

1 Approaching landscape and literature

- How do classical and biblical texts influence landscape writing?
- What are the relationships between the visual arts and literature?
- What is the basis for idealised and symbolic landscape?

Classical influences

Idylls and eclogues

The *Idylls* of the Greek poet Theocritus (born c. 270 BC) are generally taken to be the source of the pastoral in western literature. An idyll originally meant a little shape or appearance and came to mean a short descriptive poem about the imagined life of herdsmen. ‘Idyllic’, meaning full of nature’s charm, first appeared in the English language in the 19th century. The word also suggested a nostalgic ideal, allowing Theocritus to be adapted for contemporary needs. When Tennyson (1809–1892) wrote his *Idylls of the King* (about the legendary Arthur), he dedicated them to the recent memory of Prince Albert, who wore ‘the white flower of a blameless life’.

Theocritus, using a version of rustic Greek dialect within the frame of more literary diction, was creating an elegant artifice for learned readers. His shepherds and goatherds invent **epigrams** and paradoxes, refer easily to gods and goddesses and sing serenades. Within the variety of his *Idylls* he included pastoral elegy (see Part 2, page 49): the most notable tells of a shepherd, Daphnis, who angered Aphrodite; he died young and nature shared in the general lament for his loss.

The Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BC) acknowledged Theocritus as a major influence when writing his *Eclogues*, but developed the pastoral form in his own ways: he refers to contemporary events, especially civil war, he identifies the shepherd with himself as poet, and gives more focus to nature’s serenity than to the themes of human love. The terms ‘eclogue’ and ‘idyll’ often seem to be interchangeable, but eclogue often has the more specialised meaning of a dialogue in verse between shepherds or pastoral lovers. In his 1579 poem *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (see page 22, below) Edmund Spenser made frequent use of dialogue form.

Though he plays with ideas of moral or political **allegory**, Virgil rarely commits himself in his *Eclogues* to much more than learned, playful elegance. However, later poets, wanting to absorb Virgil into their Christian culture, have paid special

attention to the prophetic possibilities of *Eclogue 4*. He speaks of a child being born to coincide with a new Golden Age, 'All stains of our past wickedness being cleansed away'. Nature will rejoice and bring tributes:

Child, your first birthday presents will come from nature's wild –
 Small presents: earth will shower you with romping ivy, fox-gloves,
 Bouquets of gipsy lilies and sweetly-smelling acanthus.
 Goats shall walk home, their udders taut with milk, and nobody
 Herding them: the ox will have no fear of the lion:
 Silk-soft blossom will grow from your very cradle to lap you.
 But snakes will die, and so will fair-seeming poisonous plants.

These lines can be taken to parallel stories of the Garden of Eden (see page 15, below) and Old Testament prophecies of Christ's birth. They also show nature seeming to behave in human ways, anticipating the widespread use of **pathetic fallacy** in much of the landscape writing that places human beings in the context of nature.

Virgil: the *Georgics*

Virgil lived through one of the most turbulent and defining periods of history. Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BC and the future of Rome hung in the balance until his adopted son Octavian defeated Mark Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 BC. Virgil saw Octavian (later named Augustus) as the saviour of Rome and his imperial rule as the guarantee of future peace and prosperity. He wrote the *Georgics* between 37 and 30 BC and dedicated the poem to the statesman Maecenas, who became a famous patron of the arts.

The *Georgics* was written to celebrate farming and its enduring values. Its four sections (on crops, trees, cattle and bees) were to be read also as practical and detailed handbooks on farming methods. What may seem to us as digressions – on Octavian's status and on political issues – were intended to place the whole work in the context of a fully flourishing community in which all parts of society contributed to peace and order. Indeed, the lower stratum (of farmers working close to the soil) supplied analogies for good political and moral discipline, designed to instruct Virgil's readers, the educated classes who could influence government.

The poem implied a warning for the decision-makers. Much of the land in Italy was threatened because the farms had been depopulated to provide soldiers for the wars. Later, veteran soldiers were rewarded with land from which many peasants had to be evicted. Both types of decision had disrupted the traditions of agriculture and also breached natural decorum by confusing the needs of the wars with the needs of the land. Virgil uses a military metaphor to show how good order has been lost: he describes how horses go wild, take charge of the chariot and 'force along the trembling charioteer'.

