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The symbolism of the garden in literary tradition appears to be of a twofold nature. On the one hand, as the biblical Garden of Eden, it has been associated with the state of pre-lapsarian innocence which has irrevocably been lost to man. On the other, it is a popular *locus amoenus*, a sheltered bower and a favourite place for lovers' meetings. Moreover, the garden represents a space in which wild nature has been subordinated to ordering human activity. It seems that both biblical and romantic associations are significant in the analysis of the use of garden imagery in two lyrics by Pre-Raphaelite poets, William Morris's "A Garden by the Sea" (1867) and Algernon Charles Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden" (1876). The aim of this paper is to trace the ways in which the two poems seem to subvert the above-mentioned traditional patterns. The gardens they portray are deserted places, symbolically situated as if on the margin in between the land and the sea, but belonging to neither. Once witnesses to happy encounters of the lovers, they have been reclaimed by natural forces and subjected to the destructive workings of time. Still, while both poems take as a point of departure a similar physical description of such a forsaken garden by the sea, on closer examination this image in each poem proves to serve a different purpose.

The theme of the garden as a bower of love is a recurrent one in the poetry of William Morris.¹ However, in his "A Garden by the Sea", a slightly revised version of the nymph's song from *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) republished in *Poems by the Way* (1891), this image undergoes several interesting metamorphoses. The poem opens with a conventional image of

¹ See the garden as the setting for the meetings of the lovers in "The Man Born to Be King", "The Story of Cupid and Psyche" from *The Earthly Paradise* and in "Thunder in the Garden" from *Poems by the Way*.

a cosy, "little garden-close, / Set thick with lily and red rose" (1-2)², in which the speaker wishes he could walk with his beloved. Yet, the use of the conditional "Where I would wander if I might" (3) already introduces the prevalent mood of longing and despair. As the poem unfolds, this mood seems to permeate the further description of the garden, which proves to be increasingly puzzling:

And though within it no birds sing,
And though no pillared house is there,
And though the apple-boughs are bare
Of fruit and blossom, would to God
Her feet upon the green grass trod,
And I beheld them as before. (6-11)

The garden is thus defined through a series of negations and absences. The traditional *locus amoenus* is here transformed into a ghost of a garden, an empty space where the birds no longer sing and the apple tree is left barren. These images apparently reflect the central absence of the poem, that of the one whose feet no longer tread its paths. Thus, in the poet's recollections, it is this absence that is responsible for the change in scenery. Even though no direct biblical allusions are to be found in the poem, perhaps the garden may yet be viewed as the speaker's private version of Eden, from which all joy has been banished with the disappearance of the mysterious companion.

In the third stanza of the poem, as the speaker provides a broader perspective on the garden's topography, this mood grows even more oppressive and disturbing:

There comes a murmur from the shore,
And in the close two fair-streams are,
Drawn from the purple hills afar,
Drawn down unto the restless sea:
Dark hills whose heath-bloom feeds no bee,
Dark shore no ship has ever seen,
Tormented by the billows green
Whose murmur comes unceasingly
Unto the place for which I cry. (12-20)

The speaker's sense of dejection and misery is here expressed not only through further images of absence, such as "heath-bloom" that "feeds no bee" (16) and a shore that has never been visited by a ship, but is also reflected in the choice of

² All quotations from Morris's "A Garden by the Sea" are from *The Collected Works of William Morris. With Introductions by his Daughter May Morris. Volume IX: Love is Enough, Poems by the Way*. London, New York 1910-1911, p. 149.

the descriptive vocabulary. Particular features of the landscape appear in the poet's mind as "dark hills" (16), and a "dark shore" (17) that is "Tormented" (18) by the sea which itself is "restless" (15), and its "murmur comes unceasingly" (19). Moreover, such a depiction of the setting of the garden further destroys the image of a secure pleasant little bower of the first stanza by introducing the threat of the intrusion from the outside world represented here by the ominous hills in the background and the incessant beating of the waves. After the enumeration of the features that the garden lacks in the second and third stanzas, the final cry of longing comes as more startling and powerful, bringing to mind the use of an anti-blazon in the description of the speaker's beloved in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130.

