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THE VITAL, ARROGANT, FATAL, DOMINANT X

The poetic transcendence of experience as an epistemic exercise and its ecological value

I. Experience between saturation and divergence

Through his elaboration of the category of saturated phenomena, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion¹ has undertaken a fundamental revision of the phenomenological notion of experience, identifying the liminal status of situations in which intuition (*that which appears*) exceeds intention (*the concept*); i.e., situations in which an insurmountable asymmetry emerges between what the subject experiences and its cognitive determination. In the saturated phenomenon, the content and the object of experience do not coincide: the former exceeds the latter, highlighting an insurmountable inadequacy of the act of signification, a kind of “intentional deficit” that compels the subject to recognise themselves not as the positor but as the posited.

However, the theoretically decisive step in this proposal, is the generalisation of the category of saturation from a qualification of specific phenomena to a dimension of experience in general. This is because, as Marion observes, while we can identify a series of particular contexts (such as the event, the idol/work of art, the flesh, the icon/face) in which saturation manifests itself with undeniable force, it nevertheless must be reconstructed as a general dimension of phenomenality. The asymmetry between intuition and intention, between appearance and concept, characterises our entire cognitive relationship with the *real*, the experience of which exceeds our determination of it as *reality*.²

Recognising the universality of saturation enables us to relativise the role of intentionality, shifting it from an absolute phenomenological principle to a regional and limited mechanism. However, this does not deny that a central function of culture consists in producing languages, i.e. semantically structured frameworks that are intentionally oriented and conventionally binding, which ensure a conceptual determination of intersubjectively shared experience that is operationally efficient (functional to its strategic governance). Society needs codes – networks of signification of the real as reality – which ensure its standardised, predictable and reliable manipulation and intersubjectively shared interpretation (attribution of meanings). However, it is, necessary to recognise the limited scope of these cognitive matrices and the illusory and distorting effect of treating them as the exclusive regime governing experience. The discrepancy between intuition and concept, and between the content of experience and its semanticisation as an object, is inherent in all experience without exception, even though in a number of specific cases (defined by languages such as technique, the sciences, law, bureaucracy, economics) the implementation of mechanisms for the phenomenological objectification of experience’s contents of is

¹ Reflection on this theme encompasses consistently the French thinker’s entire research career, nevertheless finding two important milestones in Marion 1977 and 1997, and a synthesis in Marion 2001.

² One of the cornerstones of Lacan’s thought is the functional (rather than ontological) distinction between the real (the totality of what happens) and reality (the totality of what we signify), which he developed over the years, defining it with ever-greater precision. The fundamental idea is that the real resists symbolisation (translation into reality) and eludes cognitive determination as “impossible” — not because it is not given, but because it cannot be represented and therefore “always returns” as the ungovernable: “The core must be designated as the real—the real insofar as the identity of perception is its rule.” Ultimately, this is based on what Freud identifies as a kind of sampling, which assures us that we are within perception through the sense of reality that authenticates it. What does that mean? — if not that, on the subject’s side, this is called “awakening” (Lacan 1964, p.66) “The concept of repetition confronts us with a dilemma: either to accept, pure and simple, our involvement as analysts in the eristic nature of the discord inherent in any account of our experience — or to refine the concept to the level of something that would be impossible to objectify, except through a transcendental analysis of the cause” (ibid., p. 117) (*m.tr.*).

institutionalised as socially acceptable or even necessary. These mechanisms programmatically take on the cognitive deficits associated with such simplification in view of the existential and social advantages it brings.³

A device such as the clock is a prime example of the coexistence of power and irrepressible cognitive limits inherent in this conventional rationalization. Our experience of time is supremely rich, indeterminable, and by no means reducible to its measurement, yet knowing what time it is is an indispensable existential and social need. Therefore, the error lies not in continuing to tell one another what time it is, adopting this cognitive shortcut for practical and existential purposes, but in ignoring the fact that this partial and instrumental operation does not exhaustively determine the “saturated”—and therefore, ultimately, unavailable⁴—whole of our experience of time.

Highlighting the **universal dimension of experience saturation** therefore implies reformulating the very notion of culture. Culture cannot simply be conceived as a sum of signification processes and their institutional implementation, insofar as these are strategies for the symbolic conventionalisation of experience. Culture must be conceived, in addition, as the sphere in which modes are produced to reveal that experience in general entails an inherent remainder⁵ that has not yet been given meaning and may not be capable of being given meaning: that in every single experience, inescapably, a portion of intuition remains that is indeterminate and may be indeterminable as a conceptual object.⁶ The paradox of this act of symbolising the structural non-significability of a part of our experience is that it must not signify the unsignifiable (i.e. what is conceptually impossible to conceptualise), but rather signify that this part of experience, the content of intuition (“apparition”, in Marion’s terminology), is unsignifiable. This safeguards its unavailability without erasing it into mere ineffability. This non-designative symbolisation of saturation is the exact opposite of apophatic silence. To demonstrate how the still unsaid, and possibly unsayable as a representable object, is woven into the fabric of experience, and to highlight what is missing from a form of expression that is always asymmetrical in relation to the given, means, first and foremost, critically exploring the modes of signification activated, and reconstructing the related forms of rationality and selective functions. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the unspoken and the unspeakable. First of all, we must ask in which cases there are (and, if so, what are) the mechanisms that may produce the (reversible) expulsion of aspects of apparitions (of experiential content) as a function of utilitarian and/or ideological strategies for manipulating reality. Secondly, we must ask, in which contexts there are instead cognitive divergences intrinsic to the perceived phenomenon that make its intentional constitution as an object impossible, as occurs in relation to its temporal dimension.⁷

The argument underpinning this distinction is that the first order of scrutiny identifies the contextual self-critical action inherent in culture ceaseless work of learning, development and self-correction that makes it possible to expand and improve the scope of knowledge (such as, for example, scientific progress, but also the definition of the limits of respective fields of expertise; the role of practical public discourse and its distortions). By contrast, the second order, represents a structural dynamic that calls into question the very notion of knowledge, within the rational delineation of a second-level exercise in signification. This exercise radicalizes and correctively expands the Kantian distinction between

³ This is the thesis set out by Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*: a holistic problematisation of the *worldview* (*Weltanschauung*)—the cultural infrastructure through which a society crystallises a shared interpretation of collective experience—is rationally self-contradictory. To avoid imploding into generalised anomic chaos, society must share a platform of certainties (a shared network of meanings that establish a common hermeneutic horizon for the processes of sense-attribution), which are fallible and revisable, critically contestable, yet sufficiently stable and binding.

⁴ For an overview of this concept, see Rosa 2018.

⁵ On this subject. I would refer the reader to Bartolomei 2026.

⁶ On this point, see Slavoj Žižek (1996), revisiting the insights of Schelling and Lacan.

⁷ While it is beyond the scope of our discussion to argue about this, I am convinced, in line with many other interpreters, that although Husserl (1905) carries out a profound and innovative analysis of temporal experience — particularly through his elaboration of the concept of the non-point-like present, articulated in the triad of retention, original impression, and protension — he nevertheless fails to make this the cornerstone of his notion of intentionality. In contrast, Levinas (1979) emphasises that our temporal experience cannot be entirely subsumed under constitutive intentionality, which exhibits a high degree of passivity.

intellect and reason, by articulating the difference between knowledge and thought, and between determining and reflecting judgement. It therefore captures a sphere of experience that is essentially inaccessible to knowledge, as conceptual objectification, not because it lies within the supersensible but because its perceptual and historical constitution is already divergent (aporetic).

It is the perceptually and historically accessible sphere of the other-than-oneself, that imposes itself upon the subject as a sensible and hermeneutically effective self-giving (Marion 1997). This sphere is traversed by divergences that are partly irreconcilable, and which demand non-objectifying, non-exclusive, non-univocal forms of symbolization that promote the overcoming of dichotomies such as nature⁸ and culture, subject and object, the sensible and the supersensible. This symbolisation triggers non-dualistic processes of signification that are capable of semantising incompatibilities as paradoxically coexisting dimensions: neither unifiable nor a source of paralysing nonsense.

II. The epistemic role of literature

From time immemorial, the exercise of this second order scrutiny—first and foremost in practice, and secondarily in theory—has been one of the fundamental cognitive functions of languages that civilisations have developed to complement the set of languages (technology, science, law, bureaucracy, economics) which selectively and conventionally rationalise experience through mechanisms of phenomenological objectification of its contents. Art, religion and philosophy are forms of rationality which theoretically reconstruct and/or practically expose the cognitive deficits associated with such simplification. They articulate hermeneutically the sphere of meaning that eludes such reductionist determination.

This cognitive function is clearly evident in **literature, which acts as a critical consciousness of the human episteme in its claim to totalisation and absolute conceptual control over experience.** Since the dawn of history civilisations have used literature to highlight the inadequacy of an extrinsic objectification of phenomenal content which seeks to expunge the dimension of saturation and divergence inherent in such content as irrational, marginal or irrelevant subjectivism. It also seeks to expel the unrepresentable from experience, from the relationship of the subject with the other-than-self, possibly relegating it to a mere inner movement of the ego supersensibly transcending the world, confirming the subject's will to power as sovereign rather than establishing him as the guardian of being.

