on his own after Ellie has refused to accompany him, and burying him next to his parents in the village he hasn't been back to in years. While most of the narrative can be captured within this framework of the intradiegetic narrative and Jack's memories told as flashbacks, in two instances the narrative steps out of this framework: once to describe the purchase and renovation of the farm by a London family, the Robinsons, and once to describe Tom's experiences in the army and his eventual death. Both of these narrative strands are tied in closely with perceptions of the landscape, as I explore in the sections on the British countryside and pastoral traces below.

David Herman notes that retrospective stories 'include (at least) two shifts of "deitic centers"', or reference points, levels or locations on which the narrative happens (2002: 224). In the case of *Wish You Were Here*, one deitic centre is the bedroom in the house on the Isle of Wight in which the intradiegetic narrative is set. Through the flashbacks, however, the novel presents a host of other deitic centres in different times, including the farm when Jack and Tom were children, the farm after Jack's father's death, the days of the repatriation and the burial of Tom's body. By combining all these different narrative strands and deitic centres, the novel achieves what Herman calls polychrony: 'a mode of narration that purposely resists linearity by multiplying ways in which narrated events can be ordered' (2002: 221). Indeed, Jack does not recall the events in chronological order: sometimes flashbacks occur within other flashbacks, and at other times earlier events are narrated after later events or, as in the case of Tom's leaving and their father's death, events are hinted at or recounted more than once. Such recalling and retelling is one way in which, as Herman suggests, characters come to terms with the (traumatic) past (2002: 220–221). In Swift's novel, though, more happens than just flashbacks from within Jack's narrative. The flashbacks that relate events on the metadiegetic level contribute to the ways in which the pastoral concept of retreat is framed in *Wish You Were Here*. By locating the pastoral retreat on the metadiegetic level of the flashbacks, a return to the intradiegetic level – out of the flashback – automatically also provides a pastoral return away from any possible idyll. The retreat, to put it differently, is framed continuously by return, and by the awareness of environmental realities.

Woodward's novel *August* is structured according to very explicit temporal cues: the title itself refers to the month in which the Joneses go on vacation,

and in which much of the novel is set, and the eight parts of the novel are titled according to the year in which they're set, starting in 1955 and ending in 1970. The interplay of pastoral and time is played out primarily through the novel's historic setting. Yet, the temporal settings of the novel also hold spatial importance, as for much of the novel the month of August is spent in Wales, which functions as the pastoral retreat. While the Joneses' Welsh vacations are central, particularly towards the end of the novel the family's London life – which is considerably less idyllic – begins to receive more emphasis and to take up more narrative space than the vacations. The pastoral retreat of *August* is located in two locations: the first being the landscapes of Britain and Ireland where the protagonist Aldous went on cycling holidays with his friend Lesley, and the second being the farm in Wales where Aldous and his family spend a month each summer, in a kind of echo of his earlier holidays with Lesley. The first location is most explicitly a lost location: their shared holidays come to an abrupt end because of the start of the Second World War and Aldous becoming a soldier. For him, this event provides a significant marker in how he thinks about time and past and present: looking back he realizes that 'the past ended with the outbreak of war. Everything since then was the present' (Woodward 2001: 19–20). Yet, the pastoral narrative in *August* consists of much more than a mere re-enactment of the old nostalgia for the pastoral idyll. Indeed, much of the pastoral retreat is achieved through a spatio-temporal conflation in which Wales is placed in a historically earlier time than the city to which the Joneses return.

In 1955, Aldous Jones cycles from London to Wales to find a camping site for his family. Looking for 'somewhere idyllic and isolated' (Woodward 2001: 24) he gets hit by a car on a country road and meets Hugh Evans, a local farmer. He later describes this event to his wife Colette as landing 'head first in paradise' (Woodward 2001: 14). For the Joneses, the farm in Llanygwynfa is indeed paradise, a retreat in both the spatial and temporal sense. Waiting for his wife and children to arrive after his 'discovery' of the farm, Aldous finds it hard to believe that the village can be reached by train from London at all: standing on the platform he cannot imagine that 'the rails below, dead straight in both directions, provided an unbroken line of bolted steel between Llanygwynfa and London Paddington' (Woodward 2001: 16). In Aldous's mind, this distance is not merely measured in kilometres and railway tracks,

but also in time. As a child and young man, he frequently visited Wales, until the Second World War interrupted his annual camping holiday.

