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In Defence of The Flower Garden

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INTRODUCTION

It may seem odd to suggest that the flower garden needs defending. Defending from what? Defending from whom? Don't the English love their gardens? Isn't gardening a more popular pastime now than it has ever been? These questions can perhaps best be answered by posing a further question: If the flower garden were under threat, on what grounds would we seek to defend it? How many of us have a notion of the flower garden that we would be prepared to stand up for—a notion that does justice to its inner reality? For should the flower garden be in jeopardy, only those who knew its true worth would rally to its defence. The real danger to the flower garden may lie less in enemies threatening from without, than in a lack of staunch friends within.

Suppose our conception of the flower garden were inadequate, as for example when the garden is regarded not as essential to the home, but as merely a pretty adjunct, would we not then regard it as—in the last resort—dispensable? We would surely come to see it as occupying just that part of our property that could be sacrificed. And all too often that is its fate—a little bit here, a little there. Because our estimation of it falls short of its intrinsic worth, its status is reduced, it is displaced from the centre to the periphery of our lives, and thus we are prepared to countenance diminishing the extent of its domain. For after all, people will always be inclined to ask: What *useful* purpose did it ever serve? Better to put the land to good use, to productive use; or better still to make the space that the garden occupies into something of lasting practical and monetary value, preferably made of brick.

If the flower garden is in jeopardy today, it is because we surrender too willingly to such thoughts. And we do so because we have forgotten the connection the flower garden has with the inner life of the imagination and with the deepest aspirations of the soul. This is not to suggest that the flower garden should provide no harbour for what is useful, productive and practical; but only that when these things are not everywhere encompassed by beauty, and when our industrious-

ness has the effect of driving out leisure, peace and contemplation, then we will have undone the poetic reality of the flower garden. Remember that when Shelley was moved to write his *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) it was not in order to reject rationalism, science and prose. It was simply that he urged us not to forget the greater value of the imagination, of the 'caverns of the spirit' and of the poetic vision that 'turns all things to loveliness'.¹

The deeper reason why the flower garden needs defending, then, is that it shares with poetry a vulnerability to the pragmatic mind, which unflinchingly evaluates all that it encounters in utilitarian terms. It will insist that even the small portion of Nature that we call our garden is no more than a resource for us to exploit and an asset from which we can profit. There is no denying that just such an attitude has been the foundation of our collective material wealth, generation on generation. But if this should be the *only* attitude we have towards the natural world, then something within us akin to the poetic faculty will surely die. Yes, the flower garden needs defending. And yes, it needs defending not least because this unnamed faculty within us, which is the source of our own wellbeing, is as vulnerable as is the flower garden to the manoeuvres of the pragmatic mind.

THE VALUE OF USELESSNESS

When, in 1890, Monet purchased the house and garden at Giverny that was to be his home for the rest of his life, one of the first things he did—to the consternation of his neighbours and friends—was to tear up the kitchen garden! He uprooted the fruit trees and bushes and ripped out the vegetables. But this was no act of wanton destruction: in their place he planted flowers. Despite being someone who by all accounts loved his food and enjoyed long and leisurely gourmet meals, it was more important for him to live surrounded by the beauty of flowers than to have access to fresh, home grown fruit and vegetables.² For Monet the edible plant, which is so unquestionably useful to human beings, was less valuable than the plant grown simply for its flowers, which in itself serves no practical purpose.

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays* (Champaign IL: Jungle Books, 2009), p. 71.

2. Paul Hayes Tucker, *Claude Monet: Life and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 175.

Monet understood something that people of a metaphysical disposition have always known: that *what is of no use often has a higher value than what is useful*. This is because when we regard things in terms of their practical use alone, their value is—paradoxically—degraded by being so closely associated with serving our needs. Precisely in so far as we regard things as instrumental to satisfying our needs, we tend to overlook another kind of value which pertains to them as well, but which cannot be measured in the same way because it is inherent to the nature of the thing itself. Just think of the rose, and your appreciation of it has nothing to do with its usefulness: you appreciate it for what it is in itself. To the very extent that we restrict our valuation of something to what it can *do* for us, we tend to miss its intrinsic value. But when something has no obvious practical use to us, we are set free to recognise and appreciate its essential nature, irrespective of what we might gain from it. As Martin Heidegger once declared, what is useless has its own greatness, since it does not allow anything to be made of it.³

Living in a world in which usefulness is the generally accepted measure of a thing's value, one of the most heartening characteristics of the flower garden is that it falls outside the dominant utilitarian value system. When we spend time in a flower garden, we experience respite from the artificially stimulated needs and desires of the consumer culture. The flower garden is indeed a 'useless' place in which to find oneself, and therein resides its ability to lift one's spirits. Every flower garden naturally tends toward becoming a sacred precinct; for once we step inside it our *minds* are also led into a different space. There is nothing there that we can buy, possess or make use of, but there is much that may cause us to stop still in wonder.