From this phenomenological perspective, the unrepresentable aspect of experience, in, is not an indicator of the divergence between the "I" and the world, between interiority as the sphere of the spiritual and exteriority as the sphere of the material (the irresolvable conflict between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*), but rather a manifestation of the fact that the inseparable symbiosis of the external and the internal (which constitutes experience, from the radically anti-idealistic perspective of phenomenology) manifests itself in an irreducible network of divergences and the impossibility of representing the world as presence (i.e. a non-contradictory convergence between the ecstasies of time, between time and space, and perception and language).⁹

From a phenomenological perspective, as exemplified in practice through literature, the world, **the real, as an indeterminable holistic container of the subject and reality, cannot be reduced to a (flexibly distinguishable) dichotomy of nature and culture**, because the subject cannot be reduced to consciousness alone. The "I" is inextricably body, thought, language and society. The external world

⁸ For a critique of this dichotomy, see Descola 2005, who challenges the term *nature* itself (which, will in fact be avoided as far as possible in this essay).

⁹ The critique of this metaphysical illusion, that has dominated Western thought by equating knowledge with representation and art with mimesis, reaches a point of no return in the reflections of Martin Heidegger (1935–1946, with the masterful synthesis set out in the essay 'The Age of the World Picture', pp. 57–85) and Jacques Derrida (1967, 1967a, 1972). It is not necessary to agree with (at least not entirely) the *pars construens* of these works in order to recognise the diagnostic power of their respective deconstructive operations.

cannot be reduced to matter, matter cannot be reduced to an entity, and appearance does not coincide with presence. The content of experience does not coincide with its object, and phenomena and words are symbiotically and divergently co-constitutive.

Within the framework of a brief reflection on the issue of the inconsistency of an unambiguously and unilaterally objectifying notion of experience, with reference to literature, it will not be possible to address the complex and intractable nature of this problem as a whole. Instead, we will illustrate how literature, and in particular lyric poetry, functions as a critical language that offers an alternative to the “naturalistic” determination of the self as consciousness and of the other (of the totality of what appears, of reality) as an object, through the analysis of a specific textual example.

The thesis developed here, based on the reading of a single poetic composition, is, in other words, that literary discourse carries out a practical deconstruction of intentionalist representationalism—which reduces the content of experience to its conceptual objectification—by highlighting what remains outside this act of cognitive manipulation, as the unsaid and possibly unseen (the specific saturation rate of experience), in order to signify it in an alternative form. This is achieved through the construction of singular, non-abstract symbolic codes that cannot be transferred outside the concrete perceptual and narrative experiences they semantically ground. This done by resorting to imaginative rather than logical mechanisms of schematisation. From this point of view, the decisive aspect, is that literary discourse carries out this deconstructive action against the univocity of objectivist representationalism not by refuting it theoretically, but by dealing solely with singular experiences: literature is metaphysically nominalist. In its universe of discourse, universals do not exist and the universality of its own figures of meaning is produced not through abstraction but through exemplarity.¹⁰

In other words, the epistemic principle underpinning literary discourse on the real is that one can only symbolically capture the saturation inherent in individual experience by remaining totally immersed in its perceptual and narrative concreteness, and by not abstracting from it. This enables one to articulate the dimension that cannot be intentionally objectified, which emerges in the encounter with the world, with oneself and with the other.

Abstraction removes this richness, crystallises the real into reality, absolutizing the concept by neutralising the cognitive role of the imagination and dismissing it as mere fantasy.

In literary discourse, the work produces a text that is a unique semantic code in itself, functioning self-referentially as a meaning key solely for the specific experience it designates. This elevates the perceptual and narrative images associated with it to the status of signifiers that are not conventionally arbitrary but robustly motivated, summoning them imaginatively (through analogy and association) rather than logically to configure a semanticisation of the experience in question that diverges from its propositional, intentionally objectifying, representation. This makes it possible to reveal aspects of its content and its power to bring the real into view beyond its conventionalisation as reality—aspects that remain unexpressed, if not radically negated, in its univocally abstract-conceptual description.

The literary text does not recount history, rather it narratively semantises an existential episode in which experience becomes an event, thereby historicising itself (which is not the case for every experience). Similarly, it does not speak of “nature” but imaginatively semantises an experience of the perceptual sphere in which the subject does not externalise itself with respect to the real within a universe of discourse separate from reality. Instead, it symbolises its inherent connection to it, to the holistic complex of being-in-the-world, of being a body on earth and within society. This connection is attested to in a relational process of perceptual-cognitive¹¹ resonance, of which the subject is not the absolute legislator but rather the participant, inextricably both emissary and recipient.

But how, we must ask ourselves at this point, does the imaginative/narrative semanticisation of a singular experience actually work? By renouncing its abstract-representational representation, it removes the saturation of the experience, the excess of appearance over concept, from manipulative or simply

¹⁰ On the category of example, see the remarks by Agamben 2001, pp. 13ff.

¹¹ On this concept, see Rosa 2016.

apophatic repression. It inscribes experience within a network of symbolic figures that restores it as an experience of meaning, bearing an alternative signification to objectifying dualisms, to dualistic externalisation, to epistemic reductionism?

Whilst the **narrative construction** of experience as an event, and the **historical symbolisation** of the existential condition through the insoluble enigma of its indeterminacy, is a widely explored theme in criticism and aesthetics, the reflection on **the lyrical symbolisation** of the existential condition, i.e. the **imaginative**, non-logical-conceptual **construction** of bodily experience as an interrelation with the natural sphere, as being-in-the-world in the hospitable form of dwelling rather than domination is by far less developed.

The guiding hypothesis put forward here is that *lyrical discourse* is not a means of expressing the inner self (the eponymous lyrical subject) in relation to a category of privileged (existential-emotional) content (noetic- affective), but rather a formal process of semantising experience through imaginative-perceptual devices that are substitute for logical-propositional and narrative ones.¹² **In other words, the rationale of lyrical discourse implies the radical subordination of logical-propositional and narrative signification to imaginative-perceptual signification, which is structured through the combined use of metaphor and metonymy.** This implies a welcoming inherence of subjectivity within the real—which is not alienated to an “external” reality but integrated into imaginative verbalisation as an expressive signifier of the self. By dissolving any dualism that serves, cognitively, to strategically dominate the world, lyrical discourse articulates the self’s understanding on itself as a part (possibly divergent but not separate) of the world (the holistic complex of reality, differentiated epistemically as nature and society). In lyrical discourse, “nature” is not conceived as an external material sphere; rather, the inherent perceptual connection of the self to the world is recognised as a source of meaning. The very conceptual indeterminacy of experience—its saturation—is not viewed as frustration, setback or limitation, but as a source of richness and as an essential epistemological key to understanding and self-understanding, extending beyond the abstract-conceptual and strategic perspective.

The following examination of an example from this field aims to highlight the extraordinary **potential of lyrical literary discourse for epistemic correction in relation to a one-sided representationalist-presentialist perspective, which** schematises experience into objectivist dichotomies such as nature/culture, subject/object and perception/concept.

III. The garden as a symbolic figure of harmonious interdependence between human beings and the earth

The text in question is the poem “The Garden”,¹³ by the English metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell (1621–1678). A moderate Parliamentarian and follower of Oliver Cromwell, as well as a friend of John Milton, Marvell divided his time between literature and public life during the turbulent years of the English Civil War. A prolific author of political satires targeting court corruption, Britain’s enemies and Catholics, he is today read and remembered above all for a relatively small body of pastoral poems,

¹² From this point of view, a poem that uses propositional descriptions of states of mind and narrative constructions of eventful experiences to speak of the self cannot automatically be considered a lyrical text because it does not semantise experience in an imaginative-perceptual way. In other words, it does not create intuition (the apparition) through imaginative-perceptual signification. On this point, I would refer the reader to Bartolomei 2016 (Chapter XII, pp. 328 ff.) and 2017.

¹³ “The Garden”, in Marvell 1972/1987, pp. 100–101 (notes, pp. 255–258). The text is available online on the Poetry Foundation website (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44682/the-garden-56d223dec2ced>), which also provides a good bio-bibliographical introduction to the author (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/andrew-marvell>). Published posthumously in the collection *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681), alongside a Latin version (“Hortus”), the poem’s date of composition is uncertain. However, the majority of scholars agree that it was written around 1650, during the period when Marvell was away from public life, having taken up a position as a tutor in Yorkshire (see Berthoff 1970, pp. 143 ff.). For recent proposals suggesting a later date and their potential critical significance, see Davis 2011, p. 43.

mainly composed during his time at Nun Appleton Hall, near York, the country estate of one of his noble patrons. Drawing on the Horatian and Catullan tradition of *carpe diem* and the classical bucolic tradition, Marvell wrote several poems about the gardens, combining the tropes of the Greco-Latin pastoral tradition and the Renaissance-Arcadian poetry with a sumptuously Baroque rhetorical density,¹⁴ alongside imagery of biblical origin, which emerges powerfully in “The Garden”—a unique fusion of pagan myth and Christian vision, vitalistic hedonism and a metaphysical perspective.¹⁵

As W. Empson argued¹⁶ with his refined hermeneutic insight against the critical orthodoxy that had long relegated the genre to a trivial branch of existential pastime, pastoral poetry is not the product of vacuous escapism, an affected academic detachment from the dissonance of reality. Rather it is an imaginatively effective vehicle for robustly challenging dominant social and political structures, and expressing alternative visions of heroism and the sublime, which are spiritual devices associated with the intellectually and economically privileged elite. It is a space for subverting of traditional symbolic hierarchies through by juxtaposing the high and the low, revaluating the socially insignificant, and the deflating the tragic and the grandiose by elevating the “simple”. In pastoral poetry, nature and the countryside function as a ‘counterculture’ device, offering an alternative ethical and epistemological model to the prevailing one, which subordinates existence to the systemic imperatives of the social order. Not merely a vehicle for fanciful escape from the present, pastoral poetry is also a vehicle for critical antagonism. Elevating the countryside (stylised in an academically erudite manner within the Arcadian landscape) and the garden to universes of discourse, it develops symbolic figures that reverse the relegation of nature to the *background* of human life. In doing so, it restores nature to its environmental centrality and articulates the value of the natural *habitat* as an existential condition of meaning, rather than merely a reservoir of resources for material survival and profit. Beneath the mask (“disguise”) of Arcadian stereotypes, pastoral poetry is deeply marked by political and genuinely ecological concerns and as highlighted in more recent critical studies, Marvell’s work is no exception.¹⁷

In pastoral poetry, nature is a lived-in space rather than a mere material apparatus, a horizon of life rather than occupied land. The relationship with the land is not purely economic (involving the material use of its produce) or aesthetic (purely for the spectator’s gratification) but radically existential: the subject’s life is consciously defined by their relationship with *their habitat*, through which their self-understanding is mediated.

