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The Pastoral in the Anthropocene



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by Pierre-Élie Pichot



Abstract

Since the pastoral is no longer practiced as a classical poetic genre, several recent French poetic publications have offered updated revisions of this notion. An essay by Jean-Claude Pinson establishes the pastoral as the deep mission of poetry: it is the everlasting voice of Nature, whatever this concept refers to. Meanwhile, this essay argues, the poetic writings of Pierre Vinclair and Olivier Domerg develop a more complex vision of the pastoral through a coherent net of allusions to the genre. Specifically, Vinclair suspects that the pastoral tradition might exaggerate the poet's innocence, which he considers contrary to the ecological necessity of a wild poetry. Domerg, the essay shows, regenerates the pastoral by locating the ecological lyric inside the subject's gaze towards the pastoral landscape, which he cuts in new poetic forms in order to find the source of pastoral and georgic inspirations. The essay will demonstrate that the selected works of these poets prove the survival of the pastoral in contemporary literature; but unlike Pinson's theory, this poetic practice maintains a critical distance, echoing the second-wave ecocriticism, from any faith in the powers of action of the pastoral tradition.

Keywords: French poetry, ecocriticism, ecology, nature, pastoral, poetics



About the Author

Pierre-Élie Pichot defended in 2020 a thesis in French literature titled "Vulcain et les Muses", which offers a new interpretation of the descriptions of craftsmen in Renaissance poetry in the light of recent progress in the history of technology. His research on Renaissance and contemporary literature is situated at the intersection of materialist criticism and ecocriticism.

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Pierre-Élie Pichot

In twenty-first century French artistic production before 2020, the pastoral seemed to be a primarily musical genre. A 2006 opera by Gérard Pesson was entitled *Pastorale*: its libretto, in some regards a critique of the entertainment industry, was co-written by two musicologists-poets, Philippe Beck and Martin Kaltenecker, who conducted a musicological survey of the pastoral's ecological dimension. More recently, the *Beethoven Pastoral Project*, scheduled for 2020, aimed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of composer Ludwig van Beethoven, inviting artists to develop their own visions of a harmonious co-existence of mankind and nature along with their performance of the Pastoral Symphony. Supported by figures such as the Secretary General of the United Nations António Guterres, the writer Patti Smith, and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Mohammad Yunus, the project resulted in a set of concerts in France, such as "Pastoral for the Planet," set to take place on June 5, 2020 at the Grand Théâtre de Provence. In the same year, the pastoral returned to its original conceptual field, poetry—both its practice and its theory. Several French poets concurrently explored the pastoral—here referring to certain features of poetry rather than to a specific genre, mode, or tone. This essay will examine three examples demonstrating a broadening of the pastoral in contemporary French literature: the works of Jean-Claude Pinson, Pierre Vinclair, and Olivier Domerg. Although the theory claims the pastoral is everywhere in the poem, practice refers to the pastoral tradition in the form of a complex net of details, in order to enlarge its boundaries, aiming to incorporate in pastoral poems other ancient models such as the georgic, or Gifford's post-pastoral. As a consequence, while Pinson's

theory brings forth into the French poetics some of the core points of first-wave ecocriticism—widely ignored, at the time, in French Academia—Vinclair and Domerg rather seem influenced by the increasing complexity of the distinction between nature and culture, rather typical of second-wave ecocriticism.

Jean-Claude Pinson: Pastoral as a Mission

In his theoretical essay *Pastoral: de la poésie comme écologie* (2020), Pinson redefines the pastoral as an ecological mission for poetry. Specifically, for Pinson, the pastoral represents the universal expression of a possible poetic (or poethic) way of life (2020, 92). The pastoral, he argues, is not a simple literary genre, a “constructed beauty . . . as the axiom of the human sciences unduly wants it to be”¹ (2020, 128), but rather an organic tonality, arisen from life itself, an “echo to this rumor of high tide and high voltage that Phusis will continue to make hear when no human ear will be there any more to perceive it” (2020, 172). The pastoral thus appears as the human translation of something bigger than humanity, be it “Phusis,” “*Natura naturans*,” or Gaïa.

