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**Review of *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* By William Barillas**

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*The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland.* By William Barillas. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. xviii + 258 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$39.95.

Critical studies on the importance of place and landscape in Midwestern literature are not uncommon, but as William Barillas traces the trajectory of the pastoral tradition he provides a fresh perspective on how it has evolved through time and continues to influence contemporary writers. This analysis emphasizes ecology as well as landscape, making the book valuable for ecocritics as well as for scholars of the Midwest and Great Plains.

Barillas effectively argues that there is not *one* version of the Midwestern pastoral; rather, writers define the pastoral according to their individual artistic, cultural, and environmental concerns. Here Willa Cather is specifically framed as the originator of a particular type of pastoralism that does not separate aesthetic and ethical values from depictions and appreciations of nature. In this way her Nebraska novels do not simply exhibit classic pastoral elements; those elements in fact demonstrate how Cather's ideals—the democratization of landscape, the creation of art from nature, and the tangible appreciation of the sublime—are embodied in her sense of place.

Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, which calls for a balance between agricultural production and environmental conservation, specifically takes Cather's immigrant pioneers to task for their materialistic and idealistic attitudes about the land. The inclusion of Leopold indicates the need to expand our understanding of what constitutes the Midwestern pastoral to genres other than fiction. Yet it is the chapters dealing with poets Theodore Roethke, James Wright, and Jim Harrison that constitute Barillas's most effective argument about how the Midwestern pastoral is revised and updated by each successive writer.

Roethke uses the image of the greenhouse in his poetry as a symbol for the possibility of reconciling the industrial and the wild; years

later his onetime student Wright addresses the dangers of mechanizing nature to such an extent that it is actually destroyed. While Wright also suggests that each artist strive to physically and spiritually situate the self in specific place regardless of social and environmental degradation, Harrison provides a method for that very quest, and interprets the pastoral as a "getting lost" in the wild that creates the ability to deal with both personal and social history.

Additional comments on Jane Smiley, Ted Kooser, and Paul Gruchow lend still more diversity to the assembled pastoralists, as each takes a thread of the tradition and weaves it into a unique depiction of life in the Midwest. The ever-fluctuating genre of the Midwestern pastoral is important to American literature because "an informed love of place" continues to help us develop and understand our own cultural values and stabilize us in a world of change.

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