From this perspective, the garden is a key symbol.¹⁸ As Marvell explicitly states, it cannot be reduced to a place of “pleasure” but rather is idealised as a space in which to find “happiness”:

Meanwhile the mind, having had its fill of pleasure,

¹⁴ Eliot, who, through a series of exemplary essays (1921, 1921a and 1921b; 1923), made a decisive contribution to the critical rediscovery of Marvell in the twentieth century, speaks of the poet’s expressive “magniloquence”, which is singularly and ambiguously interwoven with an ironic *wit* characterised by detached self-reflection.

¹⁵ See Curtius (1948, pp. 197ff.) for a reconstruction of the classical tradition of Vergil’s “locus amoenus” (a semi-wild, beautiful stretch of land) and its convergence—not without dissonance—with the biblical tradition of the Garden of Eden.

¹⁶ See Empson 1938, a timeless classic of literary studies. The work’s general thesis is supported by various textual analyses, one of which focuses specifically on Marvell (“Marvell’s Garden: The Ideal Simplicity approached by Resolving Contradictions”, pp. 119–145).

¹⁷ “Green Marvell” is the emblematic title of an essay (Mcrae 2011) which analyses Marvell’s poetic oeuvre within the historical context of the social, political and cultural crisis that radically challenged the civilisational relationship between town and country in sixteenth-century England. As another scholar (Crewe 1994, p. 271) summarises: “Marvell’s poems are also those of a neoclassical pastoral tradition understood to be in a state of historical crisis, and thus thrown into confusion regarding many of its own most basic assumptions and resources. Among the well-recognised precipitating factors are the outbreak of the Civil War and popular revolt, the deposition of Charles I and Cromwell’s rise to power, the ongoing construction during the seventeenth century of the early modern political state, and the vexed political economy of land enclosure”.

¹⁸ See Beruete 2016 and Gärten 2022 for a reconstruction of the cultural history of the garden in the West and the East, which analyses its significance as a symbolic archetype – religious, artistic and anthropological – as well as its actual historical evolution as a form of intervention in the landscape constantly linked to changing social and aesthetic codes, as well as urban, economic and environmental factors.

Withdraws into its happiness;

The experience of perfect bodily harmony projected into the concept of the garden, in its beauty and abundance (since it must be conceived, in essence, as a *hortus*: rich in fruit that grows in abundance, satisfying the hunger and thirst of its inhabitants without gruelling effort)¹⁹ is, in fact, the idealisation of a relationship with the earth (not externalised as “nature”) that responds to its original representation as humankind’s home, a *habitat*, a welcoming space for life and growth, in an essentially peaceful, fruitful and mutually generative coexistence.

The garden is a. by definition particular, circumscribed,²⁰ patch of land where individuals and communities exercise their spatial integration within the environment. They receive its hospitality in the form of living conditions that are materially, aesthetically and spiritually pleasant, and actively participate in its upkeep and enhancement. The garden is not spontaneous nature, but an environment that is constantly adapted and improved by humankind. **The garden symbolises therefore the harmonious interdependence between humanity and the Earth.** This is a relationship of mutual giving, not one-sided exploitation and gratification. In the ideal garden, humanity gives back to the environment what it receives from it. This is achieved through a commitment to preserving and promoting its beauty and health whilst respecting the complex ecosystem it represents (geological structure, landscape, flora and fauna). An anthropological device transcending all cultures, the garden is an archetype of a harmonious interdependent relationship with the earth, but in the real gardens this utopia is constantly threatened and contradicted by the forced degradation of the ideal commitment cultivation and care into a stance of domination and exploitation, and of the ecstatic companionship into alienating objectification.

Thus, in the biblical tradition, the garden becomes a mythical emblem of a **freely given promise bound to a human responsibility that has been repeatedly failed.** The loss of this promise is therefore a culpable fall. Eden, the earthly paradise, is what the Earth might have been if we had cared for it as a companion,²¹ rather than degrading it into a hostile, cursed adversary in our struggle for

¹⁹ “What wond’rous life in this I lead! / Ripe apples drop about my head; / The luscious clusters of the vine / Upon my mouth do crush their wine; / The nectarine and curious peach / Into my hands themselves do reach; / Stumbling on melons as I pass, / Ensnar’d with flow’rs, I fall on grass” (V Stanza).

²⁰ By definition, a garden is a circumscribed space, physically separated from its surroundings, as indicated lexically both by the original Hebrew term, “gan”, for the garden in Genesis (2:8; 2:10; 2:15; 3:23–24), and by the Greek term “παράδεισος” (derived from Persian, cf. Bremmer 2002, pp. 109ff.), into which the term is translated by the Septuagint (when not rendered by “κῆπος”) only to be transposed in turn into the Vulgate as “paradisus voluptatis”. This lexical formulation significantly changes the meaning of the term Eden (which means “delights” in Hebrew) from a proper place name to a common noun (“And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden” thus becomes “God planted a paradise of delights”; see <https://biblehub.com/multi/genesis/2-8.htm>). For the significant theological implications of this deterritorialisation, see Agamben 2019. In this work, the ambiguous status of the Garden of Eden in the Christian tradition is reconstructed as a category that drifts between history, myth and eschatology without a definitive solution. Interpreted alternately as a physically situated, historically given space, or as a condition of the “natural” integrity of corporeality—potentially recoverable at the end of time as the fullness of innocence and earthly harmonies (a thesis exemplarily upheld by Dante)—the Garden of Eden is a doctrinal *crux* in which mutually incompatible theological images of the relationship between Grace and nature are condensed.

²¹ In Genesis 2:18–19, God populates the Garden of Eden with animals to provide him with companionship: “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” (All the quotations are taken from the King James Bible). For Adam, this companionship will not be enough, for he finds his true counterpart only in woman (2:20–23); yet the relational dimension inherent in dwelling (the garden is a source of companionship, not merely a rewarding space to be enjoyed) and its epistemic significance (naming one’s partner is an essential aspect of the relationship) are presented as constitutive.

survival.²² While this paradisiacal idealisation may be considered radically unrealistic - the farmer knows all too well that the earth is both a garden and a terrible desert - the intuition of an elusive yet desirable and necessary harmony cannot be eradicated from the human heart. Eden is forever lost behind us, yet it also lies ahead, awaiting a renewed personal and cosmic reconciliation of which the Earth is an integral part.

Between idealisation and reality, between intuition and concept, the “rich” experience of every physical garden is thus articulated within the mythical framework of the biblical figure as both a desire and a responsibility, as both a promise and a failure, as both a fact and a utopian alternative. At stake in the story of the Fall, is not only the human being’s relationship with transcendence (the divine) but also that with the immanence of their own earthly, corporeal condition, amidst the ever-lurking betrayal of exploitation for survival and profit.

Human beings – ever fallen – never cease to rebel against this historically and socially inexorable, inevitable and irreversible reduction of their relationship with the earth (externalised as “nature”). The cherub may raise the “flaming sword that turned every way” to prevent them from returning to Eden (Gen 3:24), but the idea of the Earth as a source of joy, a powerful alternative to its portrayal as an enemy to be fought and subjugated, a wasteland to be reclaimed, an object to be controlled, dwells within human beings like an ineradicable memory. This memory bears stubborn evidence of having once been there, of having been one with an Edenic Earth.²³ Literature is the privileged voice of this resistance, and irrevocable fidelity to the utopian, yet ever-defeated intuition embodied in earthly gardens, with their inexhaustible variety of forms, of landscape and architectural concepts, of philosophical and religious preconceptions, of historical and geographical contexts, of environmental and economic compatibilities, of private and public, individual and social aims.

In literature devoted to the garden, grace, wonder, admiration and pleasure are therefore inextricably intertwined, with the painful awareness of the precariousness and vulnerability of this experience of enjoyment, ceaselessly threatened not only by physical causes (such as transience: the metaphor of the reaper is the archetypal personification of death and the end)²⁴ but also existential ones. Ultimately, the gardener can identify with the reaper. How many gardens are swept away by the bulldozers of property development? How many new owners drive out the previous ones? Every inhabitant or visitor to a garden may find themselves exiled, like Adam, either through their own fault or due to a historical or social accident.²⁵

²² “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, till you return unto the ground; for out of it were you taken: for dust you are, and unto dust shall you return.” (Gen 3:17–19).

²³ Even if only for a few hours, as in *Paradiso* XXVI, 139–142, Dante, through the words of Adam, expresses a view widely held in patristic tradition. According to Dante’s calculations (*Inferno* IV, 55; *Paradiso* XXVI, 118–123), after spending seven hours in the Garden of Eden, Adam lived on Earth for 930 years before enduring 4,302 years of “hellish torment” (“infernale ambascia”) (*ibid.*, 133) in Limbo while awaiting Christ’s descent into the underworld. The first man sees this stark chronological disparity as an intrinsic component of the punishment associated with his disobedience.

