

G. R. F. FERRARI

The Meaninglessness of Gardens

1

When gardening is art, what are its elements? With what elements do gardeners work when they are working as artists? And when I say “elements,” I do not mean “materials.” The materials of the painter’s art, for example, are such things as his brushes and paints, his palette knives, the canvas; the elements of the painter’s art are the lines, shapes, tones, and colors that those instruments enable him to place on that canvas.¹ It is from the elements that he makes his painting, not from his materials. (The materials are what he uses to make the painting, not what he makes it from.) And it is because things of that sort are his elements that what he makes is indeed a painting. Or take the art of choreography. Its materials are the dancers’ costumed bodies, the dance floor, perhaps some props. In this case, unlike painting, the materials also include the finished product of a distinct art: music. The elements of choreography are, first and foremost, the dancers’ rhythmic movements, but also their interaction with any props that there may be. The elements of an art are what get composed into an artistic whole.

What of gardening, then? What are its materials, what are its elements? About its materials there should not be much disagreement. Plants and trees, rocks and soil, walls and fences, fountains, ponds, and streams, paths and patios together with the tools to place, construct, and control them. As with choreography, the products of other arts may be incorporated: statuary, ceramics, bridges, and gazebos. (None of these, however, is as essential to gardening as music is to dance.) People disagree on the question of garden materials chiefly when wondering how few items from a conventional list they can use and still call the

result a garden. Do rocks, white sand, and temple walls suffice? (I am thinking of the Japanese “dry garden.”) Can a place be a garden if it has no plants?

Let us set these questions aside for now and think instead about the elements of gardening, where the disagreement is sharper and more fundamental. What is it that the gardener composes into the whole that is his artwork, the garden? Some answer: foliage and flower forms, their colors, their contrasts and intervals. The gardener paints his landscape with plants. (Gertrude Jekyll is probably the most famous of garden artists associated with this view.)² Others warn us not to focus on the plants but to focus instead on shaping a space. Objects in the garden, living or not, are there, they say, to articulate a spatial envelope. Those articulations are the elements that the gardener composes into a whole.³ And although they are spatial, it is not the eye alone that discerns them. The sound of falling water heard from behind the trees, the scent of orange blossom wafting from one side: these too can delineate a space. The spatially oriented garden designer—this, rather than ‘gardener,’ becomes the natural term in this context—tends to think of his plants as plantings, clumping them together in thought, if not in the ground. A tumble of nasturtiums on the wall, a spread of lambs’ ears by the side of the path, a sea of thyme around the stepping stones, a slope of pfitzers, a line of palms on the horizon—these are among his elements. He speaks of the plants as “clothing the ground,” and the clothes he means are formfitting; it is the body they reveal that counts. Or he thinks of them as specimens, which mark their spot—the solitary pine on its little island, the group of cycads on a mound, the weeping willow rising from a sweep of grass.

It is an orientation suited to those gardens whose principal function is to invite journeys, such as the vast picturesque gardens of the landed gentry in eighteenth-century England or the stroll gardens of the Edo period in Japan.

These responses to the question “What are the elements of the gardening art?” are not wholly mistaken. But they are at risk of annexing the gardener’s art to other arts for the loan of their artistic principles: painting or, in the case of spatially oriented garden design, architecture. I will venture a different answer, which allows gardening to be an art on its own terms: when gardening is art, its elements are lives—the lives of plants.

II

The elements of the gardener’s art are lives—not living things, but lives. Living things are among the gardener’s materials; lives are his elements.⁴ As I write, I am calling to mind a particular blue potato bush (*Lycianthes rantonnetii*), a living thing purchased from the nursery. It was bred with industrial care to serve as material for my garden. But when I took and pruned it to grow as a “standard,” as a single upright stem from which shoots would spray only at the summit, I was composing with its life. In order to bring the plant before the reader’s eyes, I have had to describe its geometry—a form, it may seem, rather than a life. But I knew, and the similarly appreciative visitor to my garden knew, that the stem had taken three years to attain its knotty thickness and become a trunk—three years of patient pruning. I was aware when I purchased the plant that it would respond well to such high-handed treatment. Part of my intention was to have in that spot a plant that would grow to a middling height, unlike its companions nearby, and would permit plants that love dappled sunlight to show themselves beneath its airy canopy and to thrive there. I expected it to bloom for much of the year and to stand out from the crowd.

To be sure, I hankered too for the painterly effects that this plant would help me achieve. I wanted it for its umbrella of papery purple buttons, simple and direct as lapel poppies. I wanted to lead the viewer’s eye upward in stages from one canopy to the next. I wanted flower and foliage to explode like fireworks in the air, each firework at a different height. But it was not my

intention to treat this plant simply as a component of a complex painterly composition, still less as a mere “color-spot” in the garden. I intended to enmesh its life—to beautiful effect, if I could bring this off—with the lives of other plants. I saw not just a pretty face, but a pillar of the community.

