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Some Forsaken Gardens and What They Tell Us

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Ever since the *hortus conclusus* acquired the status of a *topos* in the Middle Ages, it has repeatedly been invoked as an image of order and control. On the other hand, its equally suggestive companion idea, that of a garden slowly reverting to a state of nature, has never earned that status that comes with a Latin tag (though in order to ease my task I shall juggle with nonce epithets like *hortus apertus*—with implications both of freedom and of openness—and *hortus desertus*). The reason is that in the classical literature—the nursery and christening place of most *topoi*—the deserted garden seems to have had no imaginative appeal, while in the mediaeval era the fact that England had recently been reclaimed from the wilderness probably stripped the charm from any ideas of regression. But although it was never institutionalized and given an official name, the *hortus apertus* has none the less fascinated various writers through the centuries, and came into its own with the rise of primitivism and with the Romantic revolution that followed. I shall glance at some of its avatars in this article.

One of the most famous of all ruined gardens exists only as a parable, in a scene from *Richard II*. Here, it is safe to say, is the *locus classicus* for the mediaeval and Renaissance attitude to gardens—places that can be sustained only by attentive husbandry:

*Gard.*, Go, bind thou up young dangling apricocks,
Which like unruly children make their sire
Swoop with oppression of their prodigal weight,
Give some supportance to the bending twigs.

*Go thou,* and like an executioner
Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays,
That look too lofty in our commonwealth:

You thus employed, I will go root away
The noisome weeds which without profit suck
The soil’s fertility from wholesome flowers.

*Man.* Why should we, in the compass of a pale,
Keep law and form and due proportion,
Showing, as in a model, our firm estate,
When our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers chok’d up,
Her fruit-trees all unprun’d, her hedges ruin’d,
Her knots disordered, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars? (119-20)
Of course Shakespeare was chiefly concerned to encode various messages about polity and government in these speeches, but for my purpose their interest lies less in tenor than in vehicle—how the gardens figure rather than what they stand for. Shakespeare presents the gardeners as the custodians of an artificial order, arresting or diverting the course of nature for the benefit of humankind. Branches must be propped, or the trees might break under the weight of their own fecundity and nourishing fruit be lost; rampant growth must be pared not only to regulate the visual order of the orchard but also to make easy the task of harvesting; weeds (plants that by horticultural definition are either useless or undecorative) must be extirpated because they compete with wholesome flowers. This vision, which is essentially utilitarian, persists through the application of the garden image to the state—flowers cannot flower; fruit trees are less than fructiferous; hedges, being breached, no longer define and contain; the imposed geometry of knots suffers when Nature declares its abhorrence of straight lines; herbs are not to be had for healing and savour. Such anthropocentric versions of the garden subject nature to human need, and advertise that subjection by the very unnaturalness of their ordonnance. And when nature reclaims these imposed forms, the word choice registers the process as suffocation, neglect, collapse and plague: "chok’d"; "unprun’d"; "ruin’d"; "disordered"; "swarming." This remained the dominant view further into the seventeenth century and beyond that too. In The Garden of Cyrus, for example, Sir Thomas Browne goes so far as to view the world through the geometric grid of the formal garden, eagerly tracing quincuncial patterns in every wrinkle and configuration of the natural world. The trees he most favours are those invested with a self-regulating geometry, but he is quite as ready as the gardeners in Richard II to invoke the aid of the pruning knife and impose that regulation on otherwise shaggy hawthorns. Here, centuries in advance of Cézanne, is evidence of a proto-Cubist way of seeing:

Now if for this order we affect coniferous and tapering trees—particularly the cypress, which grows in a conical figure—we have found a tree not only of great ornament, but in its essentials of affinity unto this order: a solid rhombus being made by the conversion of two equicnual cones, as Archimedes hath defined. . . .

And if delight or ornamental view invite a comely disposure by circular amputations, as is elegantly performed in hawthorns, then will they answer the figures made by the conversion of a rhombus which maketh two concentrical circles; the greater circumference being made by the lesser angles, the lesser by the greater. (177-78)

What Cézanne attempted in pigment, Browne attempts in prose.

