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«Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den»
Animals, Plants and Paradoxes in Abraham Cowley's Writings

Milena Romero Allué (Università degli Studi di Udine, Italia)

Abstract Moving from his peculiar way of mingling poetry and natural philosophy, his composing lyrics with the condensation of good prose and his writing essays in a poetical language, these pages investigate the ambiguous attitude towards the natural world and, in particular, towards the animal dimension that marks Abraham Cowley's writings. Close to Andrew Marvell, Richard Lovelace, John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, for instance, Cowley seems to be torn between Descartes's mechanistic approach and Gassendi's 'animistic' theories, Republican ideals and monarchic values, classic culture and modern science: the poet celebrates and worships the natural world in its wholeness, identifies humanity (and wit) with animals and plants, obliquely associates a mouse with Charles II and, by displaying a paradoxical treatment of animals that do not belong to the poetical tradition, sheds light on the 'split' spirit of his age.

A lover of paradox, oxymoron and antithesis, Abraham Cowley himself seems to embody a series of paradoxes. If in his own day he is exaggeratedly popular, even hailed as the English Anacreon, Pindar or Horace, Cowley's reputation dissolves at his death: in his *Epistle to Augustus* Alexander Pope highlights the poet's «pointed wit» and asks the renowned question «Who now reads Cowley?», thus expressing his admiration for the poet and, at the same time, testifying to his early and swift oblivion.[1] Pope declares his appreciation for the poet also in *Windsor Forest*. Lamenting his 'early loss', he keenly refers to Cowley's premature death and, at the same time, to his rapid obscurity:

> There the last numbers flow'd from Cowley's tongue.
> O early lost! what tears the river shed,
> When the sad pomp along his banks was led!
> (ll. 272-274, in Butt 1961, vol. 1)

Cowley's peculiar way of mingling poetry and natural philosophy, his writing essays in a poetical language and, vice versa, his composing poetry

1 «Who now reads Cowley? if he pleases yet, | His moral pleases, not his pointed wit; | Forgot his epic, nay, Pindaric art, | But still I love the language of his heart». Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Augustus*, ll. 75-78 (Butt 1961, vol. 4).

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with the condensation, clearness and economy of good prose both clarify his descending parable and evidence his paradoxical substance: Samuel Johnson wittily defines him as a «philosophic rhymer» and, believing that one of the great sources of poetical delight is «presenting pictures to the mind», concludes that he «gives inferences instead of images» (Hind [1925] 1961, pp. 28, 34). As much as numerous commentators argue that Cowley has surrendered his poetic spirit to science and that his imagination «corroded and shrank in the prosaic atmosphere of seventeenth-century rationalism and materialism» (Hinman 1960, p. v.), Johnson comments on his 'scientific poetry' by claiming that he turns botany into poetry: «considering botany as necessary to a physician, he retired into Kent to gather plants; and, as the predominance of a favourite study affects all subordinate operations of the intellect, botany in the mind of Cowley turned into poetry» (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 7). Johnson even declares that *The Mistress*, a collection of love poems published in 1647, «has no power of seduction» and that Cowley's «poetical account of the virtue of plants, and colours of flowers, is not perused with more sluggish frigidity» (Hind [1925] 1961, pp. 27-28).

In the same train of thought, Thomas Sprat, a founding member of the Royal Society and Cowley's literary executor and biographer, remarks the interrelation between the poet's works and his life, personality and scientific concerns. Deeply interested in the new experimental science and a distinguished natural philosopher, Cowley, it goes without saying, involves himself with the Royal Society: «in 1657 Cowley was made a doctor of physic» and «in the commencement of the Royal Society [...] he appears busy among the experimental philosophers with the title of Dr. Cowley», as Johnson reports (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 7). Prompted by the very Sprat and John Evelyn,[2] Cowley celebrates in verse the Royal Society and the glories and merits of Francis Bacon, its inspirer and moral founder, the «mighty Man» who «at last [...] arose [...] and boldly undertook the injur'd Pupil's cause»,[3] i.e. the cause of philosophy. Embracing Bacon's empirical scientific approach, Cowley believes that the authentic source of knowledge is «Nature's endless Treasurie», not the «painted Scenes, and Pageants of the Brain», i.e. art and culture: «Those smallest things of Nature let me know | Rather than all their greatest Actions Doe» (ll. 27, 30, 157-158). Cowley opens his *Proposition for the Advancement of*

2 Evelyn records in his Diary a letter written to him by Cowley on May 13, 1667: «my laziness in finishing ye copy of verse vpon ye Royal Society, for wch I was engag'd before by Mr Sprat's desire, & encourag'd since by yow, was the cause of this delay». Quoted by Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1, p. lxxvii.

3 Abraham Cowley, *To the Royal Society (The History of the Royal Society*, 2nd ed.), ll. 37-38. The lyric is included in *Occasional Verses*, a collection of poems written between 1663 and 1668. Now in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1.

Learning (1661), whose title overtly pays a homage to Bacon's celebrated work,[4] with a reference to the book of God and the book of nature and with a firm declaration of the superiority of nature over culture: «it were madness to imagine that the Cisterns of men should afford us as much, and as wholesome Waters, as the Fountains of Nature» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 285). In his heartfelt poetical praise, Cowley associates Bacon to Moses, traditionally regarded as the father of alchemy, thus evidencing the natural philosopher's paradoxical approach to learning, that is to say his embracing both hermetic knowledge and modern science:[5] «Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last» (*To the Royal Society*, l. 93). With this definition of Bacon, Cowley seems to describe himself, since, like the founder of modern science, he functions as a middle ring between two cultural modes and moments, between the Metaphysical taste and neoclassical culture: as argued by Trotter, Cowley reveals «the decadence of a Metaphysical mode and the seeds of Augustanism» and his *Miscellanies*, published in 1656, are to be regarded «as a 'limit text': as one place where one discursive practice finds its historical limit and another begins to establish itself» (Trotter 1979, pp. 1, 5).

The cunning definition «mixt Wit» that Joseph Addison attributes to Cowley's art stresses the poet's paradoxical essence and his being in between two ages and two tastes: Addison believes that «there is [a] kind of Wit which consists partly in the Resemblance of Ideas, and partly in the Resemblance of Words; which for Distinction Sake I shall call mixt Wit. This Kind of Wit is that which abounds in Cowley, more than in any author that ever wrote» (Bond 1965, p. 265). Somehow anticipating Addison's considerations, in a poem published in *Miscellanies* Cowley conceives of wit in paradoxical terms:

What is then, which like the power Divine
We onely can by Negatives define?
In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
Yet all things there agree.
(*Of Wit*, ll. 55-58, in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1)

Cowley presents wit by means of a 'negative theology' and closely connects it to the classical concept of *discors concordia*, thus obliquely, and cunningly, equating wit to paradox, the witty exercise most used in the Renaissance and in the seventeenth century, along with contradiction and

4 Bacon devises *The Great Instauration* (1620), his uncompleted general work, in six parts but publishes only portions of the project: *The Advancement of Learning* as Part I and *Novum Organum* as Part II.

