

Into the Digital Gardens:
On the Cyberpastoral Poetics of Ander Monson and Dennis Hinrichsen

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Abstract

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This thesis aims to address the development of a ‘cyberpastoral’ poetic genre situated within the contemporary technological world, and how this genre carries and furthers the scope of the traditional pastoral genre to invite poets into a digital landscape where they may confront the presence of technology within their everyday lives to address and make familiar the relationship that exists between humans and technology. In close readings of two poems which emphasize the pervasive presence of technology, Ander Monson’s “For Orts” and Dennis Hinrichsen’s “[Loop Narcissus] [w/ and iPhone & the Euclidean Plane],” I examine how these poets utilize and operate within a cyberpastoral poetic genre to emphasize the human and technological/online relationship; act as a landscape of escape and reflection; and encourage further critical investigations into our human and digital existences.

I. Preface: User History

My life can be traced in online experiences.

Shortly before the internet's evolution into the familiar landscape of Web 2.0, and as a sort of ego-stroking demonstration of tech savvy knowhow, my father created his own website to upload and share photos of my family and our lives.¹ The act of sharing—memories, milestones, and every potentially documentable moment—became easy. In the landscape of the website, and with a little hyperlink navigation, you could browse and click past my life from infancy to early adolescence in the span of a few hours. Sometimes with a convenient caption.

And while the website and its stream of photos are likely long scrubbed from the internet, the photos now relegated to private cloud storage, the computer has continued to become a bigger and bigger part of my life. It started innocently enough. Recesses spent in the quiet dark of the computer lab. Night after night spent hidden away in chatrooms with other children who preferred the internet over their families—often whom I had never met in person and never would. This slow growing preference for the world that existed within the confines of the digital world over the outside came on fast. I could go anywhere when I was online (made even better by my parents' ignorance to what I was doing), and I never even had to step outside.

By my early teens, I was fully engrossed in online culture. I grew up with it, after all. I turned to online forums for advice on puberty, bullying, and gender, trusting faceless strangers more than my family. What few friends I had had were found in video game lobbies. Online, nobody thought I was a loser because we were all losers, but at least we were happy. And the

¹ The terms 'Web 1.0,' 'Web 2.0,' and 'Web 3.0' are conceptual frameworks that describe how we use the internet. Web 2.0 refers to the period which saw the introduction of widely available internet and dynamic, interactive and personalized online experiences that emphasized user-generated content.

times where I was (forcibly) offline—tense family dinners, unwanted vacations, school—felt isolating. This feeling only grew as I struggled with my gender, sexuality, and rapidly declining mental health. I wanted nothing more than to escape from the harshness of my family, my body, and my life and make a home in the boundless possibility of the digital world.

And then came the poetry.

II. Introduction: The Technological Garden

All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.²

² Richard Brautigan, *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (A Delta Book, 1968), 1.

Coming out of the haze between the Beats and the hippies, Richard Brautigan's 1967 poem, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," makes a clear declaration in its desire for a peaceful retreat and rejoining with nature. Yet it's worth noting the complication of this countercultural position in its dependence on the presence of technology—the scope of which *seemed* possible in the rush of progress that Cold War-era innovations promised—and its full integration *with* nature. Brautigan's speaker, and their meditative prayer, addresses both the concerns and hopes of his time—to reach towards a future of possibility: the promise and potential of the power of the computer to reshape the world and lead humanity to an idyllic and verdant life in nature.

This vision of a technological utopia is in stark contrast with the concerns voiced by earlier American poets—such as those voiced by William Carlos Williams in "To Elsie" (1923) and Wallace Stevens in "The Man With the Blue Guitar" (1937)—around the threats posed by technology against the American pastoral landscape.³ Perhaps this shift in perception comes as a product of his time and social environment. Steven Moore, in his 2009 essay "Paper Flowers: Richard Brautigan's Poetry," describes the tone of this particular poem as "foretelling the dawning of the Age of Aquarius and capturing the giddy sense of new possibilities that was in the air back then."⁴ This perspective is supported, too, by Fred Turner's understanding of New Communalist beliefs in the communicative and social potential of technology.⁵ Regardless of the

³ Peter Monacell, "In the American Grid: Modern Poetry and the Suburbs," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 1 (2011): 125, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.35.1.122>.