Even before the novel has properly begun, the temporal distance so characteristic of popular pastoral is hinted at in an epigraph by R. S. Thomas: 'There is no present in Wales,/And no future;/There is only the past,/Brittle with relics'. This epigraph immediately sets the tone for Aldous's experience of Wales: it is a region that belongs to the past and is seemingly distinct from the rest of the world, at least for outsiders. Quite literally, it occurs to Aldous that '[a] much older geology shaped the landscape' (Woodward 2001: 288). In fact, he notes, he is not merely travelling in space but also through time: '[i]t hadn't occurred to Aldous before that in travelling to Wales he was travelling backwards through geological time. The country ages with each mile out of London. In Wales there were mountains that were formed right at the beginning of Earth's geological history – the oldest surfaces in the world' (Woodward 2001: 288–289). The transition between the present of London to the past of Wales begins even before arriving on their holiday destination. Cycling once again to Wales in the 1970s, Aldous crosses the Chilterns and thinks 'about the expanse of time when human beings had no place in the world' (Woodward 2001: 288) that seems more immediate here than back home in the city. In crossing the Chilterns, then, Aldous crosses into a temporal and spatial retreat and believes that, if only for a little while, he can keep the inevitable return to the city and the present at bay. Here, the novel utilizes what Caroline Edwards calls 'metachronous times'. British postmillennial fiction, she suggests, increasingly foregrounds 'temporal experience through disruptive, nonlinear, and non-contemporaneous narrative frameworks' (2012: 478). She finds examples of this trend especially in the fiction of Sam Taylor, but also in the novels of John Burnside and Jeanette Winterson that depict 'metachronous times': 'times in which multiple simultaneous pasts and futures are operative within the present' (Edwards 2012: 481). While at first sight *August* is considerably less experimental than Taylor's, Burnside's and Winterson's work, it too utilizes what could be called a form of 'metachronous times' through the spatio-temporal conflation occurring in Wales. Yet, where Edwards explores metachronous times in relation to the Arcadian revenge – when nature strikes back – time in the novels I discuss does not serve to point towards apocalypse, but rather functions as part of the pastoral movement

of retreat and return. In these works, the simultaneity of pasts and presents emphasizes the pastoral movement, especially when, as I explore in the final section of this chapter, they form pastoral traces.

Finally, in the third of the three novels discussed in this chapter – Ross Raisin's *God's Own Country* – time hardly plays a role. This work has the most contemporary setting and consists of very few flashbacks. Those that do occur are brief, and provide only necessary background to Sam Marsdyke's life, not a possibly idealized image of the countryside. Sam lives in a seemingly eternal present that only comes to an end when he's arrested for abducting a teenage girl. As I explore in the final section of this chapter on pastoral traces, using an unreliable narrator is one of the ways in which retreat into the pastoral idyll is prevented in the novel. Yet, *God's Own Country* holds up a mirror to the common idealized image of the countryside in other ways as well. Both idealization and the harsh reality of life in the countryside are depicted in the novel. Without much formal experimentation, the novel consequently offers both the retreat in terms of what the tourists think of the countryside and the return in what Sam Marsdyke experiences and describes as the son of a farmer. While most pronounced in *God's Own Country*, this juxtaposition is apparent in all three pastoral novels discussed in this chapter. They show that making the pastoral narrative productive in a time of climate crisis requires the return – for instance, in the form of awareness of agricultural and environmental change. This awareness is played out further through the contrast between the agricultural and the aesthetic landscape that is foregrounded not only in these fictional postmillennial works, but also in the physical British landscape in the early twenty-first century.

From farm to country house: The productive versus the aesthetic countryside

When the Joneses go on holiday to Wales for the last time, in 1970, they realize that the farm has lost its charm. What Aldous had described as paradise in 1955 has become a holiday destination, complete with a toilet block and designated sites for tents and caravans. For years, the Joneses had been the only holidaymakers on the Evans farm, which wasn't officially allowed to

host visitors. Ironically, the rural idyll that the Joneses sought and found in Llanngwynfa is destroyed by others looking for their own version of the rural idyll. Through its references to tourism, *August* illustrates a shift in the British countryside since the Second World War, when tourism increasingly became an important feature of the landscape. The shift from a landscape viewed predominantly as a production landscape to a landscape perceived in aesthetic terms is depicted in *August*, *God's Own Country* and *Wish You Were Here*. This shift can also be captured in terms of a change from traditional pastoral, which emphasizes a working landscape, to popular pastoral that presents the countryside as the embodiment of the rural idyll. Falling agricultural profits make a shift from predominantly agriculture to agriculture combined with tourism, or even only tourism, more appealing to farmers, and as such contribute to showing the countryside as popular pastoral rather than traditional pastoral. As research has shown, and the novels demonstrate, this is also a problematic development, leading to conflict and a greater gap between the human and non-human environments, rather than the 'escape to the country' many countryside tourists seek.¹⁶ *August*, *God's Own Country* and *Wish You Were Here* work against the ideal and rather show retreat *and* return. The three novels moreover trace a chronology from a primarily agricultural landscape to one that combines agriculture and tourism in *August*, through to the agricultural recession in the 1990s, and mad cow disease and food and mouth disease in *Wish You Were Here*, to a critique of incomers and those with second homes in the countryside in *God's Own Country*.

The production landscape is rarely referred to in *August*. The three weeks during the family's first summer in Wales are spent 'in almost pure contentment in the hills or on the beach', while '[t]he processes of the farm went on about them, an impenetrable mystery. Animals were moved from field to field for no obvious reason' (Woodward 2001: 35). Although their vacation depends on the farm, the family is not interested in the details of farm life. To put it differently, they frame the farm in terms of popular pastoral, as an idealization detached from reality. For much of the novel, Llanngwynfa remains the paradise that Aldous thought it to be in 1955. The rural retreat in *August*, though, can only exist if the realities of agriculture are obscured and replaced instead by images of rolling hills, quaint pubs and cute animals, meant for petting, not slaughter. The idyll is created on a narrative level solely by focalizing through the family –