5 In his 'scientific utopia' *New Atlantis* Bacon overtly expounds his double approach to natural philosophy. Cf. Case [1906] 1951, Rossi [1957] 1974, and Farrington 1952.

antithesis:[6] defined by Rosalie Colie as *serio ludere*, as an «exercise of wit designed to amuse an audience sufficiently sophisticated», paradox is a logical figure structured on assumptions contrary to logical expectations that insists on the intimate unity of all things and represents «the reconciliation of opposites», the fusion of form and content, subject and object (Colie 1966, pp. 5, xiv). In a most interesting way, Cowley clarifies his definition of wit as the unity of all things by means of an animal simile:

> In a true piece of Wit all things must be,
> Yet all things there agree.
> As in the Ark, joyn'd without force or strife,
> All Creatures dwelt: all Creatures that had Life.
> (*Of Wit*, ll. 57-60)

Besides shedding light on the curious choice of equating wit to animals, Thomas Browne's peculiar concept of 'amphibiousness' functions as a figure of paradox and as an apt metaphor for Cowley: believing that humanity consists both of a material and of a spiritual dimension, in *Religio Medici* Browne declares that «thus is man that great and true *Amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live […] in divided and distinguished worlds […] betweene a corporall and spirituall essence» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 44). Man, suspended between heaven and earth as a sort of intermediate ring in the great chain of being, or «Staire of creatures»,[7] is epitomised by Cowley's grasshopper, the «Happy *Insect* […] fed with nourishment divine»[8] that connects two dimensions and functions as a metaphor for the poet: «Thee *Phœbus* loves, and does inspire; | *Phœbus* is himself thy *Sire*» (*The Grassehopper*, ll. 23-24). Also Richard Lovelace represents the «happy insect» as a creature in between two worlds and explicitly links it to earth and air: «The Joyes of Earth and Ayre are thine intire, | That with thy feet and wings dost hop and flye» (*The Grasse-hopper. To my Noble Friend*, Mr. Charles Cotton, ll. 5-6; quotations are from Wilkinson 1930). Cowley's and Lovelace's grasshoppers, presented as the link between air and earth, between the divine and earthly dimensions, function as an oblique metaphor for the poet, like Plato's cicada (Reale [1993] 1996) – it is worth noticing that most frequently the English term 'grasshopper' actually means 'cicada', the celebrated τέττιξ of ancient Greece. Besides Cowley and Lovelace, also Edmund Spenser, Andrew Marvell, James Thom-

6 Christopher Ricks (1987) observes that the figures that characterise seventeenth-century literature are, chronologically, contradiction, paradox and antithesis.

7 Browne claims that «there is in this Universe a Staire, or manifeste Scale of creatures» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 42). For the idea of the 'great chain of being', see Lovejoy 1936.

8 Abraham Cowley, *The Grassehopper*, ll. 1, 3 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2).

son and Leigh Hunt, among others, praise in verse the pleasure provoked by the insect's musical chirping, thus using the term 'grasshopper' to celebrate the cicada. In *The Shepheardes Calender* Spenser writes that «such pleasaunce makes the Grasshopper so poore» (*October. Ægloga decima*, l. 11, in McLean, Prescott [1968] 1993) and in the long poem *Upon Appleton House* Marvell presents a curious exchange between men and grasshoppers and mentions the insect's «squeaking Laugh»:

> [...] Men like Grashoppers appear,
> But Grashoppers are Gyants there:
> They, in there squeaking Laugh, contemn
> Us as we walk more low than them.
> (*Upon Appleton House to my Lord Fairfax*, ll. 371-374; all references are from Lord [1984] 1993)

In *Summer* James Thomson dwells on the insect's song – «And scarce a chirping grasshopper is heard | Through the dumb mead» (ll. 446-447; all quotations are from Robertson 1951) – and in the sonnet *The Grasshopper and the Cricket* Leigh Hunt addresses the grasshopper as «sole voice that's heard amidst the lazy noon» and exhorts it to «sing in thoughtful ears this natural song», this «tricksome tune» (ll. 3, 13, 7; in Hunt 1960), thus insisting on the insect's musical competence. Paraphrasing Plato's *Phaedrus*, one of the classical sources of the city/country conflict, also Robert Burton associates poets with grasshoppers, i.e. cicadas: «poets, rhetoricians, historians, philosophers, mathematicians, sophisters, etc., they are like grasshoppers, sing they must in summer, and pine in the winter» (Jackson [1621, 1651, 1923] 1948, p. 307).

Cowley and Lovelace, highlighting the happy insect's double substance, fuse Anacreon's vision of the cicada as «daughter of the earth, lover of song» (fr. 34, l. 16, in West [1984] 1993) with an airy image of it – the cicada would later be depicted by Gabriele D'Annunzio precisely as *aerea* and *figlia dell'aria* (*La pioggia nel pineto*, ll. 68, 89, in Gibellini, Caliero 1995). Bachofen further stresses the 'amphibious' substance of cicadas arguing that they represent the union of light and darkness: since, like the first men, they are autochthons, cicadas do not generate among them but rise from the earth, from darkness, and aspire to the sun, to light, to heaven (Bachofen 1988, p. 779). The idea of the poet as a grasshopper, or of man as consisting of an animal, human and divine essence, is expounded by Browne, who further develops his speculations on the amphibious essence of humanity by declaring that man is a «composition of man and beast»: as if connecting men with the so-called *grottesche*, bizarre pictorial decorations that represent fantastic composite bodies in imitation of the frescoes discovered in Domus aurea, Browne claims that «we are all monsters, that is, a composition of man and beast» and that «We are onely that am-

phibious piece betweene a corporall and spirituall essence, that middle frame that linkes those two together» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 66). The wide diffusion of *grottesche* in the seventeenth century evidences Browne's theories, i.e. the mysterious amphibious origins of humanity and the double essence of everything: the *grottesca*, *capriccio*, *raffaelesca*, or, according to Giorgio Vasari, «pittura licenziosa e ridicola molto»,[9] frequently depicts men formed by animals, plants, columns, winged fish, medusas and other fantastic creatures, thus representing a visual paradox, the union of the human, animal and vegetal dimensions, the amalgamation of art, architecture and botany and, since it recreates a garden within the house, also the union of within and without (see Griseri 1988, Ossola 1971, Praz [1968] 1975).

Andrew Marvell, the 'garden poet' that can be associated to Cowley for numerous reasons (stylistic, thematic and biographic), overtly embraces Browne's idea of 'amphibiousness', both in a metaphorical and in a literal way. In the concluding stanza of *Upon Appleton House* he associates men, defined as «rational *Amphibii*», to tortoises: «How Tortoise like, but not so slow, | These rational *Amphibii* go?» (ll. 773-774). In the lyric *The unfortunate Lover* Marvell depicts Charles I as «Th' *Amphibium* of Life and Death» (l. 49) and in two beautiful and complex ekphrastic poems represents the halcyon, one of his favourite 'amphibious' figures, as the conjunction of night and day, water and sky, heaven and earth, spirit and matter: whereas in the lyric *The Gallery* «The *Halcyons*, calming all that's nigh, | Betwixt the Air and Water fly» (ll. 35-36), in *Upon Appleton House* «The modest *Halcyon* comes in sight, | Flying betwixt the Day and Night» (ll. 669-670).