There was, however, a fifth column of naturalness within the confines of some gardens. In his definitive essay, Bacon states his contempt for the puerile iconography of the topiarist—"for my part, I do not like images cut out in juniper or other garden stuff; they be for children" (121)—though he does go on to approve juniper wells and pyramids. And as for the knots whose disorder is lamented in Richard II, "the making of knots or figures with divers coloured earths, that they may lie under the windows of the house on that side which the garden stands, they be but toys: you may see as good sights many times in tarts" (120). It is above all in the "wilderness" which Bacon incorporates into his hortus
that we see the beginnings of an attitude very different from those expressed by Shakespeare and Browne:

For the heath, which was the third part of our plot, I wish it to be framed, as much as may be, to a natural wildness. Trees I would have none in it, but some thickets made only of sweet-briar and honeysuckle, and some wild vine amongst; and the ground set with violets, strawberries, and primroses. For these are sweet and prosperous in the shade. And these to be in the heath, here and there, and not in any order. I like also little heaps, in the nature of mole-hills (such as are in wild heaths), to be set, some with wild thyme; some with pinks; some with germander; that gives a good flower to the eye; some with periwinkle; some with violets . . . . Part of which heaps are to be with standards of little bushes pricked upon their top, and part without. The standards to be roses; juniper; holly; berberries . . . . and such like. But these standards to be kept with cutting, that they grow not out of course. (122)

Although this bears as much relation to real wildness as Herrick’s delight in disorder to an unclothed body, it none the less remains true that in the wilderness the gardener strives for naturalness within the confines of art—a sort of horticultural sprezzatura. Although the wilderness was never allowed access to the whole of the garden (as Marvell’s mower points out, gardens flaunt their separation from the meadows beyond their walls), natura naturans was admitted on the strictest terms, the terms of art itself. We can observe this paradoxical tension in the phrase “framed . . . to a natural wildness” with which Bacon begins his description, and in the arbitrary proscriptions on which the wilderness is formed. Trees have no part in the landscape, and the shrubs which Bacon does admit must be “standards to be kept with cutting, that they grow not out of course.” And as for the little molehills, each with its own floral monoculture—the most strenuous efforts at making them seem haphazard (“such as are in wild heaths”) cannot begin to disguise the absurdity of the artifice.

Nature, thus finding purchase in the heart of formal gardens, began that slow process of colonization which would eventually alter the principles of horticultural design in the next century. It also opened perceptual avenues shut off by the traditional mediaeval symbol of the nurtured garden. We look in vain in the eighteenth century for major developments along these lines, for poets are still too preoccupied with issues of decorum, of demarcation, of taxonomic “purity.” Thus when Goldsmith comes to describe the hortus desertus in The Deserted Village, we find both his attitude and his diction comparable to those of Shakespeare’s gardeners. He does strike some new notes, however:

Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,
Thy sports are fled and all thy charms withdrawn;
Amidst thy bowers the tyrant’s hand is seen,
And desolation saddens all thy green:
One only master grasps the whole domain,
And half a tillage stints thy smiling plain:
No more thy glassy brook reflects the day,
But, choked with sedges, works its weedy way.
Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
The hollow-sounding bittern guards its nest;
Amidst thy desert walks the lapwing flies,
And tires their echoes with unvaried cries.
And again:

Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o’ertops the mouldering wall;
And trembling, shrinking from the spoiler’s hand,
Far, far away, thy children leave the land. (677)

But now the sounds of population fail,
No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale,
No busy steps the grassgrown foot-way tread,
For all the bloomy flush of life is fled.
All but yon widowed, solitary thing
That feebly bends beside the plashy spring;
She, wretched matron, forced, in age, for bread,
To strip the brook with mantling cresses spread,
To pick her wintry faggot from the thorn,
To seek her nightly shed and weep till morn;
She only left of all the harmless train,
The sad historian of the pensive plain.