Plants that can be grown as standards are plants that submit to heavy manipulation; but regardless of how much a gardener intervenes in the development of his plants, it is with plant lives that he composes. Take the concept of “the wild garden,” introduced by William Robinson at the end of the nineteenth century in his book of the same name.⁵ From the outset, Robinson is at pains to distinguish “the wild” from “wilderness.” The term “wild gardening,” he writes in his preface, “is applied essentially to the placing of perfectly hardy exotic plants in places and under conditions where they will become established and take care of themselves.”⁶ The wild garden is that portion of the garden where the lives of the plants have been so arranged as to become self-sufficient.

We tend to say of such plants that they have been “naturalized,” but the expression is misleading. In such an arrangement, the hand of man the naturalizer is perfectly apparent. It is apparent, first, in the exoticism of the plants, selected from the pool of potential immigrants for their ability to lead successful lives in the new habitat. (Robinson, though an enemy of the hothouse, was no worshipper of “native” plants.)⁷ It shows itself, above all, in the astute combination of one self-sufficient species with another, for here the gardener must mind his ecology. Plants of one species, permitted to take care of themselves, must not prevent plants of another species from exercising a similar care. Their lives, in the living, must not be detrimental to the lives of others. They must manage to live together.

A wild garden will have a far less manipulated appearance than a garden populated with plants grown as standards. Yet it reveals more clearly than does the strictly pruned garden what it is for the gardener to compose with the lives of plants. It reveals this because the wild gardener, by his decision to allow the plants to dictate their own spread, by his decision to relinquish control over their geometry, has left himself mainly their lives to work with. The comparison with painting is not entirely blocked, for considerations of complementary form will have been a factor in the gardener’s choice of what to plant. And in fact

Robinson does not hesitate to describe the wild gardener, too, as making “garden-pictures.” But his book was remarkable in its day, and remains so in ours, for describing garden plants in social terms as often as in painterly or spatial terms. His plants group in colonies or families; they take shelter and find homes. The plants of the wild garden are coarse but handsome fellows with bristly beards; they are rogues who cannot lie still in primly made beds. Their collective vigor, freedom, and happiness is Robinson’s abiding theme.

III

Like Robinson, I have used social terms liberally when describing the garden. There has been mention of plant communities, of plants that stand out from the crowd, of plants managing to live together. Implicit in these terms is the comparison with an art. The comparable art is not, however, an art in the realm of aesthetics, such as painting or choreography; nor does the comparison endanger my ambition to explain gardening as an aesthetic art in its own right. It is the art of politics.⁸

To compare the gardener’s art to the political art is not at all to say that gardening is political. A slogan such as “gardening is politics” would likely suggest treating gardens as bargaining chips in a more or less overt negotiation with the neighbors over issues of self-representation and status. And this, as we shall see, would be the very opposite of what I intend by the comparison.

What justifies the comparison between gardening and politics is rather the claim with which I began: that the elements of the gardening art are lives—the lives of plants. (And whenever I write of the lives of plants, the term should be understood to include the lives of shrubs and trees.) Both the gardener and the politician organize lives. The garden is a society of plants, a society established, maintained, cared for, and ruled over by its gardener. In the wild garden, we may think of him as a founding father who rules *in absentia*, intervening only when there is trouble in the community or when he wishes to revitalize or diversify it. In the regular garden, however, he is an ever present and absolute monarch.

The functions of this “gardener” may of course be divided between many individuals. A garden designer may establish the community and leave its continuing care to his client, or to his client’s

hired hands. Even the solitary garden monarch is unlikely to have begun from scratch, but generally succeeds to a throne recently vacated, taking charge of a community with folkways already in place and resistant to change. The gardener who does begin with a blank slate may choose to build his community piecemeal, zoning with caution, expanding slowly to the suburbs of his plot, allowing neighbor plants to sound each other out before he adjudicates their eventual boundary disputes. The rare gardener who imposes from the outset a global master plan is yet rarer if he can realize the imposition and make it last.

All this is to say that, as aesthetic arts go, gardening is messy. It is fraught with unpredictability, and its work is never complete. Other artists, too, know what it is to have their artwork change its intended shape as they work on it, but few can feel this so keenly as the gardener. The reason is not simply that the materials he works with are living beings, but that the elements of his art are their very lives. The painter may be unable to gauge the effect of a certain line on the composition of the whole until he has produced it on his canvas; but this, though it need be no vice, is also no virtue in him. The artist who paints surely and deliberately, who does not surprise himself by his execution (however inspired his conception), may produce work every bit as good. But the true gardener thrives on surprise. He must, for not only are plant lives subject to the weather and to the change of seasons, but also the social system they comprise in the garden is itself as complex as the weather. Plan as he may, the gardener knows he must look to stay on top of situations as they develop. Not only does he expect this; he looks forward to it. To compose with lives is to share in them, and it is when he is adjusting and adjudicating that the gardener most feels himself a part of the community in his care.