In one passage Virgil looks far into the future and imagines a ploughman

on his land unearthing rusty weapons and ‘mighty relics of gigantic bones’. It turns out that these are fragments from the great battle of Philippi when Octavian and Antony defeated Caesar’s assassins, Brutus and Cassius. For Virgil’s contemporaries this battle was a world-influencing event, but in the wider context of history its significance shrinks and it is the ploughman who will endure. Thomas Hardy imagined a similar perspective in his poem ‘In Time of the Breaking of Nations’, written in 1915, a year into the Great War. He wrote to express the paradox of how the humble outlasts the spectacular. The foreground shows ‘Only a man harrowing clods’, ‘his old horse that stumbles and nods’, the smoke from burning couch grass, and two lovers passing by; in the misty background Hardy hints at the half-forgotten stories of wars and European dynasties.

The *Georgics* became especially popular in 18th-century England, partly because of the political background: the memory of civil war; the execution of Charles I in 1649; the restoration of the monarchy by Charles II in 1660; the disputes about the succession in 1688; Marlborough’s wars with France in the early 1700s. With national success came peace, the land could flourish and classical Roman values influenced all branches of the arts. This new Golden Age was known as ‘Augustan’, after Virgil’s Emperor Caesar Augustus.

However, English readers of the *Georgics* knew what happened to Roman history after Virgil: the moral decline of Rome and the descent into barbarism. Values are precarious, not simply because life itself is bound to be transitory but because civilisation too may be fragile if men fail to be watchful. Poets have a particular duty to protect and assert these values, which are rooted in the practical life and discipline described in the *Georgics*. They should condemn great men when they fall short. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was the greatest of the Augustan satirists; he attacked pretentious and lavish folly and celebrated the honest, simple life. In his ‘Epistle to Lord Burlington’ he exposes the empty splendour of ‘Timon’s’ villa and predicts an ideal future:

Another age shall see the golden ear
 Imbrown the slope, and nod on the parterre,
 Deep harvest bury all his pride has plann’d,
 And laughing Ceres reassume the land.

Pope anticipates here not Virgil’s ploughman at the start of the year, but Ceres, the goddess of harvest, in a gold and brown autumn, delighted that she can ‘reassume’ authority over the land. Perhaps she is also mocking the pompous Timon, who currently owns it – but his tenure will be brief. Soon his grandiose house will be buried, like those relics of Philippi. Eventually the land will return to its more appropriate past, not as a natural wilderness before mankind appeared, but as an agricultural success. This means that people will still be in control, not – like Timon – for misguided display, but secure under the guiding principles of Ceres.

Ovid: the *Metamorphoses*

Ovid (43 BC–17 AD) lived in Rome under the Emperor Augustus until he was exiled for some unspecified offence; he then lived and died on the coast of the Black Sea. His *Metamorphoses* is a collection of stories gathered from Roman, Greek and Egyptian mythology – ‘to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind’. He describes the relationships of the gods with men and women, spanning from the time of the creation of the world out of Chaos, to his own times when the assassinated Julius Caesar was transformed into a heavenly star.

Ovid’s Roman gods (notably Jupiter, Apollo, Diana, Mercury, Ceres) affect, and often afflict, human beings, by sharing our passions and frailties. Often they seem like erratic children, but with alarming power in their obsessions, lusts and resentments. It sometimes appears as though the gods too are subject to Destiny, just as humans are subject to the gods. It is not surprising that the focus of much Western literature, when authors are borrowing from the *Metamorphoses*, has been on the uncertainties inherent in life, love and death.

Out of the fifteen books of the *Metamorphoses* only the last four deal with the Trojan wars and later Roman history. Most of the work contains earlier **myths** and very few of these stories concern cities, wars or political life. They are overwhelmingly concerned with nature: myths of the sun, seas, harvest, vegetation, hunting. Primarily, Ovid wishes to convey the narrative force and the drama of his tale, but he also evokes a sense of the landscape, especially in the following:

- **Proserpina**, the daughter of Ceres, was dancing and gathering flowers with her nymphs, when Pluto, the god of the underworld, drove by in his chariot. No other goddess was prepared to abandon the sunlight and share his dark kingdom, so he abducted Proserpina. He carried her as far as the river Cyane, which began to seethe and roar to check his flight; thinking that Ceres would be pursuing, he struck a blow on the earth, which opened and let him pass through to his kingdom. Ceres searched fruitlessly for her daughter, and in rage damaged the fertility of the earth, until Arethusa, a nymph, spoke of seeing Proserpina as Pluto’s queen. Jove, as arbiter, decreed that the husband had rights as well as the mother. He judged that Proserpina should spend six months in the underworld (winter) and six months with Ceres (summer).
- **Daphne**, the daughter of Peneus, a river god, attracted the love of Apollo. He tried to approach her gently but she fled from him until she reached a river. There, she begged her father to transform her and immediately she became a laurel tree. Apollo’s love continued, but as a lasting honour to himself, celebrated poets and musicians were crowned with a laurel wreath. Special occasions in Rome – games, victory processions and religious festivals – were always sanctified with laurel.

