# Rhapsodies from the bower: Polixeni Papapetrou's *Eden*

A beautiful young female figure is immersed in a garden of flowers, a vertical garden that doesn't recede into deep space but presses itself onto the surface of the photograph. The model has flowers behind her, in front of her, upon her, all around her. Her form is rhapsodized by stitches of blooms and leaves, engulfed by nature but not contained by the three levels of representation that compress figure and ground. Real flowers and leaves are artfully arranged as crown or heart or girdle; then there are painted flowers, leaves, vines and sometimes butterflies, sprinkled in the prints of period dresses; and finally there are further prints in the backdrop made from postwar backcloth. Because all three have similar colours and mood, they parley in intricate overlap, so that the figure simultaneously comes from behind and stands in front of the garden.

Polixeni Papapetrou's *Eden* comprises 10 photographs of such girls, dryads, nymphs, whoever they are, children of a tranquil bosk, a flattened grove, a luminous bower. Polixeni stitches space together in the same way that flowers are stitched together in a wreath—the one wand entwined within the space of the other—or vines or branches are woven on a trellis. The very word bower derives from a knot, a bow (as Shakespeare acknowledges with his 'pleached bower'),[1] a tying together around an armature, where strands are interwoven, locked in, both strengthened and encumbered with their unity. They are 'Together intertwin'd and trammel'd fresh',[2] as the romantic poet Keats expressed it in his *Endymion*, a heady poem itself enmeshed with flowers and vine. In Polixeni's photographs, however, the trammelled armature is the human herself.

It is conventional in photography to talk of a prop, a theatrical thing beside the human that figuratively supports the action or allegorical meaning of the image. In Eden, there are no props. The objects that come into the studio, barkcloth, dress and floral arrangement are all of a piece. They have been conceived with one another in mind, enmeshed in the artist's imagination not as scenery in the background plus features in the foreground. Rather, a bit

[1] William Shakespeare, *Much ado about nothing* 3.1
[2] John Keats, *Endymion* 1.1389

like the decorative multiplicity of form in Gustav Klimt or Edouard Vuillard, they defy the expectations of hierarchical space, and implicate one another in their collective presence. At certain times, it is hard to extract the information that you typically want for separating the planes. They are in a sense knitted, commencing with the flowers themselves, which Polixeni conceived in collaboration with a florist. The delicate blooms are connected onto one another's stalk, threaded so as to form a unity. And so with the consonant properties of the dresses and the backdrops: they form an integrity of space, where the sprays and convolutions and overlap of flowers, leaves, tendrils and pods are stitched—or as the Greeks said, 'rhapsodized'[3]—into the single plane. But while space is collapsed onto a single plane, it is never claustrophobic, because the gaze of the spectator has plenty of places to go, ranging all over a large field of evenly weighted visual elements, a bit like in a painting where the brushstrokes in the corner are just as present as those in the centre.

This wrapping up of space in Polixeni's photographs from Eden belongs not just in the pictorial tradition of Mantegna or Botticelli but also in poetic literature, where a multiplicity of flowers recurs in a sumptuous poetic tangle. It begins for the mainstream of early modern European literature in the horticultural abundance of a palatial garden evoked by the fourteenth-century Giovanni Boccaccio, where wide areas are embowered with vines (*pergolati di viti*), where a profusion of jasmine and other flowers makes 'odoriferous and delightful shade'.[4] Such images are picked up in sixteenth-century writers like Pietro Bembo, who evokes a bower with thick jasmine, over-layered with live undergrowth (*di viva selve soprastrata*);[5] and by the baroque, the image of the bower, as if channelling paintings by Mantegna or Botticelli, reached the heavenly, as in Milton's 'thicket overgrown' all around Eden, where 'The verdurous wall of Paradise up sprung';[6] and even the embrace of Eve and Adam is described as a kind of heavenly knot: 'Imparadis't in one another's arms' as 'bliss on bliss'.[7] Each wonder is folded onto another.

[3] ῥαπτός, stitched, *Odyssey* 24.228–29, already metaphoric in the classical period, as in strung together, continuous, Pindar, *Nemean odes* 2.2; hence ῥαψῳδός
[4] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron* 3.0 (introduction)
[5] 'di spesissimi et verdissimi ginevri', *Asolani* 1.5
[6] John Milton, *Paradise lost* 4.131–143
[7] *ibid.* 4.506–08

Eden is also a tangled or layered place because, unlike Arcadia or paradise or heaven, it has the encumbrance of an expiry, a use-by date, when God chases Eve and Adam from the gates. And so it has a history, book-ended in our imagination by the creation of Adam (because why would you make Eden if not for our progenitors?) and the tragedy of the fall. It is no use after that time, because there are no longer any innocent humans who would deserve it; they are all fallible and unworthy of the luxury. So as a divine invention, Eden is almost a failed project, a bad investment, squeezed in its use—over the billions of years that the planets have been turning—to the lifetime of two humans. It is chronically crushed, tied up in time, created for a disaster and then laid to waste.

There would be many readings of the biblical place that would match Polixeni's intuitive walled garden, her enclosed photographs that spread out over the vertical picture plane with minimal depth. One reading would be directly allegorical: that Eden is childhood, a period at the beginning when we are innocent and which we subsequently lose, perchance intermittently regaining it by imaginatively connecting to our childhood. The photographic models, however, vary in age, and the series does not constitute a portrait of childhood. All the images are equally rhapsodic in their own way and the whole does not read as a clinical documentation of different stages of development. Besides, not every youngster has a childhood which is Edenic; many, alas, are denied the utopia that we identify with. Another allegorical reading would be to match the myth of Eden to life cycles and mortality; but although such content is accommodated by the work, the pictures do not confine themselves to the grim discourse of *vanitas* or *memento mori*.