⁴ Steven Moore, "Paper Flowers: Richard Brautigan's Poetry," in *My Back Pages: Reviews and Essays* (Zerogram Press, 2017), 678

⁵ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 33

Turner understands the New Communalists as distinct from New Left of the 1960s, being "the communards of the back-to-the-land movement [who] often embraced the collaborative social practices, the celebration of technology, and the cybernetic rhetoric of mainstream military-industrial-academic research."

root reason, there is no anxiety felt by Brautigan's speaker towards technological "anti-pastoral forces."⁶ The "cybernetic meadow" becomes a postmodern pastoral, one where "the machine is no longer a potential interruption but the central site of the pastoral order"—the garden is found in the machine.⁷

Brautigan's poem marks poetry's early attempts at reaching out towards the potential pleasures—rather than the perils—of the technological world. His is an honest and innocent attempt at imagining what can be done for the state of humans with the growth of the computer. Robert J. Gangewere notes this as a rarity in American poetry; to portray the relationship between the natural world and technology. Notably, he places Brautigan's poem in his 1972 anthology of American environmental literature, *The Exploited Eden*, within the 'New Realities' section.⁸ Poet Vijay Nambisan, writing from over three decades later, too acknowledges the uniqueness of Brautigan's vision of a harmony between humans and computers that sees love and acceptance at the forefront; he describes too, how the modern vision of the computer rejects this.⁹

Six decades after "Machines of Loving Grace," the disposition towards the computer has changed radically and there is little room left for visions like Brautigan's. Reading this poem from the position of our technology heavy and digital lives, however, reignites a sense of intrigue and curiosity in the relationships we hold with the computer. It's here where I am drawn in: the potential influences and impacts felt as a result of the computer's presence in our lives as

⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (Oxford University Press, 1964), 26.

⁷ Scott Hess, "Postmodern Pastoral, Advertising, and the Masque of Technology," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 1 (2004): 77.

⁸ Robert J. Gangewere, *The Exploited Eden: Literature on the American Environment* (Harper & Row, 1972), 376.

⁹ Vijay Nambisan, "Pines and Cybernetics," *The Hindu*, June 3, 2000, <https://web.archive.org/web/20180404202754/http://www.thehindu.com/2000/06/03/stories/1303110d.htm>

explored through poetry. This spotlighting of technology within poetry takes shape as the postmodern mutation of cyberpastoralism and serves to present a truer image of how a poet perceives and understands themselves in relation to the larger world by acknowledging their reliance on technology in daily functions.

In this essay, I present close readings of two poems which can be understood as operating within the cyberpastoral landscape: Ander Monson's sestina "For Orts" from *The Available World* (2010), and "[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]" by Dennis Hinrichsen from *schema geometrica* (2021). These poems address the pervasive presence of technology and place the relationship of the self and technology at the center of their work to explore gratification, digital refuge, and the inseparable nature of humans and their technologies. The work within this essay draws and builds from discussions around the state of post-pastoral poetry and attempts to define a genre of cyberpastoral poetry as it engages critically with a technological world; produces moments of revelation around the self and said worlds; acts as a point of both escape and confrontation for the speaker as they traverse real and technological spaces; and pursues a larger investigation of the relationship between an individual, the technology they use, and the natural world.

III. The Digital Age: Enter Cyberpastoralism

American literary critic Lawrence Buell describes pastoralism as a "species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without."¹⁰ Buell's understanding of pastoralism is all-encompassing; his definition captures poetry and

¹⁰ Lawrence Buell, "Pastoral Ideology," in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 32.

prose and is a “[celebration of] the nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city. This domain includes for present purposes all degrees of rusticity from farm to wilderness.”¹¹

Though, even with an all-encompassing definition, what does a pastoral celebration look like and how do we find it in the 21st century when over half the population lives in urban areas and very little of the Earth remains ecologically intact? To answer the *what*, we can look at Terry Gifford’s four understandings of the pastoral—1) as a historical form; 2) as descriptive of the country and as provider of implicit/explicit contrast to the urban; 3) as pejorative in its simplistic idealization of reality; and 4) as literature concerned with farming practices and the raising grazing animals—and view the contemporary construction of the pastoral as being in contrast to the urban, but the question of *where* still remains.¹² Perhaps we imagine our escape from the urban as taking place in the broad, sweeping landscapes or towering forests of national parks, but the majesty of these images can quickly be reduced when faced with the overwhelming congestion of tourists, the scramble to connect to public wi-fi, and the persistent struggle to capture the perfect picture for social media. To trouble the idea of finding escape in nature even more is the matter of accessibility—how many find themselves with the time, money, and means to actually *get* into nature beyond their own front lawns, public parks, or the nearest sidewalk tree? The solution comes to us through the computer screen.

The earliest use of the term ‘cyberpastoral’ comes in Tison Pugh’s 2007 critical analysis essay of the films *Electric Dreams* (1984) and *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), in which he introduces and defines the term as being a genre which “[allows] their protagonists to inhabit an inhospitable urban terrain as they simultaneously escape from its pressures” and as a “bodiless

¹¹ Lawrence Buell, “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised,” *American Literary History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 23.

¹² Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*. 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 1-3.

realm of personal freedom and desire.”¹³ As rural retreats becomes less and less viable, the escape is now situated within the computer. And it makes sense; given the ever-growing technological era we currently reside in. If we consider, again, the previously addressed scarcity of time, money, and means to achieve an escape into nature, the computer presents us with an easy alternative. With little effort and swift keystrokes, an individual can find themselves enraptured by sweeping aerial shots of faraway landscapes without ever leaving the house. Pugh’s emphasis on escape, too, is worth noting for defining this type of pastoral—especially within our current culture of pervasive social medias and alluring virtual realities that exist seemingly on par with the physical realities our bodies occupy.