With its "two fair-streams" (13) flowing from "the purple hills afar" (14) towards the sea, the third stanza may also be evocative of Tennyson's holy garden in "The Poet's Mind" and the valley of "The Lotos-Eaters". It is especially the latter of the Laureate's early poems that seems to be of importance for the interpretation of Morris's poem. The misty valley of the lotos-eaters serves to represent the languor and inertia of those mariners who have decided to give up their active life for the illusory pleasures of endless day-dreaming. It seems that such a danger of succumbing to the overwhelming nostalgia for a past encounter in the garden at the cost of the speaker's normal life also appears in stanza four of Morris's "A Garden by the Sea". The speaker declares that he pines for the place "both day and night" (21) and "let[s] slip all delight" (22), growing "both deaf and blind / Careless to win, unskilled to find, / And quick to lose what all men seek" (23-25). As David Latham points out, in its original context of *The Life and Death of Jason*, the lyric is the sea-nymph's song whose purpose is to lull Hylas into oblivion and thus make him resign from participating in the quest of the Argonauts. Yet, he observes that this state of pleasant melancholy is deceptive and already threatened within the song itself:

With the sea murmuring its ceaseless whispers of mortality, the fall is completed as paradise is lost in the past forever passing. The speaker has suffered a visibly physical fall from his wish to 'wander' blissfully with a lover in the first stanza to his 'tottering' grievously alone with the 'unforgotten face once seen, once kissed, once reft from me' in the last stanza. Paradise is revealed to be not a presence but an absence, the ultimate release from life through death. When life is reduced to a memory of what is lost, then the garden-close becomes but a grave.³

³ David Latham, introduction to *Poems by the Way*, by William Morris. Bristol 1994, p. xxx.

Thus, Latham sees the speaker's state as a resignation from the present for the sake of brooding over a past moment of happiness, a submission to a state of death-in-life, comparable to that of the knight's in Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."⁴ Interestingly, Latham also interprets the poem within the frame of the biblical Paradise lost, and hence explains the puzzling change of imagery – for the mourning lover the garden has turned into a grave.

In the last analysis, however, it seems that the poem ends on a hopeful note, as the speaker finds consolation in the belief that the garden of love may still be regained in the afterlife:

Yet tottering as I am and weak,
Still have I left a little breath
To seek within the jaws of death
An entrance to that happy place,
To seek the unforgotten face,
Once seen, once kissed, once reft from me
Anigh the murmuring of the sea. (26-32)

In the last stanza of the poem, the real garden has undergone its final transformation, this time into an ideal, a paradise to be reached once again after death, where the lovers could finally be reunited. Thus, despite its disturbing detail that accumulates throughout the poem, its ultimate message is that love can survive beyond the grave.

This belief in the endurance of love against time and death is precisely what Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden" aims to challenge and contradict. In the poem, which was first published in the *Athenaeum* in 1876 and reappeared in *Poems and Ballads. Second Series* (1878), the image of an abandoned garden that is slowly ravaged by the destructive forces of nature provides the speaker with a pretext to dwell upon the transience of human feelings in the face of the inexorable passing of time and oblivion. David G. Riede sees the poem as predominantly concerned with "the totality of death", where "The garden dies, lovers die, love, which should be eternal, dies, the earth dies, and, in a triumph that is in every sense absolute, death, with no more victims and still insatiable, turns upon himself."⁵

This nihilistic vision of Swinburne's ghost of a garden is gradually elaborated on in the first five stanzas of the poem, with each stanza adding some further detail. Depicted in the first stanza as perched "between lowland and highland"

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David G. Riede. *A Study of Romantic Mythmaking*. Charlottesville 1978, p. 134.