Based on a wide range of the possible conceptions of nature and the natural, as well as acknowledging the difficulty of precisely pinpointing the pastoral tone, Pinson’s definition does not correspond exactly to any of the three understandings of “pastoral” provided by Terry Gifford (2001, 1–3). While, in Pinson’s view, pastoral is broader than the idea of a literary genre dedicated to dialogue between shepherds (first definition by Gifford), it is not, however, a poetic description of the countryside as opposed to the urban world (the second “traditional” definition). Pinson’s take on the pastoral, in fact, draws nearer to what Gifford describes as naïve, idealizing the unpleasant realities of peasant life (the third definition). However, in Pinson’s essay, in contrast to Gifford, the pastoral’s naïvety is accepted as inevitable.

In explaining the pastoral mission, Pinson quotes Christian Prigent’s essay *Penser Sade* (2004). Prigent, a French poet, mocks the lyric celebrations of the “*noces à âme perdue avec maman Nature*” (“the lost soul’s marriage to Mother Nature”), while criticizing this evocation of naïve inspiration from nature as lacking maturity. However, according to Pinson, even Prigent is committed to the pastoral mission, for example in his collection *Les Amours Chino* (2013), a “*contre-pastorale*” that preserves traditional pastoral lexicon and ornamentation (Pinson 2020, 56–58).

In any poetry, Pinson argues, the pastoral voice can be heard, be it lyrical or not, even as satire, insofar as the poetic genre could be defined as the voice of an enigmatic totality transcending humankind—a totality which, ultimately, proves to be nature itself. One

can obviously link this thesis to the first-wave ecocriticism (developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century), whose primary concern was to have literature speak for nature, in a political perspective (Buell 1995, 11).

As an accurate model for the ecological pastoral he identifies, Pinson refers to, among others, Pierre Vinclair's collection *La Sauvagerie*, published in June 2020, together with the essay *Agir non agir: Éléments pour une poésie de la résistance écologique*. However, Vinclair's work shows a more complex relationship to nature and pastoral.

Pierre Vinclair and Paradoxical Wild Pastoral

Vinclair's poetic essay does not advocate for a pastoral poetry. "It's not a question of me pretending to be a pastoral poet," he claims (Vinclair 2020b, 40). Admittedly, having grown up in the Cantal region of France, in the middle of a hilly countryside, Pierre Vinclair is, by his own admission, a "native of the pastoral" (2020b, 40); however, he is also known for having taught for a decade in Japan, Shanghai, and Singapore, before returning to Europe. His travels led him to question the alleged universality of the pastoral voice. The critic David Farrier, who also lived in Shanghai in 2019, observes in *Anthropocene Poetics* that "despite Singapore's pastoral pretensions (greenery is everywhere, even decorating the sides of office and apartment buildings), it is one of the most urbanized places on the planet" (2019, 126). This consideration resonates with Vinclair's vision of the pastoral: according to Vinclair, by definition, poetry is *wild*, that is, poetry "owes to its own nature (and not to decisions depending on ideas) the way it has constituted itself" (2020b, 24). Too human, and too planned, pastoral therefore cannot be considered by Vinclair as an effective ecological poetics.

Through his poems, Vinclair responds to Matthew Griffith's question in *New Poetics of Climate Change*, "must poetry about climate change belong in the tradition of the pastoral or the elegy?" (2008, 4). At first glance, indeed, the poems Vinclair publishes alongside this essay are elegiac rather than pastoral. However, *La Sauvagerie* could still be inscribed within the scope of what Gifford calls the "post-pastoral" (2001, 149–74), that is, a pastoral that troubles the distinction between nature and culture². As a matter of fact, Vinclair makes it clear, sometimes very vividly, that he does not want his verses to embody any kind of idealized nature.

