Et in arcadia ego : the pastoral aesthetics of suburbia in Jeffrey Eugenides' The Virgin Suicides

Et in Arcadia Ego: The Pastoral Aesthetics of Suburbia in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

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Eugenides' *Virgin Suicides*, I will be arguing, is essentially a pastoral – suburbia being Arcadia and the memory of the deceased girls the yearning for the Golden Age. As in the paintings by Guercino and Poussin "Et in Arcadia ego" refers to the intrusion of death into the unreally idyllic bourgeois life of postwar American suburbia. The Latin motto, and with this Eugenides' social critique, is both *memento mori* and elegiac meditation. It describes, in other words, a society whose only "real" contact with reality is death, a society which is unable to face basic ontological questions and which is forever stalled in the meditation of an irretrievably lost beautiful past. Characteristically, escape seems the only way to deal with life for the overwhelming majority of the characters in the novel: for the five Lisbon girls who flee into death, for their parents who move away, and for the we-narrator(s) with their obsessive concern with the (re-)construction of the truth about the Lisbon sisters – in the teeth of the realization that they will "never find the pieces to put them back together."

Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* was an instant success: hailed as "deeply felt, lushly written, even heartrending" (Griffith 386), it was greeted by a large number of critics with great enthusiasm. But despite the overwhelmingly positive comments, reviewers were often at a loss when it came to categorization – with the result that more often than not fanciful metaphors had to stand in for precise description: The *New York Times* called it "a small but powerful opera in the unexpected form of a novel," while the *Kirkus Reviews* praised it as a "genuinely lyrical novel" and the German *Zeit* (referring to the 2004 Rowohlt translation) dubbed it a "complicated epic."

One of the main reasons for this diversity of critical views is the particular makeup of Eugenides' text: *The Virgin Suicides* is a pastoral – a literary mode so ill-defined that a recent critic suspected there might

well be "as many versions of pastoral as there are critics and scholars who write about it" (Alpers 8). It is a mode, moreover, that a number of critics (among them the editors of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*) consider extinct – "occasional twitches notwithstanding" – because the difference between "town" and "country" on which the function of the pastoral hinges (as they argue) has been all but eroded (Barrell and Bull 432). These difficulties notwithstanding, I would like to argue that reading *The Virgin Suicides* as a pastoral not only accounts for some of the notorious difficulties the text poses but also sheds some light upon an otherwise rather cryptic novel.

What is more, pastoral rhetoric – and with this pastoral aesthetics – have defined essential aspects of America's perception of itself as a nation from the earliest days of its history on. All the way down from the notions of the early settlers, who saw in America a chance to retreat from the world like Virgil's shepherds of yore, to the present, where gated neighborhoods are described as perfect landscapes, the pastoral has served as a repository for sociocultural and political beliefs, values and ideas. The nineteenth century in particular, strongly influenced by Neoplatonic and Romantic notions, used the pastoral as a projection screen for the construction of a national identity. Emerson, for one, saw the country's pastoral environment as a major source not only of inspiration but of power for the American poet:

> . . . the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains, as he saw and heard them in his infancy. And with these forms, the spells of persuasion, the keys of power are put into his hands. (*Nature* 23)

The image of the garden, a variant of the pastoral, and a landscape equally poised between the city and the wilderness, began to establish itself as a symbol of the essence of Americanness. As Henry Nash Smith points out, notions of the country as the "Garden of the World" became one of the dominant ciphers of nineteenth-century national discourse that defined the promise of American life:

> The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plow. (123)

Leo Marx even argues that, by the mid-1880s, "the pastoral ideal of America had developed . . . into something like an all-embracing ideology" (88).

The aesthetics underlying and informing the pastoral – the idea of a *locus amoenus,* a space for retreat, the notion of the ideal landscape as a sort of middle ground between countryside and city that would harbor a fundamentally harmonious form of life – define the ideology of the suburb perfectly. In a country where a far larger percentage of the population lives in suburbs than in either urban or rural areas (Beuka 2), a country in which suburbs have become the promised land of the middle class, an investigation of the suburb is bound to be descriptive of important aspects of American culture in general.

Of course, it must be added here, "suburbia" has long become a deeply riven term: the plots of similar or identical houses, the carefully trimmed lawns, the charcoal grills, the swimming pools, the alleyways and the double garages *are* a reification of the middle class American Dream. But at the same time, the suburbs are also a nightmare of conformism – the end of human individuality, the epitome of a soulless no-man's land – in brief, the aesthetic and cultural horror vision of conformity and congruity gone wrong. It is through a perceptive analysis of this deep-seated division against itself of the suburb as a cultural sign that Eugenides offers a trenchant analysis of postmodern American society.

