

A Pattern of the Mind: The Country House Poem Revisited

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Criticism of country house poems of the seventeenth century has been largely concerned with generic characteristics. What has been for the most part ignored is the essentially playful nature of the genre. Instead, critical emphasis tends to be placed on the moral value of country life. But in these poems, goodness itself is so married to pleasure that the epicurean permeates all features. It is true that morality helps to supply structure for the poem but does not, at its best, weigh down the meditation on an ordered, yet free, space enclosed by architecture and the boundaries of a park or estate.

It is also important to recognize that experience in these poems is retrospectively described. In that sense, these are poems of revisiting, even when the present tense is used. Imagination converts the original experience—always asserted to be real—into a play of fancy. A quality that memory retains is given form by a more or less extravagant use of metaphor, culminating, as we shall see, in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House." One could say that the words of the poems do not simply recreate experience but create it. In effect, the country house poem, in the greater part of the seventeenth century, evolves in the direction of an emphasis on subjective response, rather than on objective description. Playfulness, or the *quodlibet* mode, helps to explain the mixed genre of these poems.

The description of a country house and estate is a subject favored by a number of seventeenth century English poets. The reasons are complicated and will not be the focus of the present essay.¹ Suffice it to say that architecture was increasingly attracting the attention of writers as a fit subject for gentlemen to study. Henry Peacham, in his *Compleat Gentleman* comments that "this admirable Art"—by which he means geometry in general—"dares contend with nature selfe, in infusing life

as it were, into the sencelesse bodies of wood, stone, or metall."² It is this art that "with her ingenious hand reares all curious roofes and Arches, stately theaters, the Columnes simple and compounded, pendant Galleries, stately Windows, Turrets, &c."³ If before Inigo Jones introduced a new concept of architecture to England,⁴ it was the surveyor who drew plans for country houses, nevertheless the way was being prepared for a more theoretical approach to building, with renewed study of Vitruvius and with the growing taste for symmetry in the building of houses. And yet the country house poems of the seventeenth century are predominantly concerned with the older style of architecture, rather than the new Palladian style. No doubt a nostalgia for the past was partly responsible, but so was the conviction that the older style was more natural. Foreign architects are derided; indeed any notion of the professional architect has little place in these poems. Nature dominates not only the parkland but also the house, with a sense that the Golden Age is reborn only when human beings live in close harmony with nature.⁵

This moral emphasis pervades the poems that celebrate country life with the country house at the center. "Decor," Sir Henry Wotton notes in his famous work *The Elements of Architecture* (1624), "is the keeping of a due Respect between the Inhabitant and the Habitation."⁶ It may seem paradoxical that the country house poem should have so little to say about architecture, but it is the house and estate as expressions of the owner's mind that matters. For another, partial, answer to the question of why it does not have more to say on this subject, we must turn to the myth of the Golden Age. As such Roman poets as Virgil, Horace, Martial, and Ovid stressed in their works, artifice interferes between man and nature. As a version of pastoral, the country house poem is committed to the house that serves human needs rather than the one that is built for ostentation: "Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show."⁷

As "an ancient pile," Penshurst is exempt not only from the luxury associated with newer houses but also from the meddling hand of the architect. Already, in this, one of the first, and certainly most influential, poems of the genre in England, we see the past invoked for its simplicity, as well as for the memories it provides. The allusion to the Golden Age deities—Dryads, Pan, and Bacchus—evokes a time when all nature was

inhabited by such beings; a link is made to a distant past and a land of the imagination where man lived in harmony with nature and where he can still dwell through poetry and where present, past, and future are brought together. But Jonson returns to historical reality with a reminder that this house was the place where Sidney was born: "At his great birth, where all the Muses met. / There, in the writhed bark, are cut the names / Of many a sylvan, taken with his flames" (14-16). The spirit of Sidney lives on in the celebrations of love by other poets. All is liveliness where the human spirit is free to expand in its most natural environment. Hence the "ruddy satyrs" chase the nymphs to another tree where the present lady of the house first felt labor pains. Fertility on all levels is commemorated through allusions both mythological and historical. The interpreting mind of the poet has identified the significance of place.

All this is familiar in critical commentary on this poem. Seldom noted, however, are the signs of fanciful treatment of the moral theme. For example, the persistent personifying of the house—"Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show"—signals not only allegory but also a whimsical approach to the subject. Another poem, Margaret Cavendish's "The Knight and the Castle," carries personification to greater lengths by having the castle engage in a dialogue with the knight who wishes he had the means to rebuild it. Abraham Cowley puts his entire poem "On the Queen's Repairing Somerset House" into the mouth of the house itself, singing its own praises. There is something about the genre that seems to invite the excursion into an almost childlike fantasy.

Similarly, Jonson's "Bright eels that emulate them [carps and pikes], and leap on land / Before the fisher, or into his hand" (37-39), as an instance of the *sua sponte* theme from Roman poetry, typifies the penchant for English poets to treat country house and estate encomia as a play of wit. At the same time, it is the continuum of history that supplies the structure needed to accommodate the moral emphasis.⁸ Not only does the poet as guest "reign" here, but he is reminded that the reigning monarch, James I, was also a guest—and an unexpected one at that—at this house. As for the future, the children "may, every day, / Read, in their virtuous parents' noble parts. / The mysteries of manners, arms, and arts" (96-98).

It has often been noted that the words “proud, ambitious heaps,” applied in Jonson’s poem to the wrong kind of architecture, suggest the House of Pride in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, for certainly that was “a goodly heape for to behould”—in the words of Spenser’s ironic praise.⁹ This allegorical house, so closely related, as it seems, to such prodigy houses as Burghley,¹⁰ supplies the implicit contrast for a great many country house poems that stress a continuity with the past. Lucifera’s house, on the other hand, shows the attempt to be rid of the past by concealment: “And all the hinder parts, that few could spie, / Were ruinous and old, but painted cunningly.” More virtuous in its acknowledgment of the claims of the past, Geoffrey Whitney’s country house poem compares a house built by man to a bee hive and thus a place that the wanderer must return to. As “the bees at length return into their hive,” so the poet:

Even so myself; through absence many a year,
A stranger mere, where I did spend my prime.
Now parents’ love doth hale me by the ear,
And saith, Come home, defer no longer time:
Wherefore, when hap, some golden honey brings,
I will return, and rest my weary wings.¹¹

Few country house poems refer so explicitly to a return or revisiting, but this poem is not based on actual experience so much as on an argument from the analogy of the bee hive. In this sense it is more emblematic than the other country house poems that we shall be considering; these may make use of emblematic imagery, in keeping with the habits of the age, but they are more rooted in the memory of the poet.