²⁴ On this metaphor, see Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s famous ‘The Reaper and the Flowers’ and two splendid poems by Emily Dickinson: F1190/J1202 and F1668/J1624 (1884).

²⁵ Marvell devotes a cycle of poems to the figure of the “mower”, offering an intriguing conceptual variation which we cannot examine here, but which develops a nuanced perspective, with critical historical elements regarding the contemporary world and the (in the author’s view, troubling) evolution of the relationship between society and the land (cf. Berthoff 1970, pp. 115ff., Malcolmson 1994, McRae 2011). One of the poems in the series, with the programmatically polemical title “The Mower against Gardens”, forcefully challenges human intervention in the habitat arguing that rather than respecting and adapting to the natural environment, humans “distort” and damage it. The mower denounces his own role as a collective symbol of the ecocidal power of the human presence on earth. More on this poem, *infra*, VI. Conclusions.

Therefore, the wonder of experiencing the garden's beauty is therefore inextricably linked to the grief of loss (potential or actual)²⁶ and the poison of guilt (which may be amorous, moral,²⁷ or socio-ecological²⁸) and this emotional, cognitive and symbolic complexity (saturation), traversed by the rift of contradiction, finds magnificent expression in the surprising twist of meaning crafted by Marvell's poetry. Its metaphorical structure conveys the opposite of the literal text, semantically transforming the euphoric hymn celebrating life woven into its propositional content into an elegy, a dysphoric commemoration of death.

IV. Text and counter-text

From a literal, face-reading perspective, "The Garden" is a misogynistic and misanthropic celebration of the joy of finally finding oneself alone in the bosom of a benevolent nature, savouring the pleasures of beauty and the peace of an Edenic setting (Stanza V),²⁹ "far from the madding crowd" of politics, history and social life, far from the frenzied torments of love (Stanza IV).³⁰ The search for earthly glory and erotic satisfaction, is futile, the lyrical "I" laments, as it is ephemeral, disappointing turbulent and sinful. Only the solitude of *otium*, of a contemplative existence confined to the cloistered seclusion of private life, stripped of all social ambition, Stanza I)³¹ lived in an idyllic setting can guarantee quiet and innocence (Stanza II),³² satiety and rest, in the friendly abundance of fruit and the incomparable beauty of trees and flowers unmarred by the violence of the human desire to leave one's mark on the natural environment (Stanza III).³³ The companionship offered by this perfect *habitat* renders all human company

²⁶ A garden, as a figurative epitome of lost beauty, lends its name to Giorgio Bassani's famous work, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (1962). This novel intertwines the classic formula of the coming-of-age novel—as a story of loss rather than conquest (in its celebration of youth as life's irretrievable zenith)—with the historical theme of the Nazi-Fascist persecution of the Jews during the tragic period of the Second World War.

²⁷ The idea of the garden as a place of guilt and fall is a theme explored in sophisticated, unconventional short stories such as "Garden Party" by Katherine Mansfield (1922) and "Rappaccini's Daughter" by N. Hawthorne (1844).

²⁸ Marvell lived at a time in history characterised by the major socio-economic upheaval in Britain brought about by *Enclosure*: the gradual concentration of land ownership in the hands of large landowners. This was marked by the removal of common lands from public use (through the erection of fences) and the division of vast tracts of land into private holdings with a view to their intensive capitalist exploitation (high farming). This process was accompanied by the abandonment of the subsistence economy, radically transformed the British socio-economic and environmental landscape with large numbers of workers being displaced from agricultural to industrial production, and the countryside being depopulated while undergoing rapid urbanisation. The massive impact of this 'Great Transformation' (Polanyi, 1944) on the landscape and human society was recognised early on at a cultural level and received a strongly critical assessment in Thomas More's *Utopia*, in which the gradual replacement of arable land with pasture by landlords keen to increase wool production is denounced using a scathing image.: "Your sheep," I replied, "which are usually so meek and modest in their diet, have now, so it's claimed, begun to be so voracious and fierce that they swallow up people: they lay waste and depopulate fields, dwellings and towns" (More 1516, Book I, p. 76). Nineteenth-century poet John Clare (1793–1864) made the transformation of the landscape and the destruction of an entire peasant civilisation brought about by enclosure a central theme of his work. Marvell's pastoral poetry is directly embedded in the social debate sparked by large-scale land acquisition and *enclosure*. It oscillates between a critical distancing from this political-economic trend (as seen in the poem "The Mower against Gardens", which frames the issue in a meta-temporal key and condemns the very idea of the garden as an act of violence against nature) and its apologetic defence in favour of aristocratic property (see the poem "Upon Appleton House"). In any case, the eco-political dimension of this poetry cannot be ignored, and it is at the centre of a growing critical debate and interest.

²⁹ "What wond'rous life..."

³⁰ "When we have run our passion's heat, / Love hither makes his best retreat."

³¹ "How vainly men themselves amaze / To win the palm, the oak, or bays, / And their uncessant labours see / Crown'd from some single herb or tree, / Whose short and narrow verged shade / Does prudently their toils upbraid".

³² "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."

³³ "Fond lovers, cruel as their flame, / Cut in these trees their mistress' name; / Little, alas, they know or heed / How far these beauties hers exceed! / Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound, / No name shall but your own be found."

superfluous and indeed a nuisance, making Eve's presence at Adam's side seem like a loss (Stanza VIII).³⁴ No female can rival the beauty of the vegetation (green surpasses red and white, Stanza III),³⁵ as Apollo and Pan knew well. In the nymphs Daphne and Syrinx they sought not carnal seduction but their own transformation into plants (Stanza IV).³⁶ The sublime bodily pleasure of this solitary identification with the garden as a new Eden, where time is entirely detached from history and becomes a pure bio-cosmic process, purged of all anthropocentric primacy (Stanza IX),³⁷ produces a mental self-transcendence. In this state, the spirit is transfigured into a wondrous bird ready to take flight towards a sky of pure light, whilst the earthly horizon is relativised into infinite imaginative potentialities (Stanza VII).³⁸

However, it is precisely the sixth stanza, with its announcement of this dissolution, that explicitly reveals the semantic reversal metaphorically inscribed within the text's literal wording—its narrow-minded misogynistic and misanthropic invective—by embedding within the text a counter-text that semantically metamorphoses it like a hypogram:

Meanwhile the Mind, from pleasure less,
Withdraws into its happiness:
The Mind, that Ocean where each kind
Does streight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other Worlds, and other Seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green Thought in a green Shade.

Enigmatic and hypnotic, the stanza describes poetry's oximoric, "annihilating and creative", duality. Although poetry speaks of "pleasure", it nevertheless seeks "happiness", i.e. a fullness of experience that transcends pleasure, nullifying the reduction of worlds to "that which is made", to representational duplication through the web of "resemblances". The transition described here—the moment when experience is transformed into poetry—is an epistemic leap, which combines the logical, homogenising, assimilative and abstracting process of analogy (a constitutive dimension of knowledge and of the mind) with an "aversive"³⁹ annihilating, deconstructive mode of generative metaphor which differentiates and multiplies (giving expressive space to the opacity and saturation of experience), rather than assimilating and simplifying. This highlights the inadequacy of the mimetic-representational process (organisation through unifying resemblances) and the drive towards integrating it with imaginative multiplication and transcendence, not only of reality and the meanings which intentionally schematise experience ("the worlds and all that's made"), but also of intentionality itself ("the Mind, that ocean"), which is called upon to transcend itself in new ways ("far other seas").

Analogy is a formidable and indispensable logical category. It operates as a rational representation mechanism across various domains of cognitive conceptualisation, encoding experience through the statistical-inductive scrutiny of sensory perception and the analytical-deductive reconstruction of

³⁴ "Fond lovers, cruel as their flame, / Cut in these trees their mistress' name; / Little, alas, they know or heed / How far these beauties hers exceed! / Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound, / No name shall but your own be found."

³⁵ "No white nor red was ever seen / So am'rous as this lovely green."

³⁶ "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."

³⁷ "How well the skillful gard'ner drew / Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new, / Where from above the milder sun / Does through a fragrant zodiac run; / And as it works, th' industrious bee / Computes its time as well as we. / How could such sweet and wholesome hours / Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!"

³⁸ "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; / There like a bird it sits and sings, / Then whets, and combs its silver wings; / And, till prepar'd for longer flight, / Waves in its plumes the various light."

³⁹ For a refined epistemological elaboration of an "aversive" mode of thought, see Cavell 1991.

similarities and recurrences.⁴⁰ Analogy is essential for achieving conceptual homogeneity and consistency: difference is integrated into unity and subsumed under common qualities. From a heuristic and probative point of view, finding similarities is a royal road to science; it is a fundamental component of the “happiness” of the mind, of reason, and of the triumphant celebration of its “theoretical” unity with being. “Each kind/ Does streight its own resemblance find’ is, in fact, an elegant formulation of the Aristotelian principle of *analogia entis*, which is the main logical criterion for the ontological predication of being and acts as an equidistant mediating bridge between identity and otherness.

