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REDEEMING NATURE?

The Garden as a Moral Space

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Among the symbolic images associated with landscape, the garden most of all represents the human aspiration to harmoniously live *inside* nature and, at the same time, to morally and culturally step *outside* her. What characterizes the garden is above all its finality. Agricultural land is intended for production: it has as such an external finality. The garden has instead an internal order, which makes it an end in itself. Such an order, according to time and taste, may follow the laws of geometry or be modeled upon an ideally “free nature.” Nonetheless, never is the garden “only” nature. In turn, it represents a coincidence of nature and imagination, and its essence is itself charged with meanings that transcend the garden’s sheer function of being an artistic elaboration of landscape. Like agricultural land and wilderness, and before being natural scenery, the garden is in fact a moral allegory. It is the material projection of a path which takes place *in interiore homine*, and as such it can be harmonious and ordered, or disharmonious and mind-challenging like a labyrinth.

In my contribution I will try to show how a map of a moral space can be traced around landscape and its cultural images. In this map the garden symbolizes a strategy of both a composition and a fracture between human order and natural order. Through some literary and philosophical examples I will propose to read the symbology of the garden as an ambivalent figure of human relationship to nature, in both theoretical and ethical terms.

In the beginning was the Word. Right after it, there was Nature, and it was a garden. This was in fact nature’s first shape according to the Biblical tale. Following this tradition, as humans are “made in the image of God,” so does the human-made garden strive to look like that archetypical place, which was our abode before we “fell.” This striving is an endless one, a task which involves both beauty and virtue: the first garden is not only a place where one finds, to quote *Paradise Lost*, “To all delight of human sense expos’d/ In narrow room Natures whole wealth;” it is the symbol of innocence as well. Quoting Milton again, the garden stands for that “Sanctitude severe and pure” whose loss will make even nature look “Sin-bred” (Book IV, vv. 206-7; 293; 315).

After humans “invent” the sin, the archetypical garden turns suddenly into a wilderness. Exiled from it, humans are precipitated into chaos. The restoration of that primeval order is thus a “regulatory ideal” which humans ought incessantly to aim at. The art of the garden proclaims this aim: in a continuous struggle between sin and virtue, the garden corresponds to innocence whereas natural chaos corresponds to guilt, namely, moral chaos. Man’s and woman’s fall is thus nature’s fall as well. Becoming wild, nature has to suffer the fatigue of being tended. Only through human activity—a corrective and assiduous one— will it return to be a garden.

Cultivating the land means to tame it in order to satisfy our needs. Agriculture is then the sign that neither the land nor humans are free: like man and woman, after the Fall “the whole creation groans in labor pains” (Saint Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, 8, 22). Also nature awaits her redemption. The order of the garden expresses nature’s longing for such a redemption. Differently from agriculture, the garden is hence not only an escape from the chaos introduced by sin, but above all the retrieval of that dimension of aesthetic disinterest which decrees the end of a state of need. If agriculture wants to submit nature, the garden wants to redeem her. It is the place where art and nature gather in an ideal harmony.

But the imagery of the garden is not very peaceful, though. This becomes clear, in my opinion, in certain moments of Western intellectual history, and above all when the aspiration is felt to “clarify” nature’s obscure laws by means of human reason and to establish a comforting harmony, both intellectual and moral. I think in particular of the early Renaissance and the late Enlightenment-early Romanticism. Both periods developed a very distinctive aesthetics of gardening. The Renaissance Italian-style garden or the Rationalist French-style garden is a place of comforting geometries. From such a garden chaos has been apparently banned. The Pre-romantic and Romantic gardening (especially in England) re-introduce chaos but only as an ornament of an ideally “free nature.”

In both cases the allegory of the garden is eloquent: order is sought to shed light upon the dark side of nature. But human order has a dark side too.

Among the many ones, I have chosen two examples for a closer examination. The first one, doubtlessly more famous, is the esoteric garden depicted in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*Poliphilo’s Strife of Love in a Dream*, 1499), likely to be attributed to the Humanist prince Francesco Colonna (but it has been also attributed to Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo de’ Medici, and to another Francesco Colonna). This work is the most famous illustrated book among incunabola. First printed by the Aldus Manutius in Venice, *Poliphilo’s* original exemplars are extremely precious and rare.