Emilia Lanier’s “Description of Cooke-ham” is an elegiac evocation of the past:

Therefore, sweet Memory, do thou retain
Those pleasures past, which will not turn again:
Remember beauteous Dorset’s former sports¹²

The poem, written at the behest of the Dowager Countess of Cumberland to commemorate her stay at this estate, describes how the great lady took her leave of the trees that grew there: “. . . when with grief you did

depart, / Placing their former pleasures in your heart; / Giving great charge to noble memory, / There to preserve their love continually" (153-57). The personifying of trees is a way of projecting feeling into the landscape as a mirror of the grieving person; yet at the same time, it illustrates the fancifulness that pervades the country house poem in general. Since feeling matters more than descriptive detail and since such detail is conventional (*pace* Fowler's comment on this poem that "observations of landscape are unusually specific for its date," coupled with the examples he gives, 51), the poet avoids static enumeration of the sort to be found in rhetorical examples of *topographia*. The mind of the lady commemorated, as well as of the poet herself, is at the center of the poem, and memory is commemorated as the keeper of past experience.

But before pursuing the house as a "pattern of the mind" and a keeper of memory, let us consider briefly another reason, besides the Golden Age anti-architecture theme, for the absence of detailed architectural description in these poems. Rhetorically, the country house poem is an example of the scheme known as *topographia*, defined by Henry Peacham as "an evident and true description of a place To this figure refer Cosmography, by which is described countries, cities, townes, temples, orchards, gardens, fountaines, dens, and all other maner of places."¹³ His caution is: "In the use of this figure diligence ought to be used, that no necessarie circumstance be omitted, the want whereof may appeare a maime in the description." All rhetoricians, from Cicero and Quintilian on, stress the importance of setting a scene before the reader's eyes by including a sufficient number of circumstances, or details, to make the picture convincing. The most popular author of *Progymnasmata* in antiquity and in the Renaissance, Aphthonius, defines description as "an expository speech, distinctly presenting to view the thing being set forth."¹⁴ Poets of course knew instinctively that a description of a place must not merely enumerate features in the way that Aphthonius exemplifies in his description of the temple of Serapis in Alexandria, together with the Acropolis. They knew the importance of unifying details by means of the selective eye of the poet himself, who writes not only from a particular point of view but chooses his details for an affective purpose.¹⁵ Any architectural features, then, mentioned in a country house poem will be

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acting more symbolically than descriptively. We do not turn to these poems for a history of seventeenth-century architecture or gardens.

What we do find often is a playfulness in the description that charms the reader. The poets seem to be on holiday from the more serious business of life. We see them as travelers visiting stately homes in a manner not so very different from the way we visit them today, for a breath of fresh air combined with a bit of history and a glimpse of how the other half lives. It is in this spirit that Richard Corbett, who became Bishop of Oxford in 1628, describes a vacation jaunt with three friends to Warwick Castle in 1618 or 1619. The owner, Fulke Greville, greets them:

'Please you walk out and see the Castle? Come,
The owner saith, 'It is a scholar's home,
A place of strength and health; in the same fort,
You would conceive a castle and a court.'¹⁶

Even the notion of combining a fortified castle with a court is whimsically stated as Corbett continues: "The orchards, gardens, rivers, and the air, / Do with the trenches, rampires, walls compare: / It seems nor art nor force can intercept it, / As if a lover built, a soldier kept it" (413-16). As they climb a steep road up to the tower, he says that they "do not climb but walk; and though the eye / Seems to be weary, yet our feet are still / In the same posture cozened up the hill: / And thus the workman's art deceives our sense, / Making those rounds of pleasure a defence" (418-22). He keeps the metaphor of court and fort moving along to express the delight of the viewers. Rejecting detailed description, he avoids the static by keeping a double perspective on the castle and its grounds.

What I have called the playful aspect of country house poems may also be called, rhetorically, conceitedness of the kind associated with metaphysical poetry. Still another term that may be used here is *capriccio* or *capriccesque* for its connotations of fancifulness, such as the personification of the house.¹⁷ It is this mode of description that often denies the expository purpose as Aphthonius defined it. Instead, it purposely helps to create a "pattern of the mind," whether of the owner of the house or of the poet himself. The metaphors go beyond the enumeration of physical features, taking the reader into a quality of experience as identified through

memory; they simultaneously contribute to the usual purpose of these poems: encomium. How well these two aspects interact within a poem is a measure of the satisfactoriness of the poem. Subjective description alone would not have served their purpose; nor would adulation. The fanciful or playful approach has a unifying effect by placing the poet at the center of his work.

Thus Thomas Carew, writing to his friend G.N. from Wrest Park, describes the double moat around the house, praising the watery constellations within the moats more than those in the heavens:

This island mansion, which, i' th' centre placed,
Is with a double crystal heaven embraced,
In which our watery constellations float,
Our Fishes, Swans, our Waterman, and Boat,
Envied by those above, which wish to slake
Their star-burnt limbs in our refreshing lake,
But they stick fast nailed to the barren sphere,
Whilst our increase in fertile waters here
Disport, and wander freely where they please
Within the circuit of our narrow seas.¹⁸

The hyperbole charms as a flight of fancy: what is below, on earth, surpasses what is above, in the heavens. So neat is the parallel, and yet so playful, that we readily accept the conceit as depicting the mind of the owner who does not "decline . . . all the work of art" (69), though making "things not fine, / But fit for service" (56-57). Again, the simplicity of life with nature is praised above the "prouder piles, where the vain builder spent / More cost in outward gay embellishment / Than real use" (52-55). The narrowness of the house and moat is transformed into a limitless freedom within bounds.

