



Bucolics

Maurice Manning

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Untitled and unpunctuated, the seventy poems in this collection seem to cascade from one page to another. Maurice Manning extolls the virtues of nature and its many gifts, and finds deep gratitude for the mysterious hand that created it all.

that bare branch that branch made black

by the rain the silver raindrop

hanging from the black branch

Boss I like that black branch

I like that shiny raindrop Boss

tell me if I'm wrong but it makes

me think you're looking right

at me now isn't that a lark for me

to think you look that way

upside down like a tree frog

Boss I'm not surprised at all

I wouldn't doubt it for

a minute you're always up

to something I'll say one thing

you're all right all right you are

even when you're hanging Boss

Bucolics Details

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From Reader Review Bucolics for online ebook

Barbara says

I have stated that poetry is not my favorite form of literature. Of course there have been exceptions. Fortunately, one of my respected Goodread Friends has recommended this book to me. I must say, I was delighted by this little treasury of poems!

These untitled verses were novel and each one sang to me. As the title denotes, they all involve Nature. In addition they each give tribute to "Boss", Manning's apparent sobriquet for the Almighty. Each seems to demonstrate his sweet delight in nature in an innocent, rich manner.

It would be difficult to find a favorite, but here are a few examples:

LXXVII

*am I your helper Boss or am
I not do I bring in the hay
for me or you or only for
the horse I help the horse he helps
me too why sometimes Boss he hooks
his head across my shoulder just
to rest it there he'll heave a sigh
as if he's tuckered he always makes
me laugh he knows I know he wants
an apple Boss his heavy head
on me it helps it helps so much... (p.93)*

Despite the lack of punctuation or capitalization, each thing of beauty unfolds and results in a natural cadence.

XVII

*I like the weaving bees I like
the purple clover blossoms the way
the pasture runs away I like
in winter sinking lambs in straw
how I like bearing buckets full
of water waking up the sun
I like making up a little song
O looking at the sky ... (p.19)*

I could include more of these lovely, simple gems, but I will leave that to those who read my reviews.

Erica says

Charming book of poems. I almost cringe to use the word charming because it almost sounds condescending, and yet this book is brave in how directly it addresses the entity Manning calls "Boss," whom I take to be

God or whoever that mysterious force is that makes and unmakes all. The questioning is so guileless but intelligent. I almost felt like I was being led through all the unfiltered questions I have had for that nameless, elusive being, yet the author still managed to pose those questions and to challenge "Boss" lyrically, eloquently.

James Murphy says

Always eager these days to read material nostalgically reminding me of that part of my childhood spent in the country, I especially like the poetry of Maurice Manning. *Bucolics* is, to me, essentially religious poetry. These are poems, psalms, songs sung by a man of the earth connected in profound and willing wonder to a God he calls Boss. These are hillbilly hosannas.

when I chop wood you warm me twice
you send a wind then send the cool
behind it Boss we work together
side by side when I drop the share
in the dirt you make it sing you give
a song to turning dirt we keep
some big irons in the fire don't we
Boss

Paul Cockeram says

Maurice Manning's collection of poetry is a deeply American book. As its title suggests, all 78 of these poems celebrate the land and our stewardship of the plants and animals living there. The poems share a single speaker, whose voice reads like the gentle hero of a western: observant, soft-spoken, accustomed to the silence of the trail, a man who says only what he means and never wastes a word. The speaker addresses his words to "Boss," a character whose identity emerges over the course of the book as, basically, God the creator and mover of the natural world. For the speaker, Boss keeps the birds in the sky and the animals in the plains. Boss is responsible for every beauty that aches the heart, as well as every loss that wrenches the gut. The George Herbert quotation that begins Manning's book, "Shepherds are honest people, let them sing," serves as the mission statement, with the "singing" being that of the psalmist.