To emphasize the unpredictability of the elements with which the gardener works is to adduce a particular aspect of the political art: its ability to cope with crisis or, more generally, with the unforeseen. But gardening bears comparison also with a quite different type of political activity: the attempt to make a utopia. Gardens are readily imagined as places of idyllic beauty, from which ugliness has been banished. However much care they may occasion and require, gardens do not evoke the labor that made them—that is rather what farms do. Art, not labor, is what gardens wear on their faces. When poets wish to recall

a golden age, the realm they describe often resembles a garden. Philosophers of ancient Greece were fond of setting up shop in gardens—a place to escape the ills of the world while pondering them. And more than one classic of utopian literature makes a prominent place for gardens in its vision of the ideal society.⁹ There is a natural affinity between the garden and utopia. Both are societies perfect in their own terms.

But if this comparison is valid, how are we to square it with the messy, exploratory quality of the gardening art? Utopian social reform acquires direction from some more or less definite conception of human happiness. If there is an equivalent in the gardener's relation to his society of plants, should this change how we think of him?

Here it makes all the difference that the gardener's art, being aesthetic, is directed by beauty, while the utopian in the strict sense aims at the good. The good is generalizable; you and I may share the same good quality. Beauty, however, is always individual, irreplaceable. Philosophers who have pressed this point, such as Mary Mothersill and Alexander Nehamas, refuse to account for beauty by appeal to general criteria.¹⁰ It makes no matter if these criteria are the clichés of neo-classicism (harmony, balance, grace, and so on) or of modernism (challenge, disruption, tension, and so on) if the appeal is to symmetry in the Western knot garden or to triadic asymmetry in the Japanese garden. What all such criteria fail to account for is our feeling that, when we judge something beautiful, our explanations of its beauty are explanations after the fact—the fact that we find it beautiful. It is not that we are unable to point to features of the object in order to explain its beauty. The more experience we have of its context and the more articulate we are, the more we shall find to say about it. Its beauty is not an ineffable mystery. But everything we say about it, even when we are comparing its features to features found elsewhere, we say with application only to the particular beauty of this particular thing. Ultimately, every explanation of a thing's beauty implies as its final tagline, "you had to be there."

From such an account of beauty it follows that the gardener may be said to make a utopia of his garden even if he does not have a fully defined goal to achieve by the making of it. As the utopian reformer strives to eliminate from society anything that could detract from its goodness, so the gardener strives to eliminate from his gar-

den anything that could detract from its beauty. It is this striving for a kind of perfection within a community of living beings that licenses the comparison. But whereas the reformer would be paralyzed without some reasonably clear conception of the good to which his reforms tend—whether it be equality of opportunity or of possessions, or permanent peace, or release from the yoke of government, or some other difficult ideal—the gardener has more freedom of movement. Beauty is his guide, but not in the sense that by making his beautiful garden he seeks to achieve a substantive goal distinct from the garden itself; rather in the sense that at every turn, as he fashions the individual that is his artwork, he seeks not to thwart its beauty.

If he is to work along these lines, the gardener must indeed have some conception of the artistic whole to which the element that currently occupies his attention makes its contribution. But this is only to say that he must indeed be composing, not just reacting to circumstances. He must think of his elements as elements and not as patients—must operate with plant lives rather than with individual plants. But he need have no master plan for his garden; nor, if he does have such a plan, would this alter the overall pattern of his task. It would not make him a utopian with a preconceived goal that determines his every move. It would simply mean that he has chosen to imagine ahead of time many of the moves he will make with a view to fashioning his garden. The master plan is no more generalizable an explanation of the garden's individual beauty than are any other of its features.