In his celebration of Thomas Fairfax's sober and harmonious estate at Nunappleton, Marvell criticises the vogue of building exaggerated and extravagant mansions and compares the Lord General's country house to the modest and proportionate dwellings of animals, in particular 'amphibious' ones such as tortoises and birds:

Why should of all things Man unrul'd
Such unproportion'd dwellings build?
The Beasts are by their Denns exprest:
And Birds contrive an equal Nest;
The low roof'd Tortoises do dwell
In cases of Tortoise-shell.
(*Upon Appleton House*, ll. 9-14)

9 Vasari defines the *grottesche* as «sconciature di mostri per strattezza della natura e per gricciolo e ghiribizzo degli artefici, i quali fanno in quelle cose senza alcuna regola, apiccando a un sottilissimo filo un peso che non si può reggere, a un cavallo le gambe di foglie, a un uomo le gambe di gru et infiniti sciarpelloni e passerotti; e chi più stranamente se gli immaginava, quello era tenuto più valente» (Bellosi, Rossi 1991, p. 73).

John Donne anticipates the same idea in one of his two verse letters to Henry Wotton, the learned ambassador especially appreciated for his competences in architecture, experimental science and optics.[10] By exhorting him to be «thine own home, and in thy selfe dwell» (John Donne, *To Sir Henry Wotton*, l. 47, in Serpieri, Bigliazzi 2009), the poet invites the ambassador to find inspiration in the animals' lodgings and to imitate the snail:

> And seeing the snaile, which every where doth rome,
> Carrying his owne house still, still is at home.
> Follow (for he is easie pac'd) this snaile,
> Bee thine owne Palace, or the world's thy gaole.
> (*To Sir Henry Wotton*, ll. 49-52)

Richard Lovelace represents the snail as a paradigm of wisdom and good sense and, close to Thomas Browne's lucubration, regards his «marble cell» (Richard Lovelace, *The Snail*, l. 60) as a metaphor for womb and grave, birth and death: «And as thy house was thine own womb, | So thine own womb, concludes thy tomb» (*The Snail*, ll. 35-36). Both Cowley and Browne are convinced that there is a deep link between womb and grave, life and death, beginning and end. If in the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches* Cowley declares that there exists «so narrow a streight betwixt the Womb and the Grave» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 336),[11] in *Hydriotaphia* Browne even individuates a physical resemblance between the funeral urn and the maternal womb, between «our last bed» and «our first»:

> many [Urnes] have handles, ears, and long necks, but most imitate a circular figure, in a sphericall and round composure [...]. But the common form with necks was a proper figure, making our last bed like our first. (Keynes [1658; 1928] 1963a, p. 148)

Close to Donne and Marvell, in *A Paraphrase upon the 10° Epistle of the first Book of* Horace. *Horace to Fuscus Aristius*, one of the six poems included in the essay *Of Agriculture*, Cowley opposes natural and animal houses to urban mansions. Horace, «the lover of the Country», is presented in the poem as «loosely fly[ing] from bough to bough» (ll. 1, 6, in Grosart 1967, vol. 2) and is thus indirectly associated to birds, animals that, as cicadas-grasshoppers, have always functioned as a traditional

10 Cowley composes an elegy *On the Death of Sir* Henry Wootton, included in *Miscellanies*.

11 All the essays by Cowley are collected in *Several Discourses by Way of Essays in Verse and Prose*, published in 1668, in Grosart 1967, vol. 2.

metaphor for poetry: in the lyric *The Garden*[12] Cowley depicts birds, «the Freeborn Nations of the Air»,[13] precisely as «danc[ing] from Bough to Bough» (l. 55) and compares their melodies to the poet's song, wishing fowl did not became object of cruel games and hunting[14] – «'Tis well if they become not Prey» (*The Garden*, l. 65). In his paraphrase of the Horatian *Beatus ille* (*Epodes*, Ode 2), another poem that accompanies the essay *Of Agriculture*, Cowley reiterates his defence of birds by attacking the lord of the villa and his vogue of organizing «innocent wars», i.e. hunting parties, in his country estates:

> He runs the Mazes of the nimble Hare,
> His well-mouth'd Dog's glad Concert rends the Air;
> [...] And all his malice, all his craft is shown
> In innocent wars, on beasts and birds alone.
> (*Horat. Epodon*. Beatus ille qui procul, &c., ll. 35-36, 41-42)

In Cowley's Horatian Epistle the poet-bird rejects the extravagant products of art and chooses nature as the proper architect for his house:

> Would I a house for happiness erect,
> Nature alone should be the Architect.
> She'd build it more convenient, than great,
> And doubtless in the Country choose her seat.
> (*A Paraphrase upon the 10° Epistle of the first Book of Horace*, ll. 13-16)

With this wish Cowley evokes a couplet from the only poem included in his essay *Of Solitude* – «Here Nature does a House for me erect: | Nature, the fairest Architect» (ll. 9-10) – , the poem *The Wish*,[15] the lyric that illustrates the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches* («Pity great Men, great thing despise», l. 48), and the central thesis of the essay *On Greatness*, where he confesses his love for «Littleness in almost all things», for «a little convenient Estate, a little chearful House, a little Company, and a very little Feast» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 329). In the poem *To the Royal*

12 *The Garden* is the last poem included in the essay *Of Agriculture*.

13 Abraham Cowley, *Ode. Upon Liberty*, l. 48 (in *Several Discourses*, in Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2. Reformulating the same image, James Thomson will define birds as «plumy race, | The tenants of the sky» (*Winter*, ll. 137-138).

14 For the new sympathy for birds, see Margaret Cavendish, *Dialogue betwixt Birds* (1653) and Thomas Tryon, *Country-Man's Companion* and *The Complaints of the Birds and Fowls of Heaven to their Creator for the Oppressions and Violences Most Nations on the Earth do Offer Them*, both published in 1683.

15 The speaker of *The Wish* flees from «The Croud, and Buz, and Murmurings | Of this great City» so that he may «a small House, and large Garden have» (ll. 7-8, 10).