That the word "boss" is an Americanism born in Manhattan shows us the first of many signs that *Bucolics* is rooted in American tradition. This book celebrates the connections between our love of the natural world and our deeply spiritual culture. Bringing together god and nature, Manning evokes our transcendentalist heritage, our propensity for finding what is divine and miraculous within fields and horses, crows and falcons, sunshine and wind. Rendered in deceptively plain language, these meditations find wisdom and beauty aplenty; however, this collection has more than enough texture, with the speaker's worshipful voice soon giving way to wonder and even, at times, anger against Boss' implacable silence. The speaker runs the gamut of expression, speaking in tones of doubt and sadness and resentment and fear about all the heaviest-hitting subjects, mortality and aging and death. "although the tallest tree may reach/your chin I know one day you'll bend/it over Boss without a speck/of pity not a moment's pause/you'll drag it to the darkest ground/all days go one direction down." If Boss is the creator of blue skies and golden sun, then Boss is also the creator of brown dirt and gray ash. This speaker grapples with life's largest mysteries in terms simple and honest, the

sort of truthful yet unrefined poet celebrated by Whitman and Ginsberg. Every poem supports ample rereading.

Some noteworthy features of the writing include the lack of punctuation, the liberal use of the vocative O, and of course, the frequent addresses of "Boss." One reader told me she couldn't look past the "Boss," but I found its repetition calming and reverent. As for the lack of punctuation, Manning uses that decision to its greatest advantage. His sentences always hang together grammatically, so that removing the punctuation never causes confusion; rather, Manning adds layers of possible meaning by subtracting the commas and periods, opening up possibilities that allow a single poem to be correctly and meaningfully punctuated in several different ways. I had a Creative Writing class explore these possibilities in one poem, and they enthusiastically examined the impact of various changes in punctuation for what turned out to be one of the semester's most successful lessons.

This is one reason I say Manning's poems are deceptive in their apparent simplicity. Manning is a master craftsman of language, though he has created a plainspoken, superlatively wise character who manifests the great American myth of the genius from the sticks. This is a book I plan to revisit frequently, whenever I want to reawaken myself to the wonder and mystery that abide in every park and field, every morning and afternoon and evening.

Yihui says

ok ok ok so i know its about god but for me its really more about dissociating (it reminds me of night in the woods)

thx trin for lending her copy to me

think students will like this - some poems in particular

Gary McDowell says

I'm supposed to be writing a review of this book. I can't do it. I know, I'm not supposed to say "can't," but I honestly just don't know where to start...

I may leave this one for awhile and read it again later. I LOVED it, but there's something comical about it that makes me giggle when I read some of the poems. And that's not usually a reaction I like to have. Weird. Really weird.

Elizabeth says

Woah.... maybe a case of the right book at the right time, but the original and compelling and entire vision of this book just sucked me in. 70 poems all in one voice, all spoken by a farmer to "Boss" (God). There are some ticks that repeat a time to many, but overall, this person talking about weather, plants, animals, addressing Boss intimately and crankily and reverently is amazing.

Laura says

I zipped through these like an addict, lighting the tip of one with the still-burning end of the other. It is good for me to read this. So often I am lusting after wild words, strange lexicons, things a Victorian theosophist might say. It is a wonder what Manning can do with the simplest of raw materials - soil, leaf, rock. Our narrator, a farmer in his field, is in conversation with a silent and inscrutable "Boss." The resulting hymn-like soliloquies are so intricately crafted as to allow their scaffolding to disappear. We get gifts like this: "You're dripping hums between my lips;" and this: "a bird/with a whistle in its bones." As with all hymns, we get our share of graves and winding sheets ("all things go one direction down"), but somehow, Manning makes even the dark moments feel celebratory.

Erika B. (SOS BOOKS) says

I'm just going to copy and paste what I wrote down for my class discussion board! hahaha #selfplagiarism

"Shepherds are honest people, let them sing."-George Herbert (I loved this-that is the only reason this is here)

