“O thou, that dear and happy isle”:
Andrew Marvell’s Representations of Insularity

Abstract: In stanza XLI of Upon Appleton House, Andrew Marvell strikes a nostalgic note regretting his country’s loss of peace and stability in the chaos of civil wars. In the eyes of the poet, the insular nature of Britain is a blessing and a sign of God’s Providence. Calling Britain a “happy isle”, he combines the classical motif of the Fortunate Islands with the biblical account of the Garden of Eden – a common tendency in the Renaissance poetry. Yet Marvell’s images of insularity as well as his presentation of the effects of political or mental isolation that the quest for a secluded “happy isle” may lead to seem more complex and ambivalent than a mere repetition of a poetic cliché. His extensive panegyric seems to be a laboratory in which the poet tests various models of solitary happiness and geographical insularity known from literature and myth, the results of these experiments often leading to disillusionment brought about by the realisation of man’s irreparably fallen condition.

Keywords: Andrew Marvell, Upon Appleton House, Fortunate Islands, Paradise, Garden of Eden, pastoral

And this also has been one of the Fortunate Islands – to say so would definitely be a challenge to Charles Marlowe’s pessimistic vision of the dark ages of Britain, but also due recognition of a belief shared by a great number of English poets who in the geographical location of their motherland would see a sign of God’s Providence, or of geopolitical privilege, at the least. They would be familiar with the ancient authors who often identified Britain with another world lying at the end of the earth, “cut off from us by the width of the world”¹, as Virgil wrote. They could read about that in the work of a 3rd-century geographer Gaius Julius Solinus, who claimed that “the Gallic sea-coast used to be the border of the world. But the island of Britannia, from its size, almost merits the name of another world”². However, many ancient accounts of that “other world”

do not present the place as idyllic; on the contrary, their depictions of Britain resemble Joseph Conrad’s vision of “one of the dark places of the earth”\(^3\). As the earliest Roman geographer Pomponius Mela wrote, “Britain is flat, huge, fertile, but more generously so for what feeds sheep than for what sustains humans (...). It supports peoples and their kings, but all are uncivilized”\(^4\). When reading further into Solinus’ narrative, we may learn that in Britain, “birds are rare and the people unwelcoming and warlike. When they are victorious in battle, they first drink the blood of the slain, then besmear their own faces with it”\(^5\).

However, as Josephine Waters Bennet observes, “the idea that Britain was another world was too tempting a fancy to escape the attention of the English poets”\(^6\), and the notion seemed especially powerful and inspiring for the Elizabethan imagination:

“In addition to this geographical concept of England as another world because it was cut off from the land mass of the known world, there was a more nebulous and vague association of Britain with the mythical islands of the Western Ocean, such as Thule, the Fortunate Isles, or Hesperides, the Islands of the Blest, and Homer’s Ogygia”\(^7\).

Needless to say, in poets’ minds, the images of various mythological happy isles combined naturally with the biblical account of the Garden of Eden. Another interesting development of the theme in the Elizabethan poetry is the identification of Britain with Elysian Fields on account of the pseudo-etymological link with Queen Elizabeth’s (Eliza’s) name\(^8\).

Bennet traces references to Britain as one of the mythical islands in William Camden, Raphael Holinshed, John Selden, Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, William Shakespeare (Richard II, II.i. 39–57), Ben Jonson and in many other authors. Thus, she also scrupulously makes a note of Andrew Marvell’s reference to the topos in his poem Upon Appleton House\(^9\) written during the Interregnum; more precisely, to the lines of stanza XLI which invoke the insular character of Britain:

“O thou that dear and happy isle
The garden of the world ere while,
Thou Paradise of four seas,
Which heaven planted us to please,
But, to exclude the world, did guard
With wat’ry if not flaming sword;

\(^5\) Solinus, *Polyhistor*, 22.3.
\(^7\) Ibid., 117.
\(^8\) Ibid., 124–125.
\(^9\) Ibid., 131.
What luckless apple did we taste,  
To make us mortal, and thee waste?” (XLI, ll. 321–328)\(^{10}\).