Historically, pastoral is a literary form, defined *sensu strictu* by being situated in the countryside and descriptive of the life of shepherds. In its early forms up to and including the Renaissance (as well as part of the eighteenth century) it depicted shepherds engaged in friendly singing contests or in conversation with other shepherds about love or the beauty of the countryside. The cardinal convention of the pastoral from which a number of others follow is the opposition, explicit or implicit, between the idyllic pastoral environment and the reality of the world at large – the contrast between an ideal, secluded here and now, perfectly peaceful and timeless, and the outside world, haunted by continual change and death. One of the resulting standard gestures is the pronounced preference for the rustic over the urban – the celebration, as Lawrence Buell puts it in *The Environmental Imagination,* of "the ethos of nature / rurality over against the ethos of the town or city" (32).[1] The

[1] On the opposition between the rustic and the urban Frank Kermode has made a number of interesting observations (13-14). He points out – and this is noteworthy in

other routine affirmation is the temporal preference for the past over the present – often in the guise of a melancholic reference to the passing of time and past times (the Golden Age) and the grieving about the loss of a friend or lover. Both conventions figure very prominently in Eugenides' text.

The locale of the novel, for one thing, is pastoral. Set in an ideal environment – idyllic and peaceful mid-American suburbia – it is green and clean, and comfortably far away from the bustle and the pollution of the big cities. The adolescent we-narrators as well as their female counterparts – the five Lisbon daughters – live a carefree, protected life devoid of any material worries. Like the shepherds of yore, the principal activity of their successors is divided between wooing and earnest meditation.

In a similar way, the main thrust of the text is towards the past: *The Virgin Suicides* is a dirge, an extended lament of the loss of a Golden Age, or more specifically, the loss of innocence. The death of the five Lisbon sisters divides the world into a before and after – their suicides mark the fall from grace, the expulsion from paradise, the transition from a state of innocent bliss to a state of sinful understanding. At one fell swoop the strangely disembodied collective narrators lose not only their own innocence – their own youth and childlike unconcern – but they also lose an innocent America, to which they hark back with intense nostalgia: a more "real" America, one with actual winters, "vast snowdrifts, days of canceled school" (166) and a socially functional suburbia with a deeply felt sense of community, particularly in the face of external threat (the flies), engaged in collective, concerted activity: "cooperative sweeping, bag-carting, patio-hosing" (56). After the death of the five sisters all of this is gone, a world "turned into a tired performer" can offer them nothing but "another half-assed season" (167) and the neighborhood literally falls apart as "families moved away, or splintered, everybody trying out a different spot in the Sun Belt" (245). Although the exodus is only temporary, the world as it was has disappeared. When the former neighbors – including the narrators – return, they realize that their pastoral idyll has all but vanished: the disappearance of the elm trees reveals a sordidness none of them ever noticed before and all of the formerly central rural activities, work as well as pleasure, have in the meantime either been given up or are no longer legal. Lawn-mowing

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the present context – that "the first condition of the Pastoral is that it is an urban product" (14).

(which Marshall McLuhan once dubbed the lasting symbol of darkest suburbia [72]) has fallen prey to general negligence and barbecuing has been declared illegal ("city air-pollution ordinance" [246]).

One of the most salient pastoral qualities of Eugenides' text is its extreme artificiality. As one of the early critics pointed out observantly, "at its core, *The Virgin Suicides* is about artifice itself" (Griffith 386). Indeed, artificiality dominates practically every aspect of the book, ranging from its exotic theme to its juxtaposition of the grotesque and the highly serious to the unique narratorial perspective: *The Virgin Suicides* is one of the very rare texts with a collective narrator. The fact that it is never clear who is included in the narratorship and which of the changing focalizers speaks at a given point is a continual source of hermeneutic discomfort and emphatically foregrounds the narratorial voice as a mere linguistic legerdemain.