the narrative voice, on the other hand, critiques the supposed retreat. In *August*, then, the reader's faith in the story is destabilized much like the novels explored in the previous chapter did. In the context of the pastoral narrative, it serves to embed and critique the pastoral retreat by forcing awareness of the realities on the reader if not on the characters. Aldous's 'paradise', for instance, is described by the narrator as 'a thorny strip ... of marshy fields, small tenant farms, clumps of Douglas firs, abandoned aerodromes, toppled cromlechs and disused sheds of black tin' (Woodward 2001: 1). Further inland, the landscape is interspersed with 'a single-track railway [that] cuts a dead straight path across the land, accompanied by a small bundle of telephone wires mounted on crooked poles' (Woodward 2001: 1). This subtle challenge of the idyll becomes a full-blown critique when the farm on which the Joneses stay is described from the perspective of the owner. Hugh Evans is clearly not living the idyllic life that the family associate the farm with. Rather, while Aldous lands 'head first in paradise', Evans is hoping to finally buy the freehold of his tenancy (Woodward 2001: 4). The narrator subsequently presents the annual holiday as a clash between the Joneses' expectations and the Evanses' attempts to make a living. For instance, in 1969, Aldous laments the changes about to take place at the farm, as they will ruin his pastoral retreat: 'The Evanses were on the brink (as they always were) of successfully purchasing the freehold of their farm. Barry [Evans] was engaged in a perpetual struggle with the National Park authorities to convert the upper fields of the farm into a proper camp site, with toilet facilities, shops, playgrounds' (Woodward 2001: 225). Alun Howkins's overview of the British countryside in the twentieth century demonstrates why the Evanses would be so eager to build a campsite: as early as 1955, when *August* starts, a survey revealed that many farms in Wales 'were unable to generate sufficient agricultural income to justify their continued existence as farms' (2003: 145) and farmers began to explore additional means of generating income.

In the second half of the twentieth century, and especially since the beginning of the agricultural recession in the mid-1990s, the British countryside turned into landscape no longer solely associated with agricultural production.¹⁷ It has become 'a product in its own right; advertised, transacted, consumed' (Rye 2011: 263), appreciated for its recreational and aesthetic values rather than its agricultural importance (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen 2010: 195).

The number of people working in agriculture has consequently declined, while that in tourism has increased. Although the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001 was largely seen as an agricultural crisis, in terms of its effect it was much more a crisis in rural tourism. In 2001, rural tourism in Britain was worth £12 billion per year, while livestock farming was worth about £4 billion a year. The losses to the tourism industry were consequently far greater than those to the agricultural industry: in March 2001 the English Tourist Council estimated that ‘the tourist trade was losing £250 million a week while farming was losing only £60 million’ (Howkins 2003: 232). The tension between ideal and reality inherent to pastoral is further complicated by crises such as BSE after which the countryside in the popular imagination lost even more of its production dimension and became increasingly a tourist landscape.

In *Wish You Were Here*, the shift from a rural economy relying primarily on agriculture to one relying more and more on tourism is reflected in two ways: by Jack Luxton exchanging his ancestral farm in Devon for a caravan park on the Isle of Wight, and by the Robinson family buying the Luxton farm and turning it into their second home. Jack and Ellie’s move to the Isle of Wight may not be a literal example of the way in which many farms have begun to rely on tourism rather than agriculture, but Jack in particular keeps making the connection between his previous life on a working farm and his current life as the owner of a caravan park. More than once he thinks of the caravans in terms of cows: he is ‘tending a herd of caravans’ (Swift 2011: 26), sees them as ‘a form of livestock’ and decides that ‘[a] cow was only one notch up, perhaps, in thinking power, from a caravan’ (Swift 2011: 343). Jack’s family had been farming their land in Devon for generations: as he recalls his mother saying, the first farmhouse on Jebb Hill was built by a Luxton in 1614 (Swift 2011: 29). The agricultural recession of the 1990s, however, spells the end for generations of Luxtons farming on the hill. Following a BSE infection on their farm, after which the family’s sixty-five cows are culled, Jack’s father Michael commits suicide in 1994.¹⁸ The toll of BSE, the local policeman remarks, was not only animal: ‘[f]ollowing the cattle disease, there had been this gradual, much smaller yet even more dismaying epidemic’ of farmers killing themselves (Swift 2011: 240). The foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001 had similarly traumatic effects on both animals and humans: as Ian Convery et al. suggest, ‘the events of 2001 transcended the loss of the material ... and became also the loss of the

conceptual (the loss of meanings associated with this *lifespace*)' (2005: 107, original emphasis). Jack's father experiences a similar conceptual loss after the BSE outbreak on his farm which leads him with no other alternative, he believes, to kill himself.

