

**Environmental Otherness:
Nature on Human Terms in the Garden**

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One of the most challenging confrontations of otherness in current global affairs is between human beings and nature. In most debates of otherness, the natural environment features as a normative background before which the uncanny, 'unnatural' Other unfolds its monstrous potential. This article connects considerations of otherness with the dynamic and incommensurate idea commonly quick referenced by the term nature: plants, animals, weather, climate and the elements, have variously been considered as antagonists to human beings, as non-human or 'more-than-human' Others.¹ Building on notions of nature's otherness as explored by John Passmore and Simon Hailwood, this article aims to expand on notions of otherness by thinking beyond the anthropocentric sphere, considering alterity as an environmental issue and opening up a range of unresolved dichotomies.²

¹ This notion is credited to (Plumwood 2002).

² (Passmore 1980, Hailwood 2000). The debate on nature's otherness is also documented in (Keller 2010, Elliot 1995).

Nature is often seen as juxtaposed to human beings. At its most universal, the natural can be defined as that which is not artificial or human-made. However, as Lawrence Bush *et al.* point out, '[n]ature is not natural' (Busch *et al.* 1996, 3). Not only are many plants, animals and landscapes products of human adaptation, but the concept of nature is subject to the anthropocentrism of language: 'We may not create the molecules, organisms, or systems among organisms, but we nevertheless constitute nature through our practical and cognitive activities' (Busch *et al.* 1996, 4). In recent years, interpretations of this act of constitution have become the subject of intense debates on the changing nature of human-nature relations.³ In the course of the twentieth century, the uncanny consequences of attempting to control and manipulate nature, which we only partly understand, is increasingly experienced as the source of actual threats. This article explores a prime site where human beings come into contact with these issues. Gardens bridge one of the central dilemmas of human existence, how human beings relate to their environment, which makes them into philosophical sites par excellence.⁴ While decorative and recreational, even paradisaical, the image of the garden also encompasses histories of displacement and violence: unwanted plants and animals are exterminated for the sake of aesthetic ideas, and many of the plants assembled in any garden have been manipulated and uprooted from their natural habitats.⁵ The liminal space of the garden raises an awareness of the

³ Milestones in this debate are (Stiling 2012, Morton 2007, Plumwood 2002, Soper 1995, Thornber 2012).

⁴ Not only do gardeners improve their skills over time, but gardens have framed other learning activities through the ages: historians emphasise the importance of the garden as an academic site, for instance, framing ambulant study from ancient Greek history and philosophy through the Middle Ages (Harrison 2008, 71ff, Hall 2011b, Lichacev 1996).

⁵ Examples are discussed in (Uglow 2004, Drayton 2000, Bending 1998).

limitations of human knowledge, perception and control through language: one cannot talk a plant into growing. Rain clouds are above verbal insults. Woodchucks follow their own reason. Otherness mainly becomes a matter of concern in connection with change. The garden presents us with an Other that transcends ideas of purely human otherness. Writings about this Other enhance our insight into the projections involved in confronting otherness. To engage with the garden is to engage with a dynamic complex subject which exerts a transformative influence on the viewer, visitor or gardener, and even the reader of garden literature. The transformative powers of garden otherness can be reassuring and menacing at the same time.

The meaning of gardens is pursued in many diverse fields and discourses. Different aspects of gardens are investigated in disciplines ranging from anthropology, philosophy, botany, (landscape) architecture, history, art history, cultural geography, psychology, history of medicine and various branches of human health studies, environmental science and tourism (Franklin 2002, 134). Within the humanities, gardens are debated in aesthetics, literary geography, utopian studies, postcolonialism, indigenous studies and ecocriticism. Writers in all these disciplines share a sense that their field has not yet adequately come to grips with gardens. For the past twenty years, in recognition of the garden's multiple discursive properties, approaches have become more interdisciplinary, as illustrated by Mark Francis and Randolph T. Hester:

Traditionally, the garden has been examined as an idea, a place *or* an action. Gardens as idea is the dominion of the philosopher and design theorist. Historians, landscape architects, and occasionally geographers study the garden as a place. And recently, the garden as action has interested medical

researchers, psychologists and sociologists. Designers and scholars have traditionally examined the garden from within the narrow boundaries of their separate disciplines. [...] Our view is that meanings of the garden (as well as of the larger landscape of which gardens are a part) can only be understood today as a whole, as an ecology of interrelated and connected thoughts, spaces, activities, and symbols (Francis and Hester 1990, 2).