Inherent in all pastoral, there is, I think, always the critique of the ideal it celebrates or appears to celebrate. This has to do with the fact that pastoral is an extremely artificial form and never tries to cover this up.[2] A good example of this is the undated painting by Claude-Joseph Vernet entitled *Shepherd in the Alps* (figure 1). Although suffused with conventionality and a generous dose of Claudian slickness (the trees on the left could be lifted straight from one of Lorrain's pictures) this can indeed be read as a "debased landscape," as John Constable complained. In that case it would really only be another of those countless harmless commissioned views in the "sentimental" style that were so popular in the eighteenth century. But then the idealization reaches a degree here that is almost ironic. Now whether the irony was intended or not is not for me to decide here; the point I wish to make is that the high degree of artificiality draws attention to itself as a device. No observer would for a moment seriously believe that the lady and the gentleman depicted in the Vernet are actual shepherds. Too neatly arranged are the poses, too carefully draped the folds of the clothes, too perfect the light illuminating the couple, too comprehensively idyllic the landscape in the background. In this fashion, pastoral always asks for a temporary suspension of disbelief. This is one of the points Alexander Pope makes in his "Discourse on Pastoral Poetry" (1709) when he insists that pastoral

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[2] It is upon the notion of artificiality that William Empson builds his famous claim that "the essential trick of the old pastoral . . . was to make simple people express strong feelings . . . in learned and fashionable language" (17).

has recourse to "some illusion" as it "consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries" (27).

Apart from this comment on the intrinsic artificiality of the genre, Pope makes another important observation: "If we would copy Nature, it may be useful to take this Idea along with us, that pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden age. So that we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv'd then to have been" (25). The chronological primitivism Pope refers to implies two views. One that denies any Hegelian notions of social or other general progress – the unreachable past is the ideal for ever out of reach – and the notion that humanity and nature remain essentially innocent until they are corrupted by civilization. The implicit wish for an

eternal now is clearly illusory, however, as daily reality suggests, and history cannot be stopped.

Like a more traditional pastoral, *The Virgin Suicides* describes an idyllic world that is in constant danger of being lost. The idyll is forever threatened by reality and Eugenides' text heavily emphasizes this aspect. One of the fundamental insights – an epiphany in the Joycean sense of the term – of the we-narrators is the realization immediately after the first of the Lisbon daughters takes her own life, that their suburban world is a carefully guarded and secluded area from which the reality of the outside world is kept at bay. On the evening after Cecilia's suicide the we-narrators congregate on the roof of one of the neighborhood houses and become aware, suddenly and unexpectedly, of the finiteness of their Arcadia as they notice "the abrupt demarcation where the trees ended and the city began" (34). From their new vista they notice, as if for the first time, the city slums and the haze of distant factories and a sunset tainted with smog. Simultaneously, the alien noises of this other world become audible to their ears:

> Sounds we usually couldn't hear reached us now . . . we made out faintly, an indecipherable backward-playing tape of city life, cries and shouts, car horns, the voices of girls calling out numbers in an obscure tenacious game – sounds of the impoverished city we never visited, all mixed and muted, without sense, carried on a wind from that place. Then: darkness." (34-35)

In retrospect, the we-narrators realize how their parents deliberately isolated them from the surrounding world: "Occasionally we heard gunshots coming from the ghetto, but our fathers insisted it was only cars backfiring." (36) And it begins to dawn on them that "the version of the world they rendered for us was not the world they really believed in" (55).

Still, the threat itself is not extraneous (as might be expected), the narrative suggests, but rather immanent in the idyll itself. Symbolically, this dangerous undercurrent appears in the guise of the sewer tunnels that form a subterranean world of their own underneath the houses of the neighborhood. Discovered by Paul Baldino, the son of the local Italian Mafioso, they offer secret access to every home. It is during one of his forays into this local underworld – the dark side of suburbia – that he enters the Lisbons' basement and, on climbing up to the second floor, finds Cecilia in the bathroom with her wrists cut open and saves her life by calling the police. Functionally, this scene establishes a link

between an alternate reality that exists parallel to the complacently hedonistic suburbia of neatly trimmed lawns and cleanly washed cars on the one hand and death on the other. Like Paul Baldino who emerges unexpectedly and unpredictably within the sanctity of the bourgeois homes, death appears out of nothing, in the middle of a zone of perfect peace.

The overpowering intrusiveness of death is symbolized most pervasively by the yearly invasion of fish flies, which the narrators, their parents and the neighbors endure stoically, like a biblical plague, without understanding the deeper reason for its occurrence and without being able to take measures against it. The flies appear for the first time shortly after the opening of the novel. Recounting the circumstances of the first suicide the narrator recalls the report of a neighbor who observed Cecilia a day before her attempted suicide staring at a car completely covered with fish flies:

> "They're dead," she said. "They only live twenty-four hours. They hatch. They reproduce, and then they croak. They don't even get to eat." And with that she stuck her hand into the foamy layer of bugs and cleared her initials: C. L. (4)

The parallels between Cecilia's short and unfulfilled life and the cruelly ephemeral existence of the fish flies are obvious, as is the act of inscribing her own name into a layer of dead insects. When the flies appear again almost exactly one year later, and the sheer mass of their dead bodies dims the streetlights and the headlights of the cars, their presence again presages death.

