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The Celestial Gardener

BEFORE BECOMING, like many other things in the modern world, a simple utility, a 'green space', or purely an amusement, the garden, along with the house and the temple, was always considered by civilized peoples to be an image of the world.

Such was the case with the Persian garden, so famous throughout the ancient world. At the time of the Sassanids, when it reached its full development, it was rectangular in shape and divided into four parts by two main axes in the form of a cross that emphasized a path or a watercourse. At its center, where the two axes crossed, was the prince's palace, a pavilion, or fountain. This layout corresponded to the scheme of the universe divided into four zones by four great rivers. The famous 'paradise' of Cyrus at Sardis, described by Xenophon,¹ expressed this idea of a universe with the King's (magus') palace at its center representing the fecund and creative power of nature. The Persian garden was a microcosm surrounding a princely residence; it was like a sacred wood where the fundamental elements of the universe converged.² This cosmic scheme was

1. Xenophon, *Econom.* 4, 21. — It is known that the word 'paradise' is Persian, coming, via the Greek *paradison*, from the Persian *paradesha*.

2. P. Grimal, *L'Art des jardins* (1954), pp 20–21, 39, 41, 43. — The layout of the Persian garden, with its four axes and the royal palace at the center, obviously derives from a conception parallel to that of the Chinese *Ming Tang*, where the King-Pontiff regenerated his empire through the stations at the cardinal points in

perpetuated in Europe, with variations, until the classical epoch. It is what still gives Versailles its incomparable meaning.³

But if the garden is an image of the world, the world in its turn can be seen as a garden, with God the Creator as the Gardener who conceived, designed, realized, and planted it at the beginning, and whose Providence continues to care for it throughout the course of time: 'I have come to the world,' says the Gardener, 'to plant the plantation of life.'⁴

The original world was the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise:

And the Lord planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold, and the gold of that land is good. There is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates. And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it (Gen. 2:8-15).

And God, like a master craftsman happy with his creation, 'walked in the garden in the cool of the day' (Gen. 3:8).

It will have been noted that the shape of paradise corresponds to that of the Persian garden with its four cardinal axes embodied in the watercourses.

order to 'inaugurate the seasons', and then at the center of the palace in order, as the Mover of the Year, to authoritatively animate Space and Time (M. Granet, *La Pensée chinoise*, 1950), pp102-3.

3. On the symbolism of the park at Versailles: Ed. Guillou, *Versailles palais du soleil* (1963).

4. *Book of John* (Lidbarsky, p 219). This is one of the Mandaean books.

The future paradise, the world Beyond, appeared with the same traits among both the Greeks and Egyptians, to confine ourselves to these two examples. For Homer, *Elysium* is a plain without winter, where fresh breezes always blow; likewise, the *Isle of the Blessed* evoked by Pindar, in a veritable mystical frenzy, is the land 'refreshed by sea breezes, where flowers of gold shine, some on land, on the boughs of magnificent trees, others floating on the waters.'⁵ In Egypt, the *Field of Iaru* is a garden overflowing with greenery and water where the blessed feed on the fruit of the tree of life;⁶ which is a conception curiously close to that of Aphraates the Syrian, who describes the dwelling place of Christian souls as follows:

The air is pleasant and serene, a brilliant light shines, trees grow whose fruit ripens perpetually, of which the leaves never fall, and beneath these shades . . . the souls eat this fruit.⁷

But paradise is already virtually realized by the Redemption of Christ, who has renewed and restored the world. Clement of Alexandria magnificently explicates the text from Genesis in this way:

Now Moses, describing allegorically the divine prudence, called it the tree of life planted in Paradise; which Paradise may be the world in which all things proceeding from creation grow. In it also the Word blossomed and bore fruit, being 'made flesh', and gave life to those 'who had tasted of His graciousness.'⁸

The Christian and Paschal mystery is that of the return of humanity to Paradise from which it had been banished.⁹ Thus we see the Fathers emphasizing the striking parallel that exists between the Garden of Eden and the gardens that were the theater of the Redemption: the Garden of Gethsemane and the garden of Joseph

5. *Odyssey*, IV, 563–9; Pindar, *Olymp.*, II, 77 ff.