Near yonder copse, where once the garden smiled,
And still where many a garden flower grows wild;
There, where a few thorn shrubs the place disclose,
The village preacher’s modest mansion rose. (681-82)

Where Shakespeare’s gardeners deplored the absence of husbandry and, with that, the degeneration into a state of nature from a horticultural state of grace, Goldsmith directs his anger at the usurpation of the land by the rich, and the enclosures that scientific agriculture brought with it. This inevitably entails a shift of emphasis. Since enclosures do in fact increase the productivity of the land, the utilitarian notion of the garden in Richard II—the garden as pantry of herbs and fruit—can no longer be invoked to measure the decline. Rather, because Goldsmith perceives the garden as a recreational pleasance, he deplores not the loss of foodstuffs but of social amenities, fixing repeatedly on the arbour as space once fashioned in collaboration with nature, now a “shapeless ruin.” These are like the “hedges ruin’d” in Richard II and again they are not. What is functional in the one (hedges mark off fields; exclude destructive animals) is simply recreational in the other. And whereas Shakespeare might conceivably and Pope certainly have exulted in the displacement of green by tillage as evidence of human enterprise, Goldsmith cannot forget the function of the green in village life, and the social unity that has been sacrificed in the name of progress. Augustan though he might be at heart, his melancholy removes him from such acclamations as this from Windsor Forest:

And ‘midst the Desart fruitful Fields arise,
That crown’d with tufted Trees and springing Corn,
Like verdant Isles the sable Waste adorn. (196)

For Goldsmith, the fruitful fields of enclosure are desertification by another name. The brook, once the water source of the village and thus kept clear, has been reclaimed by sedges, and the paths by grass, and birds frequent the places that were once human preserves—and it is clear from his treatment that
Goldsmith presents the forsaken garden *topos* in terms of a prophetic curse. Surely he is writing with Isaiah 34 in mind:

11 But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it: and he shall stretch out upon it the line of confusion, and the stones of emptiness.

12 They shall call the nobles thereof to the kingdom, but none shall be there, and all her princes shall be nothing.

13 And the thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in the fortresses thereof: and it shall be an habitation of dragons, and a court for owls.

For Goldsmith, agrarian monopolists have cursed the land with their depopulating policies. Nature’s resumption of human space becomes (in these terms) an instrument of judgment.

If Goldsmith’s deserted garden strikes one or two un-Augustan chords, one might at least have expected Crabbe to register the standard eighteenth-century frisson. For when the work of humankind is overturned by forces beyond its control, the frailty and impotence of many reasonable enterprises is thrown into relief. In *The Parish Register*, however, Crabbe uses a deserted garden as a vehicle for characterization, and slightly alters the traditional perspectives I have so far been discussing:

> Down by the Church-way-Walk and where the Brook
> Winds round the Chancel like a Shepherd’s Crook:
> In that small House, with those green Pales before,
> Where Jasmine trails on either side the Door;
> Where those dark Shrubs that now grow wild at Will,
> Were clipt in Form and tantaliz’d with Skill;
> Where Cockles blanch’d and Pebbles neatly spread,
> Form’d shining Borders for the Larkspurs’ Bed;—
> There lived a Lady, wise, austere and nice,
> Who shew’d her Virtue by her Scorn of Vice;
> In the dear Fashions of her Youth she dress’d,
> A pea-green Joseph was her favourite Vest;
> Erect she stood, she walk’d with stately Mien,
> Tight was her length of Stays and she was tall and lean. (I, 263)

Crabbe presents the garden of Catharine Lloyd, the subject of this vignette, as an analogue of herself—her vice of negative virtue. The shining, self-advertising insistence of the borders, stressed almost at the expense of the plants themselves, faintly evokes the exclusions of a code which lacks the beauty of holiness, and the tortured forms of topiary a similarly exacting denial of natural impulse. By stressing the darkness of the shrubs as they revert to their natural patterns of growth, Crabbe suggests a mysterious potency that the Mistress Marydom of cockle shells has only temporarily kept at bay. This is not to say that he welcomes the change from an artificial to a natural order, but only to remark that some of his details set a question mark against the more traditional valuation.