In his *dizain* 440, dedicated to Jean-Claude Pinson, Pierre Vinclair responds to a reproach made to his verses in unspecified circumstances: his collection would lack the "exotic verbs" biologists use to describe the songs of birds and the animal calls. The poem develops an offensive excuse (Vinclair 2020a, 292):

Mon poème naît dans le béton, connaît
 machines, croit bêtes et plantes sauvages
 comme lui échappant aux taxinomies
 niant les trompe-l'œil, méprisant les fétiches
 pleurant sans conjurer les disparitions –
 la pastorale leur est interdite.³

Responding to Pinson's theory of pastoral, Pierre Vinclair distinguishes between a naïve version of pastoral, "fetishizing" verbs and names, and a pastoral (his own, one could argue) which does not pretend to ignore the "concrete" artificialization of the world and the effectiveness of mass extinction. Pastoral is "forbidden" to extinctions, as if it were in a sense immoral to keep pretending to know and love extinct birds and extinct words formerly used to describe them. This does not mean, however, that pastoral is lacking in his verses.

The very structure of the collection *La Sauvagerie* derives from a Renaissance pastoral work, Maurice Scève's *Délie* (1544), which, in its turn, takes the name—*Délie* (*Delia*)—of a shepherdess appearing in Virgil's third eclogue. Just as the *Délie* is composed of 449 decasyllabic poems (or *dizains*), *La Sauvagerie* is made of 499 *dizains*, mostly by Vinclair himself, and also a few by some of his poet friends. What does sixteenth century pastoral poetry mean for Pierre Vinclair? According to some narratives found in Capitalocene theory, including the work of Jason W. Moore, the Renaissance could be considered its starting point: "the rise of capitalism after 1450 marked a turning point in the history of humanity's relation with the rest of nature. It was greater than any watershed since the rise of agriculture and the first cities. And in relational terms, it was even *greater than the rise of the steam engine*" (Moore 2016, 96, emphasis in original).⁴ Ecocriticism has sometimes linked this emergence of capitalism to Renaissance debates evolving around the nature-culture distinction. As Ken Hiltner suggests, from the Renaissance onwards, early-modern England was "in the throes of what can only be described as a 'modern' environmental crisis, which engendered a number of contemporary debates, some of which address issues of environmental justice that informed (and were informed by) both canonical and noncanonical literature" (2011, 4). As a consequence, he argues, "Renaissance pastoral, in addition to sometimes being a figurative mode masking political controversy, is also frequently concerned with literal landscapes, even though it does little to describe them" (2011, 4). This consideration resonates with Vinclair's collection and with his use of the pastoral, still appearing but in a diffuse way. In contrast

to the lyrical romantic pastoral, Vincclair's pastoral retains the playfulness of the ancient eclogue, without losing its ecological and political relevance.

La Sauvagerie represents an attempt to become a framed repository of wild lifestyles, in the sense of a collection of forms of life, as a sort of literary zoo. In the second section of the collection, the author dedicates a poem to the hundred most endangered wild species in the world, including the hirola, the forest coconut or the Pangasid catfish. However, cows and other domesticated animals occupy the first 14 poems of the collection. The presence of cows can be interpreted as the industrial equivalent of the sheep in bucolic poetry, as is shown by the last anti-pastoral lines of the first *dizain* of the book:

... sur des pelouses
broutées les quadrupèdes pétaient entre les tombes
fleuries; puis vinrent l'explosion d'autres bombes
aux moteurs rugissant jusqu'aux parkings, les ice-
bergs fondirent, des îles plastiques dérivèrent
sous un smog de spams, selfies et poèmes. (2020a, 13)⁵

The emphasis on the cow's flatulence evokes a particular ecological discussion about the fact that the methane emission of cows represents a significant share of responsibility for global warming.⁶ Even before the industrial revolution, Vincclair suggests, pastoral already conveyed the environment's finitude: the combination of graves and farts express a pessimistic (if comic) melancholy, as does the imagery of the fourth decastich: "*peut- / être que vivre détruit, la vache! (seconde hypo / thèse: tout ce qu'on aime, on le saccage*" ("It may / be that living destroys, [the] holy cow! (second hypo / thesis: everything we love, we vandalize," 15). All this suggests a somewhat ironic distance from a literal imitation of the pastoral tradition.