On one level, the garden turns otherness and difference into aesthetic principles. Almost all geographical regions have produced garden cultures.⁶ 'The garden' may well be an almost universally known ideal, but this myth can take a myriad of different forms, many of which carry divergent connotations. Animals, stones, benches, water features, lanterns, greenhouses or other buildings, sun-dials and sculptures complement the live green garden elements and add their distinctive connotations. Plants are the most obvious 'ingredients', but this category encompasses contents as diverse as flowers, fruit, shrubs, trees, moss, mushrooms, all in seemingly endless variations. Whether the word evokes images of lush orchards, geometrical arrangements of cacti, topiary, ancient groves or tropical oases depends on factors such as geography, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, education, profession, travel history, gender and many others. Gardens can even be spaces quite or almost devoid of *bios*, such as Zen gardens and other sand or rock formations.⁷ Being made up of plants imported and hybridised, gardens harmonise familiar and unfamiliar aspects. This blurring of boundaries in and of

⁶ While the differences seem to outweigh the similarities between the vegetation that makes up Greenlandic gardens as described by Karen Nørregaard and gardens in other parts of Europe or the Orient, there are significant historical as well as practical, material parallels (Nørregaard 2005).

⁷ In some Arabic cultures, the desert is described as the garden of God. The desert-garden topic has gained moderate publicity through a colonial novel made into a film starring Marlene Dietrich: (Hichens 1904).

itself can be read as uncanny, and parallels between planting and burying have been pondered in various writings.⁸

Nature is beyond human control. It is not only in this sense that gardens are in an ambiguous relationship to nature. Largely made up of organic materials, they are signs of human efforts to improve and change nature – in fact the term 'nature' etymologically relates to birth and development. This implies that nature in and of itself is somehow lacking. While recreational in purpose, the garden raises uncomfortable questions: does nature belong to human beings? Do human beings belong to nature? How do we construct that which is natural, and what does this suggest about our need for control? What connections between predatory natural expansion and imperialism does the garden suggest? The garden is both material reality and the source of myths and images. It bridges experiential reality and the imagination. Contact with living matter, the emotional bond of ownership and the contact with things perceived as aesthetically pleasing combine to generate an overall positive perception of gardens.⁹ Gardening features prominently in health magazines and is recommended as an educational tool and even as a remedy to criminality.¹⁰ Besides providing opportunities for exercise and home-grown fruit

⁸ Prominent literary negotiations of this theme include (Modjeska 1994, Coetzee 2004, Graves 1956).

⁹ This is the subject of several sociological analyses, e.g. (Bhatti 2000, 2004, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2010)

¹⁰ Such is the message of *Greenfingers* (2000), a film depicting a group of prison inmates who experience how gardening, initially devised as a chore, eventually gives them an identity, a job and a place in society. Non-fictional equivalents of this rehabilitation programme can be found in several countries: http://www.humanflowerproject.com/index.php/weblog/comments/gardening_in_prison/, <http://insight-gardenprogram.org/overview.html>, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/7964436/-Windlesham-Gardening-Trophy-won-by-Foston-Hall-prison-inmates.html>. Accessed 2013-06-23.

and vegetables, gardens are said to fulfil deeper needs of generating a sense of belonging to a place. This, however, is one of many ambivalent facets of the garden. While signposting ownership, gardens conversely stress human alienation from nature and the many displacements and modifications of nature that humans have caused. Trying to understand the garden thus involves a consideration of many seemingly contradictory factors. This is captured in Michel Foucault's essay on heterotopia where he identifies the garden as 'a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity' (Foucault 1986, 25-26). Using mirror imagery, Foucault problematises how heterotopian sites, notably gardens, subvert the borderline between reality and utopia. Like reading, the garden displaces human subjects, creating and breaking illusions and generating self-knowledge, but also a potentially subversive blurring of borders. Gardens are defined by the care that human beings devote to a piece of land. And yet, the garden presents humans with the insight that nature does not care in return. As John Burroughs spells out:

Every creature must take its chances, and man is no exception. [...] Nature does not care whether the hunter slay the beast or the beast the hunter; she will make good compost of them both, and her ends are prospered whichever succeeds (Burroughs 1904, 154).

Plants respond to human affections in indirect and incomplete ways. In defining nature's otherness, Passmore emphasises that nature cannot reciprocate the sentiments involved in gardening. Whether this is seen as a strength or a threat is open to interpretation, but it may well be seen as a lack and hence, a source of fear:

...the philosopher has learnt to live with the 'strangeness' of nature, with the fact that natural processes are entirely indifferent to our existence and welfare – not positively indifferent, of course, but *incapable* of caring about us – and are complex in a way that rules out the possibility of our wholly mastering and transforming them. (Passmore 1974, 212).

While indifference distinguishes nature from humans, it however gives rise to the question of what it means to say that nature is 'incapable of caring', if human beings, who are not indifferent, are its most destructive products.