This shift is shocking, to say the least. It, like Brautigan’s “Machines of Loving Grace,” is in stark contrast with past uses and understandings of the pastoral to “critique the deleterious effects of urbanization on the nation and its residents.”¹⁴ Though, it is no failing on the part of the pastoral or the poets who engage with it. To acknowledge it as such would be its own failing to recognize the new potentials that the digital age has provided for the pastoral genre. Instead, the cyberpastoral takes shape, I argue, as the long-awaited update to the pastoral. Several key features from the traditional pastoral persist into the cyberpastoral, albeit *different* from before. Of the most notable changes is a departure from geographic concern—a departure into a cyberpastoral landscape can occur from anywhere, any time, and any place. With the removal of geographical concerns, the cyberpastoral is no longer concerned with warring urban or rural lifestyles but rather faces the complications of differentiating reality from virtuality.¹⁵

¹³ Tison Pugh, “The Perilous Pleasures of the Cyberpastoral: *Electric Dreams* and *You’ve Got Mail*,” *Studies in the Humanities* 34, no. 1 (2007): 1.

¹⁴ Monacell, “In the American Grid,” 124.

¹⁵ Pugh, “Perilous Pleasures,” 2.

The escape into the cyberpastoral is—like the traditional pastoral before it—not without its risks. Within the digital landscape, the individual is presented with questions of what is and is not real; the landscape, the users, the experience of being. Yet there is an echoing sense of familiarity that comes with this. The pastoral has long operated as hyperreal and postmodern in its rejection of a conflict within the ideal, and in its projection of a “human fantasy of leisure, simplicity, and pleasure onto an imagined all-providing landscape [called] ‘nature’.”¹⁶ And in asking what is real within the cyberpastoral, another modification to the genre is presented concerning the relationship of humans, nature, and influence felt by technology on both sides. The cyberpastoral, in turn, broadens the original scope of critical pastoral discussion around environmentalism, consumerism, culture, and class—revitalized, the cyberpastoral genre shifts the pastoral into becoming “one of the primary myths underlying our capitalist consumer society.”¹⁷

The digital landscape of the cyberpastoral presents further danger when considering the changed boundaries of human agency and mutation of relationships across the digital realm. In Michael Chorost’s, *World Wide Mind: The Coming Integration of Humanity, Machines, and the Internet* (2011), he addresses the potential risks of a digitally connected mind by other humans: “Hackers. Spam. Phishing. Identity theft. Server crashes. A connected computer is, by definition, a threatened computer.”¹⁸ Contrasted with the grounded and often docile landscape of the pastoral countryside, the cyberpastoral presents a limitless and uncontrollable world without shape. It is, however, also worth noting that Chorost’s vision of a cybernetic mind is not wholly

¹⁶ Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral,” 74-75.

¹⁷ Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral,” 78.

¹⁸ Michael Chorost, *World Wide Mind: The Coming Integration of Humanity, Machines, and the Internet* (Free Press, 2011), 197.

negative, he states earlier: “the internet is not some alien force outside us. It *is* us, our hopes and desires realized in hardware and code.”¹⁹ Just as important, the difference maintained by the cyberpastoral against the traditional pastoral is in its *direction* of temporal focus. In addressing the idealisms of pastorals, Raymond Williams described the pastoral as “the idea of an ordered and happier past set against the disturbance and disorder of the present.”²⁰ The pastoral may look *backwards*, but the cyberpastoral, in its reliance on technological innovation, looks *away* from the “pleasures of yesteryear [towards] the technological pleasures of the present and the future.”²¹

To understand the genre of the cyberpastoral and its applications within poetry, I present four qualities that serve to shape a cyberpastoral engagement: 1) a pervasive presence of some form of technology as holding influence over the poem or speaker; 2) an implicit or explicit recognition of escape, refuge, or reinvention by way of the use of technology; 3) an acknowledgement by the speaker/poet of their relationship in both the real and technological worlds; and 4) an exposing of *a* truth—felt by the speaker, poet, and/or reader—around the role played by the individual in their use of technology. Not all of the provided qualities must unanimously appear within a work for it be considered a part of the cyberpastoral genre, nor do I feel this list is all-encompassing, though I think it a good start.

Returning to Brautigan’s “Machines of Loving Grace,” this first quality of the cyberpastoral is demonstrated by the clear presence—or perhaps the invocation—of technology is what allows for the speaker to begin their foray into the cyberpastoral. The influence of technology here is obvious. It is central to the poem, but the speaker, too, is wholly concerned

¹⁹ Chorost, *World Wide Mind*, 196.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 45.