In *dizain* 334, the pastoral shepherdess "Délie" appears at the end of a section in which the poem mocks what is described as a useless scientific operation. Vincclair uses the ice cores taken by the geologist Claude Lorius in "Terre Adélie," as a pretext to create a nice echo of the name "Délie." Terre Adélie thus becomes the promised land of pastoral:

... Terre A
délie, Délie! Arcadie! écrin, depuis le m-
onde ancien, pas des plus beaux poèmes: de
l'évolution de la température,

du taux de gaz à effet de serre, en-
fin, de l’empreinte humaine sur la nature. (2020a, 235)⁷

The classic pastoral utopian location—Arcadia—is marked by the history of greenhouse gases. The exclamation: “*pas des plus beaux poèmes!*” is highly ambiguous: it can be understood as “*pas de plus beau poème*” (“there is no more beautiful poem than this one”), but also, because of the plural form, as “*ce n’est pas un des plus beaux poèmes*” (“it’s not one of the most beautiful poems”). Moreover, the pre-human atmosphere is described as an apocalyptic one, where the “*fin*” is mixed with the relieving “*enfin*,” thus appearing as an elaboration of the pastoral that runs the risk of becoming misanthropic or cynical.

Yet Vinclair does, in fact, imitate and follow pastoral trails and contemporary pastoral authors. For example, the epigraph to part IV is taken from Jay Griffiths’ *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, while *dizain* 291 is written “after Jay Griffiths”: this choice suggests how one will never be done with “imitating dead poets” (Griffith 2008, 212). The English version of *dizain* 260 is presented as an endnote which describes the collection:

Like a 5-limb lamb running iambic
As you can see, everything here’s clumsy;
Fat rhymes, rough meter, primary school technique:
Surrender the snobbism, take it easy . . . (2020a, 191)

In ancient poetry, the “low” rustic style characterized the pastoral genre; the poem under examination here recalls this since the “meter” is as “rough” as pastoral characters are supposed to be. The *dizain* thus mixes the simplicity of shepherds with contemporary issues. In the classical prosody, the iamb, a metrical foot consisting of a short syllable followed by a long syllable, is associated with satire rather than with the pastoral. In the poem, the sonic proximity between the terms “iamb(ic)” and “lamb” deliberately blurs the boundary between the satirical and the pastoral, forming a kind of satirical and wild dialogue opposed both to good manners and high style.

This mix is at the core of the poet’s inspiration. *Dizain* 403, which opens the ninth section of the collection, proposes a rather unexpected link between two images: the hermit’s beard and the fleece of a sheep. This poem, unlike many others in the collection, possesses a title, “*Laine sauvage*” (“Wild wool.” 2020a, 273). The poem forms an assemblage of different pastoral discourses, which is especially apparent when a quotation from John Muir emerges:

Barbe blanche *laine sauvage*
fi bres té

nues comme les fi ls de la vie
rge John caresse un mouton sauvage
«mouflon mouflon—ne vois-tu
rien venir? » l'homme, la guerre
wild wool was
not made for ma
n either was
poetry —or? (2020a, 273)⁸

In the deliberate confusion between white beard and sheep's fleece, a pastoral figure takes shape. Could the pastoral then be as paradoxically "wild" as the "wild wool," and, therefore, differ from the image of the cow presented at the beginning of the collection? I would argue that, rather than an image of peaceful harmony, the combination of the two types of gnarled materials willingly mixes and confuses the verses, in order to make the pastoral a knotty topic. The satirical use of "*fi*,"⁹ though outdated, still distills a hint of disdain within the "*fi bres*" and the "*fi ls*."