There are many reasons why 'the global dominance of the plant kingdom is seldom recognized' (Hall 2011b, 3). Plants are Others chiefly because they cannot be communicated with. The relationship between human beings and plants seems one-sided. In contrast to animals, plants do not display emotions. While alive, plant otherness makes it hard to conceptualise a relationship with plants, as Matthew Hall argues: 'human beings do not as readily identify with plants as with animals' (Hall 2011b, 5). Exceptions to this tendency can be found in indigenous philosophies discussed in Hall's survey of botanical philosophies:

[i]n animistic worldviews, it is a general principle that the plant, animal, and human realms interpenetrate. Within a great diversity of oral traditions, in almost all cases, there is a recognition of the kinship between human beings and the natural world, a kinship that is based not upon rebirth [...] but upon shared heritage (Hall 2011b, 100).

Human beings have projected emotions onto plants throughout history, attributing human characteristics and values to them. Plants are thereby 'made to speak' in different ways, especially flowers,¹¹ and trees stand for specific ideas, e.g. the oak

¹¹ From courtship codes to complex non-verbal messaging systems, flower language exerts fascination even for present-day novelists and critics. (Cixous 1997, Ingram 1887, Greenaway 1977, Sartillot 1993, King 2003, Seaton 1995, Tyas 1860). The most recent example of a novel returning to Victorian floral codes is (Diftenbaugh 2011).

and maple appearing on flags or coins and thereby functioning as a signifier of collective identification. Garden writing abounds with images that conceptualise the human-garden relationship in dynamic terms of human relations. The garden is personified as lover, friend, enemy, teacher, mentor, pupil, child or ward, relative, neighbour, employer, master or servant, or allegorised as an inspiring muse. In botanical classifications, the garden represents hierarchical order, and as such has provided images of leadership and business structures on small and larger scales.¹²

Such anthropomorphisations draw attention to the fact that gardens are also textual creations. They arise from plans, drawings, maps and seed order forms, and they are popular book subjects. Garden writings encompass practical advice as well as engaging the imagination. Turning to two textual examples, this article not only plans to explore the interplay of human and garden otherness and mutual transformation. As a side-line, the present analysis challenges an instance of what might be termed 'genre Othering': gardening books have received comparatively little critical attention. Given their overall use as guidebooks, one would be right to suppose there is little subtext to be explored in the bulk of gardening books available. However, there are examples which merit critical attention. This article addresses garden otherness in two texts which are read as life writing in the widest possible sense: as narratives which are in part autobiographical and which indirectly articulate verdicts on human affairs through the medium of the garden. To differing degrees, they set up the garden as a crisis laboratory where they can

¹² The model character of the garden as an ideal structure is used in company management: the American Society for Quality recently published an article alerting readers to the useful business lessons taught by gardening: (Hall 2011a).

variously escape from and work through pressing problems in their lives. Exploring the tension between the surface beauty and underground entanglements, these textual gardens evolve into sites of double meaning and subversion, but also growth and creativity.

Nicknamed 'the Mark Twain of American horticulture' (Pollan 2002, ix), Charles Dudley Warner (1829-1900) was in fact both neighbour and collaborator of Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Published at the instigation of another remarkable neighbour, the Reverend Beecher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Summer in a Garden* (1870) is a collection of nineteen weekly essays which had appeared in *The Hartford Courant* earlier that year. Warner's title echoes the retelling of a grand individual's 'Life and Times'. The possessive pride of such autobiographical works is however ironically undermined: it is only one summer which comes into focus, and the garden seems a modest and domestic setting. Warner offers a moral reading of gardens as arenas where *right* and *wrong* fight for supremacy and where a number of public concerns of late nineteenth century New England are lampooned, using fruit and vegetables as a means of illustration. Warner alerts readers to the peculiar status of his garden as a site of political double-entendre from the start, when he admits to having helped himself to Lima bean poles planted in 'another man's field' (Warner 2002, 10), reasoning that 'people in this country take great liberties at the polls' (Warner 2002, 11). His playful, indirect political commentary is powered by a religious reading of the garden as being plagued by a variety of serpents and thus a useful point from which to lecture readers about corresponding pests on the larger social plane of the union, or

dispense 'sprigs of moral philosophy' that 'sprout within the garden's luxuriant beds' (Rogers 2011, 125).

Warner crafts a text which at first glance seems to deal with a private enterprise of conquering nature and drawing highly subjective morals from the 'behaviour' of plants. The gardener plays the role of a satirical examiner who digs up evidence of how far contemporary America has evolved, or rather, failed to evolve, since the expulsion from Eden, to which the narrative takes regular recourse. From the vantage point of his garden, Warner adapts the figure of a court jester to post-Civil War Massachusetts. What Warner's book also reveals, however, is that morals and ideas of otherness are subject to change. It shows a problematic politics of exclusion and escapist use of garden imagery. Through the garden, Warner criticises modernisation and links it to dissimulation: 'Oh, for the good old days when a strawberry was a strawberry, and there was no perplexity about it! There are more berries now than churches; and no one knows what to believe' (Warner 2002, 94-95). Warner's book steers clear of any commitment regarding the question of slavery which so heavily preoccupied many contemporaries, though Warner was known as an abolitionist. He is a little more outspoken with regard to the other vital national concern of his time, the civil rights of women.¹³