Society Cowley indirectly praises Bacon precisely by invoking modesty and proportion:

> The things which these proud men despise, and call
> Impertinent, and vain, and small,
> Those smallest things of Nature let me know
> Rather than all their greatest Actions Doe.
> (*To the Royal Society*, ll. 155-158)

Bacon, who has always and notoriously criticised grandiosity, in the essay *Of Great Place* equates greatness to lack of freedom by means of a witty paradox:

> Men in great places are thrice servants […]. They have no freedom, neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times. It is a strange desire, to seek power over others and to lose power over a man's self. (Smeaton [1906] 2008, p. 31)

Like Cowley, Bacon celebrates smallness and proportion and invokes more sobriety and adherence to nature when dealing with houses: in the essay *Of Building* he argues that «houses are built to live in, and not to look on; therefore let use be preferred before uniformity, except where both may be had» (Smeaton [1906] 2008, p. 133). The opening lines of Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* formulate a stern disapproval of exaggerate, disproportionate and 'unnatural' estates that can be aligned with Bacon's and Cowley's reflections:

> Within this sober Frame expect
> Work of no Forrain *Architect*.
> […] But all things are composed here
> Like Nature, orderly and near.
> (ll. 1-2, 25-26)

These lines follow the above-quoted identification of Lord Fairfax's house with the modest and proportionate dwellings of animals,[16] a concept expressed by Cowley in the lyric that illustrates the essay *The Shortness of Life, and Uncertainty of Riches*: in this poem Cowley resumes both the idea that the dens of animals are paragons of modesty and perfection and the identification poet-bird. After a consideration on ants and grasshoppers, the speaker (overtly identified with Cowley) projects himself onto

16 «The Beasts are by their Denns exprest: | And Birds contrive an equal Nest; | The low roof'd Tortoises do dwell | In cases of Tortoise-shell» (ll. 11-14).

the «Heav’nly Lark», his «Fellow-Poet», wishing he could proudly soar above and humbly dwell below, like the bird:

> The wise Example of the Heav’nly Lark,
> Thy Fellow-Poet, *Cowley*, mark!
> Above the Clouds thy proud Musick sound,
> Thy humble Nest built on the Ground.
> (ll. 49-52)

Thanks to its ability to ascend in a most rapid and vertical way, the lark is traditionally seen as the link between heaven and earth, night and day (like the grasshopper-cicada and like Marvell’s halcyon), and its morning song is interpreted as a song of joy. Since it starts singing at dawn, in the threshold between night and day, the lark is considered the messenger of the morning, «the herald of the morn»,[17] as highlighted by Lovelace when he defines it as «the jolly bird of light | Who sounds his third retreat to Night» (*Aramantha. A Pastorall*, ll. 1-2). The joy and quasi-divinity of the lark, that starts singing in the first days of spring, have always fascinated poets and have led them to regard the bird as a figure of Christ and saints in general (Cattabiani 2000). With a celebrated simile that has contributed to its mythology, Dante compares the eagle that illustrates the excellent spirits of Paradise to the lark that soars in the air with its heavenly song:

> Quale allodetta che ’n aere si spazia
> prima cantando, e poi tace contenta
> dell’ultima dolcezza che la sazia.
> (*Paradiso*, XX.73-75; Bosco, Reggio eds. 1982-1984)

In the same train of thought, Shakespeare regards the lark as a metaphor for the poet’s skill to arise from mediocrity and reach spiritual peaks:

> Like to the lark at break of day arising
> From sullen earth sings hymns at Heaven’s gate.
> (Sonnet xxix, ll. 11-12)

Albeit Cowley criticises the vogue of hunting fowl, as already said, and poets frequently celebrate the divine essence of birds, and larks in particular, the seventeenth century is marked by a contradictory attitude. Close to John Evelyn and James I, defenders of animals and forests that have an authentic and paradoxical passion for lark hunting, Samuel Pepys

17 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.5.6; all quotations from Shakespeare’s works are from Wells, Taylor 1987.

strenuously condemns hunting and cruelty on animals but, nonetheless, records with satisfaction a «very fine dinner» that includes the «Heav'nly Lark», a culinary delicacy:

> a very fine dinner: *viz.* a dish of marrow-bones. A leg of mutton. A loin of veal. A dish of fowl, three pullets, and two dozens of larks, all in a dish. A great tart. A neat's tongue. A dish of anchoves. A dish of prawns; and cheese. (January 26, 1660; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 1, p. 29)

Whereas the vegetarian Evelyn[18] reports, often proudly, the numerous occasions in which he devotes himself to hunting and falconry,[19] Pepys is disgusted with hunting, hunters and those «great many silly stories they tell of their sport, which pleases them mightily and me not at all, such is the different pleasure in mankind» (November 9, 1665; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 6, p. 295).

Close to Evelyn's respect for animals and, at the same time, enthusiasm for falconry, Lovelace sings the nobility and grace of his brave falcon, the «Fair Princess of the spacious air» killed during a strenuous hunting party. Presenting his hawk in paradoxical terms, the poet stresses the seventeenth-century ambiguous and oscillating attitude towards birds: he claims that the «brave cousin-german to the Sun» is «safe in [her] velvet helm» and uses the oxymoron «free beauteous slave» (*The Falcon*, ll. 1, 10, 29, 21) to define the bird's condition. Evelyn reveals a similar contradictory approach to birds when he embraces the traditional association birds-freedom and, at the same time, declares that any garden of value ought to include the «winged choristers», even if they should be imprisoned in aviaries and deprived of their liberty: «our Elysium cannot be without their company though it be at the price of their liberty» (Ingram 2001, p. 254). The *volaries* advocated by Evelyn, however, are so wide that can contain even five hundred birds: «An Aviary of 60 foote long, 15 broade & 30 high will be sufficient to hold 500 smale Birds together» (Ingram 2001, p. 254).

With *The Swallow*, an *Anacreontique* poem included in *Miscellanies*, Cowley displays a mock cruel attitude when he expresses the wish that the bird of spring, as Philomel, had its tongue mutilated by Tereus:[20]

18 Evelyn writes a treatise, *Acetaria*, in order to demonstrate that a diet based exclusively on salads and vegetables guarantees a long and happy life. In *Elysium Britannicum* he links vegetarianism to antiquity: «*Sine arte Mensam*. a Sallet and to Bed [...]. So frugally did our Fore-fathers live, till the Horti urbani instituted by Epicurus» (Ingram 2001, p. 30).

19 «In the morning we went hunting and hawking [...]; I went sometimes abroad on horseback with the ladies to take the air, and now and then to hunting. [...] We hunted in the Park and killed a very fat buck. [...] I went a hawking» (October 16, 1671; August 29, 1677; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, pp. 67, 115).

20 Translated into English by Arthur Golding in 1580, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* soon become

Well't had been had Tereus made
Thee as dumb as Philomel;
There his Knife had done but well.
(ll. 4-6)

In the first lines of the poem the speaker blames the swallow with the epithet «Foolish Prater» and remonstrates because the bird has awakened him with its song:

Foolish Prater, why do'st thou
So early at my window do
With thy tuneless serenade?
(ll. 1-3)

If the source of inspiration is undoubtedly Anacreon's love poem *The Swallow*, with the above-quoted first three lines Cowley is explicitly evoking John Donne's love sonnet *The Sunne Rising*, an *aubade* lyric that attacks, almost blasphemously, the sun that has awaked and disturbed the speaker and his beloved, paradoxically represented as the real centre of the universe («This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare», l. 30):

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
(ll. 1-3)