Verses three to five describe the liberation of an innocent shepherd; but a tragic memory creeps into the virginal, Christ-like whiteness presented at the beginning of the poem. Indeed, the shepherd's "white beard" evokes the tale of "Bluebeard," in which an overly curious woman hopes that her brothers save her from her cruel husband Bluebeard, who is determined to cut off her head. In the canonical version of the tale by Charles Perrault, the following dialogue occurs: "*—Anne, ma sœur Anne, ne vois-tu rien venir? —Je vois, répondit la sœur Anne, une grosse poussière qui vient de ce côté-ci. —Sont-ce mes frères? —Hélas! non, ma sœur, c'est un troupeau de moutons . . .*" ("*—Anne, my sister Anne, don't you see anything coming? —I see, replied Sister Anne, a big dust coming from this side. —Are they my brothers? —Alas! no, my sister, it is a flock of sheep . . .*" [1697, 76]). The pastoral reference is, in Charles Perrault's text, a bad omen, a diversion which delays the help.

In Vinclair's poem, a "mouflon" is mentioned instead of a "sheep": in this sense, a domestic animal becomes wild. Unraveled, disarticulated, and much crueler than "sister Anne," the mouflon seems to be uninterested in the fate of humanity, in mortal danger. The wool of the mouflon, indeed, is "not made for ma/n," contrary to the fleece of the sheep, traditionally used for producing wool. The enjambment created by the letter "n" echoes Christian Prigent's expression "Mother Nature," thus suggesting that the wild wool, which becomes a metonymy for savagery, is "not made for ma [mother]," and therefore has nothing to do with an idealized Mother Nature. The poet thus evokes here

the thesis of one of the oldest American conservationists, John Muir: in an article from which to Pierre Vinclair takes the title of the poem under discussion here, “Wild Wool” (1875), he stated: “wild wool was not made for man but for sheep” (2015, 160). John Muir’s journeys across the Yosemite Valley is the topic of the following poems in Vinclair’s collection. Muir devoted part of his life to the preservation of spaces threatened by the creation of pastures for sustaining livestock. The initial equivalence between “white beard” and “wild wool” is then challenged, since the *bearded* John Muir has always opposed the pastoral exploitation of wool.¹⁰ Therefore, both strict opposition between wilderness and the pastoral scenery, and any equivalence between them (as expressed at the beginning of the poem) might be too simplistic. Akin to Muir, Vinclair here mourns the fatal invention that Timothy Morton, in *Dark Ecology*, calls *agrilogistics* (2016, 42). According to Morton, this “specific logistics of agriculture that arose in the Fertile Crescent and that is still plowing ahead,” “toxic to humans from the beginning” (2016, 42), is ultimately accountable for the ecologic crisis. *Agri-logistics* is not only a technology but also a metaphysical way of thinking, considering human life, regardless of its natural qualities, as a unique and different kind of existence. Morton opposes to *agrilogistics* his concept of *ecognosis* (2016, 158), the idea of considering “the structure of thought as nonhuman” and “uncanny”—Vincclair would say: wild. Could pastoral help this *ecognosis* occur in the reader’s mind?

It seems at first that Vincclair is skeptical on the question. Following the footsteps of Muir in the Yosemite Valley, Vincclair tells the reader about a “wilderness experience” that proves strongly disappointing due to the fact that it is full of tourists and other elements signaling the presence of capitalism (2020a, 282). But in the last lines of this micro-narrative, the poet gives ambiguous hope. Indeed, the traveler-turned-tourist finally finds himself “*nez à nez / avec un ours hirsute dont la patte / griffait un tronc pourri, ayant trouvé / des vers tout prêts comme un mauvais poète*” (“face to face / with a shaggy bear whose paw / clawed a rotten trunk, having found / ready-made verses like a bad poet”: 2020a, 282), which suggests that the poet is eventually content to experience the wilderness as it unfolds in front of him. The pastoral poem, though highly unsatisfying and suspect, constitutes perhaps the only poetic space in which Vincclair can still encounter the wild *ecognosis* he longs for.

Olivier Domerg: The Pastoral or the Impossible Taming of the Landscape

In poems 146 to 166, Vincclair celebrates the Cantal region where he grew up. His childhood memories answer to a *dizain* by Olivier Domerg, entitled “*La verte traVER(T)Sée*

(de Saint-Flour à Murat, et au-delà . . .).” The typographical effects allow the reader to perceive the words “*vert*” (“green”) of the mountainous landscape, “*versant*” (“slope”) of the mountain, and “*traverse*” (“crossing”), setting a pastoral scene.