This theme is repeated over and over in the genre. Mildmay Fane, for example, turns the familiar bird catalogue into a praise of small creatures, such as the owl "Ruffed like a judge, and with a beak, / As it would give the charge and speak."¹⁹ Or his ducks "dive voluntary, wash, prune, play" (68), like the poet himself. And like Carew, he finds in water an image of the heavens;

. . . the spring-head, where
 Crystal is limbecked all the year,
 And every drop distils, implies
 An ocean of felicities;
 Whilst calculating, it spins on,
 And turns the pebbles one by one,
 Administring to eye and ear
 New stars and music like the sphere;
 When every purl calcined doth run,
 And represent such from the sun. (91-100)

It is typical for the country house poet to find his heaven on earth and to find “books and learning” when “clad in water tissue suit” superior to anything the “best of scholars” might disclose.

The topos of much in little is central to George Aglionby’s poem on Bolsover Castle as it had been reconstructed by Robert Smythson:

Yet, Bolzor, ’tis thy greatest grace,
 To have such perfect symmetry,
 And so much room in so small space.
 Nature’s best workmanship we see
 In the industrious little bee.²⁰

Here architecture is excused by its littleness. Aglionby gives a brief catalogue of architectural features: “Such pillars, floors, stairs, lights, and vaults, / Such marble roofs, all without faults” (21-22). Such features, as the poets realized, cannot fittingly be described in poetry without the tedium of an inventory. What the poet is concerned to express is that the castle represents the mind of the owner: “’Tis like the Master’s mind, compact and high, / Uniform, fit for nobility” (47-48). His platonizing encomium finds “Architecture itself, if it could be / Exposed to outward view, we sure should see / Clothed in the shape of Bolzor” (15-18). In a style reminiscent of some of Ben Jonson’s own platonizing descriptions of beauty, this poet dwells on the theme of perfection, as if the castle were a woman. It seems that personification of a building is one of the most readily identifiable features of the genre but one that expresses its *serio ludens* just as much as its allegorical tendencies.

Whether a house has been reconstructed from a fort or from an abbey, the poets will praise the transformation in terms of the appropriateness to the owner's mind. Welbeck Abbey is large, unlike Bolsover; nevertheless, according to Richard Flecknoe, it is "Justly proportioned to the owner's mind: / All great and solid, as in ancient times / Before our modern buildings were our crimes."²¹ But this owner is, after all, the Duke of Newcastle, so that even his stables appear like a palace or a temple, in which the horses are venerated as "semi-gods." It is to his credit that he exemplifies courtesy, not pride, and that he converts greatness to "an art of nobleness."

The wife of the Duke, Margaret Cavendish, is praised, in another poem by Flecknoe, for her closet. So learned is she that she "Makes each place where she comes a library, / Carrying a living library in her brain / More worth than Bodley's or the Vatican."²² The ingenious hyperbole is not only acceptable as a compliment to a very learned woman but as a playfully worded tribute, rather than mere adulation. One critic has indeed commented on the "sycophantic abasement" of this piece,²³ missing, as it seems, the conventions of the genre and the inherent playfulness. It is a not unfamiliar weakness of criticism to take more seriously the encomia of the period than they were intended to be. Convention justifies much of what would otherwise seem excessive.

For poets, many of these conventions suggest the mind at play. In one of Edmund Waller's Penshurst poems, he praises Dorothy Sidney, eldest child of Robert Sidney, second earl of Leicester, for bestowing order on the grounds of the house. The comparisons with Orpheus and with Amphion are designed to portray her spirit as the inspiration by which a wood turned into a garden:

Amphion so made stones and timber leap
 Into fair figures from a confused heap;
 And in the symmetry of her parts is found
 A power like that of harmony in sound.²⁴

The platonizing that runs throughout these poems is itself both playful and poetic, though some would add "political," like the court masques. In fact, one could find many parallels between country house poems and

the masque: both are essentially cavalier in spirit; both use classical mythology as central to the encomium; both idealize individuals and nature by emphasizing beauty and harmony; both are forms of entertainment couched in moral terms. But while the masque will have some sort of plot, and probably an antimasque, as well as music, dancing, and stage sets, the country house poem is often narrative and digressive in form.

Nevertheless, artifice is omnipresent in the two genres. For the country house poem, more concerned with description of an actual place than is the masque, nature is nevertheless nature tamed. Everywhere the human hand is at work reducing wild forests and raging rivers to a more civilized pattern. England thus takes its rightful place as the garden of the world, and the classical deities are domesticated to become part of the familiar landscape, while enhancing the visible with their invisible presence. Another poem by Waller, "On St. James's Park, As Lately Improved by His Majesty," is devoted to eulogizing the reformed order of the old St James's Park by the new monarch, Charles II, in 1660.²⁵ In turn this new order—again epitomized by the "voice of Orpheus or Amphion's hand" (15)—serves as a model for the reformation of the nation. The inevitable reference to "the first paradise" appears at the beginning of the poem; though that paradise has long since vanished, "the description lasts," as Waller hopes that his own description of the park will last. Past, present, and future are contained in the image of this park as a type of earthly paradise.

Poems of rebuilding inevitably suggest a new order imposed upon old materials. Again, Waller commends the queen's rebuilding of Somerset House.²⁶ That this is more than mere compliment to the queen is indicated by the fact that she played an active part in the design of the reconstruction, having herself a considerable interest in architecture. The symbolic significance of reconstruction was irresistible to poets of the Restoration. Waller asks:

But what new mine this work supplies?
 Can such a pile from ruin rise?
 This like the first creation shows
 As if at your command it rose. (19-22)

But Waller can be more specific, as in his reference to the well-proportioned staircase that the queen built. Here is an opportunity for the poet to show his wit in an often repeated topos of the genre: the pride of the owner in its combination with humility:

She needs no weary steps ascend;
 All seems before her feet to bend:
 And her, as she was born, she lies;
 High, without taking pains to rise. (41-44)

He sums up the building, "by the Queen herself designed, [one might add, with the help of Inigo Jones] / Gives us a pattern of her mind" (31-32). In this phrase, "a pattern of her mind," Waller also sums up the theme of most, and perhaps all, country house poems. The very abstractness of the word "pattern," with its platonic implications, underlines the purpose of these poems, not as constituting an architectural record but as a eulogy of the mind of the owner.