Albeit Cowley pretends that he wishes the bird's death, by evoking Donne's sonnet he is indirectly associating the swallow with the sun, as Lovelace does with his falcon, thus endowing the animal with a quasi-divine substance. Cowley's hyperbolic representation of birds and insects as demigods and as metaphors for the poet is to be connected with his love of classical poetry, with his scientific interests, with his involvement in the Royal Society and with the general growing respect and compassion on the 'brute creation'. Pepys and Evelyn, for instance, express in numerous occasions their horror of the popular fights among animals, «this wicked and barbarous sport» (August 17, 1667; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, p. 30): if Pepys considers the battle of cocks as «a sport [...] of Barbarity» in which poor creatures «fight till they drop down» (December 21, 1663; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 4, pp. 427-428), Evelyn defines «cock-fighting, dog fighting, bear and bull-baiting» as «butcherly sports, or rather bar-

an enormous source of inspiration for literary works in England: Shakespeare, for instance, reinterprets the myth of Philomel and Tereus in *Titus Andronicus*.

barous cruelties» (June 16, 1670; Bry [1818; 1907] 1952, vol. 2, p. 49). The growing respect, or pity, for animals fosters a fervent dispute in England that will lead the parliament to approve, in the second half of the seventeenth century, a series of Acts for the protection of wild birds. In 1833, moreover, the areas for the «barbarous cruelties» denounced by Pepys and Evelyn will become illegal in London and in 1849 cock fighting will be forbidden, even though these «butcherly sports» will survive clandestinely (Thomas 1983 and [1983] 1984; De Levie 1947; Regan 1983; Singer 1990; Sorabji [1993] 2001; Franklin 2005). Thanks to his theory of monads, Leibniz is the first thinker who breaks the barriers between the animal and the human world, thus opening the path for a passionate and long-lasting debate on the dignity of animals and on the relationship between human and animal psychology. Whereas for Descartes even the most evolved animals function as machines and are devoid of intellectual and rational faculties, and of anything in common with men,[21] for Montaigne they are endowed with intellect and reason and for Gassendi they have a soul: embracing the latter thesis, Milton will comfort Adam declaring that animals «also know, | And reason not contemptibly» (*Paradise Lost*, 8.373-374; Bush [1966] 1988). Pepys expresses his sincere interest in animals also when he comments on the ferocious cruelty inflicted on a dog:

> vexed in going in to see a son of Sir Heneage Finche's beating of a poor little dog to death, letting it lie in so much pain that made me mad to see it; till by and by, the servants of the house hiding of their young maister, one of them came with a thong and killed the dog outright presently. (May 18, 1668; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol. 9, p. 203)

The new approach to the natural world, however, is not prompted only by compassion and a democratic and sensitive spirit but also, and above all, by the new scientific interest and empirical approach. Whereas Gerrard Winstanley, the leader of the Levellers, suggests that every parish should deliver a weekly lecture on natural sciences instead of the Sunday sermon, Cowley formulates and idealises an educative system that includes agriculture, gardening and zoology: juxtaposing the «genuine taste» of the countryside to the sophistications of the city and arguing that «the three first Men in the World, were a Gardner, a Ploughman and a Grazier», in the essay *Of Agriculture* he maintains that any father should «provide a Tutor for his Son to instruct him betimes in the nature and Improvements of that Land which he intended to leave him» and wishes that «one College in each University were erected, and appropriated to this Study, as

21 In a letter to the marquis of Newcastle (November 23, 1646) Descartes expounds his renowned theory of animals as clocks and expresses his intention to complete an essay on animals he has been working on for fifteen years (Belgioioso 2009, p. 2,353).

well as there are to Medicine, and the Civil Law». The College should have «four Professors constituted [...] to teach [...] First, *Aration*, and all things related to it. Secondly, *Pasturage*. Thirdly, *Gardens*, *Orchards*, *Vineyards* and *Woods*. Fourthly, All parts of *Rural Oeconomy*, which would contain the Government of *Bees*, *Swine*, *Poultry*, *Decoys*, *Ponds*, &c.» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 321). Cowley knows much about animals, both real and mythical: he is familiar not only with Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Ulisse Aldrovandi's zoological studies, Edward Topsell's *History of Four-Footed Beasts* and Thomas Moffet's *Theatre of Insects*, but also with the more scientifically treated information in Francis Willughby's *Ornithology* and Johannes Goedaert's *Metamorphoses Naturelles, ou, Histoire des insects* (Hinman 1960, p. 298). For this reason, in his Baconian essay *A Proposition for the Advancement of Learning* he stresses the importance of zoology in a university course: he explains how a proper *Colledge* should be organised and suggests that «of the twenty Professors four be always travelling beyond Seas» in order to send «Books, Simples, Animals, Stones, Metals, Minerals, &c, [...] to the Colledge» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 288).

The six poems that illustrate the essay *On Agriculture* are, placed according to the following disposition, a translation of Virgil's *Georgics* (*O fortunati nimium*, Lib. II); a translation of Horace's *Beatus ille*; *The Country Mouse* (a paraphrase upon Horace's Book 2, Satire 6); the already mentioned Horatian Epistle (*A Paraphrase upon the 10° Epistle of the first Book of* Horace. *Horace to Fuscus Aristius*); *The Country Life*, and *The Garden*, a lyric dedicated to John Evelyn. The poem *The Country Mouse* is significantly placed after the English version of *Beatus ille* and before the above-quoted Horatian Epistle, a debate between the pleasures of the city and those of the country. Just after the Horatian Epistle is placed *The Country Life*, Cowley's own translation into English of the opening verses of *Florum*, the fourth Book of his *Plantarum* (a poetical work in six Books, entirely in Latin, devoted to the vegetal world):[22] with these verses Cowley elaborates a story written by Valerius Maximus about Gyges, a «rich King, wicked and great», and Aglaüs, a countryman that «lived obscurely then without a Name» (ll. 27, 25), thus presenting again the classical *querelle* between city and country.

The Country Mouse, the animal adaptation of the classical city/country dispute, can be aligned with the well-established seventeenth-century tradition of poetical debates, such as Marvell's *A Dialogue, between The Resolved Soul, and Created Pleasure* and *A Dialogue between the Soul and Body*, Crashaw's *Musics Duel*, Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, besides

22 The whole title of the work, published in 1668, is *Poemata Latina. In quibus Continentur, Sex Libri Plantarum, Viz. Duo Herbarum. Florum. Sylvarum. Et Unus Miscellaneorum*. The author's name is Latinized in *Abrahami Couleij Angli*.

his first sonnet in English, *O, Nightingale*, and Cowley's and Crashaw's *On Hope*,[23] for instance. By means of two mice, a «good substantial, frugal and grave» country mouse and a «well-coated, sleek, and gay» city mouse (ll. 4, 5, 7), in the lyric *The Country Mouse* Cowley praises the authentic and modest habits of rural life by opposing them to the luxurious pleasures of the city, a theme he expounds in numerous poems and essays. Besides the already quoted lyrics, it is worth mentioning *The Wish* and the essay *Of My Self*: if in *The Wish*, a poem included in *The Mistress* that evokes, and most probably anticipates, Marvell's *The Garden*, Cowley introduces retirement into an amatory context, in the essay *Of My Self* he seems to parallel king Charles II and himself to Maecenas and Horace. As Maecenas presented Horace with the Sabine farm, the poet's lifelong refuge and comfort, so Cowley wishes the king could grant him a country estate, a theme that sheds light on *The Country Mouse*: «And I never then propos'd to my self any other *Advancement* from his Majesty's happy Restoration, but the getting into some moderately convenient Retreat in the Country» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 340).