6. Erman, *Religion des Egyptiens* (Fr. transl. pp251–2). Cf. *Livre des Morts* (Navelle, 59, 63).

7. Cited in E. Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism* (reprinted, Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p206.

8. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* v, 11.

9. See J. Daniélou, *Catéchèse pascale et retour au paradis*, in MD 45 (1956), pp99–119.

of Arimathea. 'In Paradise,' says St Cyril of Jerusalem, 'was the fall, and in a garden our salvation. From the tree came sin, and until the Tree sin lasted.'¹⁰ The same idea is found many centuries later in St Catherine of Siena:

I created the rational creatures in my own image and likeness, and I put them in this garden. But because of Adam's sin the garden where first there were fragrant flowers, innocently pure and so very sweet, brought forth thorns. . . . [But Christ came and] I made the earth a garden watered by the blood of Christ crucified, and planted there the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. . . .¹¹

The hill of Golgotha, where the Tree of the Cross, the new Tree of Life, was planted, has been assimilated to Paradise regained. Moreover, in iconography as in Christian literature, the blood of the Crucified One, the fountain of life, has been represented as flowing in the four directions of space, like the rivers of Eden.¹²

Less attention is given to the garden adjoining Golgotha, where Joseph of Arimathea hollowed out of rock the sepulcher used for the Lord (John 19:41). Nothing is without importance in Holy Scripture, however; as we have already had occasion to observe, the least detail is full of meaning.¹³ Such is the case here. The appearance of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalen in this garden replicates the scene of Eve's temptation in the original garden, as St Hippolytus of Rome saw clearly: 'Eve in the garden of temptation heralds Magdalen in the garden of the resurrection.'¹⁴ The wealth of meaning revealed by this exegesis invites us to stretch the parallel: this garden symbolizes the world regenerated by the victory of Christ over death, paradise regained. And as if that were not sufficient for our understanding, the inspired author takes care to tell us that

10. *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 13, 19.

11. *The Dialogue*, chap. 140; tr. S. Noffke (NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p288.

12. We have dealt with the cruci-circular pattern forming the basis of these representations in our book *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, in particular, pp14-21, 81, 157 ff.

13. See above pp 12-13.

14. *Cant. d. cant.* (Boutwetsch, p352).

Magdalen at first took Jesus for 'the gardener' (John 20:15). This little touch, which could pass as a simple realistic detail at the hand of the sacred historian, assumes a completely different meaning the moment it is placed in the symbolic context under analysis. Here, Christ reveals Himself to Magdalen and to us in his function as Divine Gardener, as the One who has come to restore the Garden of the World.

This parallel between the Gardens of Eden and the Redemption is subject to an extension in the historical order. It is found in St Bernard, who compares the spiritual history of the world with the life of a garden that unfolds in three phases: creation, reconciliation, and reparation. The first period is like the sowing and planting of the garden. The second is like the germination of the seeded and planted soil: 'For in due course, while the heavens showered from above and the skies rained down the Just one, the earth opened for a Savior to spring up' (Isaiah 45:8). The third, finally, will come at the end of time, when 'the good will be gathered from the midst of the wicked, like fruit from a garden, to be set at rest in the storehouse of God.' 'In that day,' says Isaiah (4:2), 'the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land raised on high.'¹⁵

Let us note in passing that in its eschatological perspective, this symbol is not ignored by Muslim mystics, who say that at the end of the world, 'the garden will return to the Gardener,' that is to say, the created to the Creator.¹⁶

But, concretely, the spiritual history of the world is the history of the Church of Christ. The Church also is compared to a garden and the faithful to the verdant trees growing there.

The fundamental elements of this theme are fully expounded by St Ephrem:

God planted the fair garden, He built the pure Church. . . . In the Church He planted the Word. . . . The assembly of saints bears

15. Sermon 23 in *On the Song of Songs II*, tr. K. Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976), p 29; PL 183, 884–894.

