Paradise Preserved
When Adam delved
And Eve span
Who was then the Gentleman

Burne-Jones, *Adam and Eve*
Paradise Preserved
Recreations of Eden in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century England

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Preface

Eden continues as a touchstone in the minds of Europeans and Americans for every kind of benign place, moment, and action – past, present, and future – testifying to the hold the myth retains on the human consciousness. A recent instance, almost naive in the unselfconscious reflex-like resort to its comforting inclusiveness as a metaphor, occurs in a Los Angeles Sunday newspaper review of an anthropological study arguing that humans inhabited California before the existence of the Bering ice bridge 12,000 years ago when Asians are presumed to have migrated east into North America. “Can it be,” the reviewer asks, “that Southern California, land of eternal sun and seedbed of all those fruits and nuts, is the site of the Garden of Eden?” As a facetious refutation of the anthropologist’s contention that native Americans moved west across the Bering bridge to people Euro-Asia in an earlier warm period lasting from 170,000 to 70,000 years ago, the reviewer queries: why would early man have “left California in the first place. It’s one thing to be kicked out of the Garden of Eden but, even allowing for all those scheming snakes, what kind of man would abandon Eve and leave all those avocados and palm trees for Siberia?”

So sounds the vox populi in the last quarter of a century which has watched political dreams of a new millennium turn nightmarish, and social institutions and intellectual systems falter and break down. Perhaps because of the failed promises of the twentieth century – because of the accelerating pain of history Mircea Eliade would phrase it – the present bears witness to a remarkable revival of born-again Christians. What this revivalist phenomenon may mean for the rest of the century is anyone’s guess. The idea that one can construct facsimiles of lost Eden without waiting for the end of time, the illud tempus, has been firing secularized and historically emancipated imaginations insistently since the seventeenth century. These paradises are visible and explicable in varying degrees to an historical perspective; and it may be informative to look at the ways the English of the past two centuries have tried to mirror paradise in their gardens, art, literature, technology and engineering, and urban centers.

I am conscious of how philosophically suspect these days is any effort to perceive in events an historical pattern. It is a fashionable mea culpa for historians, philosophers, and scientists to admit that their models of reality are no less the products of the human mind’s creative imagination than are the fictions of the
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novelist. “No matter,” writes Fredric Jameson, “how genuinely temporal or historical in character” an author’s original determinative choices of key factors, the sum of his insights add up to an abstraction, “an ideal cross section of the existential density of concrete history itself.” Furthermore, “such a diachronic sequence” is necessarily dialectical, prone to “the reversal of limits, of the transformation from negative to positive and from positive to negative”; and in turn, “an awareness of dialectical relationships involves or implies a diachronic framework as a necessary condition of their articulation.”

To accept one’s historical perspectives as metaphoric systems is not to deny their substantive value. Rather, as a procedural tactic, it is to free one to make conscious decisions about the shapes these metaphoric models will take. I could have structured this study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England’s continuing infatuation with paradise in more than one way: a dialectic between Eden defined as the pleasures of the primitive/natural world and Eden as the blessings of civilization, an exhaustive survey of the meanings of a central trope such as the Blessed Virgin, a theological debate over the changing sociology of the concept of paradise, an analysis of a literary genre such as the pastoral and georgic or of an art form such as landscape painting, a review of scientific-religious cosmologies and comparative crypto-mythologies, an examination of millenarian movements, an intellectual history of the ideals of retirement and friendship, or any number of other alternatives.

Given the sweep of my critical net, which fishes for both symbolic models and actual instances of the earthly paradise, I have opted for an argument more representational than systematic. Without violating the chronology, I have limited myself to identifying and examining selected, historically important recreations of paradise rather than essaying a comprehensive survey of the development of an idea. Hence, one will not find here the kind of rigorously logical argument worked out in such great studies as Arthur A. Lovejoy’s The Great Chain of Being (1936) and Ernst H. Gombrich’s Art and Illusion (1960), nor the massive evidence accumulated in Nikolaus Pevsner’s books on the architecture of England. True to Jameson’s prognosis, however, that a diachronic sequence necessarily sorts itself into a dialectic, the images of paradise isolated successively from about 1710 to 1900 fall into a dialectical pattern identifying Eden first with gardens, then antithetically with urban enclaves, and finally in a kind of synthesis with aesthetic forms. While observing loosely the movement of this dialectic, my look at some earthly paradises of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, real and conceptual, has been guided in part by the visions of major writers and artists. If not they as articulators of their society’s efforts to offset the discrepancy between the world we know and the one our spiritual needs tell us is possible, then who? Scientists, engineers, merchants? Accordingly, I have tried to be as sensitive to the ways gardeners, architects, and engineers have absorbed the recurrent paradigm of paradise into the work-a-day technological and economic stream of their experience as to the ways in which poets and painters have reduced traditional modes of Arcadian and Edenic, pagan-classical and
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Christian thought to new rituals of reality. Together, they sum up literally and symbolically, I hope, the collective efforts since the eighteenth century of the English imagination to align – update, refashion, and represent – an unending spiritual ideal with a constantly changing reality.

