



# What Else Is Pastoral?: Renaissance Literature and the Environment

*Ken Hiltner*

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Pastoral was one of the most popular literary forms of early modern England. Inspired by classical and Italian Renaissance antecedents, writers from Ben Jonson to John Beaumont and Abraham Cowley wrote in idealized terms about the English countryside. It is often argued that the Renaissance pastoral was a highly figurative mode of writing that had more to do with culture and politics than with the actual countryside of England. For decades now literary criticism has had it that in pastoral verse, hills and crags and moors were extolled for their metaphoric worth, rather than for their own qualities. In *What Else Is Pastoral?* Ken Hiltner takes a fresh look at pastoral, offering an environmentally minded reading that reconnects the poems with literal landscapes, not just figurative ones. Considering the pastoral in literature from Virgil and Petrarch to Jonson and Milton, Hiltner proposes a new ecocritical approach to these texts. We only become truly aware of our environment, he explains, when its survival is threatened. As London expanded rapidly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the city and surrounding rural landscapes began to look markedly different. Hiltner finds that Renaissance writers were acutely aware that the countryside they had known was being lost to air pollution, deforestation, and changing patterns of land use; their works suggest this new absence of nature through their appreciation for the scraps that remained in memory or in fact. A much-needed corrective to the prevailing interpretation of pastoral poetry, *What Else Is Pastoral?* shows the value of reading literature with an ecological eye.

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