The second example I will examine is less famous, but not less meaningful in relationship to its cultural and historical context; namely, the fragment of novel entitled *Der Kunstgarten* (*The art-made garden*, 1779). The author was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, one of the liveliest intellectuals in Germany at the end of the 18th century (see Verra; Hammacher; Iovino).

Poliphilo's Dream is an extremely complex and symbolically rich work. It is also linguistically complex: the book is written in a peculiar Latinate Italian, full of coined terms based on Latin and Greek roots. Arabic and Hebrew words recur as well in illustrations.

In *Poliphilo's Dream* the garden is a metaphor for knowledge. The author gathers in this novel several and diverse philosophical sources, from ancient materialism, tracing back to Empedocles and Lucretius, to the hermetic and mystical wisdom of early Humanistic cults of nature. In the oneiric landscape in which Poliphilo is transported while asleep, he encounters dragons, wolves, maidens, nymphs. Nature is mingled here with arcane temples and the archaeological remnants of past civilizations. This is a clear allusion to a hidden bond, to a unity lost to the consciousness. (And in fact, the psychologist Carl Jung admired the book, believing the dream images presaged his theory of archetypes).

Nature is seen here as not only the custodian of life and wisdom, but also as an inaccessible place, one that contains in itself the truth about all things. In a garden which is an actual "forest of symbols," where mythological animals stand side by side with obelisks, statues, hermetic pictures, and a large variety of architecture, Poliphilo sets off until he finally gets lost. Abruptly the garden turns out to be a labyrinth. From a lush and allusive, sometimes edenic, landscape all of a sudden he is thrown into a dark, undecipherable scenery. Dreaming within his own dream, Poliphilo understands that the order of nature is other than the order of our knowledge. The moral meaning of this is that love, not human logic, is the key to penetrate nature's secret. The coincidence of love and knowledge points to the joint inquiries of magic and philosophy typical of the Renaissance. The theoretical and the erotic themes are here one: if love is the secret of nature's life, all knowledge is but love. Poliphilo, literally "the Lover of Many Things," is here ready to meet his Polia, literally "Many Things," and to recognize her as nature herself.

But the labyrinth's challenge is pressing. Conquering Polia is in fact possible only at the end of a long struggle. As Poliphilo is about to take Polia into his arms, she vanishes into thin air and he wakes up. Once awake, what remains to Poliphilo is therefore not a sense of possession and happiness, but the sense of getting lost, and the awareness about the futility of human intellectual experience. Thus ruins symbolize that every form humans make up is

destined to come back to nature; they also allude to the loss of a common language for nature and humanity (Calvesi 69ff.; Di Caprio 453.). In the end of the novel, the human aspiration to approach nature by means of intellectual knowledge discloses instead a sense of profound distance. This distance is materialized into the fragmentary essence of human experience, alluded to by the archaeological ruins on which nature resurges, almost as she wanted to reclaim her own place. This reclaimed space, at the same time indecipherable and inscrutable, is a garden. But to our mind this garden is a labyrinth. The meaning is clear: our knowledge of nature (of “many things”), has rarely the grace of a garden; more often it has the chaotic and deceiving look of a labyrinth. The same seems to happen to virtue, considered in the early Renaissance as a form of intellectual knowledge.

That in nature garden and labyrinth coincide, means that humans cannot expect to give rules to nature. They are rather dominated by her. In terms of knowledge, overcoming the humanity-nature dualism is allowed on a different level than that of consciousness. Even for Humanism at its full bloom, the relationship between human order and natural order is profoundly problematic.

In the second example the moral matter is predominant over the theoretical one. The *Kunstgarten* is explicitly an ethical-philosophical dialogue. It will be integrated into *Woldemar* (1794), the second of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s two novels. The title of the dialogue’s first edition (1779) makes this philosophical intent clear. It sounds *Ein Stück Philosophie des Lebens und der Menschheit* (*A piece of philosophy of life and humankind*). The subject of the dialogue sets continuity with *Woldemar*’s *Leitmotiv*; namely, whether and how a moral behavior can be at the same time harmonious with nature and enlightened by reason.

The garden to which the title alludes is that of Dorenburg, one of the novel’s characters. In the search for truth and for a genuine moral simplicity he wants to tear down this marvelous “artistic” garden (in the title it is not specified whether it is a French- or Italian-style garden). Room can thus be made to a “free” (namely, an English-style) garden. (By the way, it is interesting to note that the aspiration to a simple life is expressed here with a sentence which sounds very similar to Thoreau’s “*Simplify! Simplify! Simplify!*” This sentence exhorts: “Simplicity, more and more simplicity and truth,” Jacobi 134).