I am less insouciant about another problem intrinsic to this study. The traditional methodology, critical tools, and historical frame of reference for the study of literature, art, and gardening is aesthetic. Contemporary comments by artists and observers are ordinarily couched in intellectual, critical, and psychological terms. As a consequence I found myself tracking the paradisal archetype, which is religious and mythic, through material not overtly religious or intentionally religious. A case in point is Sir Kenneth Clark’s use of aesthetically defined categories to describe Samuel Palmer as a painter of ideal landscapes and Constable as the supreme painter of English natural landscapes. Guided by a different set of signs, linking natural scenery and the paradigm of paradise, I have committed the heresy (or so the art historian might well charge) of treating Palmer and Constable, along with Thomas Bewick, as exponents of a common English joy in rural and village life and of the national pride in imagining that their rustic nooks of England were remnants of ancient Eden.

This hermeneutic indeterminacy is exacerbated by the intellectual shifts that have taken place since the seventeenth century in how we define our world. Northrop Frye has observed apropos of the metaphysics of both Newton and Darwin that “We have long since weathered the Newtonian crisis of separating mythological from natural space, and the Darwinian crisis of separating mythological from natural time.” It is during the period covered by this study that the Newtonian and Darwinian crises were impinging on the locus of the human consciousness, the mental horizon shifting from mythic and theological to historical and mathematical perceptions of space and time. The decline in authority during the nineteenth century of the Biblical record, accompanied by a decline of belief in an historical Fall, makes problematical to what extent the idea of paradise continues to be taken seriously and to what extent it becomes a convenient fiction for expressing the more generalized human nostalgia for what one recent critic has denounced the lost domain. This naturalization of myth has forced me to use critical tools of inference and indirection – to practise an insinuating synecdoche of interpretation. Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo rendering of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus (1501–05, Uffizi Gallery, Florence), for example, poses no difficulties of interpretation. It is what it purports to be, the portrait of a Tuscan couple and child offered as a Renaissance version of the Holy Family. But what are we to make of Ford Madox Brown’s Take Your Son, Sir! (c. 1857, Tate Gallery) whose subject is prostitution and the fallen woman, or his Last of England (1855, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham) which is a treatment of the immigration theme? The social realism of both these pictures surely also echoes, however covert or unaware Brown may have been about their typology, a medieval-Renaissance tradition, and leads us back to those early Holy Families.

Whether rightly or wrongly I have sought the figurations of Eden, Adam and
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Eve, the Annunciation and the Blessed Virgin, the Holy Madonna and Child, and the Holy Family – all topoi associated with paradise known, lost, and regained – in the literature, art, gardens, and allied social, metaphoric, and historical spheres of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English life. Precedent for such a procedure is not wanting. Much contemporary critical theory has formulated and illustrated the economy of examining the unity of an historical epoch by considering its modes of expression as part of a field of discourse which ordains the emergence of characteristic statements. By mediating the particular cultural, personal, scientific, and technological conditions affecting the complex negotiations with the world of English writers, artists, gardeners, and engineers, I hoped to make visible the submerged continuation of a religious topos into a secular age without vicious investment of it with unearned vigor, or contrariwise, reduction of it to a cliché and an abstraction.

One last observation. Theologically the concept of the hortus conclusus, or enclosed garden of paradise, along with the mystical dimensions of it fancied by medieval and Renaissance minds, is singular and conceptually ideal. I should have taken warning from that fact when I started hunting for it in every nook and shire of England. Yet, like Coleridge who kept hearing the tender undersong of love “in clamor’s hour” (“Recollections of Love,” 30), I have been beguiled by how ubiquitously the faith in a recoverable earthly paradise underlies and shapes our response to the world, despite its vehement secularization over the past three centuries and despite our possibly having long given up formal assent to the idea of an Eden lost at the beginning, and to be regained only at the end, of time.
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