In Bennet’s study, Marvell’s address seems to merely complete a long list of literary examples. I would argue, however, that it differs considerably from both the Elizabethan references to the Fortunate Islands and from the pastoral representation of the insular paradise that can be found in Restoration and Augustan poetry, for example in the “Fair-est Isle” of John Dryden’s libretto to King Arthur. First and foremost, unlike his predecessors or contemporaries, Marvell does not say that Britain is a happy isle, but claims that it used to be one “ere while”. In the quoted stanza, the combination of the classical topos with the biblical image of Paradise introduces both the theme of God’s Providence as well as that of the Original Sin, and the emphasis seems to fall on the latter. The poet sounds the note of regret and nostalgia, rather than that of praise and pride which we could hear in the poems or courtly entertainments written by the Elizabethans. The only Elizabethan echo of the topos of a happy isle that can be heard in Marvell’s verse, and it sounds very loud indeed, is a clear reference to William Shakespeare’s Richard II (which also features on Bennet’s list). But again, Shakespeare’s elaborate version of Britain as the “sceptred isle”, “this other Eden, demi-paradise”, “this little world/ This precious stone set in the silver sea,/ Which serves it in the office of a wall” (II.i.40–47)\(^{11}\), because of its immediate context, displays a higher degree of kinship with Marvell’s nostalgic stanza than with its contemporary poetic brethren. Both in Shakespeare and in Marvell the topos serves as a political allegory of a country verging on or in the state of chaos. In Shakespeare’s play, the long litany of the attributes England was blessed with becomes a preamble to the sad prophecy John of Gaunt pronounces on his death bed about the country which “Is now leased out (…) Like to a tenement or a pelting farm”, and which “hath made a shameful conquest of itself” (II.i.59–66)\(^{12}\).

The parallels between Shakespeare’s and Marvell’s visions of Britain as a garden of Eden planted upon a happy island are manifold and they deserve proper attention. Apart from the clear verbal echoes\(^{13}\), in both cases, the significance of the lines is highlighted by the political context in which they are pronounced – both passages invoke the topos of the Fortunate Island only to make more acute the sense of loss of peace and prosperity. It seems that both John of Gaunt in Shakespeare’s play and the speaker in Marvell’s poem make “use” of paradise in the way St Thomas Aquinas considered the place “useful”, even though humanity have lost it. As the great philosopher persuades (refuting one of the objections):

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 247–248.  
\(^{13}\) See notes by Nigel Smith in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, 225.
“Paradise did not become useless through being unoccupied by man after sin, just as immortality was not conferred on man in vain, though he was to lose it. For thereby we learn God’s kindness to man, and what man lost by sin.”\(^{14}\)

The sense that the loss of the island’s happiness was not effected by any external power (both poets emphasise how well-guarded Britain is by the “watery” sword or wall) but that it was caused by the sinful acts of its inhabitants is also present in both Shakespeare and Marvell; John of Gaunt says that England “hath made a shameful conquest of itself”, while Marvell directly links the decline of the land during the Civil War with the Original Sin, although he seems puzzled about what exactly was that “luckless apple” that the nation tasted. Last but not least, both Shakespeare and Marvell link the image of Britain as geographically privileged and well-protected (except from self-destructive acts) with that of a well-tended garden, which they present as a model of the commonwealth.

In the well-known allegorical lines of Richard II, the Gardener speaks of the royal garden as if it were a model of the state which needs constant care and vigilance. “Go thou”, he tells the servant, “and, like an executioner,/ Cut off the heads of too fast-growing sprays/ That look too lofty in our commonwealth”. Meanwhile, he himself, “will go root away/ The noisome weeds, which without profit suck/ The soil’s fertility from wholesome flowers” (III.iv.33–39)\(^{15}\). The servant, however, complains about the futility of tending to a mere model, while the real commonwealth is in disarray:

> Why should we in the compass of a pale
> Keep law and form and due proportion,
> Showing, as in a model, our firm estate,
> When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
> Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
> Her fruit trees all upturned, her hedges ruined,
> Her knots disordered and her wholesome herbs
> Swarming with caterpillars?” (III.iv.40–47)\(^{16}\)

It is hard to ignore Marvell’s indebtedness to this garden-allegory of Shakespeare, when one puts side by side the lines from Richard II and stanza XLI and the following two of Marvell’s country house poem, where the poet seems to enter into a dialogue with himself, a dialogue similar to that between Shakespeare’s Gardener and his helper. He has just praised his patron’s, Lord Fairfax’s, beautiful formal garden, which looks like a well-ordered fortress with a disciplined army of flowers that line up and show


\(^{15}\) W. Shakespeare, King Richard II, 365.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 365–366.
their respect to the General-Gardener. Yet, it is exactly this vision that seems to remind the poet of the loss of the other garden, the “dear and happy isle”, the “Paradise of Four seas”, that Lord Fairfax seems to have deserted when he resigned the command of the Parliamentary army and withdrew to tend to his private garden. Notably, describing that happy garden-state, now lost, Marvell cannot escape the military imagery, just as Lord Fairfax could not abandon “his warlike studies” in the garden. As the poet claims, in the happier past, “gardens only had their towers/ and all the garrisons were flowers”, when “the gard’ner had the soldier’s place,/ And his more gentle forts did trace”. That happy, and curiously fortress-like, garden-paradise has now been destroyed by war: “But war all this doth overgrow:/ We ordnance plant and powder sower. The poet’s lament of the deplorable state of the garden of Britain resembles Shakespeare’s vision of the commonwealth overgrown with weeds, but Marvell’s complaint and apparent rebuke seem more poignant, as they implicitly address his patron’s inaction and point to real chances of restoration that have been missed:

> “And yet their walks one on the sod
> Who, had it pleased him and God,
> Might once have made our gardens spring
> Fresh as his own and flourishing.
> But he preferred to the Cinque Ports
> These five imaginary forts:
> And, in those half-dry trenches, spanned
> Power which the ocean might command” (XLIV)

Thus, not only does Marvell seem to dispute the point of creating a private perfect model of the world, as the servant does in Shakespeare, but he also raises questions about the (political) ethics of man’s isolation in the self-made paradise.

That, however, does not prevent the poet from praising Lord Fairfax’s country house as a veritable locus amoenus, which he does in stanza LXXXXVI. In the world which has now become “a rude heap together hurled”, where everything is “negligently overthrown,/ Gulfs, deserts, precipices, stone”, Appleton becomes a “lesser world”, which “contains the same./ But in more decent order tame”; it is “heaven’s centre, Nature’s lap/ And Paradise’s only map”.

17 As Tom Keymer suggests, the military imagery and the visions of slaughter that permeate the landscape of Upon Appleton House can be interpreted as “something like an early modern version of post-traumatic stress” that Lord Fairfax seems to suffer from: “Try as he might, play as he might, Fairfax can’t get away. The sieges and battles stay with him; they bloody his garden” (43). However, it is the allegorical reading of the motif of a garden-fortress as hortus conclusus of the soul and the sight of Lord Fairfax’s battle with sin that seems more convincing, and definitely less anachronistic; it is in line with Marvell’s praise of his patron’s integrity and with the Protestant ideal of heroic virtue. Cf. Tom Keymer, “Horticulture Wars: Tristram Shandy and Upon Appleton House”, The Shandean 11 (1999–2000): 38–47.
18 The Poems of Andrew Marvell, 225.
19 Ibid., 226.
20 Ibid., 226.
21 Ibid., 241.
to the name of a Happy Isle, it is Fairfax’s Appleton that becomes the state in miniature, an island of peace in the middle of the sea of political chaos. The metaphor of the estate’s happy insularity is playfully turned into a physical fact, when river Denton overflows “circling in” the cattle grazing in Appleton fields. Yet, how precarious that insular peace must have been in the summer of 1651 we can realize when we look at the contemporary pamphlets and newsbooks, which, as Hirst and Zwicker write, “remained full of war and the rumour of war”\textsuperscript{22}, and at the predicted itineraries of the belligerent troops when “Scottish forces moved towards the border in late July. Should they take the eastern road in England they would pass within a few miles of Fairfax’s estate.”\textsuperscript{23}