Southey, likewise standing on the threshold of Romanticism, gives us a somewhat ambivalent vision of the forsaken garden. In one of the *English Eclogues*, “The Ruined Cottage,” the remnant garden seems all the more cherishable for the invasion of the weeds:
This woodbine wreathing round the broken porch,
Its leaves just withering, yet one autumn flower
Still fresh and fragrant; and yon hollyhock
That through the creeping weeds and nettles tall
Peers taller, lifting, column-like, a stem
Bright with roseate blossoms. I have seen
Many an old convent reverend in decay,
And many a time have trod the castle courts
And grass-green halls, yet never did they strike
Home to the heart such melancholy thoughts
As this poor cottage. Look! its little hatch
Fleeced with that grey and wintry moss; the roof
Part moulder'd in, the rest o'ergrown with weeds,
House-leek, and long thin grass, and greener moss;
So Nature steals on all the works of man,
Sure conqueror she, reclaiming to herself
His perishable piles. (415)

"Convent[s] reverend in decay" do not figure in early Augustan aesthetics, and
both Pope (in *Windsor Forest*) and Gray (in his lines "On Lord Holland's Seat
near Margate, Kent") deplore the chaos and regression associated with ruins. In
Southey's response, therefore, we can see the Picturesque has transformed some
central assumptions about the imagery of decay. Because Nature is the more
powerful force, the triumph of Nature is something to which we must acquiesce,
all passion spent. No point in deploring or regretting the inevitable: "So Nature
steals on all the works of man, / Sure conqueror she, reclaiming to herself / His
perishable piles." In the context of such irresistible power, the resolute (even
defiant) assertion of the hollyhock against the encroachment becomes almost a
moral act and seems to perpetuate the spirit of the woman who once nurtured it.
For the garden was once her preserve, and like the garden of mediaeval lore in
*Richard II*, it served the ends of humankind with its "wholesome herbs":

There was not then
A weed where all these nettles overtop
The garden-wall; but sweet-briar, scenting sweet
The morning air: rosemary and the marjoram,
All wholesome herbs; and then, that woodbine wreathed
So lavishly around the pillar'd porch
Its fragrant flowers . . . . (416)

Thus in Southey, as in Crabbe, the garden helps characterize the occupant, and
for this reason it evokes feelings of resistance and sorrow that to some extent
work against the fatalism the poet records in the earlier part of the poem: "Sadly
changed / Is this poor cottage! and its dwellers, Charles! . . . / Theirs is a simple
melancholy tale." And we find precisely the same regret centered on very similar
images in Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage* which eventually found a home in
*The Excursion*.

As celebrants of external Nature, the Romantics were duty-bound to hymn its
power and its self-renewing power; but, as humanists, they felt equally com­
pelled to regret the fact of human impotence before its acts of reclamation.
Wordsworth's version of the deserted garden is in the last resort very little
different from Goldsmith’s since it similarly superimposes an ordered past on a disordered present, and registers the effect in comparable images of suffocation and encroachment:

It was a plot
Of garden-ground, now wild, its matted weeds
Marked with the steps of those whom as they pass’d,
The goose-berry trees that shot in long lank slips,
Or currants hanging from their leafless stems
In scanty strings, had tempted to o’erleap
The broken wall. Within that cheerless spot,
Where two tall hedgerows of thick willow boughs
Joined in a damp cold nook, I found a well
Half-choked [with willow flowers and weeds.] I slaked my thirst. . . . (49)

Like the gardeners in Richard II Wordsworth laments the absence of husbandry, noting how the bushes revert to their natural rankness and stinted habits of fruit-bearing. Here we are given no sense of something far more deeply interfused, perhaps because the reversion to Nature has not run its course, and various human evidences remain to track the decay. In a curious way, Wordsworth’s treatment of the garden is rather more reactionary than Crabbe’s of his in The Parish Register—the same Crabbe whose “insensitivity” to candle smoke patterns he had once lamented. Crabbe’s shrubs reassert the vegetable wills that have been perverted by clipping and tantalizing; Wordsworth’s are lank and leafless for want of human attention—and the deserted garden as a whole is damned as a “cheerless spot.”

