Foreword: On the Gothic Nature of Gardens

William Hughes

Gardens, ostensibly, represent the antithesis of both the Gothic aesthetic and its associated culture of cruelty, transgression and excess. The very demarcation of green space *as* enclosed and duly ordered garden – as opposed to untamed wilderness, apparently boundless sublimity or ambivalent marginal landscape – bespeaks a restrictive domestication that militates against the apparent freedom that may be associated with those places less subject to human control and constant maintenance. The garden is a moral space, as it were, in which certain purported vices – disorder, weeds, imperfection – are variously avoided, discouraged or perhaps even eradicated, the very memory of their possibly anarchic or infectious presence recalled only with a shudder of distaste followed by a tentative statement with regard to their inability to return and again corrupt. Gardens stand for everything that is not Gothic. They stand for order aspired to, achieved, and imposed. They interpret deviance or departure from an accredited standard in epistemologically moral terms, implicating such departures from design with punitive reaction. Hence, the process and discipline of gardening endows those who police the borders of domestic(ated) space with righteousness as much as with the power and authority to cut and to mutilate, to burn and to poison, to judge and to approve or exclude on the grounds of colour, of gender or of national origin.[1] This same power is, in turn, effectively delegated to those who participate in – that is visit, appreciate, or perceive rather than practically order or manage – gardens, for it is through their approval and patronage that gardens are perpetuated as public as well as private spaces, as environments designed specifically for the control and suppression of nature, and for the expression of a specifically human vision of the organic environment. If the garden, in other words, is by definition *not* Gothic – unless it has been specifically styled to make it express some aspect of the Gothic aesthetic[2] – then the power of those who actively garden, and of those who design gardens is, by its very oppressive nature, a force very much driven by implicitly violent and repressive preoccupations associated with the genre.

The garden, it would therefore appear, is something of a paradox, and embodies, perversely, central Gothic imperatives within its façade of floristic orderliness and managed arboreality. There is more to be said, however, for gardens embody something of a narrative quality also, and one which further aligns them to the characteristics of the genre. Gardens, it must be remembered, are temporal as well as geographical conceptions, and the successive seasons are marked for their active manipulators and more passive perceivers by cycles of virulent growth and gradual retraction, of fecund reproduction and violent harvest, of life, death, and decay. If the gardener or horticulturist aspires to impose a sovereign will as ostensible dictator over the chlorophyllic citizens and denizens of this terrain at some time appropriated from nature, then he or she might well be minded not to forget that a deposed hegemony, given time to regroup, may be apt to return. Such returns display, characteristically, a poignant edge in the cultural and literary myths that surround gardens which, having

seen the departure of those who once lovingly cultivated them, have been reclaimed by a vivid and fertile nature, an exiled power always waiting at the human-imposed border of wall, hedge or deforested clearing.[3] But above, and indeed beyond, even the creeping return of excluded vegetation, remains the more abstracted and Absolute power of environmental ecology itself, the puissance of impersonal and implacable Nature, overwriting not merely the domesticated space itself but impacting, with imperious nonchalance, upon the wilderness which both surrounds and seeks to reclaim the fragile, human-nurtured enclave.

The human-managed cycle of the garden is thus subject to the greater tyranny of wind, rain and drought, of extremes of heat and of cold, supposedly predictable but frequently arriving without warning, even without precedent in human memory. The gardener's work is therefore in vain unless these puissant forces may be countered by the artificial stabilising of fragile ground, by drainage or irrigation, by shelter and artificial heat. Artifice, it seems, and industry at a great price of effort and economics, are needed to maintain the persistence, let alone the content, of the garden – though all of these putative safeguards remain subject to greater environmental stability – a stability that has become very much questioned in the current phase of the Anthropocene. Hence, gardens, being human impositions upon nature, are perversely sites of rebellion against the natural world they have been carved out. Representing order to human perception, they are interpositions upon what humanity might perceive as chaos – this itself being a place/non-place that by its very impersonal, inhuman nature has no conceptuality of order, chaos or morality. The Gothic garden is a knowing place. Environmental nature, on the other hand, being impersonal, knows it not and sweeps as destructively across its cultivated physicality with as little regard as if it were uncultivated wilderness, desert or tundra.