That reality of imminent war outside the happy estate of Appleton is figuratively present in the meadow section of the poem. After the outburst of nostalgia for lost happiness (stanza XLI) and the expression of regret at Fairfax’s political withdrawal (stanza XLIV), the poet decides to abandon the perfect little world of his patron’s Garden and venture into the abyss of the overgrown meadow; his passage through high-growing grass is first described as a dangerous sea journey:

“To see men through this meadow dive
We wonder how they rise alive.
As, under water none does know
Whether he fall through it or go” (XLVIII)\textsuperscript{24}

As J. P. Conlan observes, in the early modern England, especially after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the ocean was often perceived “as a special site where God revealed His judgement” and “a successful ocean crossing was often claimed as a proof of virtue”\textsuperscript{25} (31), as well as a licence and an inducement to colonial expansion. Equally, in Marvell’s meadow-ocean, God’s Providence seems revealed, when “the grassy deeps divide”, so that the mowers, whom the poet compares to Israelites, may walk “on foot through a green Sea”\textsuperscript{26}, and during their unhindered passage through the meadow, God seems to feed them with a version of manna and quails (“he called as Israelites; / But now, to make his saying true,/ Rails rain for quails, for manna dew”\textsuperscript{27}).

The crossing of the Appleton meadow is presented as a perilous journey; the meadow is an unfathomable rough ocean and, a few lines later, it turns into a fearful battlefield where the traveller witnesses the massacre of grass and accidental death of an unfledged nestling. Yet, the speaker seems to have taken the risk of crossing the sea (or the desert) to search for the promised land, for a happy island of his own. He seems to have given “the proof of virtue” and has safely landed in the wood, where he “takes sanctuary”.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{24} The Poems of Andrew Marvell, 227.
\textsuperscript{25} J.P. Conlan, “Paradise Lost: Milton’s Anti-Imperial Epic”, Pacific Coast Philology 33, no. 1 (1998): 32.
\textsuperscript{26} The Poems of Andrew Marvell, 227.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 227–228.
The wood is at the same time “yet green, yet growing ark”\(^{28}\) the speaker boards to escape the flood and a dry piece of land encompassed by water where he anchors and finds refuge. While Fairfax’s garden was circled and guarded by the five imaginary bastions, so, from the outside, the wood also seems protected by thickly growing trees; but “within/ It opens passable and thin”\(^{29}\). Here the poet seems to create for himself a different version of earthly paradise, different from the formal garden of Lord Fairfax, yet equally isolated from the world of trouble. Here, he claims, “the world no certain shot/ Can make, or me it toucheth not” (LXXVI)\(^{30}\).

As Jean Delumeau writes in his study of the Paradise topos, due to the combination and interplay of various themes which “enriched each other”, there emerged “three types of description of the earthly paradise: a landscape arranged as a garden; nature in a wild state but wonderfully blessed by the gods; and a pastoral setting for love”\(^{31}\). Lord Fairfax’s formal garden clearly belongs to the first type; the speaker’s solitary experience in the wood combines both the second and the third. Thus we learn that the wood “in as loose an order grows, / As the Corinthean porticoes”. It is “nature in a wild state”, but at the same time “the temple green” where sounds the song of “winged choirs”\(^{32}\), and where the speaker moves “like some great prelate of the grove”, forming “strange prophecies” and reading “in Nature’s mystic book”\(^{33}\). But the ecstasy he feels in the wood is as much a mystical experience as it is self-erotic. Licked and clasped by the ivy, “languishing with ease”, he tosses on the “velvet moss” and dreams of becoming Nature’s captive:

> “Bind me you woodbines in your twines,  
> Curl me about you gadding vines,  
> And oh so close your circles lace,  
> That I may never leave this place” (LXXVII)\(^{34}\)

This is probably not what we would typically classify as “a pastoral setting for love”, unless we count among the examples of the genre the unhappy story of the vain passion of Narcissus. However, if we consider what the poet has to say about paradise in his other poem invoking the old topos, we would learn that to him the essential quality of the original “happy garden-state” was the solitary existence. As Marvell persuades us in The Garden:

> “Such was that happy garden-state  
> While man there walked without a mate:

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\(^{28}\) Ibid., 230.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 231.  
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 235.  
\(^{32}\) The Poems of Andrew Marvel I, 231.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 234.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 235.
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”\textsuperscript{35}.

It is usually the ostensible misogyny of the passage that is highlighted by critics. I would rather point out how blasphemous it is. Travestying the Book of Genesis, where we learn that God said “it [was] not good that the man should be alone” and decided to “make him an help meet for him” (2.18)\textsuperscript{36}, Marvell implies that the reason for the creation of Eve, her raison d’être, so to speak, was Adam’s sense of loneliness, which was, in turn, already a symptom of his mortality (even before he plucked the forbidden fruit). The notion that, as Aristotle wrote long before, man is a social creature, was well known and accepted at the time, and, in the writings of Marvell’s contemporaries (e.g. in Thomas Hobbes or John Wilkins) this tendency towards and necessity of social organisation is linked to the humanity’s fallen condition. However, Marvell’s vision is exceptional because he plants the necessity of social intercourse, or any necessity for that matter, in the happy Garden of Eden.

Marvell’s votum separatum among the traditional accounts of the bliss of Paradise seems to arise from the poet’s ironic awareness of the dual nature of the topos. The landscape of earthly paradises is always apparently prelapsarian, but the perspective is always postlapsarian; and whatever shape the topos takes, be that a Happy Isle, the Fortunate Islands, an earthly paradise or a formal garden, its fallen perspective will always come to the surface. The attribute of any man-made garden of Eden that speaks most loudly about the fallen condition of the place is the notion of exclusion, the insistence on its insular character and the fact that it is guarded from the rest of the world. Bearing that in mind, we should look once again at the Happy Isle of Britain invoked in Marvell’s country house poem and at the logic and chronology of biblical references upon which the image is built. Like the Garden of Eden, the “Paradise of four seas” was planted by God, but, just as in the case of the creation of Eve described in the quoted stanza of The Garden, Marvell plays with the cause-effect sequence and chronology, as the garden is not planted before humans appear there, but later, to please them. But the greatest distortion of the biblical account is the claim that this earthly paradise is guarded “with wat’ry if not flaming sward” in order “to exclude the world”. The biblical Paradise does become isolated and guarded only when Adam and Eve are expelled from it:

“So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life (Genesis 3.24)”\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 158.
\textsuperscript{36}The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
The logic of biblical narrative clearly links exclusion and isolation of the place with the Original Sin; and Marvell would certainly be aware of those nuances, which not only introduce a note of ambivalence in the presentation of various types of secluded spaces in Upon Appleton House (the country house, the cloister, the garden, the wood, the happy isle), but they also implicitly question the whole tradition of the topos. Marvell’s poem itself may be perceived as an isolated field of experiment, a laboratory in which the poet tests various models of happiness known from literature and myth. But it turns out that in all “samples” tested through the space and through the history of Appleton something goes awry and the perfection cannot be attained. When, in the poem composed by Marvell a few years later, a group of English dissidents in a boat sing a psalm in praise of the blessings of Bermuda, the paradise-like island seems close and the end of their sea journey in search of a new happy isle (as the old one became hostile) seems so near. Yet the movement of the boat is only apparent, “the falling oars” keep the time to help their song, and the travellers are virtually kept in time, because at the end of their song they are exactly where they were at the beginning, and the island is still there before them— an ideal place, a no-place, u-topos, that has no location and can never be reached.

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