Sometimes a poet will contrast the house and estate of his own mind with the actuality of these as commended by other poets. Thomas Randolph describes his mind as his "manor-house," in which he is complete master. Addressing an imaginary owner of a country house, he notes: "Thou hast the commons to enclosure brought / And I have fixed a bound to my vast thought."²⁷ In another contrast, he uses the growing fashion for owners to have pictures painted of their estate: "Thou hast thy landscapes, and thy painters try / With all their skill to please the wanton eye" (143-44). The difference between outer and inner supplies the "hinge" or invention for this poem:

Within the inner closet of my brain
 Attend the nobler members of my train.
 Invention Master of my mint grows there,
 And memory my faithful Treasurer. (47-50)

In keeping with this emphasis on memory, Randolph contrasts his study of the past with the landowner's concern for the future: "He on posterity may fix his care, / And I can study on the times that were" (89-90). Withdrawal into the mind, and the traditional image of the mind as a

building or a landscape, come together in this allegorical poem. It is of interest here as representing the inner life, of which outer experience, in the shape of the sight of a country house and estate, is only a pale reflection.

The emphasis on proportion and symmetry in some of these poems seems to draw its chief significance from the demand that the house be “justly proportion’d to the owner’s mind,” in the words of Flecknoe. The newer architectural theory in a sense made a building reflect the claims of the owner’s mind to reason. We even find a reference to Sir Henry Wotton’s influential book *The Elements of Architecture* in Mildmay Fane’s poem “To the Countess of Rutland, upon Her New Re-edifying of Belvoir after It Had been Ruined by the Late Civil War”:

Where all to architect prescribe may see
 Their observations and their Cymentry
 So well scored out that it might give content
 To curious Wootten and his *Element*.²⁸

The new conception of the architect as a theorist here makes its first appearance in a country house poem. It may be that the intellectual aspect of architecture as it is capable of reflecting “a pattern of the mind” is coming to the fore, in contrast with the older negative conception of the architect as belonging to a fallen world. Biblical references to the evils of architecture are numerous in the literature of the time, from the Tower of Babel to the Book of Revelations, where the Heavenly City does not even have a temple. Only the building not made with hands is truly significant.

To justify the building or rebuilding of country houses, various strategems were adopted by the poets, such as the communal need for hospitality. But for the later poets of the period, retirement and solitude figure as the greatest value, especially for Royalists at the time of the Civil War. In the words of Mildmay Fane, in his poem “To Retiredness,” “I am taught thankfulness from trees.”²⁹ Free from ambition and strife, he studies nature: “For every field’s a several page, / Deciphering the Golden Age” (33-34). Such poems look back to Horace’s second epode, translated by a number of seventeenth century poets, including Fane himself. But in

Fane's own poem, he adds to the epicurean pleasures of country life the religious contemplation that sanctions communion with trees and fields. Above all, the freedom to wander animates another of Fane's poems:

Earth's here embroider'd into Walks: some straight,
Others like serpents are, or worms to bait
Occasion's hook, till every humour come,
And feed here fat as in Elysium.³⁰

The "humour" of wandering at will along serpentine paths shows the playful spirit that animates these poems at their best and that will culminate in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," a poem in which wandering takes on a significance beyond the epicurean. But retirement from the world seems inevitably to imply the union of pleasure with virtue, as Thomas Pestel indicates in his "General Hasting's Bower":

Where men may die contemplative
On pleasures that three senses give;
Nor minding two, whereby they live.³¹

It is the higher senses, especially sight, that dominate Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," with the difference from many other country house poems that after the initial emphasis on the mind of the owner, Lord Fairfax, the poet moves to a portrayal of his own mind, in which he becomes high priest of the place.

Lord Fairfax himself wrote a short poem "Upon the New-Built House at Appleton," in which he denigrates architecture on religious grounds:

Think not, O man that dwells herein,
This house's a stay, but as an inn,
Which for convenience fitly stands,
In way to one not made with hands;
But if a time here thou take rest,
Yet think, eternity's the best.³²

Fairfax also translated a poem by the French poet Saint-Amant under the title "The Solitude," in which the speaker explores "ancient ruined towers" and climbs a rock for a vista over the sea.³³ As he descends "at

[his] leisure," he marvels at the hollow caves, "A work so curious and so rare / As if that Neptune's court were there" (109-10). Like Marvell in "Upon Appleton House," the poet enjoys his own play of fancy, such as his view of the calm sea as like a "looking glass" in which the sun sees himself:

The sun in it's so clearly seen
 That, contemplating this bright sight,
 As 'twas a doubt whether it had been
 Himself or image gave the light,
 At first appearing to our eyes
 As if he had fallen from the skies. (135-40)

This doubleness of vision also appears in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" as a way of involving the poet's experience directly in the description of topographical features.

