

A Utopia of Gardens: Epicurus versus Marx.

(Perspectives d'Utopies, Projet de la CIRCA, la Chartreuse de la Villeneuve-lez-Avignon.)

The Chartreuse is a temple. It contains a garden. And it is there that we are being invited to imagine and to conceive gardens. How can one escape classical categories in such a context? By 'classical' I mean, of course, Jewish and Greek categories, which are "classical" because they continue to inform our thinking, they "classify" it. One cannot avoid such a context here, because it was the Jews and the Greeks who have formulated the concepts of "temple" and "garden" for us. For the Jews the world, as it was created by God, was a garden, and since it was created for man to use and to take care of, the anthropology implied is that man is a gardener. And as for the concept of "temple", the Jews thought of it not as of a space, but as of a time span, cut out from the surrounding space-time and reserved for the contemplation of the Eternal: the temple was the Sabbath. Thus, for Jewish thought, Utopia, (the "Kingdom of God"), is a sort of standing Sabbath within a garden world. We should keep this in mind when imagining and conceiving the garden.

But it is to the Greek context that I shall turn in this paper. For the Greeks the back-ground of thought and action was the city-state, the "polis". They were not creatures of God, like the Jews, but political animals, citizens. To them, like to the Romans, their heirs, the world was not a garden, but a city: "urbi et orbi". To understand Greek cosmology and anthropology, one has to analyse the structure of the city. Now the Greek city is an organisation of spaces. There are the private spaces, where the citizens, their wives, their children and their slaves labor and sleep, eat and die, and they are called "oikoi". Those spaces are the economic basis of the city. They surround a public space, the market place, where the citizens exchange their works and their ideas, in order to verify their values: in order to "normalize" them. It is called "agora", and it is the political center of the city, the "republic". Somewhere within the city a space is cut out and reserved for the contemplation of the Eternal ideas, (the Gods and their images), and the ideas thus contemplated inform the political values. This space is the temple, ("temenos"), and it is the theoretical justification of the city. Finally, there are gardens, ("ketai"), in the city. It is not quite clear what the gardens meant for Greek thought, because Plato, our standard in all matters Greek, is not in sympathy with them. But there can be no doubt that they are the hedonistic aspect of the city, (we would now say that they are "libidinous" spaces, where the "pleasure principle" is supreme).

Plato is not in sympathy with gardens, because he is "academic", his space of thought is a temple, (the temple of the god Akademos). He is a theoretician. But we have two other Greek schools of thought which may

help us to grasp the Greek meaning of gardens. One is the Stoa, which means the porch of a temple, the intermediate space between temple and garden. Like the Chartreuse, the stoics stand on a middle ground between temple and garden, between theory and pleasure. And let us not forget that it was the stoics who governed the Roman Empire before it was taken over by the Christians, those who were committed to the Jewish Kingdom of Heaven. But it is the other Greek school, the Epicurean one, which stood with both feet in the garden. In fact, it was called in Antiquity "oi apo ton keton", (those of the Garden). It is from them that we may expect to learn the meaning of gardens.

Epicurus lived in a garden near the Dipylon of Athens, a garden which he and his disciples watered. In "metaphysical" matters he was a radical materialist, but he was not primarily interested in such questions. His subject of intense interest was ethics. He was not a theoretical, but a practical thinker. His criterion of good and evil is sensation, "aisthesis". He was an esthetical man, in a sense which we are only now beginning to grasp fully. To him, ethics, (politics and private behavior), was an esthetic question. It is the pleasurable sensations which are the Good, (to agathon). But this does not make of him a hedonist in the vulgar sense of that term, one who pursued pleasure wherever he may find it. On the contrary: he believed that it is permanent pleasure, one that does not lead to ultimate suffering, (as most pleasures do) which is to be pursued. And such supreme pleasure, (which is the supreme Good), can not be in motion, but only in rest: in the quietness of mind, "ataraxia", and in the quietness of the body, "apatia". It is the absence of the Evil, of troubles and pains, which is the supreme pleasure. And what troubles us most, and what pains us most, is the fear of the gods and of death. He does not deny the existence of the gods and of death, but he holds that those are matters which do not concern us. The gods are not interested in men, and men should not be interested in them. As for death, the best way to live with it is to ignore it. Thus the good life, the esthetic life, is one of wisdom, "philosophia", which is a life of virtue and abstinence, precisely because it is a life dedicated to the sensation of supreme pleasure. In short: it is the life in a garden.