Albeit, among Cowley's paraphrases, *The Country Mouse* is a rare example of faithfulness to the original text, it introduces a substantial difference that can be obliquely linked to the poet's longing for a country retreat granted him by the king:[24] whereas in Horace's, Aesop's and Phaedrus's stories the two mice are old friends, in the English version they get to know each other by chance since the «Mouse of high degree [...] lost his way, | Wantonly walking forth to take the Air» (ll. 8-9). This stress on the mice's absence of friendship and ties seems to provide an answer to one of the most debated questions regarding the central decades of the seventeenth century in England: does the countryside represent a refuge for royalists or for republicans? The topic is still clouded by ambiguities: according to Maren-Sofie Røstvig, the writings that praise a peaceful rural retreat are a confession of loyalty to the crown. The scholar opposes contemplation to action, *otium* to *negotium*, and the classical figure of the 'happy man' in his «gentle cool retreat»[25] to the Puritan concept of the Christian pilgrim as a soldier, as a *miles Christi*:[26] she claims that the peace-

23 The subtitle of the debate is *By way of Question and Answer, betweene A. Cowley, and R. Crashaw*. Cowley's part appears separately, with minor differences, the following year in *The Mistress* (1647).

24 As reported by Johnson, Cowley «soon obtained, by the interest of the Earl of St. Alban's and the Duke of Buckingham, such a lease of the Queen's lands as afforded him an ample income» (Hind 1961, p. 9).

25 Cowley's lyric *The Garden* opens with the exclamation «Happy art Thou» and then invokes rustic life – «O blessed shades! O gentle cool retreat» – , almost paraphrasing Horace's *beatus ille* and Virgil's «O fortunatus nimium | [...] agricolas» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2).

26 «Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the

ful pleasures of gardens, fields and woods are unfit for the perfect Puritan, always poised between earthly life and the afterlife in his actively serving God and in his perpetual fight against Satan. The royalists, conversely, retired and often exiled in their country estates after the political defeat, have to make a virtue of necessity (Røstvig 1962, pp. 48, 121). Whereas, corroborating Røstvig's thesis, John Dixon Hunt argues that the lively interest in gardening in Jacobean and Caroline England is unequivocally linked to the crown and that this is the reason why the supporters of Parliament destroy the most notable examples of gardens,[27] Margarita Stocker claims that the *fuga in villa* is prompted by the Puritan spirit of rural simplicity and genuineness as opposed to the wicked city, 'England's Babylon'. It is worth noticing that the monarchists tend to exaggerate the depredations and plunders in the royal estates made in the Fifties, during Cromwell's Protectorate, and that, after the Restoration, deforestation is frequently equated to republican politics.

The debate on the symbolical and political meaning of country retirement is paralleled by a paradox inherent in the rural world, a contradiction between an idealised vision of bucolic life and its actual substance. In the essay *The Dangers of an Honest Man in much Company* Cowley analyses his own experience at Chertsey, Surrey, and confesses his disappointment before the prosaic reality he found instead of the classical Arcadia he expected:

> I thought, when I went first to dwell in the Country, that without doubt I should have met there with the Simplicity of the Old Poetical Golden Age: I thought to have found no Inhabitants there, but such as the Shepherds of Sir *Phil*. *Sidney* in *Arcadia*. […]. But to confess the Truth, I perceiv'd quickly, by infallible Demonstrations, that I was still in old *England*, and not in *Arcadia*. (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 336)

Samuel Johnson testifies to the poet's discontent and to the paradoxical substance of the country when he reports that the retreat at Chertsey is in the beginning utterly disastrous for Cowley: his fields are devastated by the neighbours' cattle, he suffers from rheumatism and is vexed by the villagers to such an extent that even plans to hang himself (Hind 1961, p. 9).

Within this maze of ambiguities and paradoxes one wonders whether the country mouse that dwells «at the large foot of a fair hollow tree» (l. 1) should be read as a royalist or as a republican. The final lines of the poem express the mouse's homesickness after his tasting the «generous Lux'ury

devil». Ephesians 6:11 (Carroll, Prickett 1997).

27 «So much gardening in Jacobean and Caroline England was royalist or bore unmistakably royalist implications that it cannot be a matter of surprise that the Parliamentarians destroyed some particularly fine example of it» (Hunt 1986, p. 143).

of the Court» and his desire to be «cover'd again» with the protective «Rocks and Mountains» and to enjoy the caves and woods of his beloved and peaceful countryside:

Our trembling Peasant wishes now in vain,
That Rocks and Mountains cover'd him again. [...]
[said he] Give me again, ye Gods, my Cave, and wood;
With peace, let Tares and Acorns be my Food.
(*The Country Mouse*, ll. 90-91, 94-95)

The mention of cave and wood highlights the gloomy, shady, protective essence that rural places convey according to Cowley. In *The Country Life*, the poem that follows and transforms in human terms *The Country Mouse*, the peasant Aglaüs is forced to leave his «happier Kingdom» (l. 22) in order to reach the court of king Gyges: «Unwillingly, and slow, and discontent, | From his lov'd Cottage, to a Throne he went» (ll. 17-18). The «happier Kingdom» abandoned by the «rev'rend Gard'ner» is depicted as «an obscure *Arcadian* vale» since, as the speaker explains, «Th' *Arcadian* Life has always shady been» (ll. 16, 44-45): most similarly, in the long poem *Sylva*, i.e. the last Book of *Plantarum*, the poet exhorts his Muse to leave the «*Flow'ry Gardens* in their fragrant Spring» in order to «trace the rougher Paths of *obscure* Woods, | All gloom aloft, beneath o'rgrown with Shrubs» (ll. 2, 3-4). Close to the country mouse, who longs for his dark caves and shady woods, the speaker of *Sylva* is in search of «the inmost Grottos of the Shades» and «lone Recesses» (ll. 8, 9). Whereas *Sylva*, the sixth Book of *Plantarum*, is partially translated into English by Aphra Behn, *The Country Life*, as already said, is Cowley's own translation of the opening verses of *Florum*, the fourth Book of his poetical study of plants – a Book partially translated into English by Nahum Tate.