By the time of their father's death, Jack's brother Tom has run away from home to join the army and their mother has been dead for years. Jack's future wife, and neighbour, Ellie points out the opportunities to Jack: they can sell Jebb Farm to Londoners who will pay good money for a house in the country. Jack's wonder at this thought centres on his initial inability to see the landscape as anything but an agricultural, working landscape: 'it was a farm and he'd never thought of the farmhouse as a separable entity, as anything other than the living quarters of a working farm' (Swift 2011: 287). The sale of Jebb Farm to the Robinsons, who turn it into a country house, does not merely illustrate late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century developments in the British countryside, but also the development of the pastoral narrative. As Williams points out, the focus of pastoral shifted in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century from agriculture to the country house (1973: 26). Rather than describing the working landscape, pastoral came to be used to describe the aesthetic landscape, for instance, in poems such as Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst' (1616). At the same time, the pastoral movement of retreat and return was severed. What's left is an emphasis on retreat only – as is the case in *Wish You Were Here* and the Robinsons' views of their new second home. For them, it's 'their own away-from-it-all place in the country' (Swift 2011: 284) and 'their own little bit of England' (Swift 2011: 285). Particularly striking is how agricultural crises don't affect affluent urbanites' perception of the countryside as retreat. When foot-and-mouth disease strikes after they've bought the house, Toby Robinson emphasizes just how much Jebb Farmhouse is a retreat that seems wholly disconnected from the rest of the world. He tells his wife Clare that the epidemic 'isn't their problem and it would blow over. In any case they didn't have to *be* there, that was the beauty ... of its being their second place' (Swift 2011: 318, original emphasis). Yet, for Clare, the epidemic will not 'blow over' – a wry reminder of the smoke of the pyres on which culled animals were burned – but might contaminate their retreat: she didn't like 'this thing happening so plainly and upsettingly close to their new property' (Swift 2011: 319). While for Clare, retreat is never wholly possible, as I explore in

the next section, Toby holds on to the image of the rural idyll and even sees the opportunities that agricultural epidemics provide people like them. As Jack learns when he sells the farm, Toby Robinson feels that 'this BSE business could only mean there might be some real bargains around' (Swift 2011: 313). This was certainly the case in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, but the influx of urbanites into the British countryside is much older than that. Howkins suggests that as early as the 1930s, large number of city dwellers were buying second homes in the countryside: 'the town was coming back to the countryside' (2003: 2). From the 1960s onwards especially, the arrival of townies or 'towns', as the protagonist of *God's Own Country* calls them, increasingly led to conflict. Ironically, while urbanites often moved to the countryside looking for a sense of community, it was precisely this community that many people living in the countryside felt was threatened by incomers (Howkins 2003: 179). In Wales, opposition to incomers was especially virulent: in the 1980s and early 1990s second homes were burned in Wales and locks of holiday cottages super-glued (Howkins 2003: 179). Protests such as those in Wales are characteristic of an epidemic market in which 'second home owners compete for the same housing stock as the permanent rural population' (Rye 2011: 265). Unlike endemic markets – such as in Scandinavian countries – where second home ownership is not seen as problematic, in the British countryside it leads to, and often exacerbates, inequalities. Moreover, as Johan Fredrik Rye notes, in an epidemic second home market where the 'second home population do not have thick, robust and long-lasting social relations to the permanent population of the rural communities, the second home phenomenon has the potential to destroy the qualities for both the visiting and the host populations' (2011: 265). The conflicts surrounding second homes illustrate the tension at the heart of pastoral, in which the experience of the retreat is shaped solely by those seeking it, without being willing to see the countryside for anything else.

Precisely such a development is sketched in *God's Own Country*, set on the Yorkshire Moors. While incomers are buying up farms, '[y]oung folk hadn't brass enough to buy houses here anymore, so they were sloping off, and all that left was the old-timers... This house hadn't left our family for near four generations, you know. As if the city folk gave a stuff for that. They were rubbing their hands waiting for the old-timers to clog it' (Raisin 2008: 31). While in all three novels characters are aware of the changing countryside,

Sam Marsdyke is most aggressive towards the influx of ‘ramblers’ and ‘towns’. Partly this has to do with Sam’s role as narrator, and the way in which the narrative’s exclusive focalization through him prevents full immersion in the rural idyll, as I explore in the next section on pastoral traces. Unlike in *August*, where the contrast between the narrative voice and the characters’ focalization ensures a complete picture of the countryside as seen by locals and by tourists, in *God’s Own Country* only Sam’s perspective is offered and the exclusive focalization leaves no room for the experiences of others. Hence, we only get the tourists’ opinions through Sam’s eyes, leading to a picture of the tourist experience that relies heavily on stereotypes of the countryside – stereotypes that Sam himself finds offensive. He is annoyed, for instance, by the way in which ramblers are too ‘respect-minded’: ‘they wouldn’t dare even look on myself for fear of crapping up Nature’s balance. The laws of the countryside. And me, I was real, living, farting Nature to their brain of things, part of the scenery same as a tree or a tractor’ (Raisin 2008: 1). Howkins suggests that the sense of entitlement that Sam believes many of the ramblers feel is an effect of laws and regulations that opened up the countryside to tourism: after the 1949 Access to the Countryside Act was passed, ‘the demand for a bit of the country, for a day out or longer holiday, has been ... a central fact of urban life’ (2003: 193). To the tourists and incomers, Sam imagines, the country is like ‘a Sunday garden ... wellingtons and four-by-fours and glishy magazines of horse arses jumping over a fence’ (Raisin 2008: 10). The result is a countryside that is becoming increasingly empty of permanent residents: as Sam notes, the houses are largely empty throughout the year, as the owners only come down during summer or Christmas holidays (Raisin 2008: 57). With many local business owners no longer willing or able to continue, the few pubs and stores near Sam’s farm are taken over by non-local companies that aim to cater to the incomers, rather than the local population. As Sam reads an advert for a new pub, it becomes clear that what the towns are looking for in the countryside is not the countryside per se, but the aesthetics of the countryside, the rural idyll that popular conceptions of pastoral enshrine: ‘*Coming soon – comfort and class in the perfect countryside setting, with traditional ales and a comprehensive wine list*’ (Raisin 2008: 42, original emphasis). People like his new neighbours, Sam decides, are ‘loopy’ for farmhouses, though not for the actual life but the ‘postcard view out of the bedroom window’ (Raisin 2008: 9). What they don’t

see is the reality of the countryside: the struggles of farmers like Sam's father, waiting on subsidies to come through, and the hard and often dirty work on the farm.