This permits us to have the following vision of the Greek garden concept: The basis of life is economic. This infra-structure is in itself meaningless, unless it leads to politics, which is where "norms" are followed. This again is merely a step toward theory, where those norms can be contemplated. And this again is a preparation for the Good life, which one dedicated to the supreme pleasure of abstinent wisdom. The private house is a step toward the market place, the market place a step toward the temple, and the temple a step toward the garden.

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As I said before: our thoughts, (and actions), are profoundly informed by Jewish and Greek categories, whether we be conscious of it or not. This is what makes us "Occidental". Thus we harbor two different anthropologies, two different images and concepts of what man is. The Jewish heritage within us sees man as a gardener, the Greek heritage sees him as one who savors the pleasures of the garden. At first sight there seems to be no profound contradiction between those two visions. It seems as if one could be gardener and garden savorer simultaneously, or at least alternatively. But at second thought one can see that those two visions of man are incompatible. The savorer of gardens lives within the garden, the gardener transcends it. To the one the garden is his surroundings, (his "Lebenswelt"), to the other it is an object to be manipulated. Those are two incompatible levels of existence. They are bound to clash, both within our individual consciousness, and within the history of Western civilisation. And we can experience this better at present than in previous situations.

To put the problem into Greek terms: For the Jewish vision the garden is the subject matter of the temple, and for the Greek vision the temple is a stepping stone toward the garden. To put it in terms of the Chartreuse: For one of our heritages the Church is surrounded by gardens which serve the monks to prepare themselves for the service of the Eternal. For our other heritage the gardens of the Chartreuse are the space where the monks lead the Good life. And to put it in terms of present-day thinking: For one of our heritages the garden is the object of the application of models. The world must be changed according to theoretical, (scientific, political and esthetic), considerations. For our other heritage the garden is the world we must try to make most of. And we must do so in the face of death, by trying to make use of it in the sense of wise pleasure.

To put the matter sharply: the incompatibility between our two heritages is at present one between Marxism and a new avatar of Epicureism. Marxism is how our Jewish heritage articulates itself best at present: it is our way to be gardeners, to change the world and thus change man, to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, to tend the garden from outside, from the transcendence of theory. And, after long having been suppressed by official ideology, (be it Christian, liberal or otherwise), and after long having been despised as decadent or sinful, there is a new Epicureism about which advocates a pleasurable, libidinous integration of man in the real, concrete world he lives in, in the world accepted to be a garden. It advocates to fight Evil not by changing the world, (which it distrusts, because it distrusts theory), but by personal, existential virtue, which is the avoidance of doing and suffering Evil, (pains and troubles). And I believe it is this new form of Epicureism which is in question here at the Chartreuse.

This new Epicureism takes numerous and bewildering shapes at present. One stems from Freud, and one can cite two extreme forms of it: Reich and Marcuse. The supreme pleasure it seeks is libidinous in a sexual sense: it is orgasmic. Another stems from phenomenology, which is the result of a crisis in Modern science. The formal and practical difficulties inherent in scientific theories have lead to the recommendation to "go back to the phenomena themselves", to "let them speak for themselves", and to abandon the futile search for an objective knowledge in favor of a concrete, intersubjective knowledge. Yet another stems from ecological considerations. The technical manipulations of the world, and of man, are seen to have endangered the precarious equilibrium of "nature", (which is the Garden), and it is recommended that man and society respect that equilibrium, if a Good life is to be achieved, one that returns to the "natural", less consumer-directed, more abstinent pleasures. And yet another stems from a new sort of religiosity, which one should not hesitate to call "pagan". It recommends the pleasurable integration of man in his senses, the abandon of man to his sensations, which is a sort of esthetic mysticism, of which the hippie movement, and California in general, is a good example.

Those numerous shapes of Epicureism intermingle in a bewildering fashion, and they have sometimes very surprising aspects. One is that science and politics, (the active, non-apathic forms of life), are being seen as art forms, and that models are no longer felt to be imperatives, but chessmen to be played with. Thus it is obvious that the new Epicureism is an answer to the difficulties inherent in Marxism, (and in Modern science and politics), a step forward from theories to concrete praxis, from the "temple" toward the "garden". Still, there is no denying that, from the point of view of Marxism, this Epicureism is a symptom of decadence, of a society ready to abandon itself to outside, revolutionary action. Thus the abandon of theory, and the commitment to concrete, pleasurable life may be seen as an invitation to outsiders to do away with it.

My purpose is not to side with one of the two heritages concerning the garden, or with the other. It is to point out the dichotomy which the concept of the garden entails for Western civilisation. We are condemned, I believe, to be gardeners and to be garden dwellers, although we cannot be both. And I believe that this is one of the basic themes to be kept in mind when, as during the present event, gardens are in question.