Marvell's 'The Garden' and the *Ars Moriendi*

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In this reading of 'The Garden' I shall attempt to show that the poem, universally acknowledged to be a hymn to the contemplative life, is also in itself a contemplative exercise. I shall suggest furthermore that its contemplation centres on death, a death which the lyricism of the verse denatures into something beguiling and restful. To view the poem from this angle is to view it as a version of the *ars moriendi*, the meditation on death which, after evolving for centuries, had acquired a distinct (if loose) generic form by the start of the seventeenth. In his introduction to an anthology of *Middle English Religious Prose*, N.F. Blake has remarked that the 'title *Ars Moriendi* is applied to works of several different types: the earlier examples are designed to encourage people to lead better lives; the later ones are more in the nature of battles between an angel and the devil for the soul of a dying man; and others, generally from the fifteenth century, are collections of prayers for the dying'.[1] One such 'early example' is *The Art of Dieing* which Blake has extracted from *The Book of Vices and Virtues* and included in his collection. I shall take this as my point of reference in discussing the tradition, since it represents the form most relevant to my purpose. (While 'The Garden' clearly offers an invitation to 'a better life', it is quite as clearly neither a psychomachia nor a viaticum.)

The anonymous author of *The Art of Dieing* goes about his business with impressive despatch: 'Yif thou wolte lyve frely, lerne to dye gladly. And if thou askest how schal a man lerne, we schulle teche the al swythe' (p.132). The first step is to appreciate the transient nature of sublunary time – 'This lif is but a passynge tyme ... ye, and that a little' (p.133). The next is to acknowledge the falseness of worldy values, and the frailty and impotence of creatures *sub specie aeternitatis*:

1 N.F. Blake, *Middle English Religious Prose* (London: Edward Arnold, 1972), pp.12-13.

> And that witnesseth wel the kynges, the erles, the prynces and the emperoures, that hadde sum tyme the joye of the world, and now thei lyen in helle and crien and wailen and waryen and seyn: 'Alas, what helpeth now us oure londes, oure grete powers in erthe, honoures, nobeleye, joye and bost? ... Our joye is turned to sorwe, oure laughtres into wepynges; corones of perles and garlandes, riche robes, pleyinges, grete festes and alle othere goodes beth aweye fro us and faileth'. (p.133)

Having accepted these premises, we are enabled to confront death as 'but a partynge bitwen the body and the soule' (p.134), and 'the brook that departeth deeth and lif, for deeth is here and lif is there' (p.135). And having done that in turn, we can begin our contemplation, retired from the world: 'Than yif thou wolte lerne good and yvele go from home, go out of thiself, that is go out of this world and lerne to dye; departe thi soule fro this body bi thinkynge; send thine herte into that other world, that is into hevene or into helle or into purgatory, and ther thou schalt see what is good and what is yvele' (p.135). There follows a *compositio loci* of these three destinations which most readers will have encountered (more vividly expressed) in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and a little peroration about doing the right thing for the right reason: 'For he that love to his ledere renneth fastere and with lesse travaile than he that serveth God for drede' (p.138). That is the torso of the text: *Memento mori, contemne mundum*, mentally rehearse the separation of soul and body, and then imagine the fate of the soul in the three zones of the afterlife.

Turning to 'The Garden' (I, 51-53), [2] we can find most of these essential stages, even if the order has been reshuffled and the emphases differently placed. Of course a Puritan poem will offer none but a satiric treatment of purgatory, and while Marvell's imagination does reach to more conventional tortures in such poems as 'Tom May's Death' and 'The Unfortunate Lover', his hell here is drawn altogether more lightly than it is in *The Art of Dieing*, where we find 'brennynge fier, stynking brymston,