²¹ Pugh, “Perilous Pleasures,” 3.

with technology as the provider for a harmonious future within a cybernetic forest, meadow, and ecology. Secondly, like the pastoral poems that came before it, the speaker finds a form of escape through their access to the technological world. Here, Brautigan's speaker's call to be "joined back to nature / [...] / and all watched over / by machines of loving grace" realizes the potential for a reconstruction of society with the acceptance of machines. And from this realization comes the third feature of the cyberpastoral poem—which sees the poet/speaker acknowledging their relationship to both the real and technological—in the shape of urgent and repeated parentheticals: "(and / the sooner the better!)," "(right now, please!)," and "(it has to be!)." Each parenthetical further amplifying the speaker's (and perhaps Brautigan's own voice, as well) belief in the promise of technology above their own human ability to create utopia. The exposing of a kind of truth is felt slowly throughout the entirety of "Machines of Loving Grace," but is perhaps most notable in the speaker's final resolution that they, and others, dream of the future promised in the title: "and all watched over / by machines of loving grace."²² This final sentiment, paired with the rest of the poem, presents a speaker who is willing to surrender their agency and control in hopes of a harmonious society created by the benevolence (and it has to be!) of a machine.

In the closing of Glen Love's essay, "*Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Theory Meets Ecocriticism*," he ponders on the meaning of the Latin motto and the future of an ecocritical pastoral, stating: "the future might well find its healing vision not in the simplicity of the garden, but in the complexity of the old-growth forest."²³ But perhaps this notion is too binary, after all; too focused on looking backwards rather than forwards. The cyberpastoral may certainly be

²² Brautigan, "Machines of Loving Grace," 1.

²³ Glen A. Love, "*Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Theory Meets Ecocriticism*," *Western American Literature* 27, no. 3 (1992): 205.

viewed as just another term joining the “explosion of prefix pastorals”—the radical pastoral, postmodern pastoral, gay sex pastoral, necropastoral, toxic pastoral, and many, many more—however, within the current context of the digital age, it seems to be more than just that.²⁴ The concerns of the genre—just as they were in the traditional. understanding of the pastoral—are real and ask serious questions of poets and readers alike. What the cyberpastoral asks is to confront the reality of now, an idea furthered by writer and artist James Bridle in their understanding of this current period—one in which our planet, societies, and selves are shaped by technology—as a new dark age, marked by “an apparent inability to see clearly what is in front of us [the availability of knowledge through technology], and to act meaningfully, with agency and justice, in the world.”²⁵ Critical engagement and exploration into cyberpastoral poetry seeks to interrogate the circumstances which have produced this inability. Here, poets situate themselves beyond the bounds of both the garden and the old-growth forest—visions of a past we cannot return to—and reach out towards the vastness of the virtual world to make sense of the present in which we live and the future that still awaits us.

IV. Overwhelming Excess and Interruption in Ander Monson’s “For Orts”

Ander Monson’s 2010 poetry collection, *The Available World*, is difficult to describe in its scope, subject, and voice in more refined words than what the title provides. It just *is*. The poems within this collection tackle all that is available to him; from an armless brother to sermons on calculus to imagined musing on the life of actor, Wil Wheaton. The poems themselves—which are accompanied by a maze-like online user-curated experience—possess

²⁴ Gifford, *Pastoral*, 203-204.

²⁵ James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* Rev. ed. (Verso, 2023), 2, 11.

their own sense of growth, as if they are building towards something much bigger and far beyond Monson himself. An early example of this portrayal of largeness is presented in the early poem, “Sometimes the Air Surrounding Me Is Sudden with Flowers,” which ends: “It’s as if I’ve never seen / the world in which I live before.”²⁶ A sequence of poems invoking the title—“Availability,” “Availability,” and “More and More Availability”—appear throughout the collection and provide the most excess in their listing, each emphasizing the keeping of these memories of muchness, not by way of the mind but by memory disk.²⁷ This sort of steady reminder of the presence of the digital acts as a central feature throughout Monson’s collection as his cataloguing of physical and virtual environments become more and more intertwined in creating the shape of his available world. A world which is clear in its cyberpastoralism and invites readers to consider the scope of *all* that is available to them, too.

The first section, “Availability” (not to be confused for the second section of the same name), opens with an epigraph from “To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvell: “Let us roll all our strength, and all / Our sweetness, up into one ball.”²⁸ Monson’s poems, however, desire a ball that encompasses his *entire* available world, taking in the discarded and unattractive scraps as he goes. This gathering act comes to address abundance and excess in one of the last poems of this first section, “For Orts,” in documenting the strange and hypnotic nature of online distractions. From the first word of the poem, Monson situates the speaker as already having retreated into the digital landscape and being overtaken by the pervasive abundance of the internet. This feeling is furthered by the strange and broken syntax, frequent and sporadic punctuation, and fragmented

²⁶ Ander Monson, *The Available World*, 14.

²⁷ Monson, *TAW*, 32-34.

²⁸ Monson, *TAW*, 2.

sentences enacting the sense of the speaker as being rapidly pulled from thing to thing, without the ability to complete their own thoughts or descriptions.