One has to move much further into the nineteenth century, and into the decadence of Romanticism, in order to find a forsaken garden unaffected by these contradictory visions of humankind and nature. And Swinburne’s is the obvious one to mention. We have only to look at “The Garden of Proserpine” to see how disaffected, world-weary, and antihumanist the poet’s vision is:

I am tired of tears and laughter,
And men that laugh and weep;
Of what may come hereafter
For men that sow to reap;
I am weary of days and hours,
Blown buds of barren flowers,
Desires and dreams and powers
And everything but sleep. (84)

A marked continuity of vision links “A Forsaken Garden” with the infernal pleasance of Proserpine. There is little in the poem that is elegiac, little that is regretful. Where Goldsmith and Wordsworth aligned declensions of the garden with the loss of human happiness, Swinburne stresses the restful vacancy of its decay and the inexorable forces that bring it about:
In a coign of the cliff between lowland and highland,
At the sea-down’s edge between windward and lee,
Walled round with rocks as an inland island,
The ghost of a garden fronts the sea.
A girdle of brushwood and thorn encloses
The steep square slope of the blossomless bed
Where the weeds that grew green from the graves of its roses
Now lie dead. (206)

Whereas earlier poets had recorded the rampancy of *natura naturans*, the weeds
that choke and assail the cultivated plants and turn usefulness to dross, Swinburne
moves an imaginative step beyond that to a sterility that eclipses both the
cultivated flowers and the displacing vegetation. Here the *hortus conclusus*
figures as a trope of lifelessness, not of order, and, like the garden of Proserpine,
becomes a forcing house of negations:

Not a flower to be pressed of the foot that falls not;
As the heart of a dead man the seed-plots are dry;
From the thick of thorns whence the nightingale calls not,
Could she call, there were never a rose to reply.

Over the meadows that blossom and wither
Rings but the note of a sea-bird’s song;
Only the sun and the rain come hither
All year long. (207)

In *The Deserted Cottage* Wordsworth traced the footprints of passers-by tempted
by the rank, unhusbanded fruit; Swinburne uses a strange double litotes to delete
even that semblance of humanity. The ruin has no historian; nor does it have the
sort of epistemological reality that Berkeley would have given it in the mind of
God. For there is no sense of a Deity in Swinburne’s poem, only an evolutionary
apocalypse when the sea from which life crawled surges over the land to efface
all consciousness of any kind. Death loses its sting, not by Pauline proclamations
of the Resurrection, but because the world has been effaced to a *tabula rasa*:

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides humble
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread
As a god self-slain on his own altar,
Death lies dead. (209)

This sort of *fin de siècle* languor must have supplied Virginia Woolf with a
starting point for the “Time Passes” interlude in *To the Lighthouse* with its
records of human impotence and its sense of a passing social order.

But before I move into the twentieth century, I want to glance at the deserted
garden in *Great Expectations* where the *topos* receives a near comic treatment.
By 1859 the Industrial Revolution had issued in such urban squalor that the
garden came to function as a refuge, a space not so much reclaimed from nature
as preserved from the encroachment of ugliness and exploitation. Indeed in
Dickens the characters who fashion little *horti conclusi* in the heart of London
always meet with his approval, as witness Mr Tartar and his “hanging garden” in The Mystery of Edwin Drood. And when a garden like Miss Havisham’s produces crops of rubbish we have a situation different from that in Goldsmith or Wordsworth. The displacement tends rather more to the grotesque than to the elegiac:

... I strolled into the garden, and strolled all over it. It was quite a wilderness, and there were old melon-frames and cucumber-frames in it, which seemed in their decline to have produced a spontaneous growth of weak attempts at pieces of old hats and boots, with now and then a weedy offshoot into the likeness of a battered saucepan.

