Victorian Pastoral

Tennyson, Hardy, and the Subversion of Forms

Owen Schur
Victorian Pastoral explores the pastoral poetry of Alfred Tennyson and Thomas Hardy as a way of understanding each poet’s relation to the literary past. This exploration of Tennyson’s and Hardy’s response to and reshaping of a specific genre sheds new light on each poet’s relation to modernist poetics. While critics and scholars have examined separately Tennyson’s and Hardy’s relation to tradition, until now no one has searched for deeper affinities between the two poets. Owen Schur also presents an overview of the pastoral tradition, suggesting the importance of rhetoric and the play of language to a full understanding of the genre.

Using deconstructionist methodology, with its emphasis on the indeterminacy and potentially subversive nature of all rhetorical systems, Schur offers close readings of Tennyson and Hardy poems, some of which fall outside the boundaries of the conventional definitions of pastoral, and places them within the context of the pastoral tradition and literary history. These demonstrate both poets’ sense of exclusion from the discourse of pastoral tradition. Both Tennyson and Hardy subvert this tradition through disfigurations of pastoral language. Moreover, the readings of specific poems by both poets show their subversion of pastoral forms producing a renewal of the genre and creating new kinds of pastoral. Further, Schur establishes these new kinds of pastoral poetry as a foreshadowing of modernist poetics. With Tennyson and Hardy, Victorian pastoral becomes modern pastoral, suggesting that the two poets are key figures in the transformation of nineteenth-century poetics into modernism.

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