For Orts

Online: sprinkling clicks among the pixels. Then rain & yes
& light & rush. In a wink they appear.

Offers. Often they are tantalizing. Wouldn't I like
larger & more meaty X & such. &

yes I such the want it. Yes I am sure am so of age!

On a fulcrum: an axe. A seesaw, a so-so

one, sharp and rust and fun. Yes I ex that box of want. So

I provide the what that is required to, yes,

process my application. This is the age

of so much, and boom! it appears in dream. It appears

I cannot remember how just now, stack overflow. Do this &

think of me says she, think of what I am like

backlit at night. Absolutely & I want & want. Like

those pills by night and presto! ether! erection! dreaming! so

is there order, pattern to it, darkness &

its opposite, all strobe, switching roles. Yes,

without prescription or direction. Yes, your avatar may appear

however you would like it to. Like you? Really? Swallow. Relive

that age,

that year forever. Then some nights I am not of age

& I am up & on those nights, like,

I wish for Teens, those lovely animals that appear

sometimes onscreen when I am up so

long & cannot Sominex. I think of sex & yes,

of Godzilla with a detritus wake: extension cord &

coils of telephone line wailing behind him &

optic cable & Ethernet cable & soon Godzilla, harbinger of the age

of muchness & overflowing emptiness, is again upon us, this yes

this rash of it this tyrannosaurus gush. And I *like*

information, virtuality. & yes I desire it yes. So

overfull that I am glistening with it, that I appear—

Pause. Reply, then rinse. With your help I disappear

completely. I want it this Biggie fullness in me. &

afterward a bloom of light, a system-broom, reboot, a bomb. So

forever I am looking for an approximation of love. Take me, my

beautiful age,
 while I am willing. It is all about the rush of Yes, how I like
 its action on the body. The thunder of the sibilant, of Yes,

of answer, of vector. Then it appears again. I think of cream, an age
 of age-defying
 monster footprints in tubs of Nivea. I fill it all with like, asymptote,
 whatever
 comes next, a set of eyes, of so-so yes. I hope that when it finally
 comes it looks like love.²⁹

The choice of the sestina form is notable, too, for how Monson molds the form to produce a sense of persistent motion through sharp enjambement that propels both the speaker and reader forward through this fast-paced cyberpastoral. In an investigation into the contemporary and whimsical sestinas of the present day, “Sestina! or, The Fate of the Idea of Form,” Stephanie Burt points out a “[noted] dissatisfaction with professionalization.”³⁰ Something which Monson concretizes in his demonstration of muchness, whirlwind, and scrap to create a sestina against professionalization (as well as her later understanding of sestinas as providing poets with an opportunity to emphasize “technique and fun”).³¹ And yet, within this romp of a tribute to junk, there also persists a pervasive technological presence and thirst for virtual gratification that can only be cyberpastoral.

On the surface of the poem, the internet presents itself as acting as the central technological presence, though it may be better to consider the role of consumerism and advertising through online distribution as the true driving force affecting the speaker. They are struck early in the first stanza by “[o]ffers. Often they are tantalizing. Wouldn’t I like / larger & more meaty X & such.” The appeal of the offer and the desire for X, whatever it may be, pushes

²⁹ Monson, *TAW*, 19-20.

³⁰ Stephanie Burt, “Sestina! or, the Fate of the Idea of Form,” *Modern Philology* 105, no. 1 (2007): 219-220.

³¹ Burt, “Sestina!” 221.

the speaker forward through the sestina in an attempt to grasp it. Later, in the syntactically difficult line of “yes I such the want it. Yes I am sure am so of age!” the repetition of both ‘yes’ and ‘&’ support a rising speed throughout the first stanza, urging the speaker (and reader) to move quickly towards the next thing. The speaker’s quick mention of ‘age,’ too, is noteworthy for how it echoes the tendency to forego age boundaries within digital spaces in favor of immediate access, regardless of what awaits. And from the urgency and desire for more, the speaker finds themselves unable to keep up with the flood of information and stimuli; they cannot comprehend “the age / of so much” and can find themselves crashing “I cannot remember how just now, stack overflow.”³²

The urgency that is imposed throughout Monson’s sestina by outside technological forces is reminiscent of the ideas surrounding the role technology plays in obtaining a pastoral ideal, as put forth by Scott Hess in “Postmodern Pastoral, Advertising, and the Masque of Technology.” He notes the similarity between the contemporary advertising industry and the pastoral mode in its “[promise of] a life of perfect leisure and secular happiness without effort, [found] simply by buying the correct product.”³³ The true nature of what draws in the speaker is never revealed to us directly—and we may go as far as thinking that the speaker’s desire mocks our own disposition towards online offers, likes, or ideals—only that there is an unwavering need for *something* and that the closeness of it alone brings the speaker closer to euphoria. But the motion and urgency of the poem points us towards believing in the digital excess as the source deliverer

³² ‘Stack overflow’ refers, in software, to a particular kind of buffer overflow that occurs when the demand for more memory exceeds what is presently available, typically resulting in the program crashing.