Considering that in *Sylva* Cowley connects the dark recesses of the Arcadian world with king Charles II, the country mouse and his nostalgia for shady caves and woods and for his «fair hollow tree» can be read as an oblique confession of royalism: the city mouse that despises the frugal peasant and claims scornfully «Let savage Beasts lodge in a Country Den» (l. 36) can be interpreted, conversely, as a metaphor for the republicans. Few lines below his praise of shady groves and dark recesses, in *Sylva* Cowley overtly alludes to the battle of Worcester, won by Cromwell's troops in 1651, and, more specifically, to king Charles's concealment in the «sheltering Branches» of an oak at Boscobel, Shropshire, in order to escape the Roundheads:

Here Deities, of old, have made Abode,
And once secur'd great CHARLES, our earthly God.
The Royal Youth, born to out-brave his Fate,
Within a neighbouring Oak maintan'd his State:

The faithful Boughs in kind Allegiance spread
Their sheltering Branches round his awful Head,
Twin'd their rough Arms, and thicken'd all the Shade.
(ll. 20-26)

In the final part of *Sylva*, a section entirely devoted to oaks, Cowley narrates in detail the king's adventurous escape, insisting precisely on the dark and shady quality of the 'sacred wood' of Boscobel:[28]

A Grove appears, which *Boscobel* they name,
Not known to Maps; a Grove of scanty Fame,
Scarce any human thing does there intrude,
But it enjoys itself in its own Solitude.
And henceforth no celebrated Shade,
Of all the *British* Groves shall be more glorious made.
Near this obscure and destin'd happy Wood,
A sacred House of lucky omen stood.
(ll. 1333-1340)

Cowley hopes in the person and quasi-divine function of the king, as his suppressed poem *The Civil War*, started in summer 1643 and abandoned after October of the same year, testifies to. In a peculiarly witty couplet, Cowley presents Charles II as an oxymoron, as a paradox, as «the locus of reconciliation, the place where contraries are resolved in a higher unity» (Trotter 1979, p. 12): «In his great looks what cheerfull anger shone! | Sad warre and joyfull Triumph mixt in One!» (I, 255-256). With these lines Cowley anticipates the daring paradoxes of Richard Crashaw and, in particular, his representation of the Magdalen in the lyric *The Weeper*, first published in 1646 and later revised:

O wit of love that thus could place,
Fountaine and Garden in one face!
O sweet contest of woes
With loves, of tears with smiles disputing.
(*The Weeper*, ll. 89-92)

28 Samuel Pepys records in his diary a colloquy with king Charles II and the latter's bitter remembrance of his refuge in «th' eternal OAK» (*Sylva*, l. 33), a vegetal shelter that let him sail from Brighton to France: «he fell into discourse of his escape from Worcester, where it made me ready to weep to hear the stories that he told of his difficulties that he passed through» (May 23, 1660; Latham, Matthews [1971] 1995, vol 5, p. 45).

By mentioning Charles's «eternal OAK»,[29] Cowley implicitly praises also the king's sincere interest in woods, and in nature more in general, to the extent that in the end of *Sylva* he expresses his hope in the king and in the forests he will replant as symbols able to guarantee the *pax Britannica* and the future of England. In the last two books of *Plantarum* the poet contrasts man's sterility and destructiveness with the possibilities of the vegetal world:

> Thus long-neglected Gardens entertain
> Their banish'd Master, when return'd again.
> All over-run with Weeds he finds, but soon
> Luxuriant Branches carefully will prune.
> The weaken'd Arms of the sick Vine he'll raise,
> And with kind Bands sustain the loosen's Sprays.
> (*Sylva*, ll. 1553-1558)

Cowley argues that with Charles II «the Golden Age seems now again restor'd» (l. 1515)[30] and believes that vegetation is able to guarantee posterity and, implicitly, immortality:

> Nor are the Woods, nor Rural Groves disdain'd;
> [...] As Colonies of Trees thou dost replace
> I' th' empty Realms of our arboreal Race;
> Nay, dost our Reign extend to future Days;
> And blest Posterity, supinely laid,
> Shall feast and revel underneath thy Shade.
> (*Sylva*, ll. 1566, 1569-1573)

Close to Cowley, Thomas Browne hopes that humanity can procreate and become eternal as trees do, in a pure and uncontaminated way, «without conjunction»: «I would be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this triviall and vulgar way of coition» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 83). Moses Cook, a gardener praised by Evelyn, compares marriage and sexual reproduction to the sowing of the earth, connects arboriculture with the birth of children and associates the conservation of the dynasty, the «posterity of the gentleman», with the growth and multiplication of the trees in his estate:

29 «Th' eternal OAK, now consecrate to thee, | No more thy Refuge, but thy Throne shall be»: *Sylva*, ll. 33-34.

30 Aphra Behn, the translator of *Sylva*, as already said, is the author of a poem entitled *The Golden Age*.

> For Nature, if once set in Motion, will rather cease to be, than alter its course; for Nature hates violence, neither can the seed receive this precious sperm without these two, Father and Mother; and these two must have a suitable Agreement between them.[31]

Further highlighting the links among trees, procreation, posterity, immortality and resurrection, Browne declares that «Generations passe while some trees stand, and old Families last not three Oaks» and that even a tree that seems to be dead «will restore it self from the root, and its dry and exuccous leaves resume their verdure again» (Keynes [1658; 1928] 1963a, pp. 166, 159). Cowley's «eternal oak» alludes to Charles's worship of nature, to the immortalising power and sacredness of trees and, at the same time, hints at the theme of monarchy from a natural perspective. The vegetal world, hierarchically organized according to arboreal nobility, or to a rigorous green 'great chain of being', is dominated by the «Royal Oak», as evidenced by Evelyn – «the large spreading of oak above all that species» (Evelyn [1664] 1972, p. 114) – , and Lovelace:

> This is the palace of the wood
> And court o' th' Royal Oak, where stood
> The whole nobility, the Pine,
> Straight Ash, tall Fir, and wanton Vine;
> The proper Cedar, and the rest;
> [...] Floored with green-velvet Camomile.
> (*Aramantha. A Pastorall*, ll. 149-153, 156)

Cowley devotes the final and longest section of *Sylva* to the *Quercus* and explicitly associates it to majesty and nobility – as already said, in this last part of *Plantarum* the poet also narrates Charles's adventurous refuge in the oak of Boscobel. In the lyric that illustrates the essay *Of Greatness* the poet embraces the idea of a vegetal ladder, albeit momentarily nullified by the devastating power of the thunder: «The humblest Bush and proudest Oak, | Are but of equal Proof against the Thunder-stroke» (ll. 13-14). The reference to thunder is not a chance since the oak, the tree most frequently struck by lightning, is traditionally considered as the original store of the fire extracted in order to nourish the sun and, for this reason, worshipped in pagan cultures and religions (Frazer 1991 and Schama 1995). Most wittily, Cowley connects the oak with the sun and sacred fire, thus highlighting its royal and divine essence, as he does in *Sylva*:

31 Moses Cook, *The Manner of Raising, Ordering, and Improving Forests and Fruit Trees*, London, 1679, 2nd ed. p. 35. Quoted by Markley 1999, p. 93.