While *August*, *God's Own Country* and *Wish You Were Here* draw on the rural retreat and emphasize the extent to which outsiders' experience of the countryside relies wholly on retreat without return, all three novels achieve a sense of return nonetheless. By doing so, these postmillennial fictions demonstrate that popular pastoral, and a separation between retreat and return, is unfeasible and impossible at a time of climate crisis – if it was ever feasible at all. At the same time, they hereby demonstrate the usefulness of pastoral as a narrative for contemporary environmental circumstances: by drawing on both the retreat and return, the narrative taps into dominant, idealizing, perceptions of the countryside, while offering a corrective more in line with contemporary realities. Another way in which the novels achieve this is through the use of pastoral traces, the third dimension of the postmillennial pastoral narrative I explore in this chapter.

Pastoral traces

The Joneses' experience of the Welsh countryside relies largely on the traditional pastoral contrast between city and country, in their case London and Wales. In the most obvious sense, this dichotomy is implied in their vacation – a modern-day pastoral retreat away from ever-expanding London. The characters, particularly Aldous, even think in terms of the pastoral contrast: 'Aldous had come to believe that Llanygwynfa and Fernlight Avenue [their London home] were balanced around a common fulcrum, and that any change in the one might cause a similar change in the other. It was as though they were geographical twins, separated at birth, but still linked by a common geological ancestry' (Woodward 2001: 63). The connection between Wales and London is exemplified by several incidents that change both the Joneses and the farm: shortly after the family buy their first car, the Evanses build milking parlours, demonstrating how 'this unfolding of technology in [the family's] lives would cause a similar disruption in Llanygwynfa' (Woodward 2001: 65). Colette reasons the other way around and anticipates a change in London

because of the milking parlours at the farm: 'she imagined that something equally disruptive would happen at Fernlight Avenue, some old process, a way of doing things, would be changed beyond recognition' (Woodward 2001: 65). Indeed, while the Joneses are on holiday, they are notified that Colette's mother, who had been living with them, has died. This event brings death to the countryside, and illustrates the *et in arcadia ego* motif so central to what Marx terms the 'complex pastoral'.

The Joneses' focalized experience of pastoral relies heavily on the contrast between country and city, favouring the view of the country as idealized retreat. The novel achieves a more fruitful take on the pastoral dichotomy through its use of what I call traces, in which London and Wales are subtly interconnected. Pastoral traces are elements belonging to the retreat appearing in the city or society, and vice versa. In this respect, the term extends the *et in arcadia ego* motif in which death disturbs the retreat, as well as Marx's machine in the garden motif. Marx argues that the return to a less-than-ideal reality is inevitable, or, as he puts it, the machine – literally or figuratively – always enters the garden. Pastoral traces, however, also bring the country or retreat to the city. They illustrate the inextricability and interdependence of retreat and return, in line with contemporary circumstances in which the boundaries between retreat and return, the city and the country have become fluid. A similar blurring takes place in *Wish You Were Here* and *God's Own Country*: quite literally through the cattle diseases in the former novel, and the protagonist's mental illness in the latter.

In *August*, the first of these interconnections between London and Wales follows the burning down of the family tent in 1963. Rather than going back to London, the Evanses invite the Joneses to stay in one of the barns for the rest of their holiday. Soon, the barn – a quintessential symbol of the countryside – is filled with the family's possessions: 'The family had set about the domestication of the barn [and] [w]ithin a few days they'd established a living space that was a rough echo of their house in London' (Woodward 2001: 50). Of course, all forms of camping, no matter how primitive, are always a way of domesticating and culturing the countryside. This example, however, explicitly brings London to Wales: through the traces of their Fernlight Avenue house, the Joneses establish a pastoral contrast themselves. It is not the absence of London, but its presence – a trace – which creates the dichotomy.

The establishing of dualities by means of traces also works the other way around, as slowly the family's home in London is filled with references to Wales. A quite literal example in this respect are Aldous's paintings of Wales that he hangs all over the house: the picture of Moelfre near the television, and pictures of a waterfall and clouds (Woodward 2001: 236–237). He even uses one of his Welsh paintings to board up the broken door, which subsequently gives them a view not of suburban London but the Welsh hills: 'a view through trees of distant Welsh hills, the painting facing into the house, brown stippled hardboard facing the street' (Woodward 2001: 271). As Colette's addiction to bicycle glue progresses, camping life on the farm also invades their house in other ways as she reproduces 'the cuisine of the fields in the kitchen at Fernlight Avenue' (Woodward 2001: 204). Most extreme in this respect is an episode from 1968 in which Colette, high on bicycle glue and sleeping pills, hallucinates a farm in the living room:

she noticed animals, tiny little ones, moving slowly across the carpet. A flock of sheep, hardly bigger than white mice, and some kitten-sized cows were scattered about the floor, doing exactly what real sheep and cows do – very little. Some sheep were nibbling at the fibres of the carpet, one of the cows was licking its hind parts with its bird-like tongue, another was, with a raised tail, letting slip from its body a little fall of manure.