- **Orpheus** was a wonderful musician who could tame even wild beasts and bring flowers into bloom. He fell in love with Eurydice, but at their wedding ceremony the torch held by Hymen, the god of marriage, smoked ominously. Soon afterwards a snake stung Eurydice's foot and her spirit descended to the underworld. Orpheus followed and his music charmed all who heard it, even Pluto, who restored Eurydice to him, provided that, on his journey back, he would not turn to look at her. He failed to obey this instruction and his wife vanished.
- **Actaeon**, a huntsman, came to a mountain spring to rest and drink the water. Diana (the goddess of the moon, of hunting and chastity) was there with her female attendants. She was bathing naked and was appalled to be seen by Actaeon. She threw water at his face; immediately antlers sprouted where the drops struck him, and he was transformed into a stag, only to be savaged to death by his dogs.

Ovid has always been widely read, especially by other poets who have alluded to his work and adapted it, most recently Ted Hughes in 1997 (see Part 3, page 101). The *Metamorphoses* was popular in the late Middle Ages and the (pagan) stories were often given Christian allegorical meaning: Apollo killing the python, for example, becomes Christ overcoming evil. Chaucer knew his work, as did Shakespeare, who used one of Ovid's tales for the episode of Pyramus and Thisbe within the play of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the story of Medea's black magic for Prospero's renunciation of his powers in *The Tempest*.

Biblical influences: Eden and expulsion

The creation story (or myth) in the book of Genesis describes the first days of the world when God created the light, water, earth, plants, trees and animals. Finally, he created man 'after our likeness' (in his own image): 'Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth'. As the last of God's creative acts, man was the best. God then brought all the creatures before Adam, the very first man, who gave them their names. Naming is more than noticing or identifying: in some cultures, it may carry a type of verbal magic. In the Garden of Eden, it signified mastery and possession.

God placed Adam (and then Eve) in the Garden of Eden, both of them innocent amidst the profusion of nature.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayst freely eat:
 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

But Eve persuaded Adam to eat from the forbidden tree. In Genesis they pick ‘fruit’ from the tree; later traditions specified it as ‘apple’.

In *Paradise Lost* (1667) Milton dramatises this moment:

Earth trembl'd from her entrails, as again
 In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan,
 Sky lowr'd, and muttering Thunder, some sad drops
 Wept at completing of the mortal Sin
 Original ...

The third ‘character’ in the story is the serpent that tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit first. It was ‘more subtle than any other beast of the field which the Lord God had made’. In *Paradise Lost* Satan, wanting revenge on God, goes on a solitary mission to the newly created Earth. He enters the garden and then transforms himself into the serpent, so that he can prey on what Milton takes to be typical female frailties – her beauty, vanity, and her manoeuvres to gain power over a man.

Adam and Eve have become stereotypes in much Christian literature. Their story has been used to justify male authority and chauvinism, and most anti-feminist attitudes; and snakes generally provoke fear and disgust.

Adam’s disobedience destroyed innocence and complicated the hierarchy of creation. **Renaissance** philosophers believed that from this act, known as The Fall, life became unpredictable; mankind now could sometimes aspire to the condition of angels and also fall to the level of beasts. Man and woman now had knowledge of evil, as well as good: behaviour and events would be confused; the earth would no longer yield its produce automatically; the climate would sometimes be harsh; suffering would be part of human destiny.

Even the assumption of human ‘dominion’ has become open to question. In modern times green movements sometimes use the Eden story to remind us that, since man was created last, nature came first and therefore has a primacy above men and a purity that should be respected. In specific terms, humans are polluting the earth and therefore continuing to disobey God or / and the principles of creation in newly disastrous ways.