Now death is one of the crucial concerns of the pastoral – for some of its variants even the dominant aspect – and is often referred to by the motto "Et in Arcadia Ego." "Et in Arcadia Ego" appears for the first time in a painting by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (also known as Guercino), possibly completed between 1618 and 1622 (figure 2).

The scene depicted shows two shepherds who stumble upon a skull and look at it with a mixture of surprise and melancholy. The skull, large and staring at the viewer of the painting, lies on a slab of stone with the inscription "Et in Arcadia Ego." Together with the large black fly placed so prominently on the pale bone, the meaning of the painting is clearly that of a *memento mori*. And the translation of "Et in Arcadia Ego" is straightforward: death as the assumed speaker reminds the onlookers, both in- and outside of the picture, that he is present even in Arcadia. In

his *Meaning in the Visual Arts,* in a wonderfully learned and spirited chapter entitled "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," Erwin Panofsky shows how this original meaning was changed, as he argues, through a reinterpretation by Poussin. In a second of two versions of the "Et in Arcadia Ego" motif, dated ca. 1638-40 (figure 3), the shepherds, inspect the inscription on a tomb, calmly and without surprise. Now the "ego" is no longer Death personified but the deceased person in the tomb. "I, too, once lived in Arcadia" he or she calls out from the grave. "Et in Arcadia Ego" ceases to be a warning of the omnipresence of death and becomes instead a meditation of loss – still fully within the scope of the pastoral but definitely with a change of emphasis.[3]

[3] Interestingly enough, the tendency away from the original meaning continued in Romanticism and when Goethe puts the words "Auch ich in Arkadien!" as a motto at the beginning of the *Italienische Reise*, "Et in Arcadia Ego" has an almost hedonistic ring as the poet contentedly states that he has arrived at the country of his dreams.

Just as it does not spare Arcadia in the paintings by Guercino and Poussin, death intrudes into the unrealistically idyllic bourgeois life of a 1960s American suburb. Eugenides' novel which circles so obsessively around death, is a modern, an American, form of "Et in Arcadia Ego." The Latin motto, and with this Eugenides' social critique, is both *memento mori* and elegiac meditation. It describes, in other words, a society whose only "real" contact with reality is death, a society which is unable to face basic ontological questions and which is forever stalled in the meditation of an irretrievably lost beautiful past. Characteristically, escape seems the only way to deal with life for the overwhelming majority of the figures in the novel: for the five Lisbon girls who flee into death, for their parents who move away, and for the we-narrator(s) with their obsessive concern with the (re-) construction of the truth about the Lisbon sisters – in the teeth of the realization that they will "never find the pieces to put them back together" (249).

And exactly as in the paintings of Guercino and Poussin, the we-narrators meditate on the presence of death and the loss of their loved ones in front of an empty tomb:

> Now and then, of course, as we were slowly carted into the melancholic remainder of our lives . . . we would stop, mostly alone, to gaze up at the whited sepulchre of the former Lisbon house. (244)

Death, as becomes clear early in the novel, should have no business in suburbia. Before the suicides of the Lisbon girls, it simply does not exist as a reality for the we-narrators:

> There had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes. The majority of dying had happened during the Second World War when we didn't exist and our fathers were impossibly skinny young men in black-and-white photographs. (35)

And even if the narrators do consider death, it is to them nothing but a very remote threat. Death is a temporal phenomenon, linked with war and old age and therefore safely at a distance: "Now our dads were middle-aged . . . but they were still a long way from death" (35). If death is perceived as a presence at all, this happens only vicariously:

> Nobody's grandfather had died, nobody's grandmother, nobody's parents, only a few dogs: Tom Burke's beagle Muffin who had choked on a Bazooka Joe bubble gum. (35)

Humans do not die in this world – only the odd pet. Still, even the death of the dog does not affect any of the characters, because it is not treated seriously but rather presented as a grotesque accident that could have been prevented if only the dog's owners had behaved more sensibly. In that sense, Muffin's death is a foreshadowing of the "real" deaths of the Lisbon daughters that are to follow. It is a foreshadowing not so much in the sense of being an antecedent event, a faint echo before the sound, as it were, it is a foreshadowing in terms of conditioning circumstances – that is the lack of any apparent sense. In analogy to the dog who died a needless death, the grotesque irrationality of the first of the five suicides seems to suggest that adequate behavior on the part of the parents, the neighbors, and the teachers, could prevent such a tragedy from happening again. But as the story demonstrates, these deaths – death as such – cannot be prevented but must be accepted: "Et in Arcadia Ego." As it turns out, nobody can deal with death, not the neighborhood, not the parents, nor the specially trained psychologists, and certainly not the collective narrator(s). That is why the dead Cecilia cannot be perceived

as dead by the mourners – not even when she is laid out in the coffin before interment and emerges "from the background like a figure in an optical illusion" (39).