But before we turn to Marvell's most famous country house poem, let us glance at the poem he wrote on another of Lord Fairfax's houses, Bilborough. Describing not the house but the hill and grove on the estate, Marvell turns the hill into an epitome of the world, as well as symbol of humility compared with the mighty mountains, symbols of pride, exemplified in Marvell's related "Epigramma in Duos Montes" as Almscliff:

See how the archèd earth does here
 Rise in a perfect hemisphere!
 The stiffest compass could not strike
 A line more circular and like;
 Nor softest pencil draw a brow
 So equal as this hill does bow.
 It seems as for a model laid,
 And that the world by it was made.³⁴

The superiority of nature over art is implied, whether the hemisphere is drawn by means of a compass or by the painter's brush. The stage is thus set for the theme of communion with nature in its dual aspect of hill and grove, where the trees speak "More certain oracles in oak" (74). For metaphorical "mountains raised of dying men" and for "groves of pikes," Fairfax has now chosen retirement amid nature and created a living

memory of his wife by engraving on the oaks her name, Vera; but these trees already knew by sympathy her virtues, as well as his advancement: "But in no memory were seen, / As under this, so straight and green" (55-56). The whole park is imbued with the spirit of Fairfax and the order that it exemplifies. Even the hill does not strive to attain height for itself "But only strives to raise the plain" (24). The conceit is conventional in that it repeats the often stated paradox that true greatness is joined to humility.

The same paradox informs the description of Lord Fairfax and his house in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House." He begins with the familiar denunciation of ambitious architecture, which is not only an insult to nature but which demands unseemly mental effort on the part of the architect:

Who of his great design in pain
Did for a model vault his brain,
Whose columns should so high be raised
To arch the brows that on them gazed.³⁵

Such houses are "unproportioned" to man, who should build like the tortoise a low-roofed but "fit case." At Appleton House, "all things are composèd here / Like nature, orderly and near" (25-26). Once again, architecture is subordinated to nature and "Things greater are in less contained" (44), while the gardener's art too gives way to nature's own:

Art would more neatly have defaced
What she had laid so sweetly waste,
In fragrant gardens, shady woods,
Deep meadows, and transparent floods. (77-80)

Here are all the classical features of the *locus amoenus*, an instance of the "disorderly order" of nature that is shortly to be turned into an expression of subjective experience.

The emphasis in the poem will be on mind, despite the attention given to sensuous experience, because perception itself here implies memory: memory not only of specific moments but memory of other moments in time and place. Here we have an ordering principle at work in arranging

the whole time sequence of the poem, as well as the significance of the events it recalls.

The role played by memory in Marvell's poem turns actual experience into a reliving colored by the imagination. As Kitty Scoular remarks, "Often he [Marvell] appears to be recollecting rather than inventing, as though he had kept a common place book during his residence at Nun Appleton and were referring to it during the composition of his poetry. Perhaps this was no more than an excellent memory."³⁶ For all the pertinence of this comment, Scoular omits the link between memory and imagination as acknowledged by Renaissance psychology, drawing upon classical and medieval tradition. Aristotle had specifically joined memory and imagination:

It is then obvious that memory refers to that part of the soul to which imagination refers; all things which are mental pictures are in themselves subjects of memory, and those which cannot exist apart from imagination are only incidentally subjects of memory.³⁷

It is safe to assume that Marvell was indeed remembering something from past experience and that it is now reconstituted with the hues of the imagination—witness his constant use of paradox and images that are less descriptive than interpretative. Besides the chronological order used in the poem is this other ordering principle of paradox. At first glance, this may seem rather a principle of disorder than of order, but it is designed to show significance in terms of the more general artistic principle, believed to derive from nature: "disorderly order."³⁸ There are thus at least two kinds of order imposed on sense experience: the chronological and the paradoxical.

In relating the history of the house, Marvell situates it in the past and commends the work of reconstruction as a spiritual, not merely physical, rebuilding: "A nunnery first gave it birth / (For virgin buildings oft brought forth)" (85-86).³⁹ The attempt on the part of the nuns to kidnap the betrothed of an earlier Fairfax is recounted with the expected irony. When, with the dissolution, it fell to the lot of the very Fairfax who had carried off his bride from the walls of the convent, it began to turn into a truly religious house (280).

The laying out of the gardens was conducted by a military Fairfax, perhaps Marvell's employer. Instead of the guns of a fort, flowers aim at the senses, and when they shoot, "the shrill report no ear can tell, / But echoes to the eye and smell" (308-09). Throughout the several stanzas devoted to this playful analogy, reminiscent of Corbett's "court and fort" paradox, Marvell reminds us of the Civil War and its devastation. He laments the time when "The gardener had the soldier's place" and "The nursery of all things green / Was then the only magazine" (337-40). Now "war all this doth overgrow; / We ordnance plant and powder sow" (344).

The most remarkable part of the poem begins with the poet's personal journey through the parkland, at stanza 47.⁴⁰ Insensibly Marvell shifts from the house and estate as reflecting the mind of Lord Fairfax to his own experience as he revisits through memory a scene fraught with symbolic meaning.⁴¹ Following up on his paradox of "Things greater . . . in less contained" (44), he begins his journey through the fields with a relativizing of size:

And now to the abyss I pass
 Of that unfathomable grass,
 Where men like grasshoppers appear,
 But grasshoppers are giants there:
 They, in their squeaking laugh, contemn
 Us as we walk more low than them:
 And, from the precipices tall
 Of the green spires, to us do call. (369-76)

He continues to work with these paradoxes of above, below, / big, little, / land, sea, / within, without, / rightside up, upside down.⁴² They are partly a way to order the kaleidoscope of perception through finding a pattern of nature's wit, partly a way to moralize on the theme of man's littleness amid the universe, and especially the universe of nature. Lord Fairfax is all but forgotten in a realm that belongs only to the poet.

When the meadow turns into a green sea hiding the farm laborers, they re-emerge bringing up flowers "so to be seen, / And prove they've at the bottom been" (383-84). Before long the sea divides for the mowers and then turns into the Red Sea with the slaughter of birds. Their plight goes

to show that building below the grass's root is no protection: "lowness is unsafe as height" (411).