(Woodward 2001: 166)

Whereas in *August* pastoral traces are employed through a series of events that bring the city to the countryside and vice versa, in *Wish You Were Here* and *God's Own Country* pastoral traces form a much more extensive – and inherent – part of the novels' narratological structure. To an extent, *Wish You Were Here* is framed by war, and further bloodshed enters the idyll through BSE, foot-and-mouth and Michael Luxton's suicide. In *God's Own Country* narrative voice and focalization are the embodiment of *et in arcadia ego*, and through Sam's confused narration – and mental illness – the pastoral idyll is never wholly achieved. Instead, it is continually informed by the artificiality of retreat, and the necessity of return.

As I explored in the previous section, *Wish You Were Here* consists largely of flashbacks, told within a larger framework of Jack sitting on his bed on the Isle of Wight, holding a gun and contemplating suicide. In that respect,

the entire pastoral narrative of his farming life is not only framed by a shift in time, reaffirming the relation between the pastoral and the past, but also in terms of possible death. In other words, to the extent that the pastoral retreat in *Wish You Were Here* even exists, it is framed by (the thought of) death through which return enters the retreat. This framing is enforced by the novel's epigraph which as a paratext or extradiegetic device introduces one of the novel's central themes: the challenge to or destruction of the retreat. The epigraph to *Wish You Were Here* takes the final lines from William Blake's 'A Little Boy Lost': 'Are these things done on Albion's shore?'. The poem tells of a small boy who confesses to not being able to love anyone else more than he loves himself. An enraged priest subsequently punishes the child:

They stripped him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain,
And burned him in a holy place
Where many had been burned before;
The weeping parents wept in vain.
Are such thing done on Albion's shore?

(Blake 1794: ll. 15–20)

Like many of the poems in *Songs of Experience* (1794), 'A Little Boy Lost' deals with the hypocrisy of religion and the state, the failure of parents to protect their children and the corruption or loss of children. At first sight this context does not fit the context of *Wish You Were Here*: except in Jack's memories, there are no children in the novel, nor does religion play any considerable role. At most, the little boy lost could be Tom, Jack's younger brother, who runs away from home in his late teens and years later dies in Afghanistan. Much like the boy in Blake's poem, he too is sacrificed for a supposedly higher cause. The boy's inability to love someone more than himself in the poem may relate to Ellie's inability to overcome her jealousy of Tom and go to the repatriation ceremony and burial with Jack. Her refusal to join him causes a deep rift between the two and on the day of Jack's return leads to him contemplating suicide. Yet, the clearest connection between Blake's poem and Swift's novel is provided by the final line of the poem, the only line used in the epigraph.

Major Richards, the army representative who comes to talk to Jack and Ellie after Tom's death, reflects on his job of bringing bad news to families all over Britain. Such scenes of loss, he thinks, 'were proliferating and increasingly pockmarking the land' (Swift 2011: 96). Though not an exact repetition of Blake's poem, Major Richards's observation echoes and in a way answers the question posed at the end of the poem. Scenes of loss are indeed happening ever more frequently on Albion's shore. Moreover, although most people may not realize it on a day-to-day basis, the country is at war: 'This was peacetime in the middle of England. But there was a war on terror' (Swift 2011: 149). The narrator's explicit reference to 'the middle of England' – the heart of Englishness – echoes Blake's use of 'Albion' as the mythical name for England. While the scenes of loss that Major Richards has in mind are army casualties, his words are also applicable to the devastation caused by BSE and foot-and-mouth disease. Even more literally than the loss of soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, the mass culling and burning of cattle in the 1990s and 2001–2002 echo the scenes of punishment in 'A Little Boy Lost'. 'Are these things done on Albion's shore?', then, can be read both in relation to war and cattle disease. Both war and cattle disease frame the pastoral retreat in the novel, and remind the reader of the inevitability of pastoral return. Interestingly, the link between war and cattle disease is also made by Tom. Neither Jack and Ellie nor Tom experience the foot-and-mouth epidemic at first hand: by that time, Jack and Ellie have sold the farm and moved to the Isle of Wight and, like Tom, see footage of the burning pyres of cattle on TV. Tom soon realizes that it is a 'useful' image to remember, especially whenever he, in Iraq and Afghanistan, 'saw a belch of black smoke, after the explosion, rise up above the flat rooftops, over the palm trees' (Swift 2011: 197). The image turns out to be even more useful when Tom tries to get the image of the first casualty he sees, Willis, out of his mind: 'He'd got the picture of Willis out of his head by remembering that cow. Strange, it was just a cow on the telly. But then *they*, B company, were just pictures on the telly for most people back home' (Swift 2011: 199, original emphasis). The footage of cattle becomes his go-to image whenever Tom tries to get the things he sees – wounded, dying or dead people – out of his head. When he dies himself, his last thoughts are of cattle as well, though not of the cow disease, but rather of lying in Barton Field as a child, hearing a sound he hasn't heard for years: 'It was the unmistakable, steady "tchch ... tchch ...

tchch” of browsing cattle, the slow, soft rip of cows’ mouths tearing up grass. It was the most soothing sound in the world’ (Swift 2011: 209). At his moment of death, the pastoral retreat enters the horrors of war – a reversal of the usual pastoral trace of return entering the retreat.