³³ Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral,” 78.

It is worth noting the distance between Hess’s essay, 2004, and the current technological moment. Whether Hess had an awareness of the path advertising and consumerism would take in the subsequent twenty years is uncertain, but it certainly has sustained staying power, regardless.

of pleasure: “Absolutely & I want & want. Like / those pills by night and presto! ether! erection! dreaming!”

The speed of wanting is noticeably slowed between the fourth and fifth stanzas by the speaker’s own interrupting thought: the image of, “Godzilla with a detritus wake: extension cord & / coils of telephone line wailing behind him & / optic cable & Ethernet cable.” Here, Monson sees the classic, nuclear-age kaiju becoming a “harbinger of the age / of muchness,” reimagining the monster and his destructive wake as synonymous for the influences felt in the digital age. And it is here where the poem reaches its climax—the pinnacle of tension between the real and unreal; the eroticism of destruction; the peak of the roller coaster moments before the fall—the speaker now confronted by a cyberpastoral entity made manifest in its excess and destruction. They stand before their available world; presented with the choice of an escape into “muchness & overflowing emptiness” the speaker declares: “yes I desire it yes.”

This desire and sudden tumble towards emptiness sees the speaker become increasingly frantic in their eagerness as they move through the penultimate stanza and envoi. Monson furthers this with a parataxic and increasingly unclear listing of that which excites the speaker towards the unknowns to come—“a bloom of light, a system-broom, reboot, a bomb” and “It is all about the rush of Yes, how I like / its action on the body”—but the speaker finds nothing concrete; they are left “forever [...] looking for an approximation of love.” The envoi sees the speaker left (again) in anticipation. Now surrounded by everything available and situated within “a pastoral dream of happiness” built up through clicks and repeated, mindless yeses, they are

left isolated by the muchness of it all.³⁴ ³⁵ Left to restart their frantic imagining of what will come next, the speaker can only “hope that when it finally comes it looks like love.”

The cyberpastoral landscape of Monson’s sestina pays close attention to technology both in its setting and language, tracking the escapist desires of the speaker as they delve deeper and deeper into the online world in search of an unknowable sense of gratification. “For Orts” can be thought of, in a way, to problematize the degree of engagement and engrossment on the part of the individual—both the speaker, reader, and Monson, himself—with the promises and potentials within online spaces. And the poem is aware of this acknowledgement, presenting itself for the Orts—the morsel, scraps, or junk, albeit digital—not the human. Here, distraction plays a two-part key role in the effectiveness and impact of this cyberpastoral—the reader, distracted by the muchness of Monson’s language; and the speaker, distracted by the false potential of happiness that lies within an online space.³⁶ “For Orts” aims to place the distractions presented to us by scrap at the forefront and showcase its ability to trap and isolate an individual from the larger available world only in recognizing the potential harm of such distractions is there any hope for escape from this cyclical cyberpastoral.

V. Consumption and the Digital Self: Dennis Hinrichsen’s “[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]”

In a review of Dennis Hinrichsen’s 2021 collection, *schema geometrica*, Kimberly Ann Priest describes it, in words that can be easily understood as motioning towards the

³⁴ Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral,” 81.

³⁵ Ander Monson, “An Interview with Ander Monson,” interview by Jeni Jobst, *Moonlighting*, The Lit Pub, December 20, 2012, <https://www.thelitpub.com/reviews-interviews/tag/Ander+Monson>.

³⁶ Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral,” 89.

cyberpastoral, as an investigation into “our individual and collective complicity with lust, destruction, and digitization that impacts ecology and economy.”³⁷ Hinrichsen himself notes the poems as being his attempt to “close that metaphysical gap between self and other, whether it was human or electronic waste, whether it was in my analog space or the digital world I fell into through my iPhone.”³⁸ This all comes to form within the collection itself as poems address the COVID-19 pandemic, critiques of social media, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, and memory all as seen and felt through a screen. With an explicit acknowledgement of the depth of the technological world, and a clear interest in exploring what it means to exist both physically and digitally, these poems present themselves clearly to be read as cyberpastorals.

Several poems throughout the collection can be viewed as a sort of ‘broken’ sonnet, each of which serve to present individual scenes building towards—similar to the slow growing feeling present in Monson’s work—the larger image of the collection.³⁹ Of these broken sonnets, “[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]” presents itself as cyberpastoral in its speaker’s questioning of the self as they exist both in the real world and within the virtual, via the screen. The sonnet portion is held between two monostichs, acting as the frame of the poem itself in raising and lowering the curtain. Within the poem itself, both the speaker and poet reach through the poem (or screen) to ask for the reader to see themselves within the text, and to question their engagement with the digital as they watch and are watched back.

[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]

³⁷ Kimberly Ann Priest, “In A Digital Wasteland,” review of *schema geometrica*, by Dennis Hinrichsen, *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, March, 2023.