The constant changes inevitably remind Marvell of masque scenery as the most striking example of shifting perceptions but also of the playfulness intrinsic to the genre. Among the notable examples of allusions to the shifting scenery of masques are the following: "No scene that turns with Engines strange / Does oftener than these meadows change" (st. 49); "This scene again withdrawing brings / A new and empty face of things" (st. 56); "Then, to conclude these pleasant acts, / Denton sets ope its cataracts" (st. 59); "And see how Chance's better wit / Could with a mask my studies hit" (st. 74); "So when the Shadows laid asleep / From underneath these banks do creep, / And on the river as it flows / With eben shuts begin to close" (st. 84); "And men the silent scene assist, / Charmed with the saphire-winged mist" (st. 85). Perhaps rightly, Muriel Bradbrook, who has discussed the relationship of this poem to the masque most extensively, sees even the extraordinary image of the behavior of the house at the approach of its master as masquelike.⁴³ "But where he comes the swelling hall / Stirs and the square grows spherical" (st. 50). As Bradbrook says, "Alteration of scale, like that of the masque, enlarges the central figure; Marvell is giving to Fairfax the kind of praise that the masquers gave to royalty, but he is paradoxically giving it in praise of an abdication of power" (215). I would only add that here, as everywhere in the poem, Marvell is playing with his perceptions in a perpetual exaggeration designed to illustrate significance and, above all, wonder. And it is wonder that is at the heart of masques. Even the ending of the poem with the appearance of the young Maria Fairfax as the genius of the place suggests the *deus ex machina* with which masques traditionally ended, to reassert divine order controlling the apparent disorder of earth.

In what is almost a free association of ideas, or at least the appearance of such an association, Marvell continues to use masque imagery to describe the shifting panorama. From the allusion to hills for obsequies in Roman camps, "This scene again withdrawing brings / A new and empty face of things" (441-42). The level space evokes at first three analogies, one to Sir Peter Lely's canvases, another to the tabula rasa of the newly created world, and finally, to the *toril* at Madrid, before the bulls

enter. But even these three are not enough to satisfy the poet: he reminds us of the Levellers, who took their pattern from such a level space. The cattle who next appear on the scene—"th' universal herd"⁴⁴ are visually characterized in terms of both the very small and the large: they are like fleas and they are like constellations, but the size of these is relative, depending on how they are viewed. The allusions to "a landscape drawn in looking glass" and to "multiplying glasses," or microscopes, suggest the illusionistic tricks that fascinated people who had learned to see in them not only a model of the fallacies of perception but also of the artifice that cheats and pleases at the same time.⁴⁵

When the flood gates are opened and the meadow literally becomes a sea, Marvell revels in the overturning of nature's order: "Let others tell the paradox, / How eels now bellow in the ox" (474). The exchange of water and land is like the other exchanges in the poem between big and little and above, below. We shortly are given another of these exchanges as the poet withdraws to the "sanctuary" of the wood: "Dark all without it knits; within / It opens passable and thin" (506-07). The contrast of within and without will reappear when he returns to the meadow, which "with moister colour dashed, / Seems as green silks but newly washed" (627-28). As the river withdraws within its banks and again becomes a crystal mirror, in it "all things gaze themselves, and doubt / If they be in it or without" (637-38).

Alongside these paradoxes of vision, Marvell reflects on the religious message to be derived from nature. Death and destruction seem to be part of the pattern, just as much as peace and quiet are. Even the sad but pleasing sound of the stock-doves spells the fate of humanity: "O why should such a couple mourn, / That in so equal flames do burn!" (527-28).⁴⁶ Meanwhile the oak tree has fed "A traitor-worm" within it, just as "our flesh corrupt within / Tempts impotent and bashful sin" (555-45); and yet the worm has fed the wood-pecker's young, "While the oak seems to fall content, / Viewing the treason's punishment" (559-60).

The digressiveness of the poem, and of country house poems in general, has been identified with the georgic mode. Marvell carries this feature, described by Erasmus as for relief and delight,⁴⁷ to new lengths. He allows himself to be carried along on wave after wave of visual experience. Such

passivity in the face of experience, which is part of his whole invention, implies an experience that can be grasped only in fragmentary images and conceits. But this passivity also means that the speaker makes himself available for play, since he appears not to be controlling the direction in which he moves or seeking to dominate what he is exposed to in the way of images. Yet this in itself is a fiction: as already noted, he balances opposites in so consistent a way that a pattern emerges. The emphasis on the visual certainly has the appearance of recreating an original experience but, in fact, reshapes it in keeping with the artistic principle of “disorderly order”; that is to say, the desirability of variety as stated, for example, by Spenser’s commentator, E.K., in *The Shepheardes Calender*.

Like the masque imagery, the “disorderly order” of nature has an intrinsic playfulness, removed as it is from the rigid structures of a more formal aesthetics. The poet invents a role for himself in the realm of nature: his spirit crows at the transformations he alleges that he witnessed, as much as it does at his own incorporation into nature, so that he is no longer mere observer but part of the scene he describes. This latter aspect occurs only gradually. It begins with his retreat from the flood into the wood, an emblem of the ark:

But I, retiring from the flood,
Take sanctuary in the wood,
And while it lasts, myself embark
In this yet green, yet growing ark . . . (st. 61)

The pronoun “I” now appears in place of the previous detachment of the observer who recorded the cattle as seeming “within the polished grass / A landskip drawn in looking-glass” (st. 58).

The estate becomes more a microcosm than ever. But Marvell has to move back to encomium of the owner, just like a masque. He does this smoothly enough by invoking the spirit of the owner’s daughter as the giver of order. The place used to be Nunappleton, controlled by nuns, but now by Maria Fairfax, in tune with nature and with a higher sense of order. Although this kind of praise is conventional as a topos of estate poetry, what is new is the apotheosis of the poet—no longer the purveyor of conventional compliments but moving outside these into an exploration of the landscape

that becomes both a subjective experience and an epitome of the times he lives in, as well as of the whole of human history. This mingling of the personal and the historical makes of place a symbol of what it is to be both a perceiving eye and a philosopher. Wearing his "antic cope" of oak leaves, he calls himself "easy philosopher," relaxed in his acceptance of himself as birdlike or treelike:

Give me but wings as they, and I
 Straight floating on the air shall fly;
 Or turn me but, and you shall see
 I was but an inverted tree. (566-68)

His passivity allows him to be part of nature; he does not make decisions but stretches out on the bank like a river god or an angler. Even the fleeting reference in this passage to "th' osier's undermined root" and "its branches rough" suggests a deep fall into nature's very workings. Chance's "better wit" takes charge of him. But because he is so passive, he is without what we call personality. He simply is. It is a new conception of order that the poet proposes: not that of the prioress of the original nunnery, but the order of "loose nature."