'In offering you the fruit of my garden' (Warner 2002, 2): from his somewhat biblical dedication onwards Warner frames the garden in terms of property. Given the importance of land ownership as a pathway to liberty in the history of the United States, it is unsurprising that Warner expresses great satisfaction in

¹³ Warner's use of the garden as a source for political commentary is taken up in Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Being There*: (Kosinski 1970) where an idiot savant's innocent garden observations are misinterpreted as political oratory.

possessing a portion of earth. He is careful to point out that any garden is an enabling size if regarded vertically:

...no man but feels more of a man in the world if he have a bit of ground that he can call his own. However small it is on the surface, it is four thousand miles deep; and that is a very handsome property. [...] The man who has planted a garden feels that he has done something for the good of the world (Warner 2002, 6).

This aphoristic observation emphasises that, within the confines of Warner's texts, at any rate, the power of the garden lies in its depth, which alerts readers to look beyond surface appearances. Thus Warner contests any simplistic equation between property and freedom. On the contrary, the garden all but enslaves his owner: 'Somebody ought to get up before the dew is off (why don't the dew stay on till after a reasonable breakfast?) and sprinkle soot on the leaves. I wonder if it is I' (Warner 2002, 14). Warner sets his gardener-persona up as a humble steward who exemplifies a sense of duty that other governments fail to match. From the first weekly entry onwards, Warner proclaims: 'I mean to have a moral garden' (Warner 2002, 10), and he makes good his threat. Ecclesiastical vocabulary and religious imagery abound as he outlines that 'the garden [...] becomes a moral agent, a test of character, as it was in the beginning' (Warner 2002, 10) and when he draws parallels between fruit cultivation, weed-removal and 'fighting original sin' (Warner 2002, 11). From the same source springs his motivation as a writer depicting the garden: 'The principal value of a private garden is not [...] to give the possessor vegetables and fruit [...], but to teach him patience and philosophy, and the higher virtues' (Warner 2002, 9). Moralising conclusions invest the writer-gardener with the role of interpreter between a biblically-connotated nature space

and human civilisation. In line with Puritan models of allegorical reading, his garden is a book where a divinely instituted nature imparts lessons in patience, humility and modesty. This programme would fail to entertain, were it not for the fact that Warner continually undermines his moral mission by siding with the wrong-doers. A case in point is his discussion of a wayward vine which ('or who') he observes living the American Dream:

There was a worthless vine that (or who) started up about midway between a grape-trellis and a row of bean-poles, some three feet from each, but a little nearer the trellis. When it came out of the ground, it looked around to see what it should do. The trellis was already occupied. The bean-pole was empty. There was evidently a little the best chance of light, air and sole proprietorship on the pole. And the vine started for the pole, and began to climb it with determination (Warner 2002, 17).

While admiring the resourcefulness of one adversary, Warner similarly personifies a particularly hateful weed, *Portulaca oleracea* or *Purslane*, by calling on the holy inquisition to have it wiped from the face of the earth:

I am half determined to petition the Oecumenical Council to issue a bull of excommunication against 'pusley.' Of all the forms which 'error' has taken in this world, I think that is about the worst. In the middle ages, the monks in St. Bernard's ascetic community at Clairvaux excommunicated a vineyard which a less rigid monk had planted near, so that it bore nothing (Warner 2002, 34).

Warner's garden is decidedly American, as indicated by his stress on autarky in an entry set in July: 'I know of nothing that makes one feel more complacent, in these July days, than to have his vegetables from his own garden. [...] It is a kind of declaration of independence' (Warner 2002, 49). The garden and garden terminology also serve to uphold Warner's own independence rhetorically and

politically, when he sees himself confronted by unwanted offers of confidentiality from President Ulysses S. Grant, an avid reader of Warner's column. Throughout the president's visit, the subject of Warner's eighth column, his narrator struggles to hold on to his neutrality as the president attempts to draw him out into committing himself to direct political remarks. Warner parries the president's attacks on his diplomatic stance, attributing his expertise at such evasive manoeuvres to his daily gardening work:

There has been a lively time in our garden this summer; but it seems to me there is very little to show for it. It has been a terrible campaign; but where is the indemnity? Where are all 'sass' and Lorraine? It is true that we have lived on the country; but we desire, besides, the fruits of the war. There are no onions, for one thing. [...] In onion is strength; and a garden without it lacks flavor. The onion in its satin wrappings is among the most beautiful of vegetables; and it is the only one that represents the essence of things. It can almost be said to have a soul. You take off coat after coat, and the onion is still there; and, when the last one is removed, who dare say that the onion itself is destroyed, though you can weep over its departed spirit? If there is any one thing on this fallen earth that the angels in heaven weep over more than another, it is the onion. (Warner 2002, 91)