And “yet” - the poet observes, giving voice to the everyday realisation that experience exceeds its conceptualization -, analogy not only risks failing, it is also never enough. It is not enough for achieving the “happiness” of the mind. There are cases, situations and dimensions of experience in which conventional (or rational) and culturally standardised analogical models for describing a state of affairs are perceived as inadequate, and no effective innovative analogical tools are available. For this reason, *otium* is so important. It is the contemplative suspension of *negotium* - all the strategic relationships with the world aimed at immediate performative successes and primal, pulsional drives, (such as Eros, incapable of symbolically codifying its own biological matrix: Daphne is not codified as laurel and Syrinx is not codified as a reed). Therefore, *otium* is an essential device for scrutinising and problematising the cognitive shortcuts constituted by conventional intentionality conveyed by linguistic meanings and socially standardised epistemic mechanisms. Engaging with one’s own *habitat* in a state of detachment from social and instinctual (including erotic) necessities and imaginaries, by relating to it not as an object (of knowledge and intervention) but as a companion,⁴¹ the mechanism of analogical assimilation reveals its limitations: a dissatisfaction emerges with regard to representation, to the “ocean of the mind”, in which the “kinds” – the categories of being – find their comparative predication. While *otium*, by enabling the mind to abandon itself to a detached (“withdrawn”) analysis of its own functions, euphorically confirms its power, it also reveals its limitations: the mind is happy to celebrate similarity,⁴² “yet” it is also dissatisfied. At some point, the mind (this expanse of thought with limits but without a bottom or boundaries: a sea and not a land)⁴³ must leave similarities behind and “create” other worlds and other

⁴⁰ Cf. *Metaphysics* 4.2 (1003a 33–35): “The term «being» is used in various senses (*multis modis*), but with reference to one central idea (*ad unum*), and one definite characteristic, and not as merely a common epithet” (*Metaphysics*, pp. 146–147). Medieval philosophers developed a sophisticated theory of the three “types” of analogy (of proportionality, of attribution and of imitation – or participation). For a historical-philosophical introduction to the concept, see Bartha 2024.

⁴¹ Marvell’s text highlights this universal anthropological aspect of the garden, as illustrated in the biblical image of Eden (Genesis 2 and 3). This figure gives mythical expression to an ideal state in which human beings are so harmoniously integrated into the natural environment that this insertion can develop into a form of mutual companionship, despite its haunting potential inadequacy and irreducible precariousness. The garden, or *locus amoenus*, is often celebrated in art as an (Arcadian) setting for perfect, peaceful and pleasant human coexistence (one need only think, for one example among many, of the eighteenth-century pictorial variations on journeys to the island of Cythera). However, it can also be viewed (as here) as the privileged environment for a social and erotic solitude in which to enjoy nature as the exclusive source of *friendly* gratification and a catalyst for spiritual elevation. For Frank Kermode (1952), it is this intellectual eulogy of solitude (derived from Cicero and revived by Montaigne) that lies at the heart of Marvell’s lyrics: “The Garden is a poem of the anti-genre of the naturalist paradise”. The text portrays “the garden of the solitary thinker [as] argument against the libertine garden of innocent sexuality” (p. 255).

⁴² It so happens that “The object with which he was compared/ Was beyond recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended/ Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself/ and things beyond Resemblance ” (Wallace Stevens, “Prologues to what is possible”, from *The Rock*, pp. 437–439).

⁴³ Emerson captures this primordial dynamic of self-transcendence in experience with eloquent subtlety: “Suffice it for the joy of the universe, that we have not arrived at a wall, but at interminable oceans. Our life seems not present, so much as prospective; not for the affairs on which it is wasted, but as a hint of this vast-flowing vigor” (Emerson 1844, “Experience”, p.282). The metaphor of the mind as a “sea” is a recurring theme in poetry. For a similar poetic vision to Marvell’s, characterised by the ecstatic dissolution, see Giacomo Leopardi’s “The Infinite” (originally “L’infinito”, 1819), (quoted here in F.H. Cliffe’s translation): “I always loved this solitary hill / And this green hedge that hides on every side / The last and dim horizon from our view. / But as I sit and gaze, a never-ending / Space far beyond it and unearthly silence / And deepest quiet to my thought I picture, / And as with terror is my heart o’ercast / With wondrous awe. And while I hear the wind / Amid the green leaves rustling, I compare / That silence infinite unto this sound, / And to my mind eternity occurs, / And all the vanished ages, and the present; / Whose sound doth meet mine ear. / And so in this / Immensity my thought is drifted on, / And to be wrecked on such a sea is sweet.”

seas. It must embark on a gradual transcendence of itself and the “made” worlds leading to an imaginative (self-)reinvention of the given (of “all that is made”: Reality) which acts as its own annihilation, a cognitive relativization. This is enhanced by joyfully abandoning oneself to vital (“green”) identification with the plant life in the garden. Paradoxically, it is precisely by “withdrawing” from unmediated drives (“from pleasure”) that the mind rediscovers the “happiness” of its original unity with the life, and its own participation as an expression of it. This a *mise en abîme* (“green thought in a green shade”)⁴⁴ that dissolves all boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, and the biological and the spiritual.⁴⁵ Mind, world and thought are inextricably linked in a metamorphic cycle that reveals the differences in substance as mere appearances, just as Daphne and Syrinx found the meaning of their being in their metamorphic reinterpretation as plants.⁴⁶

In the magnificent fresco of “The Garden”, poetry is this extraordinary mechanism (a bird with silvery wings and feathers iridescent with light) of symbolic transcendence of primal drives (“the cruel flame” of *Eros*) and of abstract-objectivist conceptualisation (“resemblances”), enabling the saturated excess of experience to be expressed imaginatively. This is particularly evident in our relationship with the natural environment, embodied by the figure of the garden, an icon of its divergent density (an indeterminable interplay of pleasure and frustration, success and failure, abundance and scarcity, power and powerlessness, intensity and precariousness, control and unavailability, innocence and guilt, enjoyment and loss, ascent and fall). By transcending the strategically selective and reductive signification of propositional referentialism, poetry articulates experience in all its irrepressible, contradictory excess, which cannot be reduced to any single unilateral externalisation. On the one hand, it celebrates the joyful paroxysm of bodily ecstasy kindled by beauty and pleasure. On the other hand, it explores the intimate contradiction of this experience —the fracture that opens up in the differentiating gesture of transcendence, in the negative act of imaginative signification. The divergence intrinsic to experience arises from the polarity between the unifying and affirmative dynamic of cosmic co-belonging (culminating in the drive towards erotic fusion, exemplified by Apollo and Pan seeking to unite with the nymphs), and the divisive and negative dynamic of symbolisation (the “withdrawing”, the “casting aside” of bodily immanence, and the metamorphic transformation of flesh into plant, of Syrinx into a reed, of Daphne into a laurel). The unconditional harmony (“quiet and Innocence”) of one’s earthly condition, promised and heralded by the garden, is ultimately inaccessible to human beings. The poetry that expresses this as a utopia of happiness also articulates its impossibility, recognising that it can be conceived only as annihilation, in that ultimate transcendence which is death.

V. From *carpe diem* to *carpe mortem*

This insoluble contradiction is the key to the antagonism between text and counter-text that characterises the semantic complexity of Marvell’s poetry, in its magnificent imaginative schematisation of the rich and contradictory complexity of the experience of exhilarating yet ambiguously alienating

⁴⁴ “Green shade” is a Virgilian invention: “quis humum florentibus herbis/ spargeret aut viridi fontis induceret umbra?” (“Who would strew the turf with flowery/ herbage, or curtain the springs with green shade?”) (Vergil, *Ecloga* IX, 19-20).

⁴⁵ In Renaissance Neoplatonism, the notion of *the anima mundi* conveys a paradoxically anti-dualistic impulse, nourishing it with a form of naturalism that is anti-Aristotelian and anti-conceptualist, and which proves decisive in the redefinition of the subject-object relationship (cf. Cassirer 1927). It is precisely this ecstatically anti-dualistic vision that constitutes the deepest Neoplatonic core of “The Garden” (entrusted to its imaginative counter-text). In my view, this is more significant than the anti-erotic and misogynistic ideological twist with which the poem’s propositional text of the poem radicalises the ritual celebration of Platonic love that was dominant in early seventeenth-century British culture and literature, marked by the rise of Puritanism (cf. Companion 1993). Highlighting the profound ambiguity of the Neoplatonic repertoire that nourished Renaissance culture—torn between incompatible schools of thought—Kermode 1952 argues that it is a mistake to read Marvell’s poetry as a treatise on Neoplatonic philosophy, rather than as a poetic vision entirely free from the conceptual repertoire from which it draws.

⁴⁶ Paradoxically, it is precisely this supreme decreative act of thought that establishes perfect equivalence between the mind and the body, the flesh and the spirit: “In this pleasurable moment of decreation, in which the mind displays its ultimate power (or aspiration) to reduce everything to its own “coloration,” all excess, including poetic excess, is to be reduced to zero, thereby restoring perfect equilibrium (green = green)” (Crewe 1994, p. 274).

enjoyment of harmonious and reconciled integration into the natural environment, as represented by the garden.

It is not a rhetorical device but a dizzying quest for meaning the fact that, in contrast to its euphoric propositional tone, the imaginative content of the poem—conveyed through the metaphorical architecture of associative analogies, constructed in visual and auditory terms—presents a dysphoric vision of death as an achievement rather than a loss, a state of joy rather than mourning; the restoration of the paradisiacal bliss enjoyed before the Fall.