If he is to conform to this order, placing himself inside it, he has to give up control. This is why he becomes the prisoner of woodbines and gadding vines: "And oh, so close your circles lace, / that I may never leave this place" (st. 77). He goes further and asks to be chained by brambles and nailed by briars, in a magic circle. In this kind of safety from the warfare of the world, he has encamped his mind: "But I on it securely play, / And gall its horsemen all the day" (st. 76). The verb "play" tells the whole story of the poet's purpose. Which is not to say that it is not serious. There is a balancing of order and disorder in the poem that is of the essence of this "easy" philosophy. The river must withdraw within its banks, becoming once more "a crystal mirror," and it is Maria Fairfax who symbolically bestows order: "Nothing could make the river be / So crystal pure but only she; / She yet more pure, sweet, straight, and fair, / Than gardens, woods, meads, rivers are" (st. 87). So the human being in the ideal paradisaical state, in which he finds Maria, represents an order of mind and spirit that transcends anything nature has to offer. Marvell gradually extricates

himself from his briars and brambles, even though they are more “courteous” than those of the outside world, to return to the reality represented by the “rational amphibii,” human beings who go about their everyday tasks while living in two worlds at once: the world of nature and the world of reason.

Inseparable from human kind, however, in interpreting experience is memory. Thus Marvell has in mind images of other gardens, such as Tempe, Aranjuez, Bel-Retiro (st. 95); it is as if he were restating the kind of outdoing comparison that he used in his Bilborough poem: “But in no memory was seen, / As under this, so straight and green” (l. 55). Memory compares and contrasts, and the garden of Marvell’s poem is shaped in recognition of this fact. Although he uses the present tense for recording what he saw on one particular day, he is like the novelist who chooses to give immediacy to his narrative by the pretense that it is all happening now.

The number of times that Marvell uses the adverb “now” in the poem is interesting. For all the emphasis on the present, he moves backward in time, and, toward the end of the poem, forward in time, as well as outwards in space to allude to his contemporary world of politics and art. To mention a few of his “now’s,” they first appear with st. 47: “And now to the abyss I pass”; they punctuate a number of other moments, such as “The mower now commands the field” (st. 53); and at the end of the last stanza, “But now the salmon fishers moist.” Interspersed among the “now’s” are a few “then’s” to mark the next phase of the journey: “Then languishing with ease” (st. 75). These adverbs help to situate the poet’s journey in time as well as in space.

But it is memory above all that assists the ordering of experience, placing it in a context, helping to give it a meaningful narrative structure. To make it compatible with play, these memories must, however, seem spontaneously allusive. Here Marvell succeeds by referring to the parting of the Red Sea or to Lely’s blank canvases in a manner that seems whimsical, albeit artificial in both the Renaissance and modern sense. For they do not support an argument but enlarge a perceptual experience and give it significance in terms of history, which is another form of narrative with a grander meaning than what one individual sees or hears.

If the outside world is a confused, or rude, "heap together hurled," the lesser world of the estate contains the same: "But in more decent order tame: / You, heaven's centre, Nature's lap, / And paradise's only map" (767-68). By the time he has identified the salmon fishers with their canoes on their heads as "rational amphibii," "tortoise-like, but not so slow," he has come full circle to the initial idea in the poem of a house as like a tortoise-shell—a low roof hut richly adapted to the creature that dwells in it. The balance between the actual sight of the salmon-fishers with canoes on their heads and the emblematic comparison—"How tortoise-like, but not so slow"—is a perfect example of how the mind of the poet interprets experience. He has found a substitute for Corinthian columns, not entirely in the "loose order of nature," but in the order of reason and poetry. He has also brought the chronological sequence of his walk through the estate to a natural end with the coming of night.⁴⁸

The beauty and vividness of the imagery make this poem credible as an example of revisiting through memory. It is memory that not only preserves experience but, in this instance, transforms experience into *topoi*. These in turn become subject to an "easy" philosophical interpretation. Although various kinds of ordering principles, including the chronological, the paradoxical, and the comparative are used, they must not seem to obtrude in a poem that acknowledges another artistic principle: disorderly order and the digressiveness that goes with it. Like Constantine Huygens, Marvell could say, "How much more comes to our vision / Than our minds may comprehend."⁴⁹ Too strict an order would deny the impossibility of understanding the meaning of everything seen; the freedom and playfulness of *capriccio* are intrinsic to his genre as he defines it.

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NOTES

¹See, for example, G. R. Hibbard, "The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 19 (1956): 159-74; William A. McClung, *The Country House in English Renaissance Poetry* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977); Alastair Fowler, "Country House Poems: The Politics of a Genre," *The Seventeenth Century* 1 (1986): 1-14; Alastair Fowler, "The Beginnings of English Georgic," *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986) 105-25.

²Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman* (1634), with intro. by G. S. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960) 73.

³Peacham 73.

⁴For Inigo Jones, see John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530 to 1830* (London: Penguin, 1953, 4th ed. 1963), chapters 7, 8, 9. See also John Summerson, *Inigo Jones* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

⁵*The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana UP, 1969).

⁶Sir Henry Wotton, *The Elements of Architecture* (1624), facsimile reprint, intro. and notes by Frederick Hard (Charlottesville: U Press of Virginia, 1968) 119.

⁷Quotations from country house poems are drawn from *The Country House Poem: A Cabinet of Seventeenth-Century Estate Poems and Related Items*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1994). "To Peshurst" (*The Forest* [1616]) is on pp. 53-56, ll. 1-6.

⁸On this subject, see Charles Molesworth, "'To Peshurst' and Jonson's Historical Imagination," *Clio* 1 (1972): 5-13.

⁹*The Faerie Queene*, 1.4.5.