2 References are to *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H.M. Margoliouth, rev. Pierre Legouis and E.E. Duncan-Jones, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

foule stormes and tempestes routynge' (p.135). 'The Garden', by contrast, conceives damnation in terms more subtle and oblique – the terms of an active life, with its sense of futility, frustration and discomfort. For Marvell, as for Shelley, hell is a city much like London. Honouring, but at the same time departing from the convention of *contemptus mundi*, he thus gives it a much wittier turn. In *The Art of Dieing*, the kings, earls and princes, having once enjoyed their worldly goods, bewail their forfeiture. For Marvell they were never worth the having, futile emblems that reward frustrated search with further frustration. A key phrase here is 'uncessant labours', which on the one hand evokes the busy self-seekings of public life, and on the other the punitive labours of hell – the dreary shovings of Sisyphus or the rock-rolling to which spendthrifts and hoarders are condemned in the Fourth Circle. And the crucial point in the labours of hell is that they have no point – they are vain. But there are also other notes of discomfort. The maze implicit in 'amaze' suggests sheer faces of foliage without any profferment of shade, and what little shade the emblems of worldly success provides is 'short', i.e. short-lived because the plants are no longer rooted, and 'narrow-verged'. The narrowness of that band suggests that the sun is close to its meridian and that the world at large is a place of hot, sweaty discomposure. If the maze is a place of bewildered entrapment, so too are the 'toils' – so long as we allow them to denote nets as well as labours. Worldly persons are trussed up – 'upbraid' is close enough to the obsolete 'upbroid' (entangle) – in the nets of the wicked. Think of Proverbs 13.12: 'The wicked desireth the net of evil men: but the root of the righteous yieldeth fruit'. It is surely not coincidental that a subsidiary meaning of 'upbraid' is 'uproot'. Just so, and the root of the righteous is in the garden, where, in contrast to the forced, unsheltered verticality of the maze plants, trees pleach themselves into an arbour, and so guarantee the 'milder Sun' of the final stanza. This provides a pleasant alternative to the heat of the worldly maze.

The 'Garlands of repose' thus woven about the speaker contain the faintest hint of funerary wreaths, those heaped about the bier in pastoral elegy, and the hint is developed by the reference to 'Quiet' at the start of stanza two. Obviously the

primary reference is to quiet in the sense of *quies* (restfulness), but can we wholly exclude the sense of *quietus*? A quietus is a release, an exemption from the painful sort of struggle depicted in the first stanza, and, as we all know from Hamlet's famous soliloquy, it is also death itself. On this construction of 'quiet' rests my case for reading 'The Garden' as an *ars moriendi*. For if, by contemplating death as an alternative to the 'uncessant labours', Marvell is able to find it untroubling and unterrifying – 'Fair' in a word – then he has mastered the art of dying: 'Yif thou wolte lyve frely, lerne to dye gladly'. Keats does much the same thing in his 'Ode to a Nightingale', for there too death is for a moment denatured into a 'rich' rather than an impoverishing experience. And if Keats's agnosticism makes him a dubious touchstone for Marvell's contemplation in 'The Garden', then perhaps we had better invoke Herbert, who is also concerned with the beautifying and denaturing of death in his little *ars moriendi*:

> Death, thou wast once an uncouth hideous thing,
> Nothing but bones,
> The sad effect of sadder grones:
> Thy mouth was open, but thou couldst not sing.
>
> * * * *
>
> But since our Saviours death did put some bloud
> Into thy face;
> Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
> Much in request, and much sought for as a good.[3]

But why, one might ask, should Marvell invoke quiet as a heavenly plant, since death has no place in heaven? The answer is that while 'quiet' retains its primary meaning of *requies aeterna*, this rest can be secured only through the prelusive experience of death. It is on the *quieti* that *lux perpetua* shines: 'Deeth is the brook that departeth deeth and lif, for deeth is here and lif is there'. Nor need the kinship of quietus and 'Innocence' cause us any disquiet if we remind ourselves what the garden actually stands for. 'Paradise' was a Persian garden before it was

3 *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), pp.185-6.