When I had exhausted the garden and a green house with nothing in it but a fallen-down grape-vine and some bottles, I found myself in a dismal corner ... . (83; Ch. 11)

In the absence of husbandry, the plants have not reverted to their native lankness and niggardness, but appear rather to have borne urban detritus. Indeed the syllepsis of “a fallen-down grape-vine and some bottles” conjures up an image of a vine bearing bottled wine, while the mimetic straggle of the syntax in “a spontaneous growth of weak attempts at pieces of old hats and boots,” with its sagging accumulation of prepositional phrases, recalls the idea of lank growth so often featured in other forsaken gardens. Here pollution, not undisciplined growth, measures the desolateness and sets a precedent for twentieth-century versions of the topos with their recurrent images of tawdriness and litter. For example, there is Robert Lowell’s “The Public Garden” and there is Richard Wilbur’s “After the Last Bulletins”:

... Trash
Tears itself on the railings,
Soars and falls with a soft crash,

Tumbles and soars again. Unruly flights
Scamper the park, and taking a statue for dead
Strike at the positive eyes,
Batter and flap the stolid head

And scratch the noble name. In empty lots
Our journals spiral in a fierce noyade... . (241)

Those empty lots derive in turn from Eliot’s Preludes where urban spaces, by virtue of their sheer vacancy, become parodic gardens in an otherwise congested, decreated environment.

That is one modern response to the deserted garden. Another is that exemplified by Patrick White. In Riders in the Chariot he launches his most spleenetic attack on middle-class values, often taking the suburban garden as their vector. Something just hinted in Crabbe (the prim, unnatural containments of Catharine Lloyd’s garden) is augmented into a prophetic horror. The two suburban conspirators against Himmelfarb are found in a garden wholly denatured:

She looked around, at the darkness that was clotting under the few tailored shrubs.
“Mrs Jolley,” she said, “this is nothing,” she said, “if not strickly between ourselves.”
“Oh yes!” said Mrs Jolley.
Mrs Flack tore off an evergreen leaf which a bird had spattered. (471; Ch. 14)
And again, Mrs Rosetree mistakes a weed for a flower:

Now Mrs Rosetree chose to remark, with a special kind of tenderness, from her side of the photinias:

“That I always think, is such a pretty little thing.”

Although she was in no mood for any bally plant.

“That,” replied the colonel, “is oxalis.”

And pulled it smartly up. (503; Ch. 15)

Gardens in this vision are simply adjuncts of an ugly urban sprawl:

Filled with such certainty, or an evening feed of steak, the bellies of stockbrokers had risen like gasometers. As the stockbrokers stood, pressing their thumbs over the nozzles of hoses, to make the water squirt better, they discussed the rival merits of thuya orientalis and retinospera pisifera plumosa. All the gardens of Paradise East were planted for posterity. (439; Ch. 12)

There is of course a double irony in the claim that future generations will enjoy the gardens of Paradise East, pointing as it does to the stinted nature of their present (all dwarfish, two-dimensional cypresses), and to the impermanence of any garden superimposed on, rather than coaxed from, the land. Look at the fate of Norbert Hare’s garden much earlier in the narrative:

... just staring out over his own property. Or beyond, it could have been—beyond the still manageable park which he had ordered to be planted, beyond even the grey raggedy scrub, for his eyes appeared momentarily to have been appeased, and that end might not have been achieved, if anchorage in time and space had forced him to recognize the native cynicism of that same, grey, raggedy scrub.

The scrub, which had been pushed back, immediately began to tangle with Norbert Hare’s willfully created park, until, years later, there was his daughter, kneeling in a tunnel of twigs which led to Xanadu. (16; Ch. 1)

The impertinence of this colonial garden to the Australian landscape on to which it has been forced leads later in the twentieth century to questions about the traditional garden tout court—the extravagance and vulgarity of its hybrid plants, the consequent impoverishment of the gene pool, the herbicides and insecticides with which it secures its order, its culpability in the spread of alien vegetation. Current issues in ecology will no doubt in time produce an altogether different version of the hortus desertus. A hint of what might lie ahead can be found in Bernadette Vallely’s 1001 Ways to Save the Planet:

Let the dandelions grow!

Dandelions, thistles, clover and nettles attract butterflies. With the removal of hedgerows, the loss of many wild plants and the increased use of pesticides, our gardens could become sanctuaries for butterflies, so set aside a section of your garden for one or all of these plants. (59)

We have come a long way from Richard II, and even from monocultural molehills of Bacon’s wilderness. But perhaps we have not—for Ms Vallely seems as eager as earlier gardeners to make a resort for “wholesome herbs.” She adds: “Dandelions are also a tasty addition to salads.”
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Works Cited