Yet because humans are as much drawn to optimism as gloom, we think of Eden—this irretrievable place that was condemned and represents our exile, our alienation—as somehow recoverable by artifice, as if we could maybe reinvent it with a satisfactory substitute, 'my bower in fairy-land'.[8] It can never be regained, we know, and the belief that we have the power to win it back is hubris, a great temerity against the divine decree that punished us as sinners by taking the garden away from us. But that does not mean that Eden has to be deleted from human consciousness. On the contrary, Eden remains in memory, either to heighten our compunction or to encourage our beneficence.

[8] Shakespeare, *A midsummer night's dream* 4.1

Eden also exists for a provisional moment in everyone's imagination with the mere mention of the word. Eden can never be rebuilt but it can be proposed. In fact Eden can only ever be commended to the imagination; and rhetorical genius can even invoke Eden for the sake of the homeland, like England, 'this scepter'd isle… This other Eden, demi-paradise'.[9] It sounds like a metaphor even when one describes the biblical reality, 'this happy state', as Milton calls it, with its 'sacred Light' and 'humid Flours, that breath'd / Their morning Incense':[10] it is a metaphor for imagination, slipping effortlessly between innocence and luxury, artlessness and wantonness. Maybe every gardener unconsciously creates an Eden or some counterpart; and the way that a garden is felt also accommodates both the high-minded and the sensual, the serene and the exciting, the intellectual and the erotic. Throughout the large collection of stories by the sixteenth-century *novelliere* Matteo Bandello, the bower features often and divides between a naughty place for an amorous assignation by stealth[11] and a kind of philosopher's cave, where the courtiers and aristocrats of the renaissance gathered to relay and ponder stories, to interpret them in perfect peace, as if transcending into an ideal world of reflexion.[12]

In *Eden*, Polixeni weaves together much more than space but metaphor, metaphors of growth, nature, life-cycles, the sacred, the ideal; and even the all-over aesthetic field constitutes a kind of metaphor, the rhapsodic, the imaginary, the connected. The space that she has created is almost nothing but a metaphor, 'her close and consecrated bower';[13] yet all of these metaphors are built upon realities, real people, who are the artist's daughter and her friends. They all have lives, with diverse and exceptional experiences; and each has a token of difference in their floral adornments. They all share the motif of flowers but the differences between each ornamental arrangement make each distinctive, suggesting intrigue or pathos or love or melancholy. One has the sense that the models are united by a power of fantasy, that they have a presence that might look at you but equally a degree of reserve in which they

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[9] Shakespeare, *Richard II* 2.1
[10] *Paradise lost* 8.191–92
[11] 'si corcarono su la molle e fresca erbetta che sotto il pergolato era, ed amorosamente si presero piacere…in simili trescamenti', *Novelle* 1.38; though also with temperance, 'dando fine ai lor amorosi abbracciamenti, discesero a basso ed entrarono in un giardino e sotto un pergolato si misero a passeggiare', 3.35
[12] Letter to Alfonso Vesconte at 2.2, *cf.* 2.12, to Anna di Polignac, 2.39, *cf.* 2.50, to Margarita Pia e Sanseverina 2.54, to Giacomo Antiquario 3.18, to Girolamo Archinto 3.49, to Count Bartolomeo Canossa 3.54, to Ridolfo Gonzaga 3.60, to Lodovico Dante Aligieri 4.8
[13] *A midsummer night's dream* 3.2

weave their own thoughts, to which you have no access. They don't propose fantasies in the sense of a tease but rather imaginative freedom; because each of the floral arrangements had to be conceived upon the conception of the dresses and backdrops. Layer upon layer, including the performance of the models, the pictures are a labour of imagination.

The connexion between the bower and fantasy had already been made by the artistic biographer Giorgio Vasari, when he mentioned 'bowers and other fantasies' in the *Life* of Andrea del Sarto.[14] Polixeni's bower is fantastic in old and new ways: old, because it has forms of painting and sculpture within it where blooms and other plant-matter are brought together; and new because they gesture to a place so far beyond the studio. Among the many discourses that Polixeni stitches together in this fantastic aesthetic bower is the theme of gender. Her models are all female; their space seems female insofar as flowers may be gendered. One might observe that flowers are not necessarily gendered as female. For example, the word in ancient Greek (ἄνθος) is masculine, as it is in Latin (*flos*).[15] Even by cultural convention, there is no absolute alignment between the flower and girls. Endymion in Keats' poem is, of course, a mythical boy and the nobility who enjoy Bandello's bowers are mostly men. Yet Polixeni only has young women in her bower and we wouldn't expect boys in there.

This exclusivity along gender lines, like the image of the unicorn in the garden of a virgin, is also metaphoric: it stands for the preserve of the individual, the quintessentially safe place that is the interior, the inner realm of thought, the preserve of an unaffected psyche, an emotional haven, a bower of immanence. It has love in it, but deferred, otherworldly, imaginary and eternal.

Robert Nelson, 2016

[14] 'e pergole et altre fantasie', Giorgio Vasari, *Vita di Andrea del Sarto*

[15] Romance languages derived from it vacillate, *e.g.* masculine in Italian (*il fiore*) though feminine in French, Spanish and Portuguese (*la fleur*, *la flor*, *a flor*). In modern Greek (το λουλούδι) it is neuter, though in German the flower is again female (*die Blume*, like flowering, *die Blüte*)