(1)⁶, “between windward and lee” (2), and “Walled round with rocks as an inland island” (3), the garden may at first seem to be another sheltered place that is suspended between the mainland and the sea, a place that is unaffected by the passing of time and change. Yet, it is here simply a graveyard, haunted by the memories of its past visitors. The speaker makes an imaginary visit to the garden in order to retrace these ghosts:

If a step should sound or a word be spoken,
 Would a ghost not rise at the strange guest's hand?
 So long have the grey bare walks lain guestless,
 Through branches and briars if a man make way,
 He shall find no life but the sea-wind's, restless
 Night and day. (11-16)

Thus, the speaker attempts to recreate the past human presences in the garden by pointing to what is now absent: the walks are “guestless” (13), a nearby track is one “none turn to climb” (18), and no flower is “to be pressed of the foot that falls not” (25). The dry plots are “blossomless” (6) and compared to “the heart of a dead man” (26). What remains instead is rocks and thorns that have overgrown the beds of roses, while the only presence to be still found there is that of the sea-wind, the sun and the rain which unite in the gradual yet relentless process of destruction.

In the second part of the poem, the speaker engages in speculations about the long-gone lovers who once wandered among the roses of the garden, believing their love to be immortal. Yet, as he rather ironically points out, whether their love was fickle or true and long-lasting, they all must have met with the same end – eternal sleep in death and obscurity to those who have come afterwards. The speaker goes on to equate the fate of all the lovers – the past as well as the future ones – with that of the flowers of the garden:

All are at one now, roses and lovers,
 Not known of the cliffs and the fields and the sea.
 Not a breath of the time that has been hovers
 In the air now soft with a summer to be.
 Not a breath shall there sweeten the seasons hereafter
 Of the flowers or the lovers that laugh now or weep,
 When as they that are free now of weeping and laughter
 We shall sleep. (57-64)

⁶ All quotations from Swinburne's poems are taken from *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne: In Six Volumes*. London 1905.

Human love is short-lived and soon forgotten just like the fragile roses that used to grow in the garden created by man, which is now reclaimed by the forces of nature and reabsorbed into the cycle of the seasons. Released from the joys and hardships of life, all human beings will thus sleep peacefully, no longer affected by change or death, until the final day when the cliff itself yields to the all-devouring sea.

Hence, the idea that love will not survive death, central to the whole poem, further leads to the poet's denial of the Christian concept of Resurrection: "From the graves they have made they shall rise up never, / Who have left nought living to ravage and rend" (67-68). This is not the only point in the poem where Swinburne alludes to biblical passages only to secularize them and subvert their meaning. Apart from the appropriation of the image of the Garden of Eden in its desolate state after the fall of man, one other case merits particular notice, namely the image of the dying god sacrificing himself on the altar:

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
 Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
 Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
 The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
 Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
 Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,
 As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,
 Death lies dead. (73-80)

This Swinburnian eschatological vision has been analysed by Francis O'Gorman in his article, "'Death lies dead': The Allusive Texture of Swinburne's 'A Forsaken Garden'". He posits that the image of a self-sacrificing god "invites association with the theology of the eucharist, mirroring an action in which the death of God for human salvation is ritually commemorated."⁷ Yet, as O'Gorman goes on to observe, "the eucharistic suggestion is evoked only to be effaced, in a garden for which there is neither break from stasis nor redemption from the bonds of death that the breaking of Jesus' body secured."⁸ The only god that the speaker here acknowledges is the god of annihilation, who, having destroyed everything around, lastly turns against his very self.

In the last stanza, the garden with its ghosts of lovers is thus doomed to ruin and eternal oblivion as the cliff crumbles into the sea. Similar images of graves collapsing into the sea also appear in Swinburne's "By the North Sea", and more

⁷ Francis O'Gorman. "'Death Lies Dead': The Allusive Texture of Swinburne's 'A Forsaken Garden'," *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Fall, 2003), p. 351.

