Utopia, an “idyllic community of substances forced to yield their disagreements for the sake of the poem,” and therefore “an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony” (Costello, Auden at Work 283).

Towards a Contemporary Pastoral in Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden”

One English lyric deserves a special mention at this point, namely Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden” (1681). This poem warrants a close reading not only for its significance and quality as a pastoral poem, but also because it documents the historical development of the mode with that unparalleled brevity and dense complexity so paradigmatic of the metaphysical tradition. Crucially, Marvell’s nature poetry, and “The Garden” in particular, should be classified as neither traditional nor concurrent with nature poetry of his contemporaries, because, as Andrew McCrae argues, “nature is rarely – if ever – just nature for Marvell.” Indeed, “[i]n the tradition of pastoral poetry, the natural world provides an avenue [for Marvell], with its own rich and highly stylized stock of imagery, for reflecting on wider issues of human life, ranging from love and sexuality through to matters of state. (McRae, “The Green Marvell” 122).

As such, “The Garden” presents a masterly poetic cross-section of the history of pastoral, and uses metaphysical conceits and imagery to come to terms with the mode’s complex, often contradictory collusion with motifs of innocence, escapism, wishful thinking and identity – as expressed by the universal idyll that is Arcadia, and by the dialectical dynamic of retreat and return. According to William Empson, “The chief point of [“The Garden”] is to contrast and reconcile conscious and unconscious states, intuitive and intellectual modes of apprehension” (Some Versions of Pastoral 119). “The Garden” is a poem ahead of its time, moreover, as it also anticipates the mode’s encounter with post-/modernist identity discourse. For “The Garden” contains some of the seventeenth century’s “most sensitive reflections,” not only “on relations between humanity and the natural world[,]” as McRae observes, but it also showcases Marvell as an astute “observer of the process of thought itself” (McRae, “The Green Marvell” 123; Friedman, “Andrew Marvell” 278).

Marvell opens “The Garden” with a meticulously constructed conceit; his poetic voice takes up the commonplace tropes of the original pastorals and, by functionally turning them upside down, adversely uses their arguments to his own advantage. With what zeal and passion—the first lines complain rhetorically—does man exert himself, the warrior to win his palm, the statesman his oak, the poet his laurel, that “single herb or tree,” in short, the symbolic reward
for their efforts (1–4). Yet the shadows projected by these emblems of fame are not nearly as lasting, the voice observes sententiously, as the shadow produced by a grove where all plants conjoin to weave not meritocratic coronets of glory but “garlands of repose” (5–8). And such a grove can only be sought in a garden, a *hortus conclusus* into which the poet has withdrawn from the world. There he has found not only the two sister nymphs “Quiet” and “Innocence,” but also their sacred plants, which, unlike the symbolic flowers of human vanity, are genuine flora of nature. It is in their midst that the poet is now enjoying a state of “solitude” more “delicious” than the most refined fellowship or “society” could offer:

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,
And Innocence thy sister dear?
Mistaken long, I sought you then
In busy companies of men:
Your sacred plants, if here below,
Only among the plants will grow:
Society is all but rude,
To this delicious solitude. (9–16)

Up to the second stanza the poet’s withdrawal is treated as a flight from society, but in the consecutive stanzas the poetic voice claims that the main motivation for such a retreat is to find rest and relief from the labours and sorrows of love. In unison, the figurative devices paradox and personification mark out the poet’s own retreat from love as if it were love’s retreat from itself: “When we have run our passions’ heat, / Love hither makes his best retreat” (25–6). Having succeeded in his withdrawal from love, the poet finds in the garden new (and different) objects of love—not fair women but “fair trees,” whose beauty far exceeds that of his “mistress” (20–22). And, when indulging in the pastoral pastime of engraving the trunks, the letters will not evoke a sweetheart but merely spell out the names by which these trees are known (22–4).

Marvell builds his next metaphysical comparison into a striking anticlimax: the poet compares his new-found ‘botanical’ love to those gods of Greek and Roman mythology who pursued a maid or a nymph only to see her transformed into a flower or a tree. Unlike the disappointed gods, however, the poet treats these metamorphoses as if they were a consciously expected or wilfully provoked outcome, and thus the fulfilment, rather than the frustration of the gods’ desire:

The gods, that mortal beauty chase,
Still in a tree did end their race;
Apollo hunted Daphne so
Only that she might laurel grow;
And Pan did after Syrinx speed
Not as a nymph, but for a reed. (27–32)

Thus Marvell expertly creates a garden as “metaphor for integrating passion, mind and soul in an image of order that resolves the human relationship with the natural” (Gifford, Pastoral 71). This represents a first master-plot of the pastoral of retreat, namely to sublimate and transform the traditional manifestations of love and passion into the creation of the arts, of poetry and song. The poetic speaker further reinforces this metamorphosis by submerging the hues and colours that traditionally connote amorous acts in the anonymity of green, the most dominant colour of the hortus of Arcadia. The poetic speaker further insists that nature’s colours are more lovable than the skin tones of feminine beauty: “No white nor red was ever seen/ So amorous as this lovely green” (17–8). Thus surrendering to the garden, the “wondrous life” the poet consequently describes is itself an enactment of the very sensations of the (lost) golden age:

The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;
The nectarine and curious peach
Into my hands themselves do reach; (35–8)

And though the poet stumbles, “insnared” by the bounteous flora, his “fall on grass” is harmless (33, 39–40). Indeed, there is an ascent from this acme of pre-lapsarian innocence, from these ingenuous “pleasures less” onto a fresh plane of thought to which the mind “withdraws.” Both figuratively and literally, nature remains all too fenced in, a true hortus conclusus. Though its maintenance may not require any human labour, every garden’s beauty still needs the artifices of wit and the mind, “that Ocean” which can retreat further into itself, and thereby be more imaginative than anything the “happy Garden-state” (57) of Arcadia could offer:

Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other Worlds, and other Seas,
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green Thought in a green Shade. (45–8)

Marvell’s lines applaud the transcendent and creative faculties of the mind, whereby he anticipates the self-reflective and imaginative tendencies of the post-/modern imagination. What are the “other Worlds” to the ones we know, for example? Is Marvell’s annihilation a process of artistic distillation which
serves to clarify or intensify the meaning of things and their place in the world, or is it rather a narcissistic, self-aggrandising, and ultimately destructive process? Then, in true metaphysical fashion, and as if to pre-empt such dialectics, Marvell constructs a conceit that turns his *hortus conclusus* into that abode most suited to the soul, for if in the ‘golden age’ man could proudly wander in the splendid nakedness of his body, in “The Garden” he may linger outdoors in the pure and luminous nudity of his spirit:

Here at the fountain’s sliding foot,
Or at some fruit-tree’s mossy root,
Casting the body’s vest aside,
My soul into the boughs does glide. (49–52)

Although “The Garden” uses conventional pastoral imagery, its speaker does not think in conventional pastoral terms. By now, the poem’s Arcadia has undergone several metamorphoses, from an all too Italian garden, to an orchard of joy and plenty, to a celebratory peregrination through the transcendent mind, and finally to the neo-Platonic dove by which the soul prepares for its destined ascent:

There, like a bird, it sits and sings,
Then whets and combs its silver wings,
And, till prepared for longer flight,
Waves in its plumes the various light. (53–6)

This metaphysical conceit is steeped in Renaissance Platonism and philosophy, which saw the physical body as inessential, as a kind of temporal clothing for the eternal soul. Accordingly, the rational Platonic lover should not only aspire to rise above the baseness of sensuality, but hope to advance beyond even the purely spiritual union with the soul of a woman, progressing up the steps of the ‘Stair of Love’ until his love is finally consummated by a spiritual union with God in the ‘Mystic Experience.’

To an opposing school of thought, one that found its main literary exponent in Ovid, love was bodily passion, unbridled by reason. True love, according to the Ovidian tradition, was the irrational and satisfying consummation of lust. Marvell’s use of the dove, turning the poet’s soul into a bird, is significant because the dove is an originally religious emblem and Marvell’s is a bird of a decidedly different feather than that which symbolises the Christian soul. This is shown by its main concern – to groom its gorgeous plumage and make it shine like a rainbow in the changing light. Indeed, far from being an allegory for the religious soul, which trains itself in the *viva contemplativa* to return to its eternal
abode, Marvell’s bird-soul stands for a neo-platonic “green Thought” retreating from the world of society into “Far other Worlds” as to contemplate its self. Thus, Marvell turns his “Garden” into a vehicle for the secularisation of the Christian soul in order to argue for the neo-platonic spiritual union with God in the ‘Mystic Experience,’ thereby anticipating the pastoral mode’s own secularisation in contemporary literature.

This ‘secularisation of pastoral’ continues as the tripartite metamorphosis ends and the speakers places the reader outside the garden, whence to take a wistful, almost nostalgic look back:

Such was that happy Garden-state
While man there walk’d without a mate:
[...]
But ’twas beyond a mortal’s share
To wander solitary there:
Two paradises ’twere in one,
To live in Paradise alone. (57–8, 61–4)

The poetic speaker likens his own retreat to man’s state in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, thereby suggesting that pastoral’s Arcadia has existed from the beginning of human life itself. Or perhaps the the speaker’s experience is not a representation itself, but time textualised, and thus transformed, and the “Garden-state” either marks the story of Eden, or is it simply an utterance the reader mistakes for a version of Eden.

The comparisons Marvell offers in his last stanza are particularly powerful when read as metaphysical conceits that prefigure the post-/modernist concerns of narrative and temporal authenticity. At first, the poet creates a continuity that is held together by its insistence on the purity of solitude and on the disruption caused by passion. Then, a discontinuity is created in that newly imagined floral sundial, more “real” in the poem than the remembered glories of the golden age, as it is perceived by sight, touch and smell (63–4). Indeed, the measurement of time (hours, minutes, seconds) may be a human invention, but the sun runs through this “fragrant Zodiack” with equal measure; and the bee “Computes its time as well as we” (68, 70), thereby unknowingly teaching a sense of practicality and modesty as it simultaneously honours and uses the work of the “skilful Gard’ner” (65). In brief, though pastoral’s “delicious solitude” can be realised within such an Arcadian “Garden-state,” it can only be a momentary experience, and hence must always hover between the mode’s inherent contradictions, in a pastoral purgatory of otherwhile and elsewhere.