In a stylistic tour de force, “The Garden” cloaks the classic Baroque *memento mori* themes in pastoral garb. The traditional lament over the brevity and fragility of human life, and the distressing perception of permanent loss brought about by fleeting time, is turned into a positive appreciation of the benefits of “transcending this world” and being freed from earthly burdens. **In sharp contrast to the conventional exhortation to *carpe diem*⁴⁷, the poet invites the reader to a *carpe mortem***, in the explicitly Christian conviction that there is life after death and that it will be far better than our current existence. This is because we are exiles from Paradise, a condition that was destined for us as creatures, yet we lost through our own fault.⁴⁸

The most common structure of poetic discourse involves a convergent overlap between propositional meaning and imaginative meaning, with the latter reinforcing and illustrating the former. Examples of divergence between the two are rare outside of modernist literary production, where, conversely, such a discrepancy becomes predominant. This because this device makes the text more difficult to understand, by depriving it of the immediate support offered by propositional evidence, resulting in a sort of “concealment” of the imaginative counter-text by the propositional text. This hermeneutic difficulty is particularly evident in the case of Marvell’s poem. As a matter of fact, the proposed interpretation, which reads it as a euphorically counter-intuitive *memento mori*, is not documented within the extensive critical reception of the text.⁴⁹ How can we argue that “The Garden” “speaks” of being dead (i.e. that this is the semantic content of its imaginative counter-text), when the semanteme “death” does not appear in the text, except as the attribute “mortal”, which is used as a generic marker

⁴⁷ One of Marvell’s most famous poems, “To His Coy Mistress” (in Marvell 1972/1987, pp. 50–51; notes, pp. 233–236; date of composition uncertain), is a classic example of the *carpe diem*, which has been highly popular since its inception in Greco-Roman literature and is focused on the existential experience of the passage of time, which is objectively unrepresentable, cognitively inaccessible and emotionally deeply unsettling. The metaphor of withering, of the decline of vegetation (as an alternative to the astronomical image of the setting sun and the onset of night) is such a universal, ancient and widespread literary *topos* that the archetype is easily dismissed as a stereotype. Literature and music contemporary to Marvell abound with this hackneyed conventionalisation of the poetic device of withering, trivialised into a hollow rhetorical device by the *carpe diem* specialist Robert Herrick, in popular texts such as “To Meddowes” and “To the Virgins, to make Much of Time” (which opens with an almost proverbial summary of the issue: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/ Old Time is still a-flying;/ And this same flower that smiles today,/ Tomorrow will be dying”). In a radical departure from this trend, Marvell overturns the botanical metaphor. Rather than drawing on the phenomenon of decline he turns to that of nature’s inexhaustible (cyclically triumphant) vitality, to develop it as a paradoxical and counter-intuitive image of a life happily persisting beneath the appearance of death. This imaginative reversal *annihilates* the ordinary experience of reality, reducing it to a shadow onto which creative thought is projected). The amorous *carpe diem* of the poem “To His Coy Mistress” also provides intertextual confirmation of the interpretation argued here of “The Garden” as a *carpe mortem*, explicitly describing the grave as a state of erotic solitude: “The grave’s a fine and private place, / But none, I think, do there embrace”.

⁴⁸ Marvell’s poetic output of is overshadowed by the imposing presence of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*; Marvell was Milton’s friend, patron and admirer, if not his literary disciple. Marvell accompanied the second edition of Milton’s work with a celebratory ode, which, however, was not without its ambiguities (see Carey 1969, p.21; Davis 2011, pp.41-43).

⁴⁹ In Crewe (1994, p. 275) an isolated comment opens to this interpretative hypothesis but is not developed further): “Yet this movement in the poem is self-negating. Not only is the liberated masculine soul an exotic figure of “feminine” narcissism—the bird of paradise that “whets and combs its silver wings”—but the zero-economy of decreation is tantamount to one of death, with the pastoral subject reduced to a thought-possessed shade”. Watson (2006, p. 111) also observes, in relation to Stanza IV, that here “the good life starts looking a lot like death. “All flesh is grass,” yet the living embrace never quite achieves the union for which it hungers—except perhaps as the union it fears”, but this is a passing remark, which will be developed into a general argument only in relation to another of Marvell’s pastoral poems, “Damon the mower”; see note 72 below.

of identity rather than a specific situational indicator? To support this interpretation, the propositional mechanism must be dismantled, and the analogical-associative schema (of both oppositional and unitive nature) must be reconstructed in detail. This imaginative schema counter-textually, weaves the metaphorical-metonymic content of the poem as a bucolic reverie on the state of being dead (death as a return to the blissful, sinless Edenic condition), and structures it as a reconstructible poetic meaning in opposition to the propositional meaning.⁵⁰

It is the very opening line of the poem that reveals its central theme of *memento mori* (“disguised” as a bucolic celebration): “How vainly”. The exclamation serves as an explicit intertextual link, a clear reference to the biblical source of artistic and religious meditations on the duality of transience and mortality (*tempus fugit*). The first verse of Kohelet’s autobiography reads “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all *is* vanity.” (*Ecclesiastes* 1:2; and again 12:8) and is the aphoristic quintessence (enshrined as a proverb) of the pessimistic view of the brevity of life and the futility of human concerns for earthly goods such as wealth, glory and power. All of these are swept away by death (in accordance with the old adage: *sic transit gloria mundi*). In line with the pessimistic warning of this book of wisdom, the first two lines of Marvell’s poem convey the idea that seeking glory is a form of vain self-deception, a kind of unproductive self-delusion, a distancing from the truth of the human condition. While the invective explicitly states the poem’s central theme (we immediately recognise that we are dealing with the thematic structure of the *vanitas* literary genre, which was typical of the 17th and 18th centuries), the stanza nevertheless develops it in a surprising way. The apostrophe, entirely conventional in the religiously inspired culture at the time, is supported by the highly unconventional rhetorical device of contrasting the vanity of historical fame with the positive value of plant life, thus establishing the poem’s first analogy through antithesis. Victory, success and social prestige are “upbraided” – refuted, “prudently” yet firmly – by the “short and narrow verged Shade” of “some single Herb and Tree” (i.e., by a little “green shade”). The primary allegorical meaning of this image (immediately grasped by contemporary readers, well accustomed to the literary genre of the *Triumphs*)⁵¹ is developed metaphorically by the lines that conclude the first stanza. The “short and narrow shade” of the laurel sprig crowning the victor’s head is to be interpreted as a positive omen and not a negative one. This foreshadows the “close” of humanity’s “unceasing labours”, as “repose” in the embrace of the Earth, beneath her crown (“Garland”) of flowers and trees (an image in which death is unequivocally evoked

⁵⁰ The nostalgic evocation of death as a state of blissful regained innocence is a recurring theme within the Christian tradition in general and very widespread within the cultural landscape of the Reformation. As a staunch, albeit moderate, Protestant, Marvell is directly linked to this strand of religious thought. However, It is, interesting to compare his poetry with thematically similar works, such as Bach’s famous Cantata BWV 82 (1727) (“Ich habe genug”: “I have enough”), which forms part of a group of compositions dedicated to glorifying death (“Komm, du süsse Todesstunde”, BWV 161; “Ich lasse dich nicht, du segnest mich denn”, BWV 157; and “Der Friede sei mit dir”, BWV 158). In the text of Cantata BWV 82 (whose author remained anonymous for centuries, although it has recently been suggested that it was written by Christoph Brinkmann, a theology student at the University of Leipzig at the time and the probable author of the texts for at least eight cantatas set to music by Bach, cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christoph_Birkmann), the propositional meaning literally expresses praise of death, without being articulated through a metaphorical countertext that imaginatively transposes the idea. The text of the cantata is therefore only formally a poem, not semantically. As it has no metaphorical meaning, it is, as a discursive genre, a straightforward homiletic profession of adherence to a faith-based truth. Only Bach’s marvellous music endows the composition with its evocatively unsettling power to convincingly express the humanly incomprehensible idea that earthly death is preferable to life: “I have enough / [...]. Now I wish, with joy, this very day / To depart from here: [...]. // Thus, with Simeon, I, too, already see / The joy of that life [in heaven]. / [...]. I have enough. // Fall into [death’s] slumber, / you languid eyes, / Droop gently and blissfully shut. / World, I will remain here no longer; / [...]. But there [in heaven], there I will look upon / Sweet peace, quiet rest. // My God, when will the beautiful “Now” come, / When I will go in peace, / And rest [here] in the sand of the cold earth // [...]. I look forward to my death; / Ah, had it already come about. / Then I will escape all the distress / That [had] bound me yet in the world”.

⁵¹ In ancient Rome, victorious generals would parade (on foot or in a chariot) through the streets of Urbs, where they would be celebrated by a jubilant crowd. During the procession, a slave held a laurel wreath aloft above the victor’s head, and at the of the ceremony’s climax whispered the ominous phrase: “Memento mori. Memento te hominem esse! Respice post te! Hominem te esse memento”. The iconic depiction of this funereal warning associated with the “Triumph” became very popular from the late Middle Ages onwards, in both painting and literature. In Marvell’s verses, it is the personified laurel wreath itself that utters the reminder of mortality.

by its metonymic designation – common in the British lyric tradition – through the grave situated in a “country churchyard”).⁵²

The pastoral reinterpretation of *the memento mori* as a blissful foretaste of freedom, peace, innocence and serenity (of being finally relieved from the “unceasing labours” of public life and the “cruel flame” of love), in harmony with nature, is expressed in this stanza through a central contrast. This brings together the rich metaphorical, metonymic and allegorical architecture⁵³ with which the poem is woven, forming a coherent whole of allusive yet converging clues and increasingly daring, innovative, powerful and imaginative inventions. The reversal of the “raising, tiresome, crowded” (full of “Oke, or Bayes”) coronation of victory (the fruit of “unceasing labours”) into the “Garland of *repose*, under” which vegetation envelops man as if he were dead, triggers a chain of analogies polarised along the three opposing axes: *above* vs. *below*,⁵⁴ *labour* vs. *repose*,⁵⁵ *solitude as innocence* vs. *company as troubling sinfulness*.⁵⁶ These are traversed and linked by the semantic theme of *closure*, which repeatedly emerges directly or is evoked indirectly (as a “visual echo”).⁵⁷ The rich and varied array of splendid associations, linked in various ways to these three central imaginative nuclei, develops the idea that vegetation refutes history (that the natural environment and the historical-social context are antithetical), framing it as a description of being dead as living in a garden, as a positive state of rest, passivity, innocence, oblivion and harmony,⁵⁸ conceivable as a state of pure Edenic bliss.

