

# The Garden as *Memento Mori*

## Derek Jarman and Jamaica Kincaid

BY MARTINE DELVAUX

*En examinant les textes de Jamaica Kincaid et ceux de Derek Jarman (Kincaid a été témoin de la mort de son frère du sida en 1996, Jarman est mort de la maladie en 1994) l'auteure fait le lien entre la mort, le récit et le jardinage.*

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes how our western societies try to ignore “the dying.” Like the idle who do not “do” anything, we consider the dying to be immoral. He suggests they are what cannot be named. We shroud them in silence. The dying cannot speak. Death is unspeakable because it is nothing, and because ultimately, it cannot be prevented. “When nothing can be done, nothing can be said” [my translation] (277) writes de Certeau. Death, however, does do something, and it is this something that can be said. And if science tries to transform bodies into text and knowledge, working to control them, to fill the unspeakable void of death with words, literary writing, according to de Certeau, effects the return of the repressed. It says of knowledge what knowledge does not want to say: that we are mortals, that bodies die, and that the inevitability of this death is what makes us alive.

For de Certeau, the writer is the dying trying to speak. And if death is unsayable, it is however writable, he suggests, within the discourse of life. But how is death written within life? How can dying be read? Jamaica Kincaid and Derek Jarman guide me through this act of reading: both of them writers (and Jarman a famous filmmaker) who wrote AIDS testimonials. Kincaid was a witness to her brother’s death from it in 1996, Jarman died of the disease in 1994; both of them, also, gardeners. And what interests me here is the connection between death, narrative and gardening. In the next minutes, I want to look at how and why gardening, in Kincaid and Jarman’s work, come to represent how one dies, and more specifically how one dies of AIDS; how gardening is a metaphor for telling and reading the act of dying.

In western culture, gardens always recall Eden: “The world as we know it ... began in a very good garden,” Kincaid writes in her introduction to *My Favorite Plant*, “a completely satisfying garden—Paradise—but after a while the owner and the occupants wanted more” (xix). In a similar way, Jarman, whose work presents a strong biblical content (mainly references to the Genesis and Christ’s passion), links the primordial garden to a secret: “before I finish,” he writes in his diary *Modern Nature* “I intend to

celebrate our corner of Paradise, the part of the garden the Lord forgot to mention” (23). This secret (what the Lord forgot to mention—homosexuality), like all secrets is, for Jarman, “the canker that destroys” (25). In other words, to borrow Act-up’s phrase: silence=death. Kincaid and Jarman both present Eden, the enclosed garden of Paradise (from the greek *para*: around and *deisos*: wall), as a false idyllic narrative, a pretty story told at someone else’s expense. And rather than striving to recreate this idyllic point of origin, both of them work to uncover the secret, the part of the garden that shouldn’t have been shown, the part of the story that shouldn’t have been told...

In Jamaica Kincaid’s writing, one can read the garden as a metaphor for narrative, for the art of telling stories. And stories, like Eden, like any garden, like nature itself, must be imperfect. “I will never have the garden I have in my mind,” she writes, “but that for me is the joy of it [...] a garden, no matter how good it is, must never completely satisfy” (1998 xix). A garden is an unsure thing: there is always the risk of it not succeeding, of nature working against it, of plants not growing or dying. But this risk, for Kincaid, is what defines it, as it does narrative: a garden, like a story, should not be idyllic. It must bring dissatisfaction, unhappiness. “I feel it’s my duty to make everyone a little less happy,” she says about her writing.

I will not give the happy ending [...] I am not at all—absolutely not at all—interested in the pursuit of happiness. I am not interested in the pursuit of positivity. I am interested in pursuing a truth, and the truth often seems to be not happiness but its opposite. (Online interview)

To choose to have a garden, then, is to accept the possibility of failure. To do gardening is to accept not only the risk of death but its inevitability. And in a similar way, to read is to be willing to risk unhappiness, this unhappiness residing, I will try to show, in a confrontation with one’s own mortality.

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Kincaid was a witness to her brother dying from AIDS in Antigua. "To be so intimately acquainted with the organism that is the HIV virus," she writes in *My Brother*,

... is to be acquainted with death.... To have the HIV virus is to have crossed the line between life and death.... On one side, there is life, and the thin shadow of death hovers over it; and on the other, there is death with a small patch of life attached to it.

This latter is the life of AIDS. (96)

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Devon is like the tree that Kincaid describes seeing with him in Antigua's botanical gardens: "It was a tree, only a tree, and it was either just emerging from a complete dormancy or it was half-dead, half-alive" (1996: 80). Devon's dying puts an end to what he could have been, maybe an accomplished plantsman, he who enjoyed gardening, a gardener who could even have written a book, Kincaid imagines, like Russell Page whose *Education of a Gardener* she describes herself reading during her first visit with her brother. And if the two siblings share a love of

plants, soon they come to share a knowledge of death. For Kincaid, Devon is death: "He lived in death," she writes. "Perhaps everyone is living in death, I actually do believe that, but usually it can't be seen; in this case it was a death I could see" (1996: 88).