16. F. Schuon, 'Comments on an Eschatological Problem,' in *Form and Substance in the Religions* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2002), p 238.

resemblance to Paradise: in it each day is plucked the fruit of Him who gives life to all. . . .¹⁷

With Sts Cyprian and Hippolytus the symbol is enriched with an allusion to the river of life divided into four branches:

The Church, like Paradise, includes fruit-bearing trees within her walls. . . . She waters the trees from four rivers, which are the four gospels, by which she dispenses the grace of baptism by means of a celestial and salutary outpouring.¹⁸

The Church, God's spiritual garden, planted in Christ as in the East: here may be seen every sort of tree [patriarchs, prophets, etc.]. An inexhaustible river flows through this garden, and from it four streams water the whole earth. So it is with the Church. Christ is the river, and he is proclaimed in the world by the four gospels. . . .¹⁹

In the last passage, we see taking shape the motif of the righteous as verdant trees, a motif that has great scope, being inspired by the Psalms. Thus, in his *Nocturne*, Isaac of Antioch paraphrases Psalm 92:

The righteous man will flourish like the palm, and grow like the cedar of Lebanon, whose leaves never fall, whose splendor never fades. He is planted in the House of the Lord and the courts of our God, where the Spirit blows and intoxicates him with its breath. Through the action of the Holy Spirit he thrives and grows tall like the cedar of Lebanon. Even in old age he bears fruit, for the sacred chants give him youth; he is full of vigor and grace, because he has understood the mysteries of the Spirit.²⁰

17. St Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, 6, 7–9, tr. S. Beck (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), p111.

18. St Cyprian, *Letters.*, 73, 10.

19. St Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*, 1, 17; cited in J. Daniélou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, p30.

20. G. Bickell, *Ausg. Gedichte der Syr. Kirchenvater*, pp164–170. The title of John Moschos' work, *The Spiritual Meadow*, is explained along the same lines; see his preface (tr. J. Wortley [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992], p3).

St Bernard, at the other end of Christianity, expresses himself no differently: 'We find men of many virtues, like fruitful trees in the garden of the Bridegroom, in the Paradise of God.' The good man is a plant of God: 'And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither' (Psalm 1:3). And Jeremiah: 'For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not notice when heat cometh' (17:8). 'The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon' (Psalm 91). 'But I am like a green olive in the house of God' (Psalm 50).²¹

This theme is very ancient. From the early years of Christianity, the Church was called 'the plantation (*phytia*) of God'; the faithful are the trees that the Heavenly Gardener has planted there. In the *Teaching of the Apostles* we read, 'The catholic Church is God's plantation.'²² St Paul had already compared baptism to a plantation, since he called the newly initiated, *neophyte*, which means 'new plant' (1 Tim. 3:6). Clement of Alexandria explains it thus:

Our gnosis and our spiritual paradise itself are the Savior, in whom we are planted, being transferred and transplanted from the old life to the good earth. And the change of plantation is accompanied by the production of much fruit.²³

The image lived on into the Middle Ages. Thus St Catherine of Siena wrote to Pope Urban VI: 'The Eternal Truth desires that in your Garden, you make a garden of God's servants. . . .'; and again: 'It is necessary . . . to renew the Garden of Holy Church.'²⁴ It even inspires a work like the *Romance of the Rose*, which is not religious, at least directly. This book presents us with two contrasted gardens, that of carnal pleasures and that of Beatitude, the only true garden of delights, wherein the Lamb of God leads the sheep in meadows of

21. St Bernard, *op. cit.*, p 28.

22. *Teaching of the Apostles* cited in J. Daniélou, *Primitive Christian Symbols*, p 27. The image is particularly developed in the text of Qumran, *ibid.*, and G. Ber-nini, *Il Giardiniere della piantagione eterna* in *Sacra Pagina* II (Louvain, 1959), pp 47-49.

23. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* IV, 1, 4.