“*La verte traVER(T)Sée* (de Saint-Flour à Murat, et au-delà . . .)” is also part of the collection *Le Manuscrit*, published in April 2021, which includes songs and prose. It is a series of fifteen poetic episodes originally published between 2018 and 2020 in the online poetry journal *Catastrophes*, co-founded by Vincclair. Its starting point is the description of a mountain in the Hautes-Alpes, the Puy de Manse, which also appears in the title of this collection. “*Manuscrit*,” meanwhile, may be interpreted as a blending between the words “manuscript” and “Sanskrit.” Reading several sections of this collection, the reader accompanies the poet along the slopes surrounding this mountain: this journey occurs through several precisely dated accounts. Over the course of the series, the poet walks further and further, until it ends, on 14 and 15 of February–March 2020 and then April–May 2020, on the tip of mount Saint-Philippe. In the fourteenth episode, the poet casts his glance at the valleys surrounding the peaks:

Dix heures, ce matin. Chorale de bêlements, en contrebas, dans les corrals de Lachaup. Il fait plus frais qu’hier. La plaine se réveille sous le soleil et les cris des bêtes qui montent, s’interpellent, se chevauchent, se concertent. On approche du point de vue qui a motivé notre retour: la face du Puy accrochant la lumière, au lever. Longeant les premiers contreforts de Coste Longue qu’on suivra cette fois jusqu’au bout (puisqu’elle offre un balcon longitudinal sur la cuvette et le motif qui nous amènent), nous réalisons, à propos de la plaine, fidèles en cela à la perception que nous en avons, qu’on peut encore parler de «mosaïque» (bêlante?) et de «sensation de matière» pleinement ressentie; comme lors de cette exposition tactile au Musée sur les différents types de laines existantes, qu’une disposition ingénieuse permettaient de toucher, soulever, palper, avant de reposer. (February–March 2020, 24)¹¹

Far from the “Bellante” tiles that can be bought in any DIY store, the mountain villages form a “bêlante” (“bleating”) mosaic: an ironic play on words (“mosaïque bêlante”) expresses the distance between these two worlds, which seem to have little in common. However, the cutting of the “Bellante” tile can also serve as a poetic model, a fitting comparison with the selection of point of view in the depiction of the Puy de Manse: “*Manse, dans le mince carreau aux bords blancs, / À travers les branches de l’arbre fruitier*” (“Manse, in the thin tile with white edges, / Through the branches of the fruit tree”: February–March 2020, 25). The tile can be read as the metaphor for the process of shaping the gaze of the walker into a photographic “square.” Throughout his walk, Domerg engages in both geometrical and phenomenological description of the landscape. A regional

“Museum” is described there as enhancing the local heritage by making people experience the touch of wool, an opportunity which had not occurred since the disappearances of shepherds in the surrounding mountains. This touch serves as a “Muse” for Domerg, and inspires him to describe the tactile feeling experienced by the shepherd.

In this lyrical episode, the pastoral is the result of a voluntary framing, a kind of geometric drawing that the poet forms by defining the subject of his depiction, thus trying to frame some kind of human order in the middle of the “*chorale de bêlements*” (“bleating choir”): this form also evokes the “*corrals*,” the cattle pens in the agro-pastoral landscape. The poem is not pastoral in the stricter sense, but it picks out and connects certain aspects of the pastoral. Considering its somewhat more historical approach of the mountain, Domerg’s poem includes with its pastoral depictions some practical elements of shepherding, thus including into the pastoral what Michael Ziser would identify as the “georgic mode” (2004, 186). In Ziser’s words, “the georgic asks not *whether* language can successfully jump up from a real original to an imitation, but *how* it can jump down from abstraction and land with a degree of efficacy upon some object in the world, becoming not just a mirror of nature or a lamp, but something more akin to a hoe or a shovel or a seed drill ‘of nature’” (2013, 183). Celebrating the material display of wools inside the museum, allowing visitors to “touch, lift, feel” the fabric, Domerg expresses his own poetics, far below the level of abstraction of Vincclair’s philosophical reasonings.