³⁸ Dennis Hinrichsen, “Andrew Collard Interviews Dennis Hinrichsen,” interview by Andrew Collard, *The Cincinnati Review*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.cincinnatiareview.com/interviews/andrew-collard-interviews-dennis-hinrichsen/>.

³⁹ Hinrichsen, interview by Collard.

—I tremble like Keats’ hand before the button

but I press it anyway & take two photographs of my eyes // one
 unspiked corona at a time // push color post them—
 faux suns adding shine to the wash // —O brief
 instant—this advertisement for self—how soon
 before you feed the totem // self as cyclops
 going down // immaculate oceans culling
 a few *loves & likes* // —O box of light I hold in my hand
 how you preen & waggle for my delight //
 a voyeuristic echo (I know you watch)
 pitching so many shirts I can wear untucked
 is it you who has fallen into a pool // the circuitry in my head
 hovering some Euclidean level above your own //
 a congruency // —ah the double bind // this water
 freighting the drowned contraption

that is manic code & desire for me // & drowning gaze (38)

The monostich that precedes the poem begins sees the speaker in hesitation. They position themselves as similar to “Keats’ hand,” which invokes the fragmentary poem, “This Living Hand,” by John Keats himself. The speaker of Keats’ brief poem addresses his awareness of death’s inevitably coming and the unfairness of that death by dreaming, through his hand, of the possibility that “red life might stream again” by reaching out of the poem to haunt the reader’s mind.⁴⁰ But the speaker of Hinrichsen’s poem, though fully aware of something inevitable, is not concerned with death. His speaker is hesitating “before the button” at the threat of being trapped and haunted by the allure of the cyberpastoral. The role of this line as a standalone monostich provides tonal framing by invoking Keats but also reveals how little this hesitation occupies the mind of the speaker, as the sonnet begins: “but I press it anyway & take two photographs of my eyes.” The metaphorical weight of this choice, as established by Keats’ hand, is made heavier by this capturing of the speaker’s eyes and solidifies their entrance into the cyberpastoral.

⁴⁰ Edward Hirsch, “On John Keats’s ‘This Living Hand,’” *Poetry Society of America*, <https://poetrysociety.org/poems-essays/old-school/on-john-keatss-this-living-hand>.

Unlike Monson's speaker, Hinrichsen's speaker maintains an awareness of their complicity within the cyberpastoral. The monostich and the "tremble" are indications of this awareness, but the photo—which is edited and posted with haste—acts as an "advertisement for self" and "feed[s] the totem" which can be assumed to be social media. And while Hinrichsen's sonnet does not directly follow a strict sonnet structure, the motion and organization of "[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]" can be viewed as variation on the Petrarchan for its sudden shift in tone, occurring between the seventh and eighth lines, when Hinrichsen solidifies himself as the speaker by interrupting the poem with a parenthetical addressed to his cellphone, now understood as the "box of light"—and perhaps it is addressed to the voyeur reader, as well—saying, "(I know you watch)." In this acknowledging, Hinrichsen exposes the felt presence of a technological entity and consistency of advertising that lurks within the cyberpastoral landscape, yet his speaker remains unable to pull themselves away.

Hinrichsen, now speaker, is not distracted by "so many shirts" or "the way waste products spewed back at me," but instead speaks directly the 'you' of both his cellphone and the captured self that looks back from the screen.⁴¹ The masque of technology has been lifted to remove the illusion as Hinrichsen confronts the relationship between worlds within his cyberpastoral.⁴² The mention of Narcissus and the Euclidean plane comes through—"is it you who has fallen into a pool"—as he questions the identity of who appears on screen (himself or his digital self; is there a difference?) and notes the closeness of himself, regardless. What is revealed, the "double bind" that Hinrichsen acknowledges, points to a continuation of his complicity in the digital world, not freedom.

⁴¹ Dennis Hinrichsen, "What, Why, How: Dennis Hinrichsen," interview by Linda K. Sienkiewicz, April 25, 2022, <https://lindaksienkiewicz.com/what-why-how-dennis-hinrichsen/>.

⁴² Hess, "Postmodern Pastoral," 87-88.

Like Monson's sestina, Hinrichsen uses strange and broken syntax to emphasize the overstimulation of the entering a digital world. However, instead of fragmented sentences, Hinrichsen uses dashes and double virgules to break, compress, and isolate moments of the poem. Hinrichsen describes them as marking out the "musical and cinematic beats" throughout his poems and that they contribute to the feeling of motion between images and scenes that complicates the readers ability to grasp a sense of completeness or satisfaction as his poems explores the digital life.⁴³ In avoiding punctuation in favor of dashes and double virgules, the poem's structure rejects narrative wholeness and instead produces a sense of looping in its movements across the page.