24. J. Leclerq, *Ste Catherine de Sienna*, pp 105, 100, 116.

eternal flowers. There they find the Fountain of Life in which an olive tree, symbolizing Grace, bathes its roots, and in which shines the sparkling carbuncle of the Beatific Vision.²⁵ This image is not unrelated to that of Dante, who describes the world of the Blessed as forming an immense Rose in the garden of the Eternal Fountain.²⁶

The scriptural comparison of man to a tree planted in the Garden of God, starting with the Man-God assimilated to the Tree of Life, finds an echo in the work of Plato. According to him,

We are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth (*phyton ouranion*) . . . for the divine power suspends the head and root of us from that place where the generation of the soul first began, and thus makes the entire body upright.²⁷

A different, and in a way inverse, form of this symbol was destined to enjoy considerable success: we have in mind the mandrake. This magic plant, which had a root but no head, did not symbolize the descent of man from heaven to earth, as did the Platonic plant, of which the root was a head, but rather his re-ascension to heaven. Just as the dark root, subject to Hecate but collected by the wise botanist, becomes a saving remedy, so the dark root of human nature, subjected to demons, becomes salutary, because the eternal Herbalist knows how to transform it by freeing it from the bonds of Satan. The poisoned root, similar to a man without a head, is crowned with eternal rest in Christ, who is the head of all.²⁸

Botanical speculations of this sort, together with those centered on the Greek pharmacopoeia, are based on a passage from the Song

25. *The Romance of the Rose*, tr. C. Dahlberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), v. 19, 932–20, 655, pp 328–337.

26. *Paradiso*, 31. — The poet Sedulius had already placed the rose in the earthly Paradise, and Prudence and St Peter Damian in the Paradise to come. Cf. Ch. Joret, *La rose dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Age*, pp 229–237.

27. Plato, *Timaeus* 90A–B. The expression was adopted by Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis*, 12 and *Anthology*, 10, 45.

28. See H. Rahner, *The Mandrake...* in *Greek Myths and Christian Mysteries*, pp 223–277.

of Solomon, which is closely related to the symbolism of the garden, as shall be immediately evident. St Gregory the Great writes:

The mandrakes spread their perfume (7:14). By the root of the mandrake we may understand the nature of man. . . . Even as a root ages in the ground and gradually begins to die, so it is with man, who, according to the nature of his flesh, resolves himself at last into ashes. The root becomes dust, and the beauty of the man's body suffers corruption. But the fragrance of the living water causes the root to revive, and similarly the human body is recreated when the Holy Spirit descends.²⁹

The dark root is nostalgic for the light, and from a headless root the fragrant efflorescence of Eternity unfolds.³⁰

These reflections on the human plant and the mandrake have already taken us from the domain of the cosmic and ecclesiastic symbolism of gardens into its microcosmic symbolism, and here we shall pause by way of ending. After the gardens of the world and the Church, we shall consider the garden of the soul.

'The human soul has become a garden full of sweet and exquisite fruits,' says St Catherine of Siena,³¹ echoing the *Letter to Diognetus*:

Those who truly love God become a paradise of delights; a fruit-bearing tree of vigorous sap springs up in them, and they are adorned with the richest fruits.³²

29. St Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, 12, 5, 7; cited in Rahner, *ibid.*, p248. One also finds the mandrake in *Genesis*, 30:14; and the *Song of Solomon*, 7:13. According to Richard of St Victor, it denotes good repute, renown.

30. In Rahner's excellent study are found all the variations on the theme with citations of texts (Origen, Philo of Karpasia, Nilus of Ancyra, etc...), as well as a rich bibliography on the question. These texts can be compared to the following passage from the Quran (50, 9–11): 'We have caused the blessed water to descend from heaven and through it have caused gardens and the grain of the harvest to grow. . . . And through it we have revived a dead land. Such is the Resurrection.' Likewise, in the Jewish tradition, it is said that a dew will come forth from the head of the Ancient of Days to revive the dead in the ages to come. (H. Serouya, *La Kabbale*, p287). Cf. St Paul, 1 Cor. 15:36–38 and 42–44, and below, chap. 11.

