**Gardens of refuge, innocence, and fragility**

*Cultivating One’s Garden, Exeter, 10/6/22*

**Preliminaries**

A green-thumbed neighbour told me he finds in his garden what he cannot ‘reliably find any more in the world’ – calm, care, gentleness, wholesomeness – a place to ‘remember’ how life should be and (perhaps) ‘used to be’.

On another occasion he aphorised – ‘plants, not people, are good’.

My neighbour was invoking a conception of gardens as ‘sanctuaries’ (Cooper) or ‘refuges’ (Kidd) from the many unattractive and unedifying features of mainstream human life.

In this talk, I want to (i) rehearse my account of ‘gardens of refuge’ and then (ii) make explicit a darker dimension of that account:

Certain ‘gardens of refuge’ can make salient the poignant reality that certain forms of moral comportment – more ‘innocent’, spontaneous – no longer obtain in the world we have inherited – an ‘unwholesome world’ (Buddhists) that has ‘lost the Way (Daoists).

Experience of gardens of refuge can induce a sense of the ‘fragility of goodness’.

(Note wider connection to theme of *misanthropy* – but I won’t go into that in this talk).

**Refuge**

Cooper describes a general type of garden – ‘sanctuary gardens’ – which offer ‘places of retreat from oppressive and discouraging aspects of the wider world’.

Standard examples: aesthetic ugliness, noise, pollution, stress, demands, restlessness, etc., characteristic of an ever-busier culture characterised by artificiality and complexity.

- we ‘escape’ into the garden to ‘cool off’ after long commute or a stressful day at work.

Some *gardens of refuge* (my term for ‘sanctuary’) include references to *moral harms* – ‘moral’ defined widely (so not just equality/fairness etc. but an array of excellences and attainments).

Some testimonies from garden scholars:

1. the garden, once ‘a place for man to escape from the threats of nature’, later became a ‘refuge from men’ – ie the human world (Adams).
2. gardens as a ‘sanctuary’ from ‘rage, death, and endless suffering’ of human history – ‘a kind of haven, if not a kind of heaven’ (Harrison).

I’ll return to these darker themes in the second half of the talk.

Distinguish three related functions of a garden of refuge (cf. my ‘GoR’ article):

1. *respite* – restorative relief from the battering pressures, distractions, and demands of mainstream human life – some gardens offer literal and figurative ‘shelter’.

Consider

1. Roman gardens – eg Cicero’s - places of leisure and relaxation (*otium*) and welcome escape from stresses of public civic life (*negotium*).

*Villeggiatura* – practice of withdrawing to country residence – escaping the overactivity and complications of urban life – peace and relief of a life of farming/gardening/viniculture (cf. modern Italian Slow Food-ies).

Pliny the Younger’s Tuscan villa life – ‘there is no need for a toga, the neighbours do not come to call, it is always quiet and peaceful’.

Epicurus’ Garden – a garden of refuge from ‘prison-house’ of city life.

1. many Chinese gardens – Ji Cheng on gardens offering ‘a pure atmosphere’ and Chen Fuyao on gardens that offer ‘protection against everything that is most detrimental to the spirit’.

These Romans, Greeks, Chinese not mere ‘grumps’ – they palpably experienced the social worlds of their day as hostile to human virtue and flourishing.

1. *restoration* – the repair or rejuvenation of damaged virtues and crumpled sensitivities, something apt to be disguised by modern focus on physical and mental health benefits of gardens/gardening.

Consider

1. Goethe – gardening encourages ‘tranquil eye’ and ‘unruffled consistency’, virtues that are ‘internal’ to practices of gardening.
2. Wittgenstein’s time as a monastery gardener as ‘regular work’ in sense of affording constancy and stability to his emotionally fractious life.

Chinese writers – washing off ‘the dust and grime of the world’ – restoring virtues and other attainments: a sense of what *matters* in life, ‘freedom’, relation to nature:

1. Táo Yuānmíng – going ‘back to nature’, ‘waking up’ to the true ‘meaning of life’.
2. Sima Guang – finding his life once again ‘under [his] own control’.
3. *reflection* – reflection as a dimension of a good life, requiring receptive conditions, an environment still but not static, attractive but not overstimulating – like gardens.

Consider

1. Marvell – ‘Fair Quiet’ and ‘delicious solitude’ in a garden, far ‘away from ‘busy companies of men’.
2. Cooper – compelling argument that a garden can offer the ‘combination of conditions conducive to *reverie*’ (cf. Rousseau/Bachelard).

– eg familiarity and freedom from ‘distractions and intrusions’ where something is always happening to stir memories, thoughts, imaginings etc.

So, gardens of refuge can offer *respite* from the world’s ills and opportunities for *restoration* and *reflection*.

But I worry that, if left at this, the account seems too *positive*. Unless amended, it occludes an important aspect of gardens of refuge: to identify it, let’s turn to the idea of *innocence.*

**Innocence**

Two complications:

1. *Respite and rejuvenation*: we cannot always achieve respite from some hazards, nor repair, or recover from, certain kinds of moral damage or spiritual contamination (one limit of the dust/grime metaphor).
2. *Reflection-in-a-refuge*: one can reflect on (i) features of the world which led one to seek refuge and (ii) the potentially permanent moral damage one has suffered.