However, the “georgic mode” is only a part of Domerg’s plentiful pastoral mosaic. In the fifteenth and final episode of April–May 2020, Domerg jumps from one agricultural plot to another in the course of his hike, as if in the middle of a giant hopscotch game: “*Le jeu est de passer d’une parcelle à l’autre. Le but, de réunir les fragments, de recoller les morceaux*” (“The game is to move from one plot to another. The goal is to reunite the fragments, to put the pieces back together.” April–May 2020, 59). It takes the next five pages to achieve this, without any rush, because the operation is not without any risk: “*De l’herbeux au verbeux, vous cherchez le bon mélange*” (“From the grassy to the verbose, you are looking for the right mixture” April–May 2020, 59). The last section asks about the main subject of the collection: “*Que prêcher alors sur la montagne? Une ode aux vaches et aux moutons? Un éloge du brin d’herbe, de la cime herbue, de la touffe intemporelle? Un discours du fragMONT à mouron?*” (“What should we preach on the mountain then? An ode to cows and sheep? In praise of the blade of grass, of the grassy peak, of the timeless tuft? A speech of the fragMOUNT with pimperlins?”: April–May 2020, 62). The answer to this question can be found when considering the particular shape of the mount: the “roundness” of the lawns, the “softness” of the grass (April–May 2020, 59) by which the Puy is characterized, which

makes the peak as “*adipeux et sans complexes (mais adipeux en dit peu . . .)*” (“adipose and without complexities (but adipose says little . . .)”: April–May 2020, 63). The pun between “*adipeux*” and the homophonic expression “*en dit peu*” (“adipose” / “tells little”) suggests that this landscape form can be read as a poetic form. As the mount “overflows in the landscape and on the page,” the Puy de “*Manse*” is a pregnant “*panse*” (“belly”), “insanely material, abundant and maternal—in that, propitious to mammals; mother-form . . .” (April–May 2020, 62). The “Mother Nature” scorned by Christian Prigent reappears despite its inherent “insanity.” Having spent the entire journey recognizing scattered pastoral themes, Domerg eventually realizes how the depiction of the pastoral landscape stands beyond any narrow definition of the pastoral genre.

Conclusions

In Pinson’s essay, pastoral can be considered the touchstone of the poetic voice. This conception of poetry is based on faith in the irreducible voice of Nature, although its meaning remains unclear. Conversely, Vinclair’s work is distrustful of any system of belief and transcendent beings: he shares Pinson’s faith occasionally, in practice, but it is never declared explicitly. The pastoral is a tradition that the poet truly knows, but which he fulfils exclusively through his singular experience, that is through the memories of his childhood or travels, which eventually lead to some pastoral epiphanies, although it’s never clear whether the poem ultimately brought forth the reader’s *ecognosis* (to quote Timothy Morton). Vinclair’s objections to Pinson’s theory echo Lance Newman’s critics towards the ecocritical theory in general: namely, that it “suffers from the weaknesses of the postmodernist tradition it extends,” insofar as “it is so willing to see performing radicalism, thinking difference, or renarrating history, not just as necessary but also as sufficient forms of political action” (2005, 17).

The key to interpreting the work of Domerg also lies in this tension between an interior, subjective pastoral and the pastoral conceived as the surviving voice of an irreducible Nature. In Domerg’s poetry too, the pastoral is a paradoxical form that can include tones and models beyond its specific poetics, such as Ziser’s “georgic mode.” While the ingredients of a pastoral poem emerge from the poet’s willingly limited gaze upon the mountain landscape, the last section of his long hike acknowledges the inability to fit the entire pastoral mountain into delimited poetic frameworks.