31. St Catherine of Siena, *Dialogues*, chap. 140.

32. *Letter to Diognetus*, 12, 1–3.

The idea of a garden of the soul arises naturally from Scripture. Jeremiah, recalling the restoration of the earthly Paradise on the Mount Sion of the Apocalypses, notes its prolongations in the human soul, which will then reflect the peace and joy of Eden.

The Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all (Jer. 31:11–12; see also Isaiah 58:9).

Philo interprets the verse: 'And Noah began to be a husbandman. . . .' (Gen. 9:20), allegorically in the same sense. By this, he says, we are to understand the cultivation of the soul (*georgiki psychis*), which consists in pulling out the trees of folly and the passions, and planting the good trees of the virtues.³³

But it is above all the garden of the *Song of Solomon* that is considered to be the symbol of the soul. At times this garden is the place of the mystical marriage of the Word and the soul, represented by the Beloved and the Spouse, and at others, the Soul itself.³⁴ There we find the splendid evocation of the sealed garden, the image of the pure soul filled with the perfume of all the virtues; without a doubt, poetry has never attained such grace and charm. 'A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates, with pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard, spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon, with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices: a fountain of gardens, a well of living water, and streams from Lebanon' (Song of Sol. 4:12–15).³⁵ The Beloved enters

33. Philo, *De agricul.*, 7, 25.

34. On the development of this theme in patristic literature, especially in St Cyril of Jerusalem and St Ambrose, see J. Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, pp191–207.

35. According to traditional exegesis, fruit trees symbolized charity, scented trees the virtue of religion, and resinous trees renunciation (Abbé Geslin, *Le Cantique des cantiques*, pp91–92).

his garden; and so the dialogue is established between him and the soul-spouse, in which the praise of the delights of this garden unfolds in endless arabesques.

Let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruits. I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk. . . . My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies (5:1; 6:2).

In the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila, the theme of Solomon's garden served as the framework for a whole mystical treatise on the states of prayer.³⁶ There we read that the mystical soul is comparable to a garden. A beginner in the spiritual life 'must look upon himself as making a garden, wherein our Lord may take His delight.' (We recognize the plot of the *Song of Solomon*.)

His Majesty roots up the weeds, and has to plant good herbs . . . as good gardeners, by the help of God, to see that the plants grow, to water them carefully, that they may not die, but produce blossoms, which shall send forth much fragrance, refreshing to our Lord, so that He may come often for His pleasure into this garden, and delight Himself in the midst of these virtues.

How is the garden to be watered? In four ways: first, with water drawn from wells by the strength of one's arms; secondly, with the help of the Persian wheel; thirdly, by irrigation; and, finally, by leaving it to the rain, when it is then the Lord Himself who waters. These four ways of watering correspond to the four types of prayer. Our Lord is the 'master of the garden', while the beginner is a gardener, and the four ways of watering are prescribed by the master of the garden. The flowers grow; God gives them a lovely scent; He cuts them, He hoes and removes the weeds. In the third way of watering, the prayer of quietude, God takes the place of the gardener and He Himself, the Heavenly Gardener, does the watering (chaps. 16 and 17): in an instant, through the water of Grace, He is

36. *Life, Written by Herself*, chaps. 11–20.

able to make the fruit grow and ripen. Finally, in the fourth way, the prayer of union, it is the heavenly rain that falls and soaks the garden. The water that falls is the grace of union (chap. 18), which falls from 'the Cloud of the Divine Majesty itself' (chap. 20).

At the end of the treatise, we see how the great mystic, in celebrating the marriage of the Soul and the Word, quite naturally rejoins the tremendous vision of the Incarnation in Isaiah: 'Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just: let the earth be opened, and bud forth a savior' (45:8).

Garden of the world, garden of the Church, garden of the soul: works of the same and unique 'Principle of every sowing', of the one and only 'Gardener of all spiritual growth'.³⁷

37. Ancient liturgical prayer: *Berlin Papyrus* (Egypt second cent.), PO 18, 430.