The decision to transform the garden gives way to a line of reasonings. The distinction between a French and an English garden, between a garden and a seemingly “free nature” (“a nature which would be nothing but natural;” 138) is in the *Kunstgarten* the metaphor for the

conflict between the natural immediacy of moral sense and the mediations of social habits, which is as well the conflict between heart and reason, *physis* and *nomos*.

For the enlightenment sensibility, well aware of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's lesson, there is a profound gap between the "ideal" garden and the "real" one. The latter carries in itself a form of artificiality which is not simply another work of art (art being, for Rousseau, a betrayal of nature's spontaneity). The "real" garden alludes to the conventional essence of moral laws. In Jacobi's work these two dimensions, namely the natural and the ethical, are deeply interlaced with each other, sometimes even superimposed upon one another. In its different shapes and orders, the garden therefore becomes a metaphor for the search for authenticity in moral life.

In fact artifice is difficult to disguise in the garden: "I do not know anything more miserable than an artificial nature which, entangled in a thousand chains, pretends to be free nature," says one of the characters (141). At the same time, the affectations of a moral conduct which pretends to be natural produce but a caricature of virtue. There is no solution to such dilemmas: from the "art-made garden" (hence the title *Der Kunstgarten*) one can never step out; likewise it is even more problematic to embrace a romantic self-creative ethic, going past the sphere of social laws and customs. The dream of a perfect garden is the dream of a moral behavior which naturally entails its law; namely, a behavior in which art is harmonious with nature, as well as heart with reason, the spirit with the letter, the real world with the ideal one. For this reason, Jacobi suggests, the many fashions of the garden (whether French, or Italian, or English) are all as artificial as the many forms of social life. Such forms are necessary, though: one does not live by nature alone. If we want a garden "to be a perfect garden, a garden in its highest sense," says a character (142), this garden will rather show its inner artifice, than look like a mannered nature. Likewise, if humans turn down the conventional (artificial) forms of social life, they are destined to fall through (153).

At this point, we are back to the juxtaposition we started with; namely, that between art and nature; which is to say, between salvation and chaos. The ideal garden, exactly like the ideal virtue in which heart and reason are harmonized, stays but a dream. And a dream remains every projected transformation as well: at the end of the dialogue Jacobi does not tell if something is really going to change in Dorenburg's garden.

A few years after the publication of the *Kunstgarten*, Goethe, the poet and scientist, will say that "even the most unnatural thing is nature" (478). Putting together poetry, nature and science, Goethe will show how nature and her laws are the destiny of the human and, in a sense, its redemption. With this purpose in mind, he will happen to imagine two gardens: one

which recurs in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, namely, the unquiet and mysterious garden evoked by Mignon in her song *Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn* (*Know you the land where lemon-trees bloom?*). This garden will reappear as the setting of Mignon's obscure and painful story in *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Travel*. The second garden is the English-style one which the Captain and Charlotte envision (but above all desire) together at the beginning of the *Elective Affinities* (1809). Around that garden, projected with their enthusiasm and "spontaneity" of dilettante-gardeners, their natural affinity will blossom. This is as to say that, whereas society and its "forms" establish chaos, nature brings back her order—an order that, in the long run, completely collides with and prevails over social conventions.

What we can see in all these examples is that the garden is an attempt to frame nature into an aesthetic and moral ideal. This ideal is supposed to set the humans free from chaos in that it sets nature free from herself. As Hegel would put it, the conflict between humanity and nature is not dialectically overcome. It is simply removed by way of a humanization of nature. The dualism between humanity and nature is resolved in that the latter term is obscured by and absorbed into the first one. The examined cases show that, though all our attempts, it is not just impossible for nature go "out" of herself and become "human order." They also show that it is quite difficult for humans to confront nature, trying to establish artificial and controllable "islands" inside her. It is as though chaos, like death in Guercino's and Lorraine's painting, would claim its presence in Arcadia.

Even in historical moments in which philosophy and art cherished a dream of order and light, they could not help facing the dark side of their vision. Nature, both inside and outside the human mind, was there to remind us how garden and wilderness, like order and chaos, could be so close to one another.

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