THE ENGLISH PARADOX

The valuation of usefulness over and above that which is revealed to the contemplative mind has been a distinctive feature of the English philosophical tradition. The tradition commences with Francis Bacon, in whose *Novum Organum* and other writings a strong emphasis is placed on cultivating useful knowledge that will benefit humankind, while rejecting as worthless the metaphysical speculations of such

3. Martin Heidegger, 'Traditional Language and Technological Language', translated by Wanda Torres Gregory in *Journal of Philosophical Research* 23 (1998) 129–45: p. 131.

great philosophers as Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.⁴ After Bacon, the pragmatic approach to knowledge was championed by one thinker after another, from Thomas Hobbes to John Stuart Mill.

One of the consequences of accentuating the value of what is useful is that the energies of a culture are increasingly extroverted. Technological thinking displaces contemplative thinking in the general estimation of what is truly worthwhile. People are concerned more about how to achieve this or that result, than to open themselves in wonder at what *is*.

And yet, paradoxically, England was also the birthplace of the flower garden whose purpose, according to those who contributed most to its development, runs counter to the direction taken by merely utilitarian and technological thinking. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century pioneers of the English flower garden, William Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll, had no doubt that one of its central aims is to elevate the mind beyond the instrumental mode of thinking to a pure appreciation of Nature's beauty. For Robinson, the garden should be 'a reflex of Nature in her fairest moods', and he felt no inhibition about addressing Nature as the 'universal Mother', a semi-divine being.⁵ In a similar vein, Jekyll wrote that the garden should be like 'the offering of a constant hymn of praise' and that its best purpose is 'to lift up the heart in a spirit of praise and thankfulness'.⁶ It is as if the English, whose genius it was to promote the drastic narrowing of human consciousness that was the necessary prerequisite for the scientific and industrial revolutions, at the same time provided the antidote to it in the form of a heightened aesthetic appreciation of the flower garden, which veered towards an almost mystical communion with Nature.

This is not to overlook the fact that Robinson and Jekyll were both extremely down to earth and pragmatic gardeners, and that the vast bulk of their writings was devoted to giving very practical advice. Neither is it to pass over the hours of physical toil and grind that the

4. Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 56ff.

5. Thus Robinson quotes Shelley's translation of the Homeric Hymn 'To Earth, Mother of All' in *The English Flower Garden* (first published 1883; repr. London: Bloomsbury, 1998), p. 86. For 'a reflex of Nature in her fairest moods', see Mea Allan, *William Robinson, 1838-1935: Father of the English Flower Garden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 133.

6. Quoted in Penelope Hobhouse, ed., *Gertrude Jekyll on Gardening* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 23.

creation and maintenance of a flower garden requires. But when these two great gardeners reflected on the deeper purpose of flower gardening, they saw this in what can only be described as semi-religious terms. Both were acutely aware of the growing alienation of an increasingly urbanised population from the natural world, in a society and economy that were based on the perception of Nature as a resource to be exploited as efficiently as possible. In the flower garden, by contrast, the purpose was not to exploit or plunder, nor even to sow crops in order to harvest edible products. The flower garden was not conceived as a means to a utilitarian end: it existed as an end in itself. Amidst the depredations of urban industrial society, the purpose of gardening was conceived to be the rehabilitation of humankind within a re-enchanted natural world. Gardening was less about *using* than celebrating and revering Nature.

A REVALUATION OF VALUES

No one could doubt that the dominant utilitarian way of relating to Nature has brought us many material benefits. Few of us would want to give up their washing machine, television or computer; or to renounce the ability to fly around the globe or travel at high speed by motorcar or train. And yet the collective emphasis on the pursuit of the useful—of what is apparently beneficial to *us*—has led us to the brink of global environmental catastrophe. The systematic degradation of the natural environment, upon which our material affluence is based, is now returning to haunt us. Along with the many practical measures that need to be taken to avert the threat of widespread environmental collapse, a fundamental change of heart is also needed—a change in our *way* of relating to Nature.