The utopian analogy fits the garden as artwork in a further way—one which brings out the limits of the gardener's care for his plant community. In discussions of utopia, questions such as these commonly arise: Is the best society also the happiest society? If so, is the happiest society one whose members are each, individually, as happy as they could be? Or is its happiness to be made out in social, political terms? We might point, for example, to its high degree of public participation, to its unoppressive government, or to the harmonious relations between all classes of citizen within its bounds. But if this is how we proceed, we might discover that the happiness of the society is at odds with the happiness of its members. (A healthy degree of public participation could be experienced by some individuals as onerous

duty.) This theme, already present in one of the earliest ventures in utopian literature, Plato's *Republic*, eventually gave rise to a counter genre, the dystopian literature exemplified most famously by George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

For the gardener, however, this dilemma, with its dystopian shadow, does not arise. (That a garden may have been nurtured by the sweat of the oppressed, however relevant it may be in other contexts, does not affect this point.)¹¹ Beauty, not the good, is his guide. And the beauty at which he ultimately aims is achieved by the whole, not by the parts taken separately. For this reason, the "happiness"—the health—of the individual plants must remain only a subordinate concern. A plant that grows too big for its spot, flourish though it may, will find the gardener a merciless master. Whole families of plants, in fact, however healthy and individually beautiful they may be, he regards as outlaws—weeds—and attempts to banish from his garden. The elements of the gardener's art, remember, are plant lives, not living plants. Living plants are merely his materials. As materials, they have no rights. The gardener who takes pity on a disruptive plant has abdicated his art and is acting instead either as a simple plant lover or, less forgivably (since love for one's plants is a proper component of the art), as a mere plant collector. The dilemma, if it does arise for him, arises for him as an individual; it is not a dilemma internal to the art. Certainly, the gardener wants his plants happy, but he wants this because a happy plant is a better-looking plant. Provided he can keep his love of plants in perspective, it will not take charge and torment him, nor will it stymie his art.

A ruler who dealt with his human subjects as the gardener deals with his plants would be a monster. Human beings in their social coexistence must not be reduced to instruments of beauty. Arts that have no choice but to impress living human beings into the service of beauty, such as choreography, are in fact liable to the charge of monstrosity when regarded in social terms. Balanchine was admired for his art but decried by some for inducing anorexic anxiety in his ballerinas and for being complicit in their sacrifice of a rounded human life to artistic ambition. The brilliant but tyrannical theater or film director is himself a stock character of plays and films.

But choreography and the directing of theater or film are not monstrous arts, however monstrous

individual choreographers and directors may be. That is because the elements of these arts are not human lives. Living human beings are required for performing what choreographers or directors create, but the elements from which they compose their work are not human lives but the rhythmic movements of living dancers or the talk, the gestures, the movements, and the mutual engagements of living actors. And what this goes to show is that gardening is the only established art in the aesthetic realm that composes its work from lives. (I specify "established" art to exclude, say, designing a vivarium of tropical fish in order to decorate a room.) The lives of garden plants have beauty for their overriding purpose. Anything else such a life might achieve—stocking the larder, for example, or shading the house—is incidental. That is, it will be incidental if the composition to which that life belongs is to qualify as a work of art. Left to themselves, such plants, like any other, would have their own lives to lead, but they are never left to themselves. They may be left untended, but their lives are never their own. Even in the wild garden, as we saw, the controlling hand of the gardener makes assignments and sets limits to the lives of the plants with an eye to the beauty of the whole.

It would be outrageous to say of any dancer or actor that his life had no nonincidental purpose but beauty, even if the dancer or actor himself were obsessive enough to think so. And if he were, it still would not be with this beauty-obsessed life that the choreographer or the director composes. By pursuing the political analogy, then, we have come to appreciate the peculiarity of gardening as an aesthetic art. No other aesthetic art has lives for its elements. And it is because lives are its elements that gardening is the art that it is.¹²

iv

With these results in hand, we have arrived at the point where the question can be asked, what, if anything, gardens mean—what, if anything, they communicate or attempt to get across. And my contention is that, when considered as works of art, gardens have no meaning. They communicate nothing. As works of art, they operate at the degree zero of meaning. And this is part of their charm.

We have been thinking of the garden as a society of plants, governed and cared for by its

gardener. Now, all human societies are replete with symbolic elements, each of which can be said to have a meaning—perhaps several meanings. The green light means go; the cross means Christianity, if it does not mean a hospital. And human societies are, of course, peopled by individuals able to communicate with each other, convey messages to each other. Nevertheless, the society as a whole has no meaning. It conveys no overarching message. Whatever it may be that a sociologist is achieving who claims to grasp its system or its “code” as a whole and finds the words to encapsulate its traits, he is not describing the results of a communication. A society includes communicators and their instruments of communication but is not itself an example of either.

So it is too with the garden. There is nothing for gardens to get across. I mean the garden as a whole; there are, admittedly, any number of ways in which particular areas of the garden or items within it may be said to mean something. A plant may be a traditional symbol of love or of loss; three rocks in a Japanese garden may symbolize the Buddhist trinity; a faux Greek temple by a stream may turn a glade into a playground of the nymphs. A grotto might by itself evoke the underworld; place an inscription from Virgil close to its entrance and it will evoke the descent of Aeneas into the underworld. Some items or areas are straightforwardly pictorial and will carry meaning to the same extent that pictorial artworks in general do. The depictions may be imported wholesale into the garden from other arts, as with garden statuary. Or they may be realized in the plant life or in other garden materials. Here belong the dry gravel “rivers” of Japanese gardens, the miniaturized views of famous landscapes that are a feature of the Chinese gardening tradition, and the animal topiary of the West.