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of, this perceived impasse pastoral (and with it, *The Virgin Suicides*) is not escapist – on the contrary. Of course, one needs to distinguish here, as Leo Marx has done in *The Machine in the Garden,* between a "pastoral of sentiment" and a "pastoral of mind." There is, indeed, a form of sentimental pastoral that naïvely celebrates and revels in the unbridled fantasy of eternal spring in Eden. But then there is also the highly serious "pastoral of mind" which according to Marx, "requires an effort of mind and spirit," and is intrinsically critical of what it appears to celebrate. Marx uses Shakespeare's *Tempest* as an example and argues that what allows pastoral to engage seriously with the idea of a successful return to nature is its "temporariness" (69). In this sense pastoral, and here Marx quotes Robert Frost, offers "a momentary stay against confusion" (69). Pastoral really foregrounds transience because the timeless ideal state it portrays is always seen against the backdrop of the reality it attempts to exclude.

Eugenides' book is three things: it is a *memento mori* and an elegy over the loss of human life, but most of all it is an account of the attempt to come to terms with death. Unfortunately, all efforts are in vain and as adults the collective narrators are still left with nothing but an intense, unstilled sensation of loss and yearning: "we couldn't help but retrace their steps, rethink their thoughts" (248).

The fact that the narrative is told from the point of view of a group of males looking back to their adolescence implies that there could be a change of perspective between the time of the events in the past and the future from when it is told. But strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, this is not the case. Although they have physically become older – "with thinning hair and soft bellies" (249) – they have made no progress in answering the fundamental questions they have pondered ever since. The death of the girls is not in the least more clear to them – on the contrary, as time progresses, the only thing that seemed to grant a grasp on the events, memory, begins to fail them and the material evidence gathered in suitcases, which are only opened on special occasions and venerated like relics, gather dust and turn to dust like relics. That the collective narrators, after trying unsuccessfully all known approaches towards understanding death within their reach – criminology, psychology, theology, sociology – are still unable to grasp what happened, might

suggest that they never really left adolescence behind and are trapped forever in their naïve worship of an illusory pastoral never-never land. After all, they still meet in the tree-house in their adult years – desperately clinging to their retreat within the retreat – and continue their religious devotion of the girls and their memory, still spellbound by the mystery of the girls' deaths and forced forever to revisit their memories despite the realization that this was all "a chasing after the wind" (248).

Nonetheless, this is not, I think, the book's principal thrust. While *The Virgin Suicides* does problematize suburban values and aesthetics and so sheds light on the anxieties and the dynamics of American culture at large, it does not leave the reader with a tableau depicting immaturity and resignation. On the contrary: although largely unaware of their own achievement, the we-narrators have transcended suburban mediocrity by overcoming the paralyzing contradictoriness of its aesthetics. Their tireless devotion, the fierceness of their determination to come to terms with the riddle of the girls' deaths and, above all, the intensity and honesty of their original experience bespeak a downright aestheticist attitude reminiscent of Walter Pater's plea for intensity in human life:

> . . . our one chance lies in . . . getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity . . . Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most. (153)

What keeps their commitment alive and ennobles their endeavors, however misguided they may seem, is their unwillingness or their inability to finish the puzzle they had begun to lay out in their youth:

> In the end we had the pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries we couldn't name. (246)

Forever attempting to "name," to come to terms with the "emptinessess" and "gaps" of, and left by, the Lisbon sisters may not yield any results. But then the narrators' tireless attempts to endow what must be their "real" home, the suburbia of their youth, with meaningful beauty is ultimately a postmodern gesture. What they are after is less a grasp of the girls' individual existences than a systematic explanation of their own fascination with them, an aesthetic theory. Such a theory would allow

them to find those rules which, according to David Harvey, "allow eternal and immutable truths to be conveyed in the midst of the maelstrom of flux and change" (205). More importantly, the concomitant (if retroactive) construction and reconstruction of the aesthetic image of the five Lisbon daughters ultimately allows them to piece together some sense of belongingness and identity. Clearly, the journey is the reward here.

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