Yay pastoral poetry! Virgil/Vergil would be proud! (How do you spell his name anyway?!) I actually thoroughly enjoyed the use of the word "Boss." At first it kind of threw me for a loop because I obviously associate it with slavery which is darker subject matter. I decided though that the intermingling of that darkness is what makes Manning's writing celebratory and cool. It's repetition became almost calming and prayerful. The Appalachian dialect really creates a very soothing tone. I think I would read this book on a Sunday evening in the summertime. That's the feeling/tone that I took away from it. He takes very raw materials found within nature and makes them seem wondrous. His connection to God and nature is undeniable. I felt like I was back in American literature learning about transcendentalism. (Whitman would be proud too!) I think that addressing God as "Boss" also has an interesting twist to it because the speaker isn't necessarily always reverent. He seems upset at times but then he also can turn that emotion into a very interesting intimacy. I liked the lack of punctuation because it catered to the simplicity of the poem. Sometimes grammar becomes complicated and I feel like this speaker is so salt-of-the-earth that it would distract readers from his messages. I feel like I'm writing a book review! I'd give this four out of five stars! I liked this one!

Kirk says

Well done, Maurice! Giving words to the longings and thoughts of the soul in a unique form makes them that much more sacred and perspicacious.

Anna says

"Shepherds are honest people, let them sing."

That line from George Herbert opens *Bucolics*, Maurice Manning's third book.

Haunting and funny, innovative and heartening, this collection of seventy untitled, unpunctuated poems features a nameless land laborer talking to his creator, whom he calls 'boss.' Not a religious book in the traditional sense, this is rather one of questions, wonder, and, at times, sadness. The poems move like a reverie and it strikes deep. I swallowed big pieces of this book when I first picked it up; as I neared the end, I took it in tiny sips, not wanting my first read to be over so soon. And while the book is a smooth, easy read, it's as deceptively simple as a psalm.

The fourth poem reads:

"are you every sorry Boss ever
have a problem ever get
shamefaced stuff your hands
in your big boss pockets
it's never easy is it Boss never
boss ever get a slow start ever
feel like you're at the end
of the line the end of your rope
have you ever had it up to here
wherever that is on you I know
it's high up to your neck Boss
the top of your head you must
be tall to take it all the way
you do taller than the top
of the moon Boss O I wonder
what you see when you look up"

But I don't like excerpting that one poem, because *Bucolics* is very much a collection. While Manning published individual poems in literary magazines, it's hard for me to imagine their singular impact. Each gathers strength from the poems that surround it, and I'm glad I was first introduced to this work as a whole. The narrative is catalyzed by juxtaposition; emotion hangs in the breaks between poems and lines. Funny little rhythms and syntactical recurrence tell big stories. I haven't read anything like this before.

I'm not the only one who was a little bewildered by my encounter with this book. Poet Andrew Hudgins described this as "seamless and utterly contemporary melding of Virgil, Hesiod, the Bible, folk songs, labor songs, and God knows what all else into something new and wonderful." I'd add that the collection is firmly grounded (so to speak) in the soil of the Earth. The patterns of nature and of the narrator's work with animals and dirt are echoed in this extended poetic cycle. And if that sounds too serious for your taste, know that these poems are webbed with humor.

"I wonder if that horse's sports are real
or painted on it makes me smile
to think about it Boss even

field hands need a laugh or two
a rusty riddle a twisty tongue
I wouldn't put it past you O
you sneaky devil you cutup Boss"

I heard once that the more you like a piece of writing, the more tempted you are to demonstrate its virtues by simply quote from the thing. As is the case for me now. After Lawrence Booth's *Book of Visions and A Companion for Owls: Being the Commonplace Book of D. Boone, Long Hunter, Back Woodsman &c.*, *Bucolics* affirms Manning as my very favorite living poet. And I'd like nothing more than to put a copy of his poems in your hand.

If it sounds like I'm gushing, maybe I am. So let me shift to urgency: Read this book. Now

Sherry Chandler says

I have imported my review of *Bucolics* from my defunct blog and added it below.

I wouldn't exactly call it a review.

Manning is a poet willing to take big leaps. So far, I think he's landed on his feet.

But then I am prejudiced, because he seems determined to remain a Kentucky poet first and foremost, a poet of the common people.

Which doesn't keep his poetry from being very smart.

In the opening sentence to his essay "Poetry and Religion,"* Mark Jarman says

Just as poetry persists in the face of widespread indifference, so has a sense of the religious in poetry continued to exist despite the indifference of most poets to religion. It might be better to modify the word *indifference* or to refract it into ignorance, nostalgia, and animosity. Nevertheless, the religious impulse in poetry endures; many poems being written today show that urge to be tied to or united with or at one with a supernatural power that exists before, after, and throughout creation.