The garden that contains such symbolic or pictorial elements will still have no overall meaning as a garden. Its gardener’s guiding purpose in making the artwork that is the garden as a whole will not have been to get something across by its means (or if it was, then, as I will shortly argue, he was doing something other than make a work of garden art). Symbolic and pictorial elements in the garden are accents. They inflect the garden in various ways. Often they will associate the garden with the gardening traditions that formed it or had some influence upon it (as a Japanese lantern in a mostly Western garden may indicate the tra-

dition from which the plantings in its immediate area derive). Or they may be used to evoke an atmosphere—elegiac, perhaps, or quirky. Or a statue concealed by a turn in the hedge, say, will delight by its potential for surprise.

It takes some delicacy to integrate pictorial and symbolic elements into a garden; all too easily, such elements can jar or seem mere gimmicks. And once again, the political analogy can shed light on the reason for this. Symbolism in human societies does not render the society as a whole symbolic, but nor does it tend to jar or stand out. It is integral to human society because humans are communicative beings. Plants, obviously, are not. They cannot appreciate any symbolic meaning they may themselves bear. Nor have they any use for the pictorial items in their midst—not as images, at any rate. Hence such items can appear to be interlopers.

Seeing a statue or a building in a green landscape, we find it natural to speak of trees and plants as the setting for the artwork or the architecture. But a garden is not a landscape. In a garden, it is the statues, gazebos, grottos, and temples that must serve as the setting for the lives of the plants. A gardener who designs with the opposite intention is not making a work of garden art but a sculpture park or an outdoor museum exhibit.

Occasionally, an especially grand garden will aspire to the condition of narrative. The clearest cases are provided by some of the great English picturesque “landscape” gardens (note the ominous term) that were laid out in the eighteenth century. Stourhead estate in Wiltshire contains a much-discussed example.¹³ The garden, laid out as a circuit around a lake, is defined by the architectural and iconographic attractions that provide stops along the way. These range from such items as a medieval cross and an urn to full-scale Grecian and Roman temples. The grotto recalling Aeneas, mentioned earlier, comes from this place. Stourhead would serve as a perfect example of the garden as outdoor museum, were it not that it seems in addition to arrange its museum pieces to suggest the skeleton of a narrative. The circuit is intended to be walked in one direction only, so that the stops along the way are taken in a particular order. The descent into the underworld of the grotto occurs about halfway through the circuit, as Aeneas’ descent comes at the halfway point of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The circuit culminates at a Grecian

temple of Apollo, the god of wisdom. Medieval and rustic English items occur as preliminaries, counterpoints, or detours. It is not hard to imagine the route as a pilgrimage toward neoclassical enlightenment.

Stourhead is undoubtedly a garden whose design aims to get something across to its visitors. That garden historians have offered a wide variety of interpretations of its exact meaning only serves to confirm it as a garden that aims to have at least one. What is more, it is the place as a whole that conveys its meaning, which can only be appreciated from an entire circuit. The symbolic elements do not merely inflect the garden; taken in order, they constitute its point. What has become, then, of my contention that symbolic and pictorial elements function only as meaningful accents in the garden, while the garden as a whole carries no meaning?

That contention remains firm; for there is no whole to the garden at Stourhead. Rather, it is a garden that, over its entire extent, has been co-opted in order to produce something other than a work of garden art: a narrative. (Likewise, a garden consisting entirely of topiary, or of symbolic rocks, would be a garden that has been co-opted to produce a depiction.) This narrative does indeed make for an artistic whole; but it is not the artistic whole that a garden alone can be, a whole composed of the lives of plants.

Gardens are not, in fact, very good at telling stories or painting pictures, nor should we expect them to be. The strain tends to show when they are co-opted for such purposes. One group of writers on Stourhead astutely compare it to the Disney theme park ride “Pirates of the Caribbean.”¹⁴ Here too there is the suggestion of a narrative as our boat whirls from diorama to diorama. The ride is exciting (What will we see and feel next?), but offers none of the involvement in plot that comes from watching Johnny Depp in the movie. Likewise, Stourhead is a very beautiful place; but it is not much of a story.

The work of art that is a garden is unusual among artworks in that it does not seek an audience. And this is what we would expect of an artwork that has no meaning. The garden welcomes visitors but was not made with them primarily in mind. The solitary painter or writer who never goes looking for an audience is a figure who exists, certainly, but is the eccentric case. In gardening, such a figure is the norm. The gardener

works for himself and for his household. (He may put his services out for hire to other households, but an employer is something different from an audience.)