taken up as a synonym for the Garden of Eden and then finally employed as a metaphor for heaven. Entering the garden, Marvell enters an earthly paradise which rehearses the bliss of Paradise to come. A condition for the enjoyment of either paradise, earthly or celestial, is innocence. The fall brought death and banishment with it, but once paradise has been regained, death loses its sting. As innocence is recovered in its moral sense, so too death becomes 'innocent' in the sense of being unable to do any harm. Neither quiet nor innocence can figure in the world for the world is too 'busy', opposed to contemplative *otium*, and too populous (contemplation can never be pursued collectively). The Latin *delicio* means, in the definition of Lewis and Short, '*to allure* one from the right way'. Hence 'delicious Solitude' to some extent reverses the passage of the fall, and allures the speaker back from the wrong way of the world as the company of Eve allured his prototype in the contrary direction. William Godshalk has suggested that in 'the absence of a better name, and taking full account of the references of the poem, [we] ... call the *persona* 'Marvell's Adam', and that 'the main movement of the poem' be viewed as 'Adam's spiritual progress through the garden'.[4] Putting it another way, we could say that Marvell follows the procedures of the *ars moriendi*, and re-living the cycle of creation, death and redemption, re-enacts the myth of Adam.

Contemptus mundi involves more than simply renouncing the materialism of the world; it also demands that human passion be measured against the permanence of divine love – measured, and found wanting. Hence stanza three extends the renunciation of stanza one with the same sense of foolish misplacement ('fond' matches 'vainly') and the same sense of heat and discomfort that carries with it a whiff of hell: 'cruel as their Flame.' In stanza one Marvell suggested that humankind, caught up in the struggle for self-aggrandisement, had no real perception of its end, investing the wreaths with a foresight absent from persons who wear them. Dazed by their self-reflexive amazement, these cannot see beyond the present moment of the struggle: they lack the *providentia* implied by 'prudently'. In stanza four much the same

4 William Leigh Godshalk, 'Marvell's *Garden* and the Theologians', *Studies in Philology*, 66 (1969), 641.

sense of a providence beyond even the godly vision of Apollo and Pan suggests a larger, more significant plan beneath their trivial motives of passion. Their pursuit is as vain as that of mortals, and yet that very vanity points them to the proper, the contemplative, end of being. As St Augustine observes to God, 'Thou has created us for Thyself, and our heart is not quiet until it rests in thee', but, at the same time, that rest is deferred by the pursuit of worldly ends: 'Give me chastity and continency, but not yet'.

Having spurned the world with its material and erotic temptations, Marvell can now enjoy a sort of messianic banquet in the garden, reliving the life of Adam before the fall, and at the same time anticipating life in Paradise regained, a condition we can describe by a line transposed from a later point in the poem: 'Two Paradises 'twere in one'. But, as *The Art of Dieing* reminds us, death is the passage between the two conditions. William Empson was the first to suggest an allusion to the fall at the end of stanza five, and any allusion to the fall *de facto* entails an allusion to the death: 'Since by man came death'. The recumbency of the speaker therefore reminds us of quiet in both its forms: *quies* and *quietus*. It is a stylized, apotropaic death, rehearsing its pangs and at the same time inoculating against its sting. Marvell refracts the brute fact in a gentle choreographic gesture, and to that extent departs from the charnel house images more usually associated with the *ars moriendi*. His ensnarement recalls the 'upbroided' toils (nets) of life in the world, but the snare is only notional (a flower chain is easily broken). Still, it reminds the soul that even in the contemplative brackets of an earthly paradise, sublunary pleasures can never be wholly innocent. The growth of quiet and innocence upon earth is only provisional: 'Your sacred Plants, if here below, / Only among the Plants will grow'. Disencumbered of the body, the mind can get down to the serious business of contemplation. Physical satiety might at first seem an odd preparation for the *via contemplativa*, but it is worth recalling that some of the best authorities on mental prayer have pointed to the dangers that a more conventional ascesis can bring in its wake. Bede Frost quotes St Francis de Sales as saying that to attempt mental prayer with an exhausted body is to attempt the impossible: 'To eat little, work