Given the complex and at times conflicting relationship between the gardens and the greater natural environment, and the implicitly violent nature of gardening as a human activity, it is surprising that there has to date been no significant interrogation of systematic horticulture by way of the genre, its literary conventions and critical preoccupations. In part this is quite simply a consequence of the politics of academic ecocriticism. Despite a long-standing commitment to reading Romantic textuality in ecocritical discourse, ecocriticism has characteristically eschewed the Gothic generally – even where it has paradoxically exemplified, in particular, the work of Margaret Atwood in its exposition of a meaningful wilderness. Perhaps it is the absence of a consistent Utopian idealism across the genre that disqualifies Gothic as a subject suitable for interrogation in the eyes of some ecocritics, for where Gothic textuality may be frequently apocalyptic it is, arguably, seldom unequivocally redemptive or regenerative. Possibly, though, the genre has customarily been seen as simply too popular, too demotic, for rarefied and elite scholarship. Certainly, other than the long-standing appreciation of Atwood and the Canadian wilderness, little was said at length – and certainly not within the confines of a single volume – until the publication of the pioneering collection *Ecogothic* in 2013.[4] That volume, as wide as its interpretations of several conflicting and complementary natures might have been, did not address the implications of that most intimate of horticultural spaces – the garden. For this reason, the present collection of original and provocative essays, with

its introduction and afterword, should prove not merely a useful supplement to the broader textual and conceptual field of ecocriticism but a significant extension to the specific confluence of theory and genre that is ecoGothic.

The current volume is both timely and overdue. It is, after all, an appropriate extension of the preoccupation with wilderness, shared by both ecocriticism and ecoGothicism, into the cultivated and domesticated environment. This critical intervention comes at a time when, with the global environmental system apparently on the verge of collapse, those fragile human spaces of non-agrarian cultivation are themselves threatened by personal poverty consequent upon macro-economics as much as by wide-ranging climate change.[5] Indeed, gardening itself – admittedly as a small-scale activity when laid against commercial agriculture and industry – might be considered in having its own redemptive function in redressing the damage of global warming.[6] Bearing that in mind, the radical implications of both the garden and the Gothic may once more be reconfigured into a surprising new configuration, where the former may mean so much more than cultivated space, and the latter have greater implications than ephemeral popular culture.

William Hughes

Taipa, Macau, January 2020

Notes

1 This process of horticultural policing is, in the British experience at least, not confined to the systematic expulsion of unwanted or alien flora, such as the domestic dandelion or the invasive Spanish bluebells: See Royal Horticultural Society, 'Dandelion', available online at https://www.rhs.org.uk/Advice/Profile?PID=1012, accessed 9 January 2020 at 1006; BBC *Gardener's World*, 13 August 2019, available online at https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/solve-problems/how-do-i-get-rid-of-invasive-spanish-bluebells/, accessed 9 January 2020 at 0952. Similar programmes of control and eradication are being applied not merely to invasive mammalian species such as the grey squirrel or the muntjac deer but also to insects such as the harlequin ladybird. See, for example, 'DEFRA in the Media', 24 February 2019, available online at https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2019/02/24/the-sunday-times-on-grey-squirrels/, accessed on 9 January 2020 at 1000; BBC *Gardener's World*, 12 August 2019, available online at https://www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/solve-problems/what-can-i-do-about-harlequin-ladybirds/, accessed 9 January 2020 at 0957.

2 See, for example, Alle Connell, '35 Eerie Photos of Kat Von D's Pitch Black Garden: Goth Gardening at its Finest', available online at http://www.revelist.com/bloggers/kat-von-d-black-garden/8318, accessed 09 January 2020 at 1012.

3 See, for example, Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1911), pp. 97-102;' The Lost Gardens of Heligan', available online at https://www.heligan.com/the-story/introduction, accessed 9 January 2020 at 1316. Consider also the imagery of the final phase of Algernon Blackwood's 'The Man Whom e Trees Loved' in *Pan's Garden: A Volume of Nature Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1912), pp. 3-99 at pp. 98-99.

4 Andrew Smith and William Hughes, eds, *Ecogothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

5 'Hunter Community Gardening' (cached 11 December 2013), available online at http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Qy6ox84N0fEJ:huntercommunitygardening.org.uk/about/+&cd=16&hl=en&ct=clnk, accessed 9 January 2020 at 1533.Tony Russell, 'Storms and Floods: Have Your Trees Been Damaged?', *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 March 2014, available online at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/plants/trees/10683870/Storms-and-floods-have-your-trees-been-damaged.html, accessed 9 January 2020 at 1528.

6 See, for example, National Wildlife Federation, 'Gardeners Can Play an Important Role in Reducing Global Warming', *Science Daily*, 19 May 2007, available online at https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070519084046.htm, accessed 9 January 2020 at 1524.