Institutional factors doubtless encourage the gardener not to seek an audience—most gardens, after all, are an integral part of someone’s private home—but this cannot be the whole explanation. The gardening that goes on in public parks does not seek an audience either. It is simply that its efforts receive many more visitors than would pass through a private garden. Such visitors appreciate the garden—when it is the garden they go to appreciate and not, say, a picnic—by sitting or strolling in the company of its plants. That is, they appreciate the public garden no differently than a private gardener or his visitors appreciate his garden. They do not go to the park to discover what the gardeners sought to get across to them by its means. Nor is it the gardeners’ task to seek to get something across. Those gardeners should not be trying to paint with plants or tell a story through them. Their task is rather to arrange a society of plants in the company of which the visitors can feel comfortable or in some other way engaged. Company, not a message, is what gardens offer, no matter whether they are public or private—the company of plants.¹⁵

The reason this should be so again has to do with the fact that the elements of the gardener’s art are the lives of plants. The gardener’s materials are actual living beings, and the elements from which he composes are their actual lives. Were he to compose instead merely from their shapes, from their colors, from how they move in the wind, his work would resemble that of a choreographer, and we would be no more likely to describe ourselves as spending time in the company of his plants than we would be to describe ourselves as spending time in the company of dancers when watching a dance performance. But he composes instead from their lives. And it is important that those lives are actual, not fictional. We would readily describe ourselves, it is true, as spending time in the company of characters in a novel, a play, or even a painting, for all that those characters are fictional. But this is a quite different experience from being in the company of plants in a garden, and it is different in part because the “lives” of characters in the narrative and pictorial arts do not function as the elements from which their practitioners compose. (A film or a play, for example, is composed, as I wrote earlier,

from the talk, the gestures, the movements, and the mutual engagements of actors.)

In the garden, lives function only as elements, not as objects depicted or otherwise represented, as in novels or realistic paintings. The whole composed from those lives is, we could say, a society turned into a work of abstract art. But because its elements are indeed lives, we are content to dwell in their company. Faced with an abstract painting on a gallery wall, we go looking for messages. We strive to interpret. Not so in a garden. We consider and gauge the gardener's skill, to be sure, and in that sense ask after his intentions for the work. The gardener, for his part, is always checking on the progress of his ideas as they realize themselves on the ground. But this is to consider artistic success, not the work's meaning.

There is something refreshing about a type of art that does not need to tease you with meaning in order to absorb you by its beauty. It is refreshing because it is unusual, and it is refreshing because it offers ease of seeking to the beauty-seeking mind. This is what I meant when I wrote that having no meaning is part of the garden's charm. Perhaps it is why gardens have always been associated with relaxation and retirement and why in narratives a loving description of some garden or other is regularly the prelude to a dramatic incident occurring within its confines. (No arbor but has seen its tryst; no pleached allée but has invited hot pursuit.) It is because gardens are art, yet tell no story of their own, that they serve so well as the setting for one.

v

It is high time for me to defuse some of the objections that this account may have sparked in the reader's mind. By what right, one might ask, do I treat gardens as works of art? I have spoken repeatedly of the society of plants, but what of the human socializing that goes on in gardens and always has? What of the many pleasurable or useful activities that gardens make possible, all of them distinct both from the gardening itself and from aesthetic appreciation of its results? Is it not the case that most people value their gardens more as a place to relax, play games, cook out, or entertain than for any pretensions to art that they might boast? And if pretensions are involved, are they not more likely to be directed toward impressing the neighbors than toward achieving beauty? Or,

again, why have I not once taken note of the obvious fact that gardens stand in a far closer relation to nature than is true of the arts in general? Nature and art are opposites, but natural processes are everywhere at work in the garden, and not tangentially so, but as an essential component of the garden's effect.

Now, I readily concede that not everything in the garden is art and that not every garden is an artwork of any kind, successful or otherwise. Sometimes a garden is just a place to let the dog run. And even the most artful gardens are likely to have areas set aside for activities other than aesthetic appreciation or engagement: places to sit and converse or read; places for children to play; raised beds where herbs and vegetables are grown for the kitchen. My aim has been to show what a garden is when it is art rather than when it is not. And I have been at pains not to justify the garden's artistic status via the standard route of comparing it to arts that everyone recognizes as aesthetic. The lure of that route is its promise to assimilate the unfamiliar to the familiar; its danger is that by this assimilation, the peculiarity of the unfamiliar is smothered.¹⁶ Instead, I have justified the garden's artistic status by appeal to its pursuit of what all aesthetic arts pursue, beauty, and I have then tried to explain what makes gardening unique among the aesthetic arts.