Aha, thought I, when I read this sentence, I have found my way to talk about Maurice Manning's *Bucolics*. Others have spoken of the prosody, of the simplicity of the voice, have described the collection, Manning's third, as a series of 78 numbered pieces that read like rustic psalms.

Well, let me take that qualification back. The Book of Psalms itself was supposedly written by a rustic, attributed to the shepherd king David and using the language of shepherds and others who live close to the earth. So the term "rustic psalm" is tautological.

A *psalm* of course is a sacred song. A *bucolic* is at once a pastoral poem *and* a herdsman/shepherd/farmer.

Maurice Manning's *Bucolics* are spoken to a deity called Boss:

I
boss of the grassy green
boss of the silver puddle
how happy is my lot
to tend the green to catch
the water when it rains
to do the doing Boss

There they are defined, Boss and bucolic, on the first page, the overlord and the servant.

"I do not believe," says Jarman, "that there is one genre of religious poetry being written in America today, as there was in England in the 17th century..." Jarman is, of course, speaking of those poets we call the Metaphysicals: John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvel, et al.

It could be argued that Manning has set out to write an American metaphysical poetry. He began this work with *A Companion for Owls*, though it might be argued that it was there in the very beginning. *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions* was, after all, a book of visions.

Jarman himself says, on his cover blurb to *Bucolics*:

In these marvelous addresses to the Almighty, Maurice Manning reminds us of our agrarian roots and that our best metaphors for the ineffable all spring from the soil. These psalms, powerful and hectoring, tautological and unique, are reminiscent of King David's. They are spellbinding.

Spellbinding is an interesting choice of descriptor.

To return to Jarman's essay, first published in 1991, he goes on to say:

The desire for atonement, secularized by the Romantic movement, takes a characteristic form in American poetry about nature. ...The poet William Matthews has observed humorously that American literature is "thick with forest Christians" and that the theme of many nature poems is "I went out into the woods today and it made me feel, you know, sort of religious." The satire is effective because of its self-evidence. ...What interests me, however, is how in approaching the mystery with religious respect, American poets anthropomorphize nature, even to the point of domesticating it ... in order to make it inviting, and most importantly, inviting to us.

Is Boss an anthropomorphized version of nature? I asked myself that often, reading the poems. That would be the easy answer, for me any way. But if he is, he isn't always that inviting. Sometimes he is remote and cold:

XII

why Boss why do the days drift by
like a leaf asleep on a bed of water
does the leaf forgive the tree that let
it fall into the water does
it know how stiff the river's face
can be how smileless...
when all the leaf was trying to do
is cuddle Boss does cuddling move
the likes of you are you the river or
the thing that makes the river's face
so still...

In talking about her book *Inventing Niagara* at the 2008 Kentucky Women Writers Conference, Ginger Strand commented on the way humans like to think of nature as something over apart from us, something we do not partake of. According to Jarman, Americans have

a fundamental belief ...that nature or the earth is better than the world where we actually do our living.

Manning's bucolic lives in nature. His companions seem to be a horse and a dog, sometimes a fox or a rooster drop into the poems, but as far as other humans go, this creature seems lonelier than Caliban, as much a creature of the earth, as enslaved of the Boss as Caliban is of Prospero (speaking of spellbinding).

XXII

yes I've tried to hide my face
behind a tree I have been glad
to see the river run with mud
so fast it will not hold my look
but believe me Boss I can not hide
I can not muddy you I can
not chop you from my stony field
you're like a weed...

"Yet," says Jarman,

in the pantheistic view of nature I have been describing, the idea of reconstitution as reincarnation is strong; certainly it is implicit in the Christian sacrament of communion.

I don't find much of the New Testament in *Bucolics*. Though the bucolic is a farmer and caught in the cycle of nature, speaks of haymaking, the plow, the hoe, though he jokes with the Boss, calls him "you sneaky devil, you cut up," he may have more in common with Job than with Peter. He compares himself to the horse and the hoe, not to the seed.