There is nowhere better to begin than in our gardens. For here we can consciously implement a revaluation of values, through making a daily practice of the celebration of a *non-utilitarian* relationship to Nature. We have seen that, according to Jekyll, the flower garden should ideally become a 'hymn of praise'. If we were really able to garden with such a motivation, then each one of us would be contributing to the creation of a counter-current to the collective view of Nature as no more than a resource to be pillaged. In nurturing our flower gardens, we would be taking a stand against the hegemony of the pragmatic mind. We would be taking a stand for Nature.

We may not need to change much of what we already *do* in our gardens in order to give critical impetus to this counter-current. The issue is rather *how* we do what we do. As is so often the case, the most important factor in bringing about genuine change is the kind of consciousness we bring to what we are already doing, so that our actions become infused with a different quality. The source of this difference in quality is our whole-hearted embrace of the ideals which we adopt, and which would guide and inform our practical gardening work.

It is important to have these ideals to hand and accessible, because while we are on our knees digging out the ground elder or couch grass, or are engaged in some other seemingly interminable chore, few of us are immune to the ambushes of the demon of futility. At such moments, when we ask ourselves, 'Is this really the best way of spending my time?', we need our ideals, and we need them lodged in our hearts, as much to succour us in doubt as to inspire us when all is going well. There are three ideals in particular that are the keys to how our work in the flower garden can contribute to the redemption of our relationship to Nature.

1) Gardening is a work dedicated to beauty

The first ideal is that the aim of gardening is to bring more beauty into the world. Gardening is *a work dedicated to beauty*. It would indeed be a very odd gardener who deliberately tried to make a garden as ugly as possible, and yet ugliness is often the side effect of human labour that is dedicated entirely to the pragmatic and useful. With the enhancement of beauty affirmed as the central aim of gardening, the dominant utilitarian ethic that everywhere prevails outside our gardens is reversed *within* them. The flower garden becomes a utilitarian-free zone! Every tool that is used, every plant that is sown or put in the ground, every deed that the gardener performs, and every scratch, strain and sting visited upon the gardener in the daily toil of this work, all serve the same overriding purpose of nurturing 'useless' beauty.

If to dedicate oneself to such a useless aim seems perverse, then we would do well to recall that in the old philosophy beauty was known as one of the 'Transcendentals' because it was understood to be a divine attribute, or a divine name, along with truth and goodness.⁷

7. The fourth major attribute was Unity. For Beauty, Truth, Goodness and Unity as

According to this tradition, beauty, truth and goodness were regarded as the three shining ideals that all human beings should try to live by. They are ends in themselves, not means to some other end. Once attained, we no longer hunger for something else: as much as they are their own justification, they also provide a satisfaction that no material artefact or possession can give. To foster beauty in the world, even if it is in so humble a thing as a beautiful garden, takes us at least one third of the way—if not to God—then at least towards living a decent human life.

But what do we mean by beauty? Many philosophers have said that a thing is beautiful if its outer form corresponds to, or makes manifest, its best inner potential.⁸ This inner potential exists as an ideal that most living organisms achieve only imperfectly; but to the extent to which the ideal form is embodied in the individual organism, the latter becomes radiant with beauty. In the flower, this radiant beauty reminds us of the transcendent beauty of perfect geometrical forms. And this in itself is reason enough to grow flowers.⁹ But what makes the garden as a whole beautiful is the more hidden form of its best inner potential brought to fulfilment, and in so far as this is achieved a certain spiritual luminosity begins to pervade the whole.

2) Gardening is relationship to the spirit of place

If we garden with the conviction that our purpose is to enhance the beauty of a place, we soon discover that some of the things we do will ‘work’ and other things will not. It often becomes necessary to put aside our own pet schemes and wishes for how we would like the

divine qualities, see St Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on The Divine Names (De Divinis Nominibus) of Dionysius*, IV.5–6, in James F. Anderson, *Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas* (South Bend IN: Regnery/Gateway Inc., 1953), pp. 89–98.

8. For example, Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.6.2: ‘We hold that all the loveliness of this world comes by communion in Ideal-Form’ (in the translation of Stephen MacKenna, *Plotinus: The Enneads* [London: Faber and Faber, 1969]). Thomas Aquinas, *op. cit.* p. 88, concurs: ‘Each thing is beautiful according to its proper form . . .’. Hegel, too, asserts that beauty arises when a thing is ‘so transfigured by the informing spirit in order to express the Idea, that the figure shows it and it alone—the shape or form of Beauty’ (*Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part III: Philosophy of Mind* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971], §556, p. 293).