It is a consequence of my account that there are only two types of garden activity that treat the garden as the artwork that it is when it is an artwork: one is the gardening itself; the other is observation of the garden as a whole. To observe the garden as a whole does not require obtaining a bird's-eye view of it. (In fact, that is likely to be the very last thing it requires.) It may be to walk through the garden, looking, smelling, listening, touching, even tasting; it may be to sit still and project oneself through the garden. It need only be to focus on an element or two, on the understanding that such a focus implies the whole of which these are elements, whether in the periphery of active attention, or as a nebula known to memory, or as a shimmer of possibility. (This last point tells against Kant's attempt to restrict the appreciation of gardens to the visual dimension on the grounds that a garden's beauty is constituted by nothing short of its total form, apprehended by the senses in its totality.)¹⁷

But such an approach perhaps seems to give short shrift to the contribution other garden

activities can make to our understanding of what a garden is. It is not just that conversation, games, lounging, dining, reading, reverie, and the rest have long been traditional garden activities, nor simply that many or even most people value their gardens mainly for these reasons and would be happy to delegate the landscaping and the maintenance to a professional. It may seem, rather, that such activities go to the core of the garden's significance. And what they would reveal it to be, *par excellence*, is a place of leisure.

I have been at pains not to tether my sense of what gardening is when it is art to any claim about what a garden is in general—a question I regard as unanswerable. As a result, it would be possible for me to dismiss this objection as beside the point. But I would prefer to integrate it into my account. The promise of leisure that has always made up a good deal of the garden's point for us is not irrelevant to the garden's status as art; nor do we disconnect the garden from its heartbeat when we treat it as art.

The reading, relaxing, entertaining, and musing that go on in gardens could go on elsewhere. But there is a reason why they go on in gardens as much as they do. Gardens, when they are art, aim at beauty. A connection with beauty is more firmly established in their case than it is for the interior spaces of the house, which, however fine they may be, are inevitably more utilitarian. The connection between beauty and leisure, for its part, is traditional, and it is strong. Both are loved for their own sakes; both are more readily associated with pleasure than with the good. This is so, at least, when leisure is not mere rest from work, aimed only at restoring vitality—and that is not the sort of leisure that tends to go on in gardens.

What is more, since the beauty in gardens is composed from the lives of plants and since this allows us to feel, when we are in a garden, that we are in the company of plants, it is natural that we should share in their society by being active in our own complementary way, as they are in theirs. Such activity is not the kind of sharing in the lives of the plants that the gardener experiences as he gardens, nor does it make those who share in this manner a bona fide element of the gardener's artwork, but it is a connection nonetheless. A sign that this is so is how easily we drift between garden activities and the activity of observing the garden as a whole, and how much more easily we shift between the activity in question and giving

attention to our surroundings when in the garden than when indoors.¹⁸

With regard to how the gardener can share in the lives of his plants as he gardens, an argument is made that the satisfactions this activity brings go well beyond the realm of the aesthetic.¹⁹ It is another way of suggesting that to treat gardens as artworks misses too much about them that really matters. The serious gardener, it is said, makes gardening a structural part of his life, not an incidental one; experiences good results in the garden not just as successes but as a kind of gift or blessing; may even become a better person through his gardening. All of this seems true to me. None of it, however, is any less true of the serious artist. The satisfactions of gardening may be every bit as grand as those described and still be the satisfactions of art.

This much would be true of any art, not only of one that has the lives of living beings for its elements. What that distinctive characteristic of gardening makes true of it that is less true of other arts is that gardening offers a grandeur of engagement to a wider range of folk than other arts do. We tend to become more passionate and serious about our gardens than, say, our dancing or guitar playing, and we do so for two reasons. One is simply that plants are alive and can be beautiful just by themselves, so that they do half our work for us. It is easier to be an accomplished gardener than an accomplished dancer or guitar player, let alone novelist or choreographer. The other—and this goes directly to the point at issue—is that because what we compose with as gardeners are the very lives of our plants, a concern for living plants that we feel just as one living being for another becomes readily allied to the more specialized and rarefied aims of the gardening art. Anyone can feel it, and anyone can be drawn in. Perhaps we do not even notice how we are drawn in.