Tom’s death provides a quite literal *et in arcadia ego* for the Robinsons, especially Clare Robinson. The letter announcing it is initially delivered to Jebb farm. Although Clare immediately sends the letter on to the Isle of Wight, she feels uneasy about the news it might bear. Her forebodings are confirmed when, a few days later, she reads a short report in the local newspaper about Tom Luxton’s death. Toby’s had an affair for years. Clare’s knowledge of this affair is another way in which the less-than-idyllic world enters the retreat, exemplifying the *et in arcadia ego* motif in the novel. At Jebb, Clare tries to forget that ‘her marriage was really a rather flimsy, unlovely affair’, especially now that she’s been given ‘the bribe of this handsomely refurbished farmhouse in its splendid setting’ (Swift 2011: 309). Yet, even though she believes that Jebb has ‘a healing effect’ on her and the family as a whole, she can never wholly forget about the affair, or about Tom’s death. Another thing that disturbs her and keeps her from wholly immersing herself in the pastoral retreat of Jebb is the old oak near the farmhouse. She has the feeling that there’s something sinister about it. Although she never finds out, the tree is the clearest and most permanent symbol of death entering the idyll, as it is against this tree that Michael Luxton shot himself. The mysterious hole in its trunk is where the bullet exited Michael’s head.

While a disturbance of the aesthetic landscape, death is an inherent part of the farming landscape. In *God’s Own Country* Sam notes a dead rabbit on the moors (Raisin 2008: 4), recounts the dangers that young puppies face from bigger animals or birds of prey (Raisin 2008: 6) and assists in the birth of a dead lamb (Raisin 2008: 114). In winter, the sheep on the farm run the risk of dying from pneumonia, especially if they aren’t taken in on time (Raisin 2008: 123). Sam himself participates in the rural *et in arcadia ego* as well when he kills a chicken belonging to one of his neighbours. He knows that the fox stalking the farms will be blamed for this – a fox that he explicitly identifies with: ‘Real vermin, you and me, skulking around in the dark, eh?’ (Raisin 2008: 21). The connection between the countryside and war that is created in *Wish You Were Here* through Tom Luxton is also made in *God’s Own Country*. On the moors, Sam sees the military installation at Fylingdales in the distance.

He thinks it being there is ridiculous: 'What did they think – there was going to be a war? The Battle of the Farmers and the Off-comed-ones' (Raisin 2008: 177). His comments on Fylingdales emphasize the pastoral trace of return in the retreat of the countryside, yet he also tries to negate this by making the possibility of actual war in the countryside sound ridiculous. Installations such as Fylingdales quite literally bring war to the countryside – and, as such, also introduce return into the retreat. As Rachel Woodward notes, '[r]ural areas provide the location and backdrop to most [military] training' (Woodward 2000: 646). The invasion of return into the retreat, through warfare or otherwise, shows the countryside as 'certainly not the rural idyll of community and nature in harmony' (Woodward 2000: 648).

Yet, the most significant means by which return enters the rural retreat in *God's Own Country* is through Sam himself, a mentally unstable and potentially unreliable narrator. Expelled from school for supposedly assaulting a girl, he now spends his time on his father's farm. From the beginning, Sam is presented as troubled, cynical and quick to believe that others think poorly of him. His attempt to befriend the new neighbours – incomers recently moved into a former farmhouse – fails when he forgets to check the mushrooms he picks for them for maggots. Nonetheless, he ends up befriendng the neighbours' teenage daughter Jo, and when she wants to run away from home, he goes with her. As the story of their journey across the moors continues, however, it becomes increasingly uncertain whether Jo really wants to go along with Sam. For the reader it is difficult to gauge what and how much happens against Jo's will: the novel is exclusively narrated through Sam, who does not seem to have the ability to imagine Jo's feelings, either because he cannot, or because he doesn't want to. After Jo has tried to run away from him, Sam catches up with her and ties her up – for her own good, he says. To the reader, Sam's interpretation of this event is clear evidence that he is mentally unstable. It makes the entire narrative and his account of the events that came before suspect. Their journey ends in Whitby, where Sam hides himself and Jo with the idea that they will be able to catch a ship to America. Even then he seems unaware of what is really happening and instead remarks on the pleasant location – a damp cave – and the 'postcard' view it offers (Raisin 2008: 181). The final, brief, part of the novel is set four years later, when Sam is about to be released from prison, having served a sentence for holding Jo against her will.