The Song of Solomon

The Song of Solomon (or *Song of Songs*) from the Old Testament reads like an erotic poem of human love, generally as a dialogue between two lovers. It has also been interpreted allegorically as God’s love for the Hebrew people, or Christ’s love for the Church, or the perfected soul (personified as female) for the Word of God. The Alexandrian scholar Origen (185–254) believed that earthly love, which promises much, generally disappoints. But its archetype, which is God’s love,

always fulfils the soul's longing. And so the allegorical interpretation of *The Song* takes the reader through the earthly language and to the celestial meaning beyond.

The Song, or poem, is rich with imagery of plants, animals, fruits and spices. The land is made fertile by rivers, streams and fountains and offers up luxury for lovers to enjoy. Many of the ecstatic similes to describe the beloved are drawn from nature:

this thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts are clusters of grapes ...

His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet-smelling myrrh.

At the heart of the song is the *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden), which also supplies a strong precedent for medieval poets in their love stories. Their setting is always a version of *locus amoenus* and three archetypal gardens are likely to influence it:

- the Garden of Eden (see page 15, above)
- *Le Roman de la Rose* (see page 19, below)
- *The Song of Solomon*.

The Garden of Eden is biblical, *Le Roman de la Rose* is secular and literary, but the various interpretations of *The Song of Solomon* make it a hybrid work. This ambivalence parallels the uncertain language of much medieval love poetry. It seems to bridge pagan and Christian worlds. Many critics have commented on the 'religion' of love, how the lover seems almost to worship his lady, and how it is sometimes unclear whether he is addressing a courtly lady or the Virgin Mary.

The garden too is an ambivalent place, occupying somewhere between the wild and the cultivated. Nature ministers lavishly to men and women without anyone having to tend the land. However, there is always formality and control, especially when an archetypal garden is adapted for *fin amour*.

A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.

Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard ...

... A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.

(Chapter 4, verses 12–15)

The garden of love

Late 14th-century England suffered the Hundred Years' War with France and several devastating outbreaks of plague – disasters that came near to ruining the economy. Yet there was also a great flowering of the arts under the royal patronage of Richard II (reigned 1377–1399) and aristocrats such as John of Gaunt. Money, time and energy were spent on the great English cathedrals, on music and display at court. Writers flourished too, as varied as Langland, Chaucer and the anonymous poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Dream poetry

Like many of their contemporaries, all three writers often told stories in their poems through dreams and visions. Some critics have argued that a dream is a way of escaping from grim reality; but the dream-poem is also a way of experimenting with visions of heaven or hell, of inventing a journey which educates the ignorant traveller, or (in more modern interpretation) of exploring the subconscious. Dream-literature has an origin in Christian mysticism; it also derives from French and Italian love poetry.

Typically, the poet recalls a dream, maybe a few years in the past, into which he plants a **persona** (the 'I' figure), who is often self-effacing and naive. This can be entertaining for the sophisticated poet and his courtly audience; but because the dreamer is also very receptive, it also provides a convenient *tabula rasa* for the experiences and landscapes of the dream. Sometimes the dreamer is led by an informative guide who can interpret what is seen; it is an important feature of most medieval writing that everything we perceive through our senses has a deeper spiritual meaning or counterpart, and, in particular, that the intense experiences of secular love may be related to the love of God.

One of Chaucer's most entertaining and thought-provoking dream-poems is *The Parlement of Foulys* (1382). The poet has been reading Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, then, with imagination filled, he falls asleep and in his dream Scipio's guide appears to him. The dreamer (Chaucer's persona) is led to a gate on which the inscriptions point to the delights and despairs of love; he enters into a landscape so packed with plants and creatures that it feels more like a stylised tapestry than the real world (see Part 3, page 85). But this is not the world as we normally see it: this is a place as a dream might distort or intensify it, and as literary convention has handed it down to Chaucer.

The dreamer sees Cupid, Venus, Priapus, and personifications known to Chaucer's audience through *Le Roman de la Rose* – all of them unsettling or threatening – along with celebrated victims from history and mythology 'And al here love, and in what plyte they dyde'. He moves from the garden into a grassy place 'upon an hil of flouris', where the goddess Nature is about to preside over

a debate amongst the birds about fidelity and *fin amour*. This is the point of the poem: the '*demande d'amour*' (the question about love). But this enclosed, and rather oppressive, space of the garden opens out into a wider space for the parliament, so that the opinions expressed have enough air to breathe and expand.