Disdain not in this leafie Court to dwell,
Who its lov'd Monarch did secure so well.
Th' eternal OAK, now consecrate to thee,
No more thy Refuge, but thy Throne shall be.
(*Sylva*, ll. 31-34)

The poet expresses reverence, almost adoration, for trees, often perceived in human terms. In the essay *Of My Self* he meditates upon his «oft turning others' leaves», as Sidney would say (Philip Sidney, sonnet 1, l. 7; all quotations are from Duncan-Jones [1989] 2002), i.e. his lifelong and «immoderate Love» of the classic poets, and, with a witty vegetal simile, identifies himself with a tree on whose bark are «stamp'd first, or rather engrav'd» the names of his beloved masters: «The Poets […] were like Letters cut in the Bark of a young Tree, which with the Tree still grow proportionably» (Grosart [1881] 1967, 2, p. 340). In his elegy for the death of Cowley, John Denham dwells precisely on the poet's ability to know and emulate the ancients without being «Pindar's Ape»,[32] thus alluding both to Cowley's classical culture and to the lively debate on creation/imitation:

To him no Author was unknown,
Yet what he wrote was all his own.
[…] He did not Steal, but Emulate,
And when he would like them appear
Their Garb, but not their Cloaths, did wear.
(*On Mr.* ABRAHAM COWLEY. *His Death and Burial amongst the Ancient Poets*», ll. 28-29, 35-37; qtd. by Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 1, p. cxxi)

Cowley frequently associates himself with plants. In the essay *Of My Self* he declares that «the natural Affections of my Soul gave me a secret Bent of Aversion for them [Glories, Business], as some Plants are said to turn away from others» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 339) and even identifies himself with a modest hyssop rooted up by the civil war, «that violent publick Storm»:

With these Affections of Mind, and my Heart wholly set upon Letters, I went to the University; but was soon torn from thence by that violent publick Storm which would suffer nothing to Stand where it did, but rooted up every Plant, even from the Princely Cedars to me the Hyssop. (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 340)

32 «Let dainty wits cry on the sisters nine, | That bravely masked, their fancies may be told: | Or Pindar's Apes, flaunt they in phrases fine, | Enamm'ling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold». Philip Sidney, sonnet 3, ll. 1-4.

By depicting himself as a tree ‘wounded’, but not injured, by the names of his adored ancient poets, Cowley reinterprets the habit of carving the bark of trees with the name of the beloved, a classical literary *topos*. Ariosto’s Angelica, for instance, engraves the name of Medoro in all the trees she can find:

Fra piacer tanti, ovunque un arbor dritto
Vedesse ombrare o fonte o rivo puro,
V’avea spillo o coltel subito fitto;
[…] Angelica e Medoro, in varî modi
Legati insieme di diversi nodi.
(*Orlando furioso*, 19.36.1-3, 7-8; in Caretti 2005)

Erminia, in love with Tancredi, does the same:

Sovente, allor che sugli estivi ardori
giacean le pecorelle a l’ombra assise,
ne la scorza de’ faggi e degli allori
segnò l’amato nome in mille guise.
(*Gerusalemme liberata*, 7.19.1-4; in Chiappelli 1982)

In his enraptured and devoted celebration of nature, Marvell wishes he could be dissolved in the vegetal world, rejects erotic love and, overcoming tradition, goes so far as to sternly criticise the cruel habit of carving trees with the beloved’s name, a profanation of the «Genius of Trees»:

Fond Lovers, cruel as their Flame,
Cut in these Trees their Mistress name.
Little, Alas, they know, or heed,
How far these Beauties Hers exceed!
Fair Trees! Where s’ere your barkes I wound,
No Name shall but your own be found.
(*The Garden*, ll. 19-24)

With *The Tree*, included in the early collection *The Mistress*, Cowley anticipates Marvell’s *Garden*. By presenting anthropomorphic and almost prophetic trees, the speaker of the lyric, on a first reading identifiable with Marvell’s «fond Lovers», expresses his grief, and remorse, at seeing that the tree he carved with his beloved’s name has withered and, shortly, died:

I Chose the flouri’shing’st Tree in all the Parke,
With freshest Boughs, and Fairest head;
I cut my Love into his gentle Barke,
And in three days, behold, ’tis dead;

My very written flames so vi'olent be
They've burnt and wither'd up the Tree.
[…] Pardon, yee Birds and Nymphes who lov'd this Shade;
And pardon mee, thou gentle Tree;
I thought her name would thee have happy made,
And blessed Omens hop'd from Thee;
Notes of my Love, thrive there (said I) and grow;
And with yee let my Love doe so.
(*The Tree*, stanzas i, iv)

Trees are to be respected and revered when alive since they suffer as human beings do. If in the lyric included in the essay *Of Solitude* Cowley disapproves of those artists that «can the fair and living Trees neglect» and «Yet the dead Timber prize» (ll. 11, 12), in *Pomona*, Book 5 of *Plantarum*, he observes the similarities between plants and the human body in order to stress the relationships between man, the vegetal world and God. Most possibly inspired by Helkiah Crooke's *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), the poet individuates common signs in trees and the human body as, for instance, in the walnut and the human head:

[…] haud equidem reor absque Deorum
Consilio hæc *Capitis* nux est sortita *figuram*.
(*Juglans*, in *Plantarum*, Liber Quintus. Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 205)[33]

In *Of Greatness*, one of his last essays, the poet interprets and presents trees as a witty, and paradoxical, metaphor for humanity. Claiming that their branches aspire to heaven whereas their roots tend to hell, Cowley highlights the 'amphibious' essence of trees:

As far as up tow'rds Heav'n the Branches grow,
So far the Root sinks down to Hell below.[34]
(Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 331)

Trees, as much as larks, grasshoppers and men, have their body fed by earthly nutrition, whereas their spiritual dimension is nourished by heaven above, close to Browne's «great and true *Amphibium*, whose nature is disposed to live […] in divided and distinguished worlds […] betweene a corporall and spirituall essence» (Keynes [1643; 1928] 1963b, p. 44).

33 These lines are not available in English since Nahum Tate translates only a small part of *Pomona*, the fifth Book of *Plantarum*.

34 Cowley quotes also the original version of the two verses, a slight deformation of Virgil's *Aeneid*: «Sed quantum vertice ad auras | Ætherias, tantum radice ad Tartara tendit» (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 331).

Not only animals, but also plants, thus, function as metaphors for the poet, and for humanity. In the same way, Cowley associates wit, his most peculiar feature, to animals, as already noticed,[35] and to plants as well: in *The Preface of the Author* to the folio volume published in 1656, the poet declares that he «should take the boldness to prune and lop away», to «replant» and «cut off» some books and asks «if *Wit* be such a *Plant*, that it scarce receives heat enough to preserve it alive even in the *Summer* of our cold *Clymate*, how can it choose but wither in a long and sharp *Winter*?» (Waller 1905, pp. 5, 7).

Curiously, or, better, paradoxically enough, the lover of paradox that embodies paradox, the natural philosopher that in *Sylva* describes himself as *Plantarum vates* (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol. 2, p. 219),[36] the poet that defends, celebrates and worships the natural world in its wholeness, to such an extent that even identifies humanity, and wit, with animals and plants, will be defined by Samuel Johnson precisely as «unnatural»: «we sometimes esteem [Cowley] as learned, and sometimes despise as trifling, always admire as ingenious, and always condemn as unnatural» (Hind [1925] 1961, p. 28).

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35 Cfr. Cowley's already quoted lines: «In a true piece of Wit all things must be, | Yet all things there agree. | As in the Ark, joyn'd without force or strife, | All Creatures dwelt: all Creatures that had Life». *Of Wit*, ll. 57-60.

36 In her English version of the sixth Book of *Plantarum*, Aphra Behn translates *Plantarum vates* as «Priest of Plants»: l. 59 (Grosart [1881] 1967, vol 2).

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