In the poem, the restless instability of worldly desire (because it is transitory and illusory) and the ceaseless effort (*the labour*) to obtain material goods, historical achievements and erotic love are thus set against the quiet, vegetal permanence that constantly renews itself, with its form of passive, pre- (post-)moral vitality that guarantees rest, as cessation, as a return to that pre-worldly earth that was Paradise. This antithesis is expressed through a kaleidoscope of images so rich and coherent from an imaginative point of view that any conceptual assessment of the arguments (any agreement or disagreement with the

⁵² The same ambiguous imaginative “duality” of green—a colour which symbolises both life and death, and is explored in Marvell’s poetry—is a central metaphorical theme of the Lieder cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* by Franz Schubert (1823), based on a collection of poems by Wilhelm Müller published in 1821. Green is both “the evil colour” (originally “Die böse Farbe”, D 795/17), when associated with the exuberance of plant life indifferent to human decline and suffering—insensibly alien, in its shrill exuberance, to the painful memory of moments of lost romantic happiness—and “the beloved colour (originally “Die liebe Farbe”, D 795/16), when it embodies the end of amorous torments brought about by death: “I shall dress in green, / In green weeping willows, / My treasure likes green so much. / I want to look for a cypress grove, / A heath of green rosemary: / My treasure likes green so much. // Dig a grave for me in the turf, / Cover me in green grass, / My treasure likes green so much. / No little black cross, no bright little flowers, / Green, everything green all around! / My treasure likes green so much”.

⁵³ See Berthoff 1970, pp. 3ff.

⁵⁴ “Your sacred Plants, **if here below**/Only among the Plants will grow./.../ Where from **above** the milder Sun. /.../ Ripe Apples **drop about** my head;/ The Luscious Clusters of the Vine/ **Upon my Mouth** do crush their Wine;/.../ Insnared with Flow’rs, **I fall on Grass**. /.../ Here at the Fountains sliding **foot**,/ Or at some Fruit-trees mossy **root**”.

⁵⁴ “Your sacred Plants, **if here below**/Only among the Plants will grow./.../ Where from **above** the milder Sun. /.../ Ripe Apples **drop about** my head;/ The Luscious Clusters of the Vine/ **Upon my Mouth** do crush their Wine;/.../ Insnared with Flow’rs, **I fall on Grass**. /.../ Here at the Fountains sliding **foot**,/ Or at some Fruit-trees mossy **root**”.

⁵⁵ And **their unceasing labours see**/.../To weave the Garlands of **repose**. /.../ **Fair quiet**, have I found thee here,/ And Innocence thy Sister dear! /.../ And, as it works, **th’ industrious Bee**/ Computes its time as well as we./ How could such **sweet and wholesome Hours**”.

⁵⁶ For the lyrical I, solitude and innocence are inseparable (and are therefore found together in the tranquillity of being apart from human society: : “repose/ .../ have I found thee here, / And Innocence /.../ **After** a place, so **pure** and sweet/ Mistaken long, I sought you then/ In busie Companies of Men:/.../ Society is all but rude,/ To this delicious Solitude”), because (as orthodox Puritanism taught) sex (erotic companionship) is a sin. The entire eighth stanza is a eulogy to solitude, in keeping with this religious and de-eroticised notion of innocence through its paradoxical assertion that Paradise was indeed Paradise only insofar as it represented an Adamic state of pre-Expulsion solitude, “naked” of erotic, sinful trouble: “Such was **that happy Garden-state**,/ While Man there walked **without a Mate**:/ After a place, so pure and sweet,/ What other Help could yet be meet!/ But ‘twas **beyond a Mortal’s share**/ To wander solitary there:/ **Two Paradises ‘twere in one**/ To live in Paradise alone.” Death is the attainment of this “post-mortal happy Garden-state” of a “double” Paradise, for it is a state of total separation from human convivence.

⁵⁷ “When we have run our Passion’ heat/.../. The Gods, that mortal Beauty chase, /Still in a Tree did end their race.”

⁵⁸ “Fair trees! where s’er your barks I wound, / **No Name shall but your own be found**.”

opinions expressed) is secondary to the cognitive gain offered by interpreting the poem, i.e. by deciphering its metaphorical meaning, by reconstructing its architecture as an imaginative schematisation of the state of being dead. The text's success as a literary work (as a marvellous work of art) does not stem from its ability to persuade the reader of the validity of the presented thesis. In other words, readers do not need to be convinced that being dead and impervious to love is a blissful state in order to recognise the text's poetic power. This power does not arise from the ideological message conveyed, but rather from the hermeneutic activation of the reader's imagination, which is called upon to engage in a non-conceptual, non-objectifying experience of the beauty of natural environment beauty (and one's own relationship with it) offered by spending time in a garden.

By deciphering the complex architecture shaped by the contrast between text and counter-text and by the chain of audiovisual associations and figurative patterns, the reader recognises the majestic bird that "into the boughs does glide"⁵⁹ and, lazily and silently, "whets and combs its silver wings", as the poem itself. The poem turns to an image of the soul, "prepar'd for the longer flight" of death".⁶⁰ Thus, the reader comes to read the poem as the song of this prepared being, a song that is not to be "believed" but merely listened to. The bird alights and sings, awaiting (perched, unhurried, in the certainty born of anticipation) the moment of final liberation, and flutters its feathers – (in its verses, carefully combed and sharpened, chiselled and smoothed) the "various Light" that shines "from above the milder Sun". The bird, gliding amongst the branches, in full, fluid harmony with its plant habitat, is poetry singing the blissful enjoyment of nature. It is a harbinger of death, where adherence to the "green form of life" is an imaginative annihilation of earthly life, reduced "To a green thought in a green shade".⁶¹ It is the poem that, "waving the Light" in its silvery verses, sketches that fragrant zodiac (Stanza IX)⁶² which constitutes a "new dial", a new reckoning of time, quite different from the ordinary anthropocentric reckoning of fleeting time – a reckoning based on that "sweet and wholesome" prospective anticipation which is the present of the peaceful and beautiful plant life ("Herbs and Flowers"), as a peaceful duration indifferent to the turbulent succession of history.⁶³

A poetic image does not need to be "believed"; neither it need to be "true" to be authentic. The "foreign song" that the bird sings on the fringes of what is conceivable is "Without human feeling: it is sung in the distance" – an emotional separation from direct experience (in a "withdrawal of the mind")

⁵⁹ "All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature" (Emerson 1844, "Experience", p.268)

⁶⁰ Very close to this image is the enigmatic figure of the bird, which appears as an omen of death in one of Wallace Stevens's final poems, "Of Mere Being" (1954), pp. 476-477, which can be read as a refined poetic paraphrase of Marvell's stanza: "The palm at the end of the mind,/ Beyond the last thought, rises/ In the bronze distance./ A gold-feathered bird/ Sings in the palm, without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song./ You know then that it is not the reason/ That makes us happy or unhappy. / The bird sings. Its feathers shine. / The palm stands on the edge of space. / The wind moves slowly in the branches. / The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down." The poem sings "without human meaning (beyond the last thought, on the edge of space", at the frontier of the unrepresentable, in the divergent saturation of experience that no intentionality can semantically designate within an objectifying conceptuality. Its "golden" verses "shine", waving the iridescent "Light of a new time – dial running Sun".

⁶¹ "Chasing mortal Beauty" (the beauty granted to mortals), the gods Apollo and Pan (allegorical figures representing poetry as a "divine" power, the human mind that "transcends the sea"), "still in a tree did end their race". Poetry attains its spoils of beauty through the symbolic transfiguration ("annihilation") of the human condition, transforming Daphne into a laurel, Syrinx into a reed. This is achieved by symbolising the bodily-perceptual experience—not reductively objectified or conceptualised—of one's place on earth, by overcoming its dualistic externalisation as nature.

⁶² "How well the skillful gard'ner drew/ Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new, / Where from above the milder sun/ Does through a fragrant zodiac run; / And as it works, th' industrious bee/ Computes its time as well as we. / How could such sweet and wholesome hours/ Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!" (Stanza IX).

⁶³ Since ancient times, bees, which disappear during the winter months only to reappear in spring, have, been a symbol of the natural cycle of the alternation between death and life. An echo of this ambivalence, played out alongside the above/below polarization, can be found in the second stanza (replaced by a radically new text in 1861) of the first version (published in 1859 under the title "The Sleeping") of one of Dickinson's most famous poems ("Safe in their Alabaster Chambers" - F124/J216 (1859–1861): "Light laughs the breeze/ In her Castle above them - Babbles the Bee in a stolid Ear" (in Franklin 1998, Vol. I pp. 159-164).

that ensures it is a non-figurative, non-representational image (the bird being made of silver or gold, not flesh and blood)). No direct knowledge or moral lesson can be deduced from the imaginative description offered by the poem. However, the order it establishes as beauty (not as objectification but as imaginative exposition),⁶⁴ helps us to survive the divergences inscribed in experience and to make sense of the nonsensical (including death). It helps to forge a new relationship with the world and the natural environment, that goes beyond its strategic standardisation and its representational objectification, broadening the sphere of hermeneutic reception of the saturation and mystery inherent in being in the world.