It may border on over-interpretation to hear the diction of 'In God we Trust' echoed in the phrase 'In onions is strength.' But given Warner's predilection for conceits of statesmanship, the onion as an iconic model epitomises his view of the multiple layers of parallels between plants and human political affairs. The allegorical onion epitomises Warner's use of the garden as an resource of suggestive figures. His text is scattered with aphoristic similes relating people, plants and texts. Lettuce is compared to conversation, in need of oil to give it nutritional value, and corn is extolled as 'the child of song. It waves in all literature' (Warner 2002, 44). Even most prosaic vegetables undergo poetic

blossoming, though not without authorial comment on the problems of representation involved: Warner stereotypes the bean as 'a graceful, engaging vine; but you never can put beans into poetry, nor into the highest sort of prose' (Warner 2002, 44).

By contrast, Warner does not devote much space to descriptions of flowers. He cultivates edibles, such as strawberries, melons, beans, squashes and peas. Beside telling readers about the fate of his fruit and vegetables, his narrative mainly deals with their enemies (neighbourhood boys, pests and weeds), and the occasional visitor. The usefulness of Warner's garden supports the didactic undertone as he constructs a form of osmosis between the earth, its product and the human beings who tend the ground and ingest its products: 'There is life in the ground; it goes into the seeds; and it also, when it is stirred up goes into the man who stirs it' (Warner 2002, 6). Warner distinguishes between this kind of man, white New England gardeners like himself, and unorthodox ones, such as Chinese immigrants, to whom he ascribes unnatural tastes, as when he depicts the following reaction of an immigrant to Warner's nemesis, his most hated weed:

I saw a Chinaman, who came over with a returned missionary, and pretended to be converted, boil a lot of it in a pot, stir in eggs, and mix and eat it with relish, — 'Me likee he.' It will be a good thing to keep the Chinamen on when they come to do our gardening. I only fear they will cultivate it at the expense of the strawberries and melons. Who can say that other weeds, which we despise, may not be the favorite food of some remote people or tribe (Warner 2002, 25-26).

Racist analogies between immigrants and weeds, besides making Warner's text unpalatable to a present-day audience, clearly signal that the garden-human relationship has been adapted to accommodate Otherness of a changing nature. A

garden walk in the company of President Grant culminates in a similar comparison between immigration of plants and humans:

As we walked along, the keen eye of the president rested upon some handsome sprays of 'pusley,' which must have grown up since Saturday night, it was most fortunate; for it led his Excellency to speak of the Chinese problem. [...] He said I was right in saying that 'pusley' was the natural food of the Chinaman, and that where the 'pusley' was there would the Chinaman be also. For his part, he welcomed the Chinese emigration: we needed the Chinaman in our gardens to eat the 'pusley;' [...] To get rid of rats and 'pusley,' he said, was a necessity of our civilization. (Warner 2002, 40)

The racism articulated here is a rare moment of consent of the two leading intellectuals who are given a voice in this text. Though benevolent on the surface and driven by a moral impulse to improve the land and the character of his readership, Warner's text is steeped in prejudice. The anthropomorphisation of his garden inhabitants into desirable and undesirable occupants evinces a disturbing side when he casually inserts an anti-Semitic remark:

I will not associate with any vegetable which is disreputable, or has not some quality that can contribute to my moral growth. I do not care to be seen much with the squashes or the dead-beets. Fortunately I can cut down any sorts I do not like with the hoe, and, probably, commit no more sin in doing so, than the Christians did in hewing down the Jews in the middle ages (Warner 2002, 43).

Some of the most blatant expressions of xenophobia are directed at Asian immigrants, articulating a callous indifference as to the value of the lives of Chinese children:

I have mentioned my attempt to put in a few modest turnips [...]. Into three or four short rows I presume I put enough to sow an acre; and they all came up,—came up as thick as grass, as crowded and useless as babies in a Chinese village. Of course, they had to be thinned out; that is, pretty much

all pulled up; and it took me a long time; for it takes a conscientious man some time to decide which are the best and healthiest plants to spare (Warner 2002, 47).

Warner's white New England is in need of constant 'weeding', and his parallelism between portraits of plants and humans evinces a eugenic philosophy that would have deserved a critical comment from the editor. From a present-day perspective the racism, ostracism and numerous instances of political incorrectness of his garden book produce a jarring note on the comic 'man-against-nature' plot of his columns. The absence of any substantial critical comment on these elements in the preface and introduction is suggestive of a general tendency to misread gardening books of the kind published by Warner as harmless green comedies of manners, to be read for entertainment but treated as politically insignificant. Published three years prior to *The Gilded Age*, the novel in which Warner and Twain coin the phrase that characterises the post-war years as materialistic, corrupt and wasteful, his garden book is a plant fable which is uncannily exempt from critical responses as a garden *vertu* removed from politics and reality.