Le Roman de la Rose

Le Roman de la Rose, begun by Guillaume de Lorris (c. 1230) and finished by Jean de Meun (c. 1237), had an enormous influence on 14th-century European literature, second only to the Bible. It was translated into German and Italian – and part of it was also translated into Middle English, possibly by Chaucer.

It is an allegory of *fin amour*, telling of a young man who dreams that he walks on a May morning along the bank of the River of Life. He sees a walled garden, and eventually discovers the door to the garden, where the porter Idleness tells him that this is the garden of Delight, whose people relax and take pleasure in the shade of the trees. In the garden, he meets personifications of courtly life and then wanders away to enjoy the streams, animals and flowers. He is unaware that the god of Love is following him.

He reaches a fountain on which an inscription tells that this is where Narcissus saw his reflection and died for his love. The dreamer is alarmed but eventually looks into the water. At the bottom are two crystal stones that reflect a garden of roses nearby. Among the roses is a bud, not quite open. The dreamer reaches to pluck it, but the god of Love disables him with his arrows. The dreamer submits, does homage, becomes Love's servant – and thereby accepts the situation of being in love.

Service is painful and difficult; being in love is a craft involving great delicacy. The story describes setbacks and minor achievements for the dreamer, but always within the confines of the garden. Just as a medieval court is a complicated and artificial world in itself, so the garden of love in de Lorris' allegory may seem remote from real life. But the lover's psychology is detailed, and modern readers, when accustomed to the working of allegory, find the poem very sensitive to a lover's heightened sense of elation and despair.

For courtly poets and audiences (most poems were intended to be heard rather than read), *Le Roman de la Rose* was part of received knowledge. It could be used as a type of code. A springtime garden, gentle streams, heightened colours of flowers and grass, roses and lilies were all symbolic points of reference, not real conditions in any particular garden. When a poet mentioned them, they activated the whole genre of *fin amour* which de Lorris had started. The garden's formality was important too: it was an appropriate setting for the esoteric rules of court and the disciplines of service. In war a young man would serve his overlord; in peace he became a courtier showing obedience to his lady. Both types of service required

discipline of a young man's powerful instincts: aggression to Mars, the god of war; sexual passion to Venus, the goddess of love.

The greenwood

The oak tree has always been associated with the robust, male English character, honest independence and individual liberty. England's pride was her navy and great ships were made of oak. It is no surprise that even today many village pubs are named after the oak – names such as The Royal Oak, Hearts of Oak.

Forests are more than national symbols. In Anglo-Saxon England there was little dense forest but there were many working woodlands with a vigorous local economy relating to towns, villages and settlements. Then the Norman Conquest brutally imposed forest law to reserve huge areas of woodland for the king's pleasure, to preserve game and to provide the sport of hunting for the aristocracy. The historian Simon Schama in his *Landscape and Memory* (1995) notes that 'the nomenclature "forest" that now replaced the older Latin terms of *saltus* or *silva* was in all probability derived from *foris*, or "outside"'.

The common people were largely dispossessed. A 16th-century summary of laws recorded the brutal penalty for killing a deer: 'the removal of both sets of soft organs: eyes and testicles'. Schama points out that in practice fines were more widespread and more useful – both to the crown, that always needed money for wars, and, in turn, to barons leasing the land. The barons allowed unscrupulous middlemen to fleece the commoners still further.

From these injustices there grew up the stories of Robin Hood, the outlaw who harassed corrupt officials but remained conservatively loyal to the king. His 'court' in the forest was based on decency, natural justice and honest English comradeship. Shakespeare's outlaws in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *As You Like It* are based on these popular legends. The exiled Duke in *As You Like It* is said to 'live like the old Robin Hood of England ... and fleet time carelessly as they did in the golden world'. Adam, well named as the honest old commoner who values tradition, is brought to the Duke who entertains him as an equal; the open-air feast in the forest is the ideal place for nature to validate the reciprocal values shared by the leader and his subjects.

Stories of Robin Hood first appeared in the repertoire of minstrels performing for aristocrats, and then became the subject of popular ballads. Robin and his men live in the greenwood and wear Lincoln green. Green is the colour of growth and renewal, as Robin, a sort of Lord of Misrule, uses law-breaking as a means of moral health to restore the land to the honest jurisdiction of the king. In 1515 Henry VIII, wanting to strengthen his contract with ordinary people, joined in the annual Robin Hood festivities.