‘Making do’ and ‘making-with’: A politics of compassion in the English countryside

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James Rebanks, *English Pastoral: An Inheritance*, Penguin 2020

James Rebanks’s second book, *English Pastoral*, tells the story of three generations of farmers: himself, his father and his grandfather. It comes at a critical juncture for farming, which is torn between efforts to continually drive costs down while feeding ever more mouths, and an obligation to protect our vulnerable environment. Rebanks’s voice helps to bridge the separation that many in the developed West feel from the ‘vital [agricultural] processes that sustain us’ (p137), and outlines an alternative path that balances the harsh realities that modern farmers face with a compassionate call to care for our natural world.

Rebanks tells a story from his childhood: his hands tremble nervously as he is about to flick a switch controlling the electrical wires around a field of cows. He’s been shocked before, and the dodgy circuitry hasn’t been fixed. It’s the result, he says, of an ‘unspoken ethos’ among farmers ‘to manage with half-broken things or mend them’; they call it ‘making do’ (p43).

English Pastoral draws on such wisdom to speak about broader ideas surrounding humanity’s relationship with nature. Rebanks is deeply critical of the flaws of farming ‘progress’, with its vast fields of mass-produced uniform crops, damaging pesticides and machinery, and lack of genetic diversity. But he also critiques the opposing approach of ecologists and activists who propose cordoning off large tracts of land in an effort to return them to an imagined ‘wild’ former state. This state, he explains, is irreconcilable with the way our infrastructure has shaped our environment in the UK for thousands of years, and the space we require to sustain ourselves (p248).

Uncomfortable with extremes of agricultural intensification on the one hand and ‘land-sparing’ for rewilding (discussed further in this edition by Kate Swade) on the other, Rebanks turns to the old ethos of ‘making do’ to chart a new path. He uses his own farm as an example, combining his grandfather’s knowledge of the land with that which he’s learned from environmentalists and ecologists – alongside some useful techniques from agricultural modernisation. Key to this form of agroecology (also discussed further in this edition by Richard Bramley) is the acceptance that we cannot return to a pre-modern utopia, nor can we modernise farming to the extent of 'pure productivity' (p202).

Like the half-functioning electrical unit that just about gets the job done, agroecology doesn't have to be perfect to be valuable: 'A field with twenty species of flowers and grasses in it may not be as ecologically pristine as a wild beaver-made meadow, or a bison-grazed woodland clearing, but that doesn't render it worthless. It is much richer and better for nature than a flowerless silage field' (p252). Towards the end of the book, Rebanks tells a more recent story: that of his elderly dad showing his children how to refashion two broken gates into a new one. His words resonate keenly both with the wisdom of prior generations and with his new path for farming: 'you could make something new from something broken' (p205).

Rebanks's ethos of 'making do' is connected to what multi-disciplinary feminist scholar Donna Haraway might term *sympoiesis*: 'Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means "making-with"'.[1] Rebanks notes the arrogance of the way many in the West appear to claim to have 'raised ourselves from the earth', and he offers a vision, as well as an example in the form of his own farm, of how we might 'put farming and nature back together, not drive them further apart' (pp114, 202). Complementing Haraway's point that 'nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing',[2] Rebanks tells us how species such as the curlew have existed 'alongside mankind for so long that no one is quite sure where it lived in the distant wilder past' (p202). Once we dispose of the utopic vision of an ancient, perfect natural system, we can 'make-with' the land to produce sustenance *and* allow life to flourish. After all, the roots of the word 'utopia' lie not only in the Greek for 'good place', but 'no place'.[3]

Rebanks identifies a disconnect between our modern, largely urban lives, and the 'harsh realities' of the acts farmers do in our name to feed us (p200) (see Luke Pollard's article in this edition for more on the political ramifications of this divide). Rebanks sees the answer in reaching out: 'the more we share our farm, the more it feels like it matters' (p243). He fosters connection with the local rural community, but goes further, to embrace a 'small army of naturalists' (p243), school tours, and, through his writing, the wider public. The ethos of 'making-with' is evident, then, not just in humanity's relationship with the nonhuman, but with each other: 'no farm is an island, but part of a wider ecosystem, a valley, a river catchment, an interconnected world' (p247).

Inheritance and familial obligation are at the heart of *English Pastoral*, but Rebanks comes to recognise the importance of 'making-with' a deeper history and future generations. Many of his criticisms of the idealisation of the 'old ways' come from this elongated timeline. He recognises that, over three generations, it starts to feel as though this is the way things have always been done. By studying the social history of several centuries, and the ecological history of millennia, he realises this is not at all the case. Rebanks finds flaws and wisdom in his grandfather's teaching, and looks ahead to bring improvement for future generations; he demonstrates a hybrid of the old ways as well as some changes that are 'good and necessary, and perhaps inevitable' (p174). 'Planting a tree', Rebanks says, 'means you believe, and care about, a world that will be there after you are gone' (p268). And he's planted over 12,000.

English Pastoral is book about balance and moderation. However, despite his fascination with hedgerows, walls, and other such borders, I don't find it valid to criticise Rebanks for sitting on the fence. He may map out a terrain that is 'messy and complicated' (p13), but he provides a guiding principle: a politics of compassion.

Leading clinical psychologist and founder of Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) Paul Gilbert acknowledges the multitudes of definitions for compassion, but offers a simple description of 'a basic kindness, with a deep awareness of the suffering of oneself and of other living things'.[4] Gilbert elaborates, identifying a few central qualities of compassion (p290): it requires 'strength', such as that required to protect the environment in the face of immense commercial pressures; 'wisdom', to understand humanity's complexity and still learn from the old while embracing parts of the new; 'responsibility', to realise that, whatever the extent of suffering, we must alleviate it in whatever small ways we can; 'warmth', to show care and kindness in all our actions; and 'non-judgement', to accept ourselves and others by recognising that we all respond to our own unique pressures and struggles – as Rebanks says of his father and grandfather, 'they responded to the ages they lived and worked in, and so must I' (p256).

This principle of compassion is not explicitly defined, but threads through every element of Rebanks's writing. It is present in the way he accepts his own flaws and struggles, and how he relates to family, community, his land and the entire external world that pulls 'to-and-fro by invisible threads' (p228). He uses reasoned arguments and statistics to make the case for compassionate action, but the strength of the book lies in the marriage of these elements with moments of imagery and storytelling that are visceral and embodied: a ewe's throat slit, 'a hot purple-red river pouring down her opened neck', to avoid torment from crows, which have 'stabbed out her eyes'; a nest of robin chicks, victims of his own chemical pesticides, 'cold bundles of pink skin and bone'; a curlew egg, rescued from a tractor and held in a child's hand, 'it was warm, and the mottled colour of the boiled imitation pebble sweets you could buy at the seaside' (pp35, 151, 29).

One of the little boys on a school trip to Rebanks's farm was 'having a rough time at home'. He took the boy aside to talk 'gently' about the hens and their nest boxes. The boy 'reached in and lifted out the warm eggs, and his face glowed for a second with the sheer simple joy of it' (p244). Rebanks is able to pass on to this boy the compassionate joy he felt as a child holding the curlew egg; in his vital prose he passes this on to his readers, tethering us to the land that sustains us.

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Notes

1 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham NC, Duke University Press 2016, p58.
2 *Staying with the Trouble*, p58.
3 Oxford Reference, 'Utopia': https://www.oxfordreference.com.
4 Paul Gilbert, *The Compassionate Mind*, London, Robinson, 2009, p3.