LXXVIII

...Boss

I don't like that that moment when
you turn me out alone to graze
to graze is such a hot-faced slight
as close as breath but never close
enough to know if I was hitched
for real or if the hitching Boss
I felt was just a feeling sweet
but not the honeypot itself
which swings the gate right back to you
O tell me why I can't hold back
this bitter thought are you the bee
or just a stinging story Boss

And so the story ends, on a bitter question.

Like unto Jarman's question:

Is it no longer possible [after the violence of the 20th century] to see history in religious terms,
as a function of the personality of God, a God capable of judgment and mercy and expecting
obedience?

Certainly the bucolic seems to take great joy in the world the Boss has given him but his constant complaint is that the Boss won't answer his questions.

It probably isn't fair to compare *Bucolics* to the nature poetry Jarman cites in "Poetry and Religion." Though there are trees in the poems, leaves and branches, there is little of the forest, the wild. There is none of the violence that Jarman sees as lying at the heart of Christianity. There are none of the noble predators that populate the poems of Mary Oliver. A fox shows up in dreams, on the edge of things, a mystical fox:

LXIX

beyond the field this time

he's back once more the fox
beyond my doings Boss
beyond my little day

The hawk is having fun riding the wind: "I wonder if you said listen Red / I'm going to let you ride the wind / you won't even have to flap". And while the bucolic interacts with a buzzard, the bird is not the vehicle of resurrection that he is in Robinson Jeffers's poem "Vulture." He's more a clown, an incompetent:

XLVI
the way that buzzard hops it makes
me sad to see him Boss the way
he flops around I know his wings
won't work he's got a naked tail

And as Manning's carrion-eater is not a high-soaring *vulture* but a grounded old *buzzard*, so *Bucolics* is not nature poetry but pastoral, agrarian, concerned with the barnyard and not the forest. The bucolic lives in the country of Wendell Berry, the mad farmer. In fact, he might be called a mad farmer in his own right.

The simplicity of the vocabulary, the praise of apparently simple things like a red bug on a leaf or a drop of rain on a black branch, might fool one into thinking these are simple poems. But the simple diction has overtones of William Blake, and however jocular the bucolic's language, the spiritual problems he sets forth in these poems are as knotty as anything in John Donne.

*Quotes from "Poetry and Religion" taken from Mark Jarman, *The Secret of Poetry* (Story Line Press, 2001)

S. says

Ah, Joyous Affirmation! Let Maurice Manning be led to the head of the table. If I had to choose between drugs and this book, I'd probably choose this book. Is this book married? Because I'd marry it.

William Reichard says

What a beautiful, flowing book of poems! Or, what a beautiful, flowing long poem! Marked only by numbers, these poems form a monologue, addressed to "Boss" (i.e. God). Sometimes the narrator describes to the Boss the world around him, sometimes he directly addresses the Boss, and sometimes he asks the Boss questions, challenges him, waits for answers. But all the time, throughout the poems, there is a sense of reverence for the world, a kind of praise that isn't a prayer. Lovely.

Joe says

Short-lined, unpunctuated little conversations w/a God who is pictured as a laconic rural laborer. Calls the G-O-D B-O-S-S. Lots of rhymes and little bells being rung. Devotional in the way of Christopher Smart, Blake, prayer primer books--much play which makes the sudden emergence of doubt more unsettling: "I'm happy Boss happy as a bird / hopping on a branch just a little branch" to "what reason can you give me now / for filling half of everything / with honey just to leave the half / remaining torn from even hope / for sweetness like a rabbit's lip / no doubt you run your finger down / the little face of everything / to cleave it clean in two." Boss takes on shades of slave driver.

I plowed right in--the book invites that. Unfortunately, a sort of samey-malaise settles over the last third and while the floating syntax makes turns from praise, speculation, fear, doubt etc faster, there are parts where they could work harder to have the poem cut backwards into itself. This aside, some poems are absolute knock outs and Manning is a genius in employing and getting away with clusters of monosyllabic rhymes.

Ear candy for anyone trying to write simple poems. Thanks for the recommendation, Mr. Big-Fuggin-Deal-Verse-Daily.