Here the better metaphor is *innocence* – a quality which, once lost, cannot be regained. Innocent people naturally/spontaneous act virtuously because it does not occur to them to do otherwise: they don’t experience the temptations that demand the *moral toil* of self-disciplined restraint.

Suggestion: certain gardens of refuge can induce a sense of lost *moral innocence* – of the disappearance, even irretrievability, of certain superior forms of moral comportment – ones still available, albeit in fragile and fleeting ways, within gardens of refuge [only GoRs?]

Some examples:

1. *paradise gardens* – Islamic and Christian gardens which depict nature as God intended it (verdant, hospitable, beautiful) *and* *also* the kind of life God intended for us (peaceful, contented, innocent) – a time when living was ‘a delightful task’ (Milton).

Postlapsarian narratives of the Fall underscore destruction of (a) nature-as-intended and (b) human-life-as-intended – innocent and naturally good – condemning us to a life of physical and moral *toil* (cf. Merchant on ‘recovery ideal’ – cf. Bacon on gardens).

I find that (b) tends to get neglected in accounts of the Fall.

Tradition connecting gardens to ‘retreat, contemplation, and repose’ thus has a ‘darker resonance’ *qua* reminders of fallenness, lost innocence, and moral disaster (Ross).

1. *Daoism and Nóngjiā* (‘School of the Tillers’) – shared narrative: gradual loss of earlier, simpler, innocent ways of being that spoiled our relations to plants, animals, nature.
2. Daoist depictions of earlier forms of human life – peaceful, contented, people happily lived alongside ‘the birds and the beasts’ and cooperated with natural processes of the world (cf. *Dàodéjīng*, Zhuāngzǐ, Liezi).

Such innocent styles of life now lost to imperatives to control, ‘contend’, ‘impose’ – we transitioned from ‘gardeners’ to ‘technologists’ (Heidegger).

1. Nóngjiā: earlier ‘agrarian’ ways of life of modesty and hard work and mutual trust – displaced by artificial alternatives (‘covenants’, technologization etc.)

Our intelligence and technological capacities transformed us into more exploitative creatures – *harmony-with* can now be replaced by *control-of*.

Interpretation:

1. a garden of refuge allows us to experience and engage with nature in ways marked by care, calmness, humility, simplicity, thoughtfulness, respectful cooperation with plants and animals etc.
2. such experiences contrast with the realities of mainstream life beyond the garden wall – a world whose ills drive us to seek the protective and restorative powers of ‘refuges’.
3. such contrasts make salient the radical rarity – even impossibility – of maintaining those kinds of innocent and spontaneous moral comportment in one’s wider life.

Such salience modulates into a series of *moods* – a poignant sense of our lost moral innocence; a longing nostalgia for lost ways of being-in-nature; a disheartening sense of the moral hazards and toil of the world into which we have been ‘thrown’ (Heidegger).

Is this all too high-falutin’? No – other than my neighbour, many examples:

1. Ruth Ozeki’s novel, *All Over Creation*: a Japanese-American woman’s heart ‘crack[s] open’ at the ‘hopeless beauty and fragility and loss of all that is precious on earth’.

She experiences this in a Californian greenhouse (air-conditioned, artificial) which recalls and pathetically contrasts with her Hawai’ian childhood home to which she cannot return – a place and a time of her life where ‘everything is a garden’.

1. Japanese Zen gardens – ‘Retreats’ at Jikōin, Daisenin, and Byōdōin – many built under influence of doctrine of the ‘Degeneration of the Dharma’ (*mappō*) of moral, social and natural deterioration (wars, natural disasters, endless corruption).

Chōmei’s *Hojoki* - the world a ‘hard place’ to live in, now the ‘benevolence’ of earlier ages has disappeared – also recorded in court diaries of the period.

Aspiration to protect and preserve the Dharma – temple-building, burying scriptures and *garden-making* – because Zen gardens are hospitable to, and symbolic of, teachings and ethos of Zen: simplicity, humility, self-restraint, ephemerality (Cooper and James).

Yuriko Saito said Zen gardens offer a ‘glimpse of the world as it appears to a Zen-enlightened sensibility’.

‘Glimpse’ is the right word: a brief, fleeting sighting of something passing by, or passing away, a kind of Zen moral comportment characterised by an innocence, spontaneity, and simplicity increasingly absent from a an ever-more hostile world.

A world too harsh and too restless to accommodate the ‘fragility of goodness’ (Nussbaum).

I think this is what my neighbour meant when saying that he finds in his garden what he can no longer ‘reliably find’ in the world: echoes of morally innocent life characterised by ‘quieter’ virtues – peacefulness and contentedness, stillness and quietude, gentleness, loving care, and an *intimacy* of the human and the natural.

A way of being-in-the-world to ‘remember’ – with poignant melancholic nostalgia.

IJK