This article's second textual example represents the garden as an actual spaces of human growth. Margery Fish (1888-1969) is celebrated in gardening circles for her listed garden at East Lambrook Manor in Somerset, widely regarded as the perfect English cottage garden.¹⁴ *We Made a Garden* is both an account of how this model came about, and a portrait of her marriage. Thematically arranged with chapters disseminating advice on making rock gardens, water features or compost,

¹⁴ The continuing popularity of Margery Fish's gardening and writing is documented on the East Lambrook website: <http://www.eastlambrook.co.uk/pages/>, http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/04/2007_37_mon.shtml. Accessed 2013-06-23.

the book portrays two London journalists who retire to Somerset in 1937. Fish comes to gardening near the age of fifty, but she is a young gardener. From her recreational discovery of gardening she draws material for a series of no fewer than eight books produced in quick succession at the end of her life.¹⁵

Costs, climate, weather, timing, drainage and irrigation, lawn making, weeds and the maintenance of gravel paths are just some of the topics Fish shares with her readers. Dealt with in twenty-four short chapters, they focus attention on the immediate and the practical. Fish's written garden is largely exempt from book learning and intellectual exercise. She mentions taking inspiration from 'an American book' (Fish 2002, 59) and cites the authority of Kew Gardens as the source of some of her ideas, but otherwise her gardening story is one of trial and error. The book even echoes a conversion narrative not just by documenting Margery's learning curve. To garden becomes an education in the true etymological sense of the word as it leads her out of the institutional violence of an unequal marriage. *We Made a Garden* (1956) hints at a *ménage à trois* from its title onwards,¹⁶ and a review even describes it as 'a gardening book with a villain.'¹⁷ The relationship between Margery Fish and her husband adds a heterotopian dimension of controversy to her garden narrative.¹⁸ As Michael

¹⁵ While her *Cottage Garden Flowers* (1961) became a bestseller, *Gardening on Clay and Lime* (1970), *Gardening in the Shade* (1964), *Ground Cover Plants* (1964), *A Flower for Every Day* (1965), *Carefree Gardening* (1966) and *An All Year Round Garden* (1964) are regarded as classics and continue to draw gardening readers due to their simplicity, practical common sense and witty tone.

¹⁶ Attention to the collaboration between Margery Fish and her husband has recently been rekindled by its being included in the BBC's *Forgotten Gardeners Series* and in (Rogers 2011)

¹⁷ <http://davesgarden.com/products/gbw/c/680/>. Accessed 2013-06-15.

¹⁸ According to James Fenton, 'The original mooted title had been *Gardening With Walter*. A friend of mine who knew Mrs Fish suggested that *We Made A Mess Of Our*

Pollan points out, the interpersonal tensions generated by the two eponymous gardeners even provide the book with the dimension of a *bildungsroman*:

The book was first published in 1956, and Margery Fish comes across as every inch the 50's wife, patiently enduring Walter's interminable lectures on the importance of structure in the garden—walls, lawns, paths—and the relative inconsequentiality of her own cherished flowers. But lurking just beneath the surface of Margery's submissiveness is a subversive streak.¹⁹

Readers in search of solutions to gardening conundrums thus frequently find themselves in the position of referee between two often opposed beliefs about gardening, gender relations and problem-solving strategies while witnessing an individual's awakening into creativity. Margery the novice prefers small 'unshowy' flowers (Fish 2002, 56), experimental styles and a garden that blooms all year round. Walter is a summer gardener with conservative opinions, a passion for large, striking flowers and the conviction that 'the four essentials of a good garden are perfect lawns, paths, hedges and walls' (Fish 2002, 23). While Walter has some previous gardening experience and assumes charge of structural directions, Margery fills the spaces thus created and does so in an experimental and exuberant way. This conventional division of labour with its gendered teacher-student relationship undergoes drastic changes in the course of the twelve years documented in the book. Fish internalises the heterotopian characteristics of the

Marriage would have summed up the subject better. I never know, when I turn to this book, whether to be more shocked by the odiousness of Walter Fish or by the cunning artlessness of Margery's appeal for our sympathy over what she has been through.' See 'After You'd Gone', *The Guardian* (30 November 2002), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2002/nov/30/shopping.gardens>. Accessed 2013-06-15

¹⁹ Michael Pollan, 'Gardening.' *The New York Times Book Review* (December 8, 1996). <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/gardening-3/>. Accessed 2012-07-15.

garden: meek on the surface, she keeps meticulous score of the points she wins over Walter. Her 'subversive streak' ultimately wins out as Walter dies first (in 1947), leaving Margery to both carry out her planting schemes as she sees fit and to put the process into written words.