On the other hand, though, the three works analyzed are similar when it comes to their vision of a fragmented, intermittent, and never certain pastoral. Pastoral landscapes have become so rare that they risk becoming a vague memory, or even disappearing “under a smog of spam, selfies and poems,” as Vinclair writes in his first *dizain*. But it does

not matter if only a trace of pastoral remains: pastoral is already a trace. As Hiltner argued, “pastoral works . . . can be responsible for the appearance of an environment (and, with it, the emergence of environmental consciousness) even while doing very little to represent it” (Hiltner 2011, 59). Some wildness remains within the pastoral, just as memories of wildness live on in the “wild memorial” of Vinclair’s “zoo” (2020a, 292), even in downtown Singapore or choked by the smog of Shanghai.

In recent poetic production, the pastoral genre carries on its expansion and modernization. Second-wave ecocriticism, breaking down of some of the long-standing distinctions between the human and the non-human and questioning these very concepts, pave the way to pastoral innovations such as Vinclair’s and Domerg’s. Technologies, that could be considered inconsistent with the pastoral tone, are necessary for the poets, who publish through online journals such as *Catastrophes*. However, the poet is required not to leave the pastoral imagination to science—that same science which mournfully measures the methane emissions of cows and digs the Antarctic in search of cleaner air, in Vinclair’s verse. The Anthropocene brings about a crisis in the depiction of the world around us; the pastoral is an alternative voice, always choppy or laborious, yet flourishing in recent French poetry.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

² According to Gifford, the six criteria of post-pastoral are: 1) an “awe in attention to the natural world,” a “deep sense of the immanence in the natural things,” 2) a “creative-destructive universe equally in balance,” 3) a “recognition that the inner is also the workings of the outer,” and that what happens to animal species also happens to humans, 4) it “convey[s] an awareness of both nature as culture and of culture as nature,” 5) it raises awareness about ecology, and 6) it provides criticism of the human will to power.

³ “My poem is born in the concrete, knows / machines, believes beasts and wild plants / like him escaping from taxonomies / denying the trompe-l’œil, despising the fetishes / crying without conjuring the extinctions— / to them pastoral is forbidden.”

⁴ But this thesis has been challenged, for example by Alf Hornborg, who calls it eurocentric. See Hornborg, 2017.

⁵ “. . . on grazed lawns / the quadrupeds farted between the flowered graves / then came the explosion of other bombs / roaring engines into the parking lots, the ice / bergs melted, plastic islands drifted / under a smog of spam, selfies and poems.”

⁶ See Bell, 2019.

⁷ “Adélie / Land, Délie! Arcadia! jewel case, from the ancient / world on, no more beautiful poems: of / the evolution of the temperature, / of the rate of greenhouse gases, fin / ally, of the human imprint on nature.”

⁸ “White beard wild wool / fibers as fine as the spider’s silk / John pets a wild sheep / “mouflon mouflon—don’t you see / anything coming?” man, the war / wild wool was / not made for ma / n either was / poetry—or?”

⁹ “Fie.”

¹⁰ Muir pretty much liked anything that was wild, and his essay “Wild Wool” (in *Wilderness Essays* [1980], 2015) demonstrates that wool from wild sheep is far superior to that of domesticated breeds.

¹¹ “Ten o’clock, this morning. Chorus of bleating, below, in the corrals of Lachaup. The weather is cooler than yesterday. The plain wakes up under the sun and the cries of the beasts that go up, call each other, overlap, concert. We approach the point of view which motivated our return: the face of the Puy catching the light, in the rising. Following the first buttresses of Coste Longue that this time we will follow until the end (since it offers a longitudinal balcony on the basin and the reason that bring [*sic*] us), concerning the plain, faithful, in this respect, to the perception that we have, we realize that we can still speak of a (bleating?) ‘mosaic’ and of ‘sensation of matter’ fully experienced—as during this tactile exhibition at the Museum about the various types of existing wools, that an ingenious disposition allowed to touch, lift, feel, before resting.” The internal quotes are from a previous book by Olivier Domerg and Brigitte Palaggi, *Le Chant du Hors-champ*, 2009.

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