9. Thus Keith Critchlow, *The Hidden Geometry of Flowers: Living Rhythms, Form and Number* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011), p. 26: ‘What is evident in the geometry of the face of a flower can remind us of the geometry that underlies all existence.’

garden to look, and selflessly to consider what is right for this particular place. In so doing an important shift in our thinking occurs: rather than force the garden to conform to *our* wishes and designs, we relate ourselves to the unspoken wishes and clandestine designs of the garden. We begin to consider the garden *as an entity in its own right*, and in so doing we can find ourselves returning to the ancient notion of the *genius loci* or the 'spirit of place'. This notion implies that the garden is not just a space 'out there'—it has an inner aspect too. If we take seriously the idea that every garden has an 'inner' spirit of place, we then dislodge one of the cornerstones of the modern disenchanted worldview—which is that there is no such thing as spirit, let alone spirit in nature.

And so, in cultivating the flower garden, we find that we are at the same time drawn into cultivating a relationship with the *genius loci*. Indeed, one cannot garden properly unless one develops a sixth sense for the 'spirit of place', which we learn to feel in the atmosphere that a garden has. This is because our actions can either make the garden more coherent, its atmosphere stronger, more joyful and celebratory, or they can have a devastating, wounding effect on the garden. When for example the gardener puts in a plant that lightens a dull corner, or softens a hard edge, the atmosphere of the whole garden can be enhanced. Equally if the gardener puts in some shrub that does not properly 'fit' the space in which it is planted, or takes out a venerable friend that has inhabited a particular spot for many years, the integrity of the whole garden suffers.

To garden sensitively, we have *to enter into dialogue* with the garden, or with the garden's presiding spirit. The garden is not just a *tabula rasa* or 'blank slate' with which we can do anything we like. As an entity in its own right, the garden's needs—in the sense of its best inner potential—are precisely what the gardener is there to serve. And so we find ourselves respectfully asking: 'What would like to happen here?' or 'What needs to happen in this corner of the garden?' or 'What is suggesting itself here?'

Viewed from this perspective, the gardener's role can be understood as no less than *to become the consciousness of the garden*. By living with the garden over the seasons, we come to listen to what it is whispering to us. The garden is unconscious. It is in a dream, so we have to listen to its dream, and then make it real. This is the opposite of drawing up a plan in one's office and imposing one's favoured design on the garden.

3) Gardening is recreating Paradise on Earth

Since the very dawn of gardening there has been the idea that the secret purpose of the garden is to recreate Paradise on Earth. This idea runs like a golden thread through the history of gardening.¹⁰ Paradise could be understood quite simply as a condition in which *the divine is a felt presence* on Earth. In the Paradise Garden, the veil between the sensory world and the spiritual world becomes more transparent. This can be experienced directly in the atmosphere that a garden acquires when a relationship is established between the gardener and the spirit of place. We could understand this in terms of our becoming more aware of the creative and formative energies of nature, which stand behind what we see about us as the created or finished forms of all the plants and flowers that we can see and touch and smell. It is their very aliveness and their inner 'luminosity' that pervade the garden as a whole, attracting our attention to a deeper level of nature than what is simply sense-perceptible.

The Paradise Garden could be said to have such an intensified atmosphere of aliveness and beauty that it becomes more than this *particular* garden that we are relating to and in dialogue with. It becomes something much bigger, more *universal*. This is Nature once again as the 'Universal Mother' referred to by William Robinson—a spiritual being, a greater spiritual presence that we become aware of in the garden. And to the extent that Nature's spiritual presence can be felt, *the garden becomes an Icon*, in the sense of a work of art through which the imperceptible becomes perceptible, and something transcendent is made immanent. In the garden, as in the Icon, what is universal can become an almost tangible presence.

If we can work towards realising the ideal of the garden as a recreation of Paradise, even if we are only able to manage it in a very small and humble way in our own little garden, then we will be contributing not only to the defence of the flower garden but also to the healing of our world. For what is crucial is that we establish our gardens as sacred precincts in which the dominant secular and utilitarian mindset has no place, because here a wholly different way of relating to Nature is practised. In place of the utilitarian relationship

10. See, for example, Ronald King, *The Quest for Paradise: A History of the World's Gardens* (Weybridge: Whittet Books, 1979).

to Nature, we cultivate a reverential relationship; instead of regarding Nature as there to serve our needs, we regard ourselves as there to serve Nature's needs; and instead of Nature being a rather vague and sentimental abstract concept, in the flower garden we come to experience her as an enchanted, vibrant presence.