Despite extending over a respectable two acres, the East Lambrook garden is introduced in terms of smallness. Smallness is a positive attribute both of the garden as a whole and of particular flowers, and attention to small details is a hallmark of an observant gardener, as when Fish suggests 'taking a magnifying glass to study the exquisite workmanship' of the *Garrya elliptica* catkin (Fish 2002, 31). Smallness is power in the numerous examples of plants thriving in the interstices, capable of arranging themselves between stones, on walls, gravel paths and in other seemingly inhospitable circumstances. Contemplating such plant behaviour on a gravel path Walter insisted on making leads Margery to muse about the profitable sides of adversity: 'small rock plants still seed themselves on the hard surface of chippings rolled tight into this tar substance, and it makes me wonder if one might not get better results if a really hard surface was made on which to plant seeds. They may respond better to a little resistance' (Fish 2002, 27). Margery certainly seems to grow more determined the more Walter challenges her. Small plants triumphantly come up in non-places and prove capable of taking care of themselves, vindicating her beliefs and defeating Walter's scorn. The garden plants are anthropomorphised, short referenced as 'my little family' (Fish 2002, 16). There is a dialogue between herself and her surroundings, even though its relative impact may vary, as when she concedes that her first attempts at weeding do more for herself than for the garden: 'My few

snatched efforts made very little impression on the wilderness, but they made me feel better' (Fish 2002, 14). The garden characterises human beings and vice versa, as when Fish states that her husband would 'no more have left his grass uncut or the edges untrimmed than he would have neglected to shave' (Fish 2002, 24). The parallels between human beings and flowers in particular are stressed by common names. Margery Fish's own first name illustrates this through its etymological links to marguerites (chrysanthemums) and marjoram. Human and floral identities blend together when Fish describes catching 'glimpses of Mme [Madame] Abel Chatenay and Lady Hillingdon peeping in at us while we had our meals' (Fish 2002, 30).

Where most other garden books follow the progress of seasons or give month-by-month accounts of the garden's development, Fish charts gardening progress as a series of personal competitions which lend drive to the narrative. Gardening in Fish's biography is sport, encompassing human as well as non-human competitors, as when she and her sister attempt to clear the bank around the orchard: 'We had a magnificent time clearing the ground, because there was a lot of bindweed there, as well as the easier weeds. We both agreed that there is no sport in the world that compares with clearing ground of bindweed. It is far more exciting than golf or fishing' (Fish 2002, 66). The garden is a creative arena which helps her accept the many changes she experiences in her private life and in society at large.

Fish's garden making covers the late 1930s through the Second World War, but apart from occasional expressions of regret at the loss of a helper, and a four-line comment on a gardening hiatus in 1939 when Walter's duties as Press Advisor to

the Censor exile the couple to London (Fish 2002, 62), readers are allowed to forget there is bloodshed going on while focusing their attention on how best to attach climbers. Retired from his post as news editor of the Daily Mail, Walter Fish continued as advisor to the Ministry of Information through the war. Being journalists, both Walter and Margery were acutely aware of the political and social explosions occurring outside their idyll, as documented by their very act of seeking a country retreat as early as they did. Yet the war is conspicuously absent from the narrative. Thus the book reflects the conscious decision to create a space not invaded, certainly not dominated, by nationality, armed conflict and newspaper realities.

Or rather, the garden becomes an arena in which an 'Other war' is fought, articulated in numerous disputes about what, how and where to plant. Fish employs martial vocabulary in relating her experience with rock gardening and a specific type of stonecrop: 'I think its name is *Sedum spurium* and it is the most inveterate invader I have ever met. Sometimes in the summer my heart softens when I see its really pretty flat pink rosettes, but most of the time it is war' (Fish 2002, 70-71). The narrative abounds with 'campaigns' and 'attacks' (Fish 2002, 62). Fish's brief chapter on staking shows that the pastoral garden at East Lambrook takes the brunt of some of the aggression generated by the couple's very divergent tastes. Having admitted to her own failure to stake her flowers properly, Fish describes how Walter cathartically resolves the issue: 'Then he took those poor unsuspecting flowers, put a rope round their necks and tied them so tightly to the stake that they looked throttled. He put into the action all the exasperation he felt at a pig-headed woman who just would not learn' (Fish 2002,

46). In several places Fish identifies flowers specifically as feminine: 'My planting was so insecure that the plants lurched about in the bed and were blown this way and that by the wind. Like a woman holding onto her hat they were too busy trying to keep a foothold in the earth to give a thought to anything else' (Fish 2002, 43). She looks upon her plants as the children she never had, albeit conceding that the ruthlessness advocated by her husband has its uses:

Plants are like babies, they know when an amateur is handling them. My plants knew, but I didn't. Walter would not tolerate an unhealthy or badly grown plant and if he saw anything that wasn't looking happy he pulled it up. Often I would go out and find a row of sick-looking plants laid out like a lot of dead rats. It became something like a game. If I knew I had an ailing child I was trying to bring round I'd do my utmost to steer him away from that spot. It didn't often work and now I know he was right (Fish 2002, 43)