Sam is a typical unreliable narrator – even though the reader may not understand the extent to which he is unreliable until at least halfway through the novel. Indeed, for a long time, the reader may be tempted to give Sam the benefit of the doubt: his description of the supposed assault that has him expelled from school, for instance, might make the reader believe that it was not so much assault, but at least initially desired by the girl. The novel's exclusive narration through Sam also affects the pastoral dimension. Specifically, I want to argue, Sam's unreliable narration provides a return to the pastoral retreat created by the incomers' and rambler's experience of the landscape. Unreliable narration in *God's Own Country*, then, functions as a pastoral trace on the narratological level, exemplifying the inevitable return from the retreat that can never be avoided. In coining the concept of the unreliable narrator Wayne Booth proposed that a narrator is reliable 'when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), *unreliable* when he does not' (1961: 158–159, original emphasis). Some critics of Booth's concept have argued that his suggestion that unreliable narration is a product of a clash between narration and the implied author relies on the belief that the author has the same beliefs as the reader. As Ansgar Nünning argues, '[a] pederast would not find anything wrong with Nabokov's *Lolita*' (1999: 61). Yet, while Nünning suggests that attributing unreliability depends on text reception, he also argues that certain textual markers signal unreliability, which makes his theory problematic, as Greta Olson argues (2003: 97). Olson instead suggests a distinction between fallible narrators and untrustworthy narrators. In the former case, 'external circumstances appear to cause the narrator's misperceptions rather than inherent characteristics' (2003: 102); in the case of the latter, '[t]he inconsistencies these narrators demonstrate appear to be caused by ingrained behavioral traits or some current self-interest' (2003: 102).¹⁹

Sam is an example of what Olson terms 'an untrustworthy narrator': he seems to suffer from some sort of mental illness that makes him unable to interpret signs and, importantly, makes him seemingly insensitive to the feelings of others. He is simply incapable of interpreting or understanding situations as they are. At the same time, the reader can never be certain of this as the novel provides little to no distance between the experiencing-I and the narrating-I. No evidence is provided that the account of running away with Jo

is related at a much later time than the actual act of running away took place, which would allow Sam to reflect on his actions and potentially reinterpret them. This also means that we get no evidence of whether Sam is really mentally confused and unaware of the ethical implications of his actions, or whether he is deliberately malicious, and hides it in the narrative. If the latter is the case, although nothing in the narrative points towards this, the story of the months leading up to Sam's eventual arrest could function as a way for him to retrospectively make his actions seem better. Either way, the reader is left having to reinterpret the narrative when it becomes obvious that Sam is an unreliable narrator. The process of coming to terms with unreliable narration in *God's Own Country* hence functions as a pastoral movement in its own right. In the passages where Sam draws on stereotypical idealized images of the countryside when he imagines the incomers' and rambles' perceptions, a retreat is suggested. When the reader becomes aware of Sam's unreliability, any retreat becomes impossible. In other words, by forcing the reader to question everything Sam says – including his descriptions of the landscape – the reader is prevented from being wholly immersed in the novel, as well as any pastoral retreat it might offer.

In using the pastoral narrative, the three postmillennial novels explored in this chapter go back to the traditional movement of retreat and return and thereby present a pastoral much more in line with, and applicable to, contemporary environmental circumstances. The pastoral as presented in these novels nowhere relies solely on problematic idealization, and instead combines the image of the rural or pastoral retreat that dominates so many contemporary discourses of nature with an all-pervasive awareness of environmental realities, including the state of the countryside in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That the necessity of return cannot be avoided shows especially in the narratives' use of pastoral traces in which return consistently invades the retreat, and the other way around. In addition to the literal, physical landscapes depicted in *August*, *Wish You Were Here* and *God's Own Country*, the pastoral narrative in these novels also functions as a kind of middle landscape in itself. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx suggests that the pastoral landscape is a

landscape in between the city and the wilderness. In order to be truly pastoral a space has to be neither too wild not too civilized, safe from the possible dangers of nature, as well as the corruption of the city. In a contemporary setting, in which awareness of nature is necessarily shaped by climate crisis, the pastoral narrative also functions as a middle space in between problematic idealization and despair. Indeed, the concept of the pastoral middle space offers a particularly productive way of thinking through contemporary climate crisis, as does the concept of pastoral traces. Widespread cultural awareness of contemporary environmental circumstances functions as a trace on our perceptions of nature that can never be untainted by crisis. At the same time, problematic though it may be, the idea of the pastoral retreat frequently underlies popular discourses of climate crisis. Depictions of the loss of species and environments are so poignant because underlying them is the belief in an ideal, spatially and temporally remote place of 'pure' nature. Seen through the lens of pastoral, environmental rhetoric is also indebted to Williams's pastoral escalator, in which the pastoral retreat is located ever further into the past. Consequently the destruction of the retreat and the loss of the idyll are popularly located with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, or the Agricultural Revolution, or even the Cognitive Revolution between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago.

As a middle space between idealization and despair, the pastoral narrative straddles our conflicting emotions and perceptions of nature. It also embodies the variety of nature experiences that may exist at the same time: for the same person, nature might offer seemingly untainted enjoyment of a space relatively devoid of human influence while it is under threat. Rather than a narrative that is outdated and problematic, then, the pastoral narrative embodies the tensions that are central to the twenty-first century and a time of climate crisis. Far from being outdated or in need of replacement, the pastoral narrative lends itself well to the twenty-first century and to the human desire for nature, albeit a desire tempered by knowledge of crisis.