¹⁰On this parallel, see my "Elizabethan Architecture and *The Faerie Queene*: Some Structural Analogies," *Dalhousie Review* 45 (1966): 470-78.

¹¹Geoffrey Whitney, "Patria Cuique Cara: To Richard Cotton Esquire," *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586), Fowler 31-32, ll. 43-48.

¹²Emilia Lanier, "The Description of Cooke-ham," *Salve Deus Rex Iudaeorum* (1611), Fowler 45-50, ll. 117-20.

¹³Henry Peacham, *Garden of Eloquence* (1593), ed. William G. Crane (Gainesville, Florida: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1954) 141.

¹⁴Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, trans. Ray Nadeau, *Speech Monographs* 19 (1952) 279.

¹⁵See, for example, my "The Refusal to Paint: Shakespeare's Poetry of Place," *Comparative Drama* 23 (1989-90): 331-43.

¹⁶In *Iter Boreale* (1647), Fowler 409-12, ll. 409-11.

¹⁷On this word as a critical term, see my "The *Capriccio* in Literature," *The Jest and Earnestness of Art*, ed. Philipp P. Fehl and Stephen S. Prokopoff (Urbana, IL: Krannert Art Museum, U of Illinois, 1987) 13-18.

¹⁸"To My Friend G. N. From Wrest," *Poems* (1640), Fowler 89-95, ll. 79-88.

¹⁹Mildmay Fane, "My Happy Life, to a Friend," *Otia Sacra* (1648), see Fowler 206-15, ll. 59-60.

²⁰Fowler notes that the poet is possibly George Aglionby and that the poem was probably written between 1621 and 1642. The text is taken from BL.Harl. ms. 4955, fol. 188, Fowler 167-72, ll. 38-42.

²¹Richard Flecknoe, "On Welbeck," *A Farrago of Several Pieces . . .* (1666), Fowler 176-77, ll. 10-12.

²²Richard Flecknoe, "On the Duchess of Newcastle's Closet," *Poems* (1645), Fowler 179-83, ll. 12-14.

²³Henry Ten Eyck Perry, *The First Duchess of Newcastle and Her Husband as Figures in Literary History* (Boston: Ginn, 1918), cited in Fowler 180.

²⁴"At Penshurst[1]," *Poems* (1645), Fowler 181-83, ll. 17-20.

²⁵"On St. James's Park, As lately Improved by His Majesty," from the broadside of 1660; reprinted in *The Poems of Edmund Waller*, ed. G. Thorn Drury (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893). Fowler 187-96.

²⁶"Upon Her Majesty's New Building at Somerset House," from the broadside 1665; reprinted in Thom Drury. Fowler 197-201.

²⁷Thomas Randolph, "On the Inestimable Content he Enjoys in the Muses . . .," *Poems, with the Muses' Looking-Glass . . .* (1638), Fowler 138-44, ll. 67-68.

²⁸Fulbeck Hall ms. "Poems 1665," fol. 971. Fowler 255-58, ll. 15-11.

²⁹*Otia Sacra* (1648), Fowler 216-19, l. 30.

³⁰Mildmay Fane, "To Sir John Wentworth . . .," *Otia Sacra*, Fowler 227-32, ll. 57-60.

³¹Thomas Pestel, "General Hasting's Bower," Fowler 202-04, ll. 16-18.

³²Bodl. ms. Fairfax 40, p. 593. Fowler 328-29.

³³From Bodl. ms. Fairfax 40. Fowler 330-34, l. 62.

³⁴In *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681). Fowler 302-05, ll. 1-8.

³⁵In *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681). Fowler 281-301, ll.1-9.

³⁶Kitty Scouler, *Natural Magic: Studies in the Presentation of Nature in English Poetry from Spenser to Marvell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) 165.

³⁷Aristotle, "On Memory and Recollection," *Parva Naturalia*, trans. W. S. Hett (London: Heinemann, 1957) 287.

³⁸In a forthcoming article, "Disorderly Order': E.K.'s Analogy between Poetry and Painting," I discuss this artistic principle.

³⁹These lines occur in a section of the poem omitted from Fowler's text. See *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) 78.

⁴⁰On the gardenist background of the poem, see John Dixon Hunt, "'Loose Nature' and the 'Garden Square': The Gardenist Background for Marvell's Poetry," *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 331-51.

⁴¹The possible connections between Marvell's poem and Huygen's "Hofwik" are examined in Peter Davidson and Adriaan van der Weel, *A Selection of the Poems of Sir Constantijn Huygens, 1596-1687* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1996) 211-14. Reference is made to the way Huygens, like Marvell, describes a moralized walk around an estate. They also mention Huygens' use of the Art of Memory in associating specific ideas with specific places in his garden.

⁴²Among the most illuminating and provocative treatments of the paradoxes of Marvell's poem is Rosalie L. Colie's "My Ecchoing Song": *Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 181-294.

⁴³Muriel Bradbrook, "Marvell and the Masque," *Tercentenary Essays in Honor of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Kenneth Friedenreich (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977) 204-23.

⁴⁴Marvell alludes directly to Sir William Davenant's *Gondibert* II.vi., in which he describes a painting of the creation, with "th' universal herd" appearing on the sixth day.

⁴⁵Cf. Sir George Mackenzie, "Caelia's Country House and Closet" (c. 1667-68), *Works*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh 1716-22), Fowler 344-53, ll. 123-24: "She here an artificial rock has raised, / By which, even whilst we're cheated, we are pleased."

⁴⁶See Donno edition for this passage and the following ones.

⁴⁷Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette UP, 1963) 54-55.

⁴⁸Ann E. Berthoff, in her *The Resolved Soul: A Study of Marvell's Major Poems* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970), refers to the correspondence between "the picture of a salmon-fisher with his boat over his head" as "an image of the earth and its heaven" (193). One could also say that this image is another example of the "upside-down" theme. Berthoff emphasizes everywhere in this poem the correspondences that serve as a unifying theme.

⁴⁹Huygens, "Batava Tempe" 215-16, *A Selection of the Poems of Sir Constantijn Huygens* 45.