⁸ *Ibid.*

to the point, in the final passage of his *Tristram of Lyonesse*, in which the tomb King Mark has built for the lovers meets with a similar fate:

[...] till at last
 On these things too was doom as darkness cast:
 For the strong sea hath swallowed wall and tower,
 And where their limbs were laid in woful hour
 For many a fathom gleams and moves and moans
 The tide that sweeps above their coffined bones
 In the wrecked chancel by the shivered shrine:
 Nor where they sleep shall moon or sunlight shine
 Nor man look down for ever: none shall say,
 Here once, or here, Tristram and Iseult lay:
 But peace they have that none may gain who live.
 And rest about them that no love can give,
 And over them, while death and life shall be,
 The light and sound and darkness of the sea. (4475-4488)

John D. Rosenberg sees this addition to the medieval legend in terms of “a second doom”: “For the waves shatter the chapel and the sea closes over their uncoffined bones. Fulfilled love in Swinburne pays the penalty of double death.”⁹ What he appears to overlook, however, is the poet’s emphasis on the sense of peace beyond the reach of the living, rest that can never be achieved in love. Thus, in Swinburne, the prospect of succumbing to eternal repose under the waves is not necessarily a negative one. Conversely, it may be seen as a blessing. The poet’s lifelong fascination with the sea has been well-documented, both in his letters and in his poetry. Probably its best-known expression may be found in “The Triumph of Time”, where the rejected lover seeks consolation in the arms of “the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea” (257-258). Once again, the speaker yearns to give in to an eternal sleep which will purge his soul from earthly passions and allow him to be absorbed into the natural rhythms of underwater life:

I shall sleep, and move with the moving ships,
 Change as the winds change, veer in the tide;
 My lips will feast on the foam of thy lips,
 I shall rise with thy rising, with thee subside;
 Sleep, and not know if she be, if she were,
 Filled full with life to the eyes and hair,
 As a rose is fulfilled to the roseleaf tips
 With splendid summer and perfume and pride.
 This woven raiment of nights and days,

⁹ John D. Rosenberg. “Swinburne,” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Dec., 1967), p. 137.

Were it once cast off and unwound from me,
 Naked and glad would I walk in thy ways,
 Alive and aware of thy ways and thee;
 Clear of the whole world, hidden at home,
 Clothed with the green and crowned with the foam,
 A pulse of the life of thy straits and bays,
 A vein in the heart of the streams of the sea. (273-288)

A similar yet more indirect preference for the underwater over the earthly garden may also be traced in "A Forsaken Garden". Throughout the poem, the imagery of the decaying and crumbling garden is opposed to the everlasting presence of the sea. Thus, "the foam-flowers endure when the rose-blossoms wither" (43), and the song of the nightingale, traditionally associated with love, has been replaced by "the note of a sea-bird's song" (30).

In conclusion, it seems that both Morris and Swinburne use the familiar image of the bower of love only to turn it into a post-lapsarian wasteland. Placed on the verge between the land and the sea, the gardens in both poems prove to be liminal also in terms of time, as they mark the threshold between the past, the present and the future. In Morris's "A Garden by the Sea", the garden becomes emblematic of the most cherished, personal memory as well as an ideal projected into the future, a place where the speaker hopes to be reunited with his beloved one in the afterlife. On the other hand, in Swinburne's "A Forsaken Garden", the abandoned garden serves to represent the transience of human love which cannot withstand the deleterious workings of time. While in Morris's poem the memory of the garden is intimate and permeated with nostalgia; in Swinburne, the speaker's tone remains elegiac but impersonal and detached. His vision is macrocosmic, as his conclusions concern all humanity, anonymous lovers of the past as well as those of the future. Still, also in Swinburne's poem, the fate of the garden brings consolation to the speaker. The vision of the final peaceful sleep under the waves may be seen as a respite from the tormenting passions and disappointments of earthly love.

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