hard, have much worry of the mind, and refuse sleep to the body, is to try to get much work out of a horse in poor condition without feeding him up'.[5] No one could accuse the speaker of not being 'fed up' after stanza five: Thomson would later bring indolence to an exquisite climax by eating peaches off a tree (as a giraffe might), but Marvell goes one better and has the grapes advance to meet his lips. In accordance with the Ignatian form of mental prayer, the *compositio loci* is now complete, and the body put to rest. What follows is the analysis, the operation of the mind upon its subject-matter, which none the less remains a kind of imaginative *compositio*, since the faculty of fancy is called into play. In the *ars moriendi* the soul would now be envisaging heaven and hell, and this indeed is what Marvell hints it is doing. Why otherwise would it be concerned not only with the projection of 'other Worlds' but also of 'other Seas'? A sea looms large in the heavenly city of Revelation and another figures in the conventional picture of hell. (The *Offertorium* of the Requiem Mass, for example, invokes Christ to liberate the souls of the faithful *de profondo lacu.*) Moving free of the recumbent body, the speaker has become a 'shade' in the sense of 'spirit', and has taken *contemptus mundi* even to contempt for the sanctified creatures of the garden. This is because he has been united with the dynamic Principle of creation – green thought, *natura naturans* – rather than its static revelation in *natura naturata* ('all that's made').

Colloquy is the next stage of mental prayer, the stage at which the soul is ravished up into the Godhead. This occurs in stanza seven, where the death so gently and balletically denatured in stanza five is more eagerly embraced. Look at the contemptuous casting aside of the 'Bodies Vest'. Frank Kermode has cautioned against fussy expositions of the 'Fountains sliding foot': 'there is no need to be over-curious about the fountain; its obvious symbolic quality may have an interesting history, but it is primarily an easily accessible emblem of purity'.[6] This may be

5 Bede Frost, *The Art of Mental Prayer* (London: Philip Allan, 1932), p. 152.

6 Frank Kermode, 'The Argument of Marvell's *Garden*', in *Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. W.R. Keast (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.302.

so, but surely it provides an equally accessible emblem of death: 'Deeth is the brook that departeth deeth and lif, for deeth is here and lif is there'. I find also in the 'sliding Foot' a recapitulation of 'Insnar'd with Flow'rs / I fall'.

The remaining two stanzas mark a return from the high point of colloquy to the quotidian world, though it is after all the sanctified world of the garden, and the return thus softened. They function as sort of de Quincian knocking at the garden gate, with their jocular, even worldly tone. Even so, the tense hints at the reluctant severance of contemplative from his beatific vision 'Such *was* that happy Garden-state' brings to mind (to mine, at any rate) the disappointed historic present in the 'Ode to the Nightingale' of 'Fled is that vision', where a distancing deictic also suggests separation. If it is beyond a 'Mortal's share / To wander solitary there', then clearly mortality is a consummation devoutly to be wished, and the prime task of the *ars moriendi* accomplished. Time, likewise, that hurrying spectre of *carpe florem* poetry and the terror of those who have not reconciled themselves to death (think of the *lente lente* speech in *Doctor Faustus*), becomes in the garden a source of restful contemplation. The frantic snatch of *carpe florem* has indeed given way to something much closer to *considerate lilia agri.* While the bee's industriousness reminds us of the unsanctified hurry of the people outside, its presence in the garden points to a sanctification of busy-ness in the effort of meditation – computation (at root a 'thinking with') and contemplation are related ideas. So too are holiness and wholesomeness, sharing as they do the *halig* root, the root of the completeness imaged by the Dial. 'This lif is but a passynge tyme', but if that time is devoted to the holy contemplation of Paradise in paradise, its passing cannot agitate the thinker. And that, I would say, is the final purpose of the *ars moriendi* : 'Yif thou wolte lyve frely, lerne to dye gladly'.