From this perspective, figurative, metaphorical, poetic (mythical) discourse is a form of “domestication” (in the Emersonian sense of the term)⁶⁵ of the chaos inherent in the opacity of the existential, intellectual and ontological content of experience, which elude linear abstract-conceptual intentionality. However, the organising, signifying and transfiguring articulation of *transcendence* proposed by this “poetic” exploration of “chaos” (transfigured into beauty) may sometimes (often) fail or prove impossible. The poet, the thinker, and human beings in general are always confronted with the tragic defeat of form in the face of a subject matter that resists articulation and presents itself as an intractable “otherness” (this is the case of suffering, as discussed in Emerson’s reflection, an of death, evoked in this poem in a gesture of reconciliation with its wound, conceived in light of life’s inherent connection to the mystery of the natural world).

Poetic discourse is therefore often the “mourning” witness and herald of a tragic (in the Nietzschean sense) failure of the human quest for meaning in the face of the “formless” (as irreducible non-meaning), the opaque, and the saturated. The Kantian dialectic of beauty and the sublime, the Nietzschean tragic dialectic of active Apollonian symbolisation and the passive expressive Dionysian abandonment (Nietzsche 1872/1886) are the systolic-diastolic rhythm of this poetic attempt to bring order to chaos, to give form to the formless, transparency to the saturated, and symbolisation to natural immanence. As Wallace Stevens puts it with magnificent imaginative power: poetry is the “blessed rage for order”,⁶⁶ a power of meaning, but also, antithetically, the “destructive force” that bears witness to the manifold triumphs of nonsense and exposes the limits of the human endeavour towards order annihilating meanings to create ever-new ones.⁶⁷

VI. Conclusion

Marvell’s poetry celebrates the joyful wonder of a vitalistic, total identification with the natural environment and the exultation at the perfect harmony between humankind and the Earth, in a sumptuous ode, iridescent with precious and luminous imagery (“silver wings and various light”), which, simultaneously denounces the unattainability of this ideal. The desired reconciliation is heralded and promised by every earthly garden, but it is a utopia—as existentially necessary as it is cognitively disruptive – that can only be conceived within the horizon of death.

Adopting a radical pessimistic stance, which is highly baroque and clearly marked by the sombre Puritan vision of a human condition irreparably compromised by sin — in stark contrast to the optimism

⁶⁴ “The beauty of the fable proves the importance of the sense” (Emerson 1844, “The Poet”, p.253).

⁶⁵ On this point, see Cavell’s 1991 interpretation of Emerson, which refers to forms of thought and language that do not eliminate chaos, opacity or saturation, nor do they erase otherness; rather they reduce its alienation, enabling us to experience unapproachable difference as an experience of meaning.

⁶⁶ See “The Idea of Order at Key West”, from *Ideas of Order*, pp. 105.

⁶⁷ As set out programmatically in the title of another poem by Wallace Stevens: “Poetry Is a Destructive Force” (from *Parts of a World*, p. 178): “That’s what misery is,/ Nothing to have at heart./ It is to have or nothing./ It is a thing to have,/ A lion, an ox in his breast,/ To feel it breathing there./ Corazon, stout dog,/ Young ox, bow-legged bear,/ He tastes its blood, not spit./ He is like a man/ In the body of a violent beast./ Its muscles are his own . . . / The lion sleeps in the sun./ Its nose is on its paws. / It can kill a man”.

of the Enlightenment —,⁶⁸ Marvell asserts that no earthly garden can be a paradise because fallen man is denied Adamic delight and innocence.⁶⁹ For Marvell, the tragic paradox inherent in the myth of the Fall (not merely biblical, but interculturally universal; cf. Ricoeur 1960, pp. 153ff.) is that the enchantment of this idyllic harmony between humans and nature can only be realised through one's own disappearance. The idea that the very concept of a garden contains the intrinsic ecocidal potential of human presence on Earth is, moreover, explicitly and angrily expressed in another, grimly pessimistic poem by Marvell:

Luxurious man, to bring his vice in use,
Did after him the world seduce,
And from the fields the flowers and plants allure,
Where nature was most plain and pure.
He first enclosed within the gardens square
A dead and standing pool of air,
And a more luscious earth for them did knead,
Which stupified them while it fed.
The pink grew then as double as his mind;
The nutriment did change the kind.
With strange perfumes he did the roses taint,
And flowers themselves were taught to paint.
The tulip, white, did for complexion seek,
And learned to interline its cheek:
Its onion root they then so high did hold,
That one was for a meadow sold.
Another world was searched, through oceans new,
To find the Marvel of Peru.
And yet these rarities might be allowed
To man, that sovereign thing and proud,
Had he not dealt between the bark and tree,
Forbidden mixtures there to see.
No plant now knew the stock from which it came;

⁶⁸ In *Julie, or The New Heloise* (1761), the *English-style* Élysée garden created by the protagonist and her husband, M. de Wolmar, is a successful example of harmony between man and the environment. It is a perfect balance of human intervention and natural beauty (see Rousseau 1761, "Lettre sur l'Élysée" XI, Part III, pp. 470ff.). For Rousseau, this pastoral idyll reflects an alternative ideal of civilisation to the historically predominant one, which has severed humanity's original unity with nature. The idea that interpersonal relationships can disturb and even shatter this rediscovered harmony (Julie does not survive the unhappiness of a socially impossible love) is a Rousseauian conviction that subtly aligns with the eulogy of solitude woven into Marvell's text.

⁶⁹ The contemporary pessimistic realist would argue that achieving a state of perfect ecological harmony between humanity and the environment would require the Western citizen to reset the historical and social machinery of civilisation. This would entail alienating individuals not only from the body of society, but also from the material necessities of survival and the symbolic codes of their cultural tradition. As Daniel Defoe's proto-ecological parable of Robinson Crusoe teaches us, no amount of solitude or 'zero hour' can change this. Reliance on technology for economic and productive regulation of one's relationship with the environment is integral to Western identity.

He grafts upon the wild the tame:
 That th' uncertain and adulterate fruit
 Might put the palate in dispute.
 His green seraglio has its eunuchs too,
 Lest any tyrant him outdo.
 And in the cherry he does nature vex,
 To procreate without a sex.
 'Tis all enforced, the fountain and the grot,
 While the sweet fields do lie forgot:
 Where willing nature does to all dispense
 A wild and fragrant innocence:
 And fauns and fairies do the meadows till,
 More by their presence than their skill.
 Their statues, polished by some ancient hand,
 May to adorn the gardens stand:
 But howsoe'er the figures do excel,
 The gods themselves with us do dwell

“The Mower against Gardens”⁷⁰

In “The Garden”, speaker of the poem is joyfully free from the troubles of love, politics, society and economics. He is fully immersed in the Edenic jubilation of an unspoilt environment, simply because he has “cast the body’s vest aside”. Death is the condition for regaining Adamic “fair quiet and Innocence”, for being able to conceive of the intact beauty of a paradisiacal earthly state as a real possibility rather than an illusory fantasy, restoring the Earth to itself.

On this Earth, utopia is unattainable yet conceiving it is an inescapable existential necessity.⁷¹ The mind cannot escape the joy of “transcending this world, annihilating it and recreating it in far other worlds, and other seas”.

It is precisely in the service of this indispensable happiness of the *as if*—the challenge to cognitive reductionisms and representationalist simplification that reduces the world to a resource and object of a sovereign, external and detached subject—that poetry finds its role, as the supreme vehicle of transcending the given, and experience’s inadequate conceptualization. Poetry is a majestic bird ready to take flight into the mystery. As the song passes through the earthly garden, it contemplates and celebrates it as an earthly paradise. It imaginatively foreshadows death as a state of bliss, of liberation from the cognitive, spiritual and biological limits that afflict earthly existence. It does not sell the imaginative transcendence of the given as an easy, gratifying and futile illusion. By imagining the world as an Arcadia that does not exist, true poetry, true art, cannot help but carve into the stone of meaning the memory of

⁷⁰ In Marvell 1972/1987, pp. 105–106 (notes, pp. 260–261). The text is available online on the Poetry Foundation website (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48333/the-mower-against-gardens>).

⁷¹ Marvell wrote a century and a half after Thomas More published *Utopia*, a seminal text of modernity and a key work in the education of the British citizens during the Baroque era. They were called upon to engage in a rigorous examination of a thesis that elevates the political dimension to the level of a framework for spiritual self-understanding.

death as an indelible earthly truth: *Et in Arcadia ego*.⁷² It articulates the abyss of death as a condition of meaning, as a *mysterium* through which the human condition is revealed, in an indissoluble interplay of the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*, disorienting yet not ineffable.⁷³

⁷² This is exemplified by works of the same name by Guercino (1618) and Nicolas Poussin (1628–1630 and 1638–1640), which are very close in date to Marvell’s poem. Watson (2006, p. 129) highlights the connection between the theme of death and pastoral poetry in another of Marvell’s texts, “Damon the Mower”, where life and death impulses are inextricably intertwined in an erotic fantasy of self-annihilation: “Poussin’s meditative versions of *Et in Arcadia ego* would sustain the same reading. Death may be present even in Arcadia, but **Arcadia may be truly present only in death, where the human ego is erased [m.e]**: Arcadia is also in me, says the Grim Reaper, encouragingly. **Come die with me and be my love, says nature to the pastoral amorist**. This is a voice that Tibullus heard,” as did Pseudo-Dionysius, and perhaps Sidney. [...]. This ataraxia seems disturbingly similar to the Arcadia found in death. Oblivion is a state of nature”.

⁷³ “The A B C of being [...]. The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.” Wallace Stevens (1947), “The motive for metaphor”, from *Transport to Summer*, p.257

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