A large part of Margery Fish's learning experience in the garden consists in accepting necessary brutalities such as pruning, staking or deadheading, and to occasionally perpetrate them herself, with particular pleasure, she confesses, in those places which symbolise her husband's dictates:

I should have preferred to fill our cracks with a mixture of sand and fine soil so that tiny green plants would creep along the stones but this was one of the things that Walter would not have at any price. I was allowed a very few small holes, in which I planted thymes and Dresden China daisies, and the effect was far too neat and tidy. Time has improved things and a lot of Somerset cement has become loosened, some of it helped, I admit, by a crowbar, and now I have little plants crawling in and out of nearly every crevice. (Fish 2002, 28)

Social consequences of the war are reflected in the evolution of gardening practices. Fish notes the change in attitude and class relations when describing how hedges used to screen the upper classes from a view of working class people:

It is difficult now to understand our point of view and remarkable that things could have changed so completely in such a short time. For in those days it was unthinkable that ladies and gentlemen enjoying themselves in the garden should be disturbed by the sight of tradesmen delivering food at the back door (Fish 2002, 33).

Before the war, there were servants and distinct class relations while during and after the war, life for the former leisure classes became more labour-intensive. A poignant moment of change comes for Fish when she describes herself washing the dishes in a space formerly reserved for housemaids where she had windows put in so as to be able to look out, an improvement which the housemaids of old would have appreciated, had anybody thought her capable of appreciating a view. Gardening is a large part of her strategy for coming to terms with these changes. Looking back at her younger self, she self-ironically recalls how gardens used to be for sitting in or playing golf and how she failed to see the attraction in getting up to remove twigs or deadhead plants. Gardening taught her to appreciate a physically active life and gave her a practical outlet for a creativity long suppressed by the gender conventions of her time.

Documenting numerous changes in gardening and in society, the book's most striking development, however, is Margery's development, from a clueless city dweller to the creator of an influential gardening style. The book recreates her coming of age as a gardener, as the first chapters are dominated by the lessons she

took from Walter, while the latter chapters contain authoritative gardening advice. It is in these concluding chapters that a gardener who has come into her own shares her expertise. While the ending of the book tells readers that gardening is 'about going on and on' (Fish 2002, 98), the narrative at the same time reaches a stable balance which integrates the otherness of her late husband's ideas, jettisoning some and modifying others, to create a compromise that is both collaborative and independent.

Considerations of nature in terms of otherness open up a range of haunting and unruly unknowns. Like any human Other, nature forces the human Self to confront its rational limits and to negotiate superhuman powers. As with human Others, the borderline between the Self-sphere and the Other-sphere dissolves into doubt, the more closely one examines it and the safety signalled by familiar objects may turn to terror. As the textual analysis has shown, gardens occupy an unstable in-between location or 'interplaces' (Casey 1993, 154). While constituting domesticated places 'of mediation between nature and civilization' (Meeker 1974, 71-72), they retain traces of uncontrollable wilderness. In writings overtly addressed to gardening, the garden is shown to be a factor (if not actor) which affects the gardener's self-image, and even functions as a teacher and incitement to further creative expression, such as writing, as Michael Pollan points out:

gardening, like angling, engages us with the natural world, as actors rather than passive spectators. Both put us smack on the frontier between nature and culture, which is always an interesting place for a writer to stand. And both literary traditions power practical and philosophical questions about how we might better go about rhyming our desires with nature's ways, questions that only grow more urgent with time. (Pollan 2002, ix)

From early on, ecologists have pointed out that 'nature is not a passive recipient of human action' (Passmore 1974, 24). The same is true for garden spaces which document human manipulations of nature and may provoke adjustments in thinking and behaviour. In the two texts analysed above, negotiations of the garden become a means of confronting human Otherness. They also represent a body of textual Others in that few critics have so far addressed the human element in garden life writings. While garden books written by well-known writers such as Charles Dudley Warner, Jamaica Kincaid and Vita Sackville-West have received literary responses,²⁰ the poetic value of many texts unduly dismissed as manuals remains to be acknowledged and explored.²¹ There are numerous examples of how gardens are used to negotiate cultural otherness,²² both in life writing and in fictional works. Garden writings explore and document how fixed positions of otherness resolve into acceptance of change. Hovering between private and public life worlds, the garden symbolises human indecision about where we belong, but it also celebrates this uncertainty. By presenting human beings with an interactive projection ground on which to create our own environmental ideas, the garden challenges us to develop our sense of place in a world that is both shrinking and growing.

²⁰ (Kincaid 1999, Sackville-West 1951, Warner 2002).

²¹ Examples worth investigating include Gertrude Jekyll, Eleanor Perényi or Katharine S. White. (Jekyll 1982, Perényi 2002, White 2002).

²² Prominent postcolonial examples include (Kincaid 1999, 2005, Senior 1994).

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