There has been a two-way flow between the digital and human world throughout the poem.⁴⁴ Hinrichsen's poem acknowledges the connection between everything through the online world and, in doing so, identifies the inescapability of the cyberpastoral scene. This interrogation between the speaker, poet, and technology occurs earlier—and often with different questions—in the collection than "[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]," and it will keep occurring. This particular poem turns its focus to the potential depth of the digital pool in which our reflection is presented from; here it sees the waters as holding the shape of the poet in social media profiles, targeted advertisements, and the literal photos capturing their likeness. By returning to this question throughout the collection, Hinrichsen is able to address several topics—the environment, pandemics, aging, consumption, pornography, music, and more—within the realm of the cyberpastoral from a several angles and, with each perspective presented, asks the reader to consider them and their complicity in them, too.

⁴³ Hinrichsen, interview by Sienkiewicz.

⁴⁴ Hinrichsen, interviewed by Sienkiewicz.

VI. Conclusion

Pugh's initial conception of the cyberpastoral genre is situated within the landscape of late Web 1.0 and is particularly focused on the technological culture and capabilities from the mid-1980s to early 1990s. In these specific cyberpastorals, their technologies—artificial intelligence, surveillance, and email—function within the technological bounds of the early Digital Revolution and are not yet capable of the speed, frequency, accessibility, or pervasiveness that contemporary technologies possess. This vision of the cyberpastoral comes from 2007, before the rapid development of new technologies in the Fourth Industrial Age and precedes the everydayness of technology within social, political, and economic realms. Though, even with no awareness of the incoming future development of technology, the final question Pugh poses at the end of his investigation into cyberpastoral solidifies the staying power of the genre by encouraging continued engagement with the genre and future texts that aim to engage with it, saying: "... it will be instructive to observe the ways in which technology is depicted in regard to human pastoral romance: will it remain complicit in the degradation of humanity, or will human romance and electronic innovation enter into a more mutually beneficial relationship?"⁴⁵

And what role does poetry play in the pursuit of a cyberpastoral genre? How does poetry, not science fiction, aim to address our engagement with technological world? In Joyelle McSweeney's collection of essays, *The Necropastoral*, she writes on the concerns held by the poetry of the present—that which "subsumes and consumes the past into its present"—saying:

"[I]t necessarily negates many of the values that come with the western literary tradition, including stability, well craftedness, elegance, restraint, timelessness, humanism. It is concerned with the media through which is moves, flimsy concerns and flimsy conceits, superficiality, errata and (likely) ephemera, flexibility,

⁴⁵ Pugh, "Perilous Pleasures," 12.

instability typified by bombast, excess, and overproduction.”⁴⁶

The poetry of this technological era *must* acknowledge its own present if it is to hope to understand the complexity of human existence as it is influenced by the rapid flow of information, instant communication, and an increasing dependency on the digital. Writing within the cyberpastoral genre is not an attempt at bringing science fiction to poetry but is a way of exploring the very real world in which we live. Gifford, in addressing the number of prefix pastorals, emphasized that the variation of subgenres points suggests an “assumption that pastoral is now a conceptual term that is seen as being adaptable and vital to confront contemporary concerns.”⁴⁷

The poetry of the cyberpastoral presents an opportunity for a closer look at the interactions between humans and their technology and seeks to engage with and critique the complexities of those interactions. The poems of Ander Monson’s available world present the largeness and abundance of digital worlds as cyberpastoral escapes with the goal of revealing how this overwhelming muchness and constant seeking of gratification can be a lonely endeavor. Using the sestina form in “For Orts,” he is able to emphasize the allure of online worlds and the repeated frequency of distraction that occurs online. Hinrichsen’s “[Loop Narcissus] [w/ an iPhone & the Euclidean Plane]” presents a different kind of cyberpastoral in his (notably also using a formal structure, albeit refitted for the cyberpastoral) broken sonnet that is filled with structural interruption that reflects an unreachable satisfaction in scrolling, though it still addresses the same frequency of distraction that Monson presents. By entering the world of the

⁴⁶ Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 153.

⁴⁷ Gifford, *Pastoral*, 204.

cyberpastoral, these poets question the nature of their technological livelihoods and grapple with their own complicity in the actions of the global technological machine.

The world is now online, that much is uncontested. And in being online, it has brought about a new kind of open-access pastoral retreat through virtual worlds, social networks, endless media, and a looping scroll that provides boundless gratification. These pastorals—the eponymous cyberpastoral—are everyday sanctuaries, but they are not perfect and require close and critical attention. The recognition of such complications through poetry produces nuanced and confrontational investigations into the presence of technology in daily life and the way it alters our understanding of the world as a result. Within the landscape of the cyberpastoral, the poetry of the traditional pastoral is adapted, making it a viable ground for investigating contemporary concerns. The result is poetry that asks both the writer and reader to “wade through the plague ground of the present” in search of “the present tense resembles you in all its spumey and spectacular 3-D.”⁴⁸ Here now, within our own cyberpastoral landscapes, we come to recognize the weight of our relationships with technology and consider the physical and digital role we play as we continue towards the future.

⁴⁸ McSweeney, *Necropastoral*, 157.

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