However, while Kincaid can see this death, witness it, she realizes that her brother's life remains a secret (he who, she finds out after his death, had homosexual relationships). His life was a blank piece of paper, an unwritten narrative: "his life unfolded," she writes,

and there was everything to see and there was nothing to see; in his life there had been no flowering... his life was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet. (1996: 162-3)

But although she presents Devon as having led an infertile life, although she condemns this falling of the bud, the fact that he died "without ever understanding or knowing, or being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he was" (1996: 162), Kincaid nonetheless sees her brother's dying as a form of life:

The plantsman in my brother will never be, and all the other things that he might have been in his life have died; but inside his body a death lives, flowering upon flowering, with a voraciousness that nothing

seems able to satisfy and stop. (1996: 20)

Throughout her testimonial, Kincaid tries to grasp the crossing of the line between life and death that her brother and his illness have come to symbolize. She herself mirrored this crossing while Devon was dying as she went back and forth between Antigua, the land of her childhood which had come to signify death, and Vermont, the place of her chosen adult life as a writer, wife and mother. "The dead never die," she writes, and death flowers in her book like it does in Antiguan cemeteries, where,

a grave is topped off with a huge mound of loose earth—carelessly, as if piled up in child's play, not serious at all—because death is just another way of being, and the dead will not stay put... and no structure of concrete or stone can contain them. (1993: 64)

The death witnessed in her brother begins growing within Kincaid's narrative, like the virus that had invaded her brother's body. As if books, like AIDS, make death flower; as if, like Antiguan cemeteries, they are places in which the dead, rather than rest, keep on living.

In the course of her narrative, Kincaid describes how, during a visit to her brother, she noticed that the soursop tree outside the house that he shared with their mother, had been charred. The tree had become a nuisance to her, the mother explained: it had become host to a colony of parasitic insects that had started migrating into the house. This infestation was caused by the presence of a passion fruit vine that she (the mother) had brought back from her native island, Dominica, a plant that she loved and tried to grow next to the soursop tree. The vine, in its growth, had leaped up into the tree, weakening it and making it vulnerable to parasites. Kincaid relates her mother's burning of the tree to a desire, common in people,

to eradicate all the things that are an annoyance, all the things that interfere with the smooth running of your day, a day which should produce for you a feeling of complete satisfaction, a kind of happiness even.... (1996: 126)

The soursop tree is a metaphor for the stories Kincaid writes, stories that bear unhappiness. In fact, she links the story of the charred soursop tree to another burning: to the time when her mother burned all of her stories, all of her daughter's books. Near the soursop tree lies an old stone heap which reminds Kincaid of the day when her mother doused her books in kerosene and set fire to them, those books being the things that, like the tree, "had come between me and the smooth flow of her life" (1996: 133-4). This the mother did to punish her 13-year-old daughter who, instead of changing her brother's diaper (the same brother who died of AIDS), instead of helping her mother through hard times, had chosen to read books: "it was the

realization of this that released in her a fury toward me," writes Kincaid, "a fury so fierce that I believed ... that she wanted me dead" (1996: 131). Books interrupt the smooth flow of life. Books do not bring about happy endings. Books, like the soursop tree, like AIDS, transmit a knowledge of death.

Towards the end of her narrative, Kincaid describes walking through an airport in Miami with two rhododendrons bought at the Fairchild botanical gardens, a moment that coincides, she realizes later, with her brother's actual death. The two plants survive the trip back home, but soon after her arrival, they die, infested with parasites that allow a population of small flies to prosper inside the house. "And nothing I could do," she writes, "no remedy in any of many plant encyclopedias I have, could save them. They bloomed beautifully and then died, dying, as always, being so irreversible" (1996: 177). Kincaid carried these plants home while death was growing inside her brother. But unlike her mother who set fire to the soursop tree, she did not kill the plants, she did not try to kill their death. Instead, she tried to save them, as she tries to "save herself" through writing.

But what, in fact, does she save: her life or her death? In writing about her brother's death, in trying to read his dying, Kincaid acquires an intimate knowledge of her own. The burned books, the plagued and charred soursop tree, the infested rhododendrons, her brother dying of AIDS.... The tales she tells stage a threading of the line between life and death. And for Kincaid, this is what writing, and reading, is about. Her perfect reader (who she describes at the end of *My Brother* and who in reality was New Yorker editor, William Shawn, who died around the same time as Devon), is one to whom she can tell any story, whether he wants to hear it or not, and who will read everything, whether he likes it or not. And through this imagining of a reader who will read even what makes him or her unhappy, Kincaid endlessly "bring[s] the burned books back to [her] life," bringing back to her life (rather than to life, rather than resurrecting) books that signify death, books that, like the Tree in the Garden of Eden, contain and now transmit to us a knowledge of death. Books that uncover the secret, undo the silence around dying.

