

Speculations on a Garden of Forking Paths:

Andrew Marvell's poetic ipse in the void of being

Gilles Lazare

A man is only a particle inserted in unstable and entangled wholes.

Georges Bataille, *The Labyrinth*

Shattered in the dark night of solitude I awake: a cigarette burns in one hand; beside me Marvell and Blanchot, within me, Bataille. *The Garden*. A sudden vertigo. That notional space, a category of being, the ipse has its profound generation in revelation; an elemental cry bursting from within the self, but quietly, contemplatively. It reaches out across centuries and millennia to adjust the perversion of Time, an antinomy Nature has best eluded through cyclical regeneration. In the maw of Death, man is reborn, lives and fades to dust. Literature is his epitaph.

...this invention [writing] will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who use it, because they will not practise their memory..... You have invented an elixir not of memory but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise.

Plato, *Phaedrus*

It is not tense but logical that Marvell should conclude *The Garden* with a rhetorical question, championing the fragility of "herbs and flowers" over the concrete reckoning with which humanity sets its understanding of time and history. Somehow, and yet quite specifically, that ceaseless drive of Nature towards repetition tolerates the individual within a whole, a relative ordering of consciousness that is transcendental; materiality subsumed into a constant regenerative system which eludes fixity.

"Casting the body's vest aside,
My soul into a bough does glide"

That ipse, Marvell's soul, has escaped the curse of "incessant labours" in an Eden of reverie, and has seen in that verdant arena a topos for the deepest communion, the profoundest of revelation. It is not panic: at least, not in the Christian conception of Nature without anima, a fierce Other ravaging the already tormented human soul with primal darkness, a realm of dark passions engendered by the daemonic god, Pan. Long before Nietzsche, Marvell proposed a threat to the Apollonian, hegemonic order of civilisation with a simple Dionysian image:

"The luscious clusters of the vine
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;"

Nature is not seen as tantalisingly recessive, but on the contrary, bountiful, excessive. It offers itself up to the neophyte in a sublime experience of ecstasy. And simultaneously Marvell conflates in one stanza the antagonism of the Apollonian and the Dionysian (in the form of Pan), uniting two strands of human existence through desire; but desire seen not simply as a hunger for the superficial and the worldly, instead desire pursued for a multiplicity of ends, not always clear to the protagonists themselves. Thus both gods,

"...that mortal beauty did chase
Still in a tree did end their race;"

A divinely baroque idea is perceived underlying Marvell's image of perversely unfrustrated lust: an inversion of cause and effect, a fragmentation and reconstruction of traditional narrative along a distinctly esoteric and heretical line. His is a thesis of infinitely subtle transformations, exposing in its welter of antinomies and heterodoxies, an irrational concept of history where existence is played out not for the ostensible benefit of the individual, but as part of a greater, supra-divine plan to which even the gods are subject.

"Apollo hunted Daphne so,

Only that she might laurel grow;
And Pan did offer Syrinx speed,
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.”

This constant inversion of ‘reality’, the plunge into a Chthonian world, betrays Marvell’s radical dis-ease – the dread of mundane existence, the banality of prolonged human suffering. Instead he proposes a flight of the mind into the void of being, unfettered by morality. In that utopia of existence is the freedom of the individual unconstrained by culture and society; an existence that is not simple, not a death of the self, it is wholly complex. Poetry, contemplation, reverie, epiphany. All these contemporary, twentieth century preoccupations, prefigured in Marvell’s cosmogony; a cyclical concern with fundamental questions.

Being depends on the mediation of words, which cannot merely present it arbitrarily as ‘autonomous being’, but which must present it profoundly as ‘being in relation’.

Georges Bataille, *The Labyrinth*

This “being in relation” is not necessarily taken by Marvell to be with human society, but conversely in the wilful merging of the ipse into unmediated existence, being, both material and spiritual. It is most definitely not a reduction of complex human interaction towards a denial of individual consciousness, but a fundamentally proximate interpenetration of the human and the ‘natural’ worlds. Recognising, in Bataille’s terms, a “principle of insufficiency” as basic to human life, Marvell seeks an intensity of existence that radically incorporates the spiritual and the corporeal. His is a retreat into the mind and into the imagination, but one that is never divorced from bodily sensations. If the heritage of rational-materialism and industrialisation has been the privileging of the mechanical over the human sensorium, then it is in Marvell that, at the very outset of the so-called Enlightenment, an alternative is offered to the regime of the empirical:

“The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight 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.”

That flight of annihilation is an intoxication, a petit mort connecting the empyrean and the quotidian:

“When we have run our passion’s heat,
Love hither makes his best retreat”

It is a version of Benjamin’s ‘profane illumination’, a sudden diversion of consciousness outside of the strict confines of the continuum of history, a sacrifice of the ego in favour of some kind of psychic continuity, displacing insufficiency and discontinuity. It is a potlatch, an erotic sacrifice spent as the waves of an archetypal ocean break over the human subject, filling his ears with an interminable crash and rumble that lasts but a moment, disorientating and disconcerting.

But like all such epiphanies, the moment of revelation is transitory, it connects the subject with the world; not just Nature but human society too. And it is the place for which the subject yearns in those other, equally interminable moments of suffering. Its Present, a Jetztzeit, seemed so private, so entire and whole within the self, but of course its revelation was precisely a sublime collapse of dichotomies into the void of being, not an apotheosis of ipse. Beyond that moment, and in the discontinuity of mundane existence,

“... ‘twas beyond a mortal’s share
To wander solitary there.”

Marvell uses the mediation of language to open up a ‘third’ space, a void beyond binary distinctions between mind and body, one which incorporates both and is yet more than the sum total of its constituents. It does not deny or negate human endeavour and the linear ‘progress’ of civilisation, it affirms difference by allowing

for multiple timescales within its larger scheme of cyclical regeneration. Just as the Seasons are marked by the flowering and withering of plants, so too is human history marked by the growth and decay of civilisations.

I am not learned; I am not ignorant. I have known joys. That is saying too little: I am alive, and this life gives me the greatest pleasure. And what of death? When I die (perhaps any minute now), I will feel immense pleasure. I am not talking about the foretaste of death, which is stale and often disagreeable. Suffering dulls the senses. But such is the remarkable truth, and I am sure of it: I experience boundless pleasure in living, and I will take boundless satisfaction in dying.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*

© Giles Lane March 1996
published in *Errant Bodies Flowers* Los Angeles 1997