To eat from the Tree of Knowledge is to enter mortality. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden for having eaten the forbidden fruit and gained a knowledge that was meant to remain a mystery. Man fell because of his rivalry with God. And as a punishment, he was given death: "for dust you are and to dust you will return." To gain knowledge, then, is to become acquainted with death.

When Derek Jarman learned that he was HIV-positive, he bought a small wooden house on the coast of Southern England, on a peninsula that sticks out into the English Channel. Dungeness is an outgrowth, an aberration of the land. It is an inhospitable place, the sunniest and driest place in England. And there, in front of a nuclear power

plant, Jarman planted an open-air garden, a garden without a fence, his back facing the death that faced him. Against the wind and the sun that attack the land, he nurtured this garden like he did his own body, taking care of his death as he did of his health. Dungeness was Jarman's body: a garden in front of a nuclear power plant, a garden of shingle, rocks and pieces of metal in which rare, beautiful, luscious flowers grew.

Jarman's 1991 movie *The Garden*, filmed in Dungeness, is about homosexuality, discrimination and AIDS. By means of biblical imagery and allegory (the Fall of Man is brought on by a Nazi snake; Christ, embodied by two young male lovers, is martyred by police officers because of his sexuality), Jarman testifies to his illness and forthcoming death, as well as to the disappearance of his friends. "I walk in this garden holding the hands of dead friends," says the film's narrator.

Old age came quickly for my frosted generation. They died so silently. The forgotten generation screamed to quietly protest their innocence. Cold, they died so silently. I have no words, my shaking hand cannot express my fury.

Sadness is all I have.

Cold, cold, cold, you died so silently.

Linked hands at 4 a.m. Deep under the sky.

Never heard the sweet flesh song.

They died so silently.

Matthew fucked Mark fucked Luke fucked John.

Who lay in the bed that I lie on.

This song. Cold, cold, cold, we die so silently. Sweet garden.

Cold, cold, cold, I die so silently.

Jarman's film is almost completely silent (except for sounds and music that accompany the images), a silence that is meant to render the silence surrounding those dying of AIDS. It presents, however, a narratorial voice that we hear speaking twice, an "I" which we are brought to associate with Jarman who films himself at his working table: a sort of God or Holy Spirit. At the end of the film, tongues of fire descend on apostles embodied by males of different ages. These are the witnesses who receive the duty to transmit the story and break the silence.

At the end of his life, Jarman, the film-maker, the painter, the writer and the gardener, lost his eye-sight. All that was left for him to see was the shape of things, contours without content. His last piece, *Blue*, is monochrome, the screen completely covered in the color of the title during the 76 minutes that the film lasts: "*Blue*," he

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writes, "is darkness made visible" (14). Jarman goes so far as to refuse the use of images, of representation, a desire voiced previously in *The Garden*. "I want to share this emptiness with you," says the narrator as the movie begins,

not fill the silence with false notes or put tracks through the void. I want to share this wilderness of failure the others have built through highways, fast lanes and both directions. I offer you a journey without direction, uncertainty and no sweet conclusion. When the light faded, I went in search of myself and many destinations.

Here, the image has become silent, its unique color used to render the coldness and silence of death: "I have no friends now who are not dead or dying. Like a blue frost it caught them" (1994a: 7)

Jarman, like Kincaid, refuses predictable trajectories, ready-made stories and happy endings. Instead, he looks straight at the void: "To be an astronaut of the void," he writes in his film script to Blue, "leave the comfortable house that imprisons you with reassurance. Remember, To be going and to have are not eternal—fight the fear that engenders the beginning, the middle and the end" (1994a: 15-6). Jarman chooses to render the silence, the coldness, the blueness of death, as well as its eternal quality, the fact that death is never really an ending: "Blue, an open door to the soul, an infinite possibility becoming tangible" (1994a: 11). The ultimate words of his film seem to point towards this view of death as life, not as eternal life in the Christian sense, but as natural life, a life which, naturally, implies death. And so, at the end of his last film, Jarman addresses his own death, splitting himself in two, "I" and "you", living this ending that is always a beginning (I quote the last line): "I place a delphinium, Blue, upon your grave" (1994a: 30). Asked "How would [you] like to be remembered?" Jarman once answered, "As a flower" (1994b: 123).

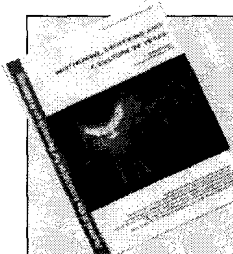
Genesis teaches us that the garden is the place where one learns about dying. It is a *memento mori*. It says: remember your death to come; remember to die. So I repeat my initial question: how can one read the act of dying? How can dying, as de Certeau suggests, be written within the discourse of life? The garden says: remember that your future death is part of your present life. It says that death does something, and that it is writable. Hence: to accept to read the act of dying is to accept that we carry it within us, that to be one who lives is to be one who dies. To read is to eat from the Tree and become acquainted with death; it is to receive Jarman's tongues of fire and become a witness; it is to become Kincaid's ideal reader. Finally, to read this way is not to read death as the end of the story but as its beginning, as a perpetual flowering.

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