What of the garden's especially close relation to the natural world? Can my account of the garden as art include it? It seems to me that it can, because everything important that authorities on gardens bring to the table under the rubric of nature can be discussed instead in terms of the lives of plants. It is because the lives of plants are the elements of the gardener's art that the natural world enters into its effects more centrally than is the case with other arts. And this claim should be distinguished from the claim that gardens put their natural materials on display, draw attention

to their naturalness, while arts such as painting, which also use materials derived from nature, do not.²⁰ What gardens put on display are the lives of plants, and these are the elements, not the materials, of the gardening art. They are displayed by being composed into an artistic whole. Their naturalness is included in the display by virtue of the fact that the lives of plants are mutable, ongoing, biologically patterned in their development and because this development in turn is subject to the natural environment. These and other characteristics of plant lives are taken up by the gardener as he composes, and we need look no further to explain the special relation that gardening bears to the natural world. But the gardener's art does not require him to draw special attention to his materials, the living plants themselves, any more than the painter's art requires him to draw attention to the natural qualities of his paint or canvas. Conversely, the painter's art puts its elements (not its materials) on display quite as much as the gardener's art does. It does so by inviting the viewer to consider the interplay of line, form, tone, and color on the painted surface. That is, it does not conceal the fact that it is art.

It does not matter to the point I am making here whether a garden is severely geometrical or as natural looking as may be. A shrub pruned into a sphere allows nature into the garden as surely as a scarf of daffodils in the wild garden may. At the extreme, admittedly, a garden could be designed to evoke a prairie with wildflowers, a stream falling in the mountains, or some yet more specific place in the wilderness—perhaps one with a name. Such a garden could then be said to imitate nature. Or consider a neighbor who plants his front garden exclusively to natives and allows them to grow untrammelled while others on his street cover their well-trimmed frontages with lawn or with F1 hybrids. If he does so to set an example, perhaps in the hope of effecting a conversion, we may then say that this neighbor is using his garden to make a statement about the relation between gardens and the natural world. But gardens that either imitate nature or make statements about nature are rare. That some gardens can do this gives no reason to suppose that all gardens, just by being gardens, also do.

It may seem, however, that there is much more to nature in the garden than the lives of plants. Surely nature includes also rocks and stones, water, the wind, the light of sun and moon? And

what of birds, insects, animals? Are these too not nature, and is the garden not made with a mind also to them? They are, and it is. Nevertheless, their inclusion does not disturb the centrality of the lives of plants to the garden. The garden is not a menagerie; the other living creatures inhabit the garden in much the way that we do when we engage in garden activities rather than work on or appreciate the garden as art. The gardener includes them in his plans as visitors from the natural world, much as he includes other people as visitors from the civilized world.

As for the rocks, the water, the wind: these the gardener should regard as setting, background, environment for the lives of the plants, not vice versa. The relation the lives of the plants bear to such things is the same as I argued it should be with garden buildings if a garden is not to return to the condition of landscape. The writer who declared that the Japanese garden designer "creates a theater for the wind to speak" was inspired by Ezra Pound to make the declaration, and he was exaggerating.²¹ The wind is not the star of the show. To suggest that it is, however, would be one way of drawing our attention to its several roles in the garden, which we might otherwise neglect. True enough, few things intoxicate so completely in the garden as to sit and watch the wind in another of its roles, blowing the light all over the place. But what we are actually watching, when this is what we are fortunate enough to watch, is an episode in the lives of the plants, as they scatter the light with their wind-driven foliage.

I should not allow this mention of the Japanese garden to pass without acknowledging that the lives of plants in this tradition of gardening are far from central to the garden as art. Rocks and stones are at least as important an element of the garden composition, perhaps more so. The eleventh-century gardening classic, the *Sakuteiki*, apparently uses the term "placing of stones" as a synonym for "making a garden."²² And in the practice of dry gardening, plant life is either reduced to a bare minimum or eliminated altogether. The word we translate as dry garden, *karesansui*, literally means "withered mountain water." Its named elements are those of a landscape seen at a distance.

At the beginning of this article I posed the question, can an assemblage of rocks and white sand make a garden? And my unspoken target was the famous and much-discussed *karesansui*

of the Ryoanji Buddhist temple in Kyoto—fifteen rocks of varying size and form spaced irregularly in a tennis court–sized rectangle of geometrically raked white sand. From the viewing veranda of the temple they are seen against a low wall surmounted by a pitched roof. Above the wall in the near distance a fine treescape is visible, the effect of which on the whole is not negligible. (Imagine if the near distance revealed a cityscape instead.) Still, it would be perverse to insist in this case, as I did when discussing garden architecture, that the rocks are the setting for the trees, and not the other way round. The rocks are the focus here.

I am prepared to conclude that the *karesansui* of Ryoanji, although it is surely a work of art, is not by my criteria a work of garden art. My inclination is to call it an installation, or perhaps, in light of its potential use as a tool for monastic meditation, a mandala.²³ If it was intended to be as straightforwardly pictorial as some believe— islands in the sea or a tiger and her cubs crossing the water—it would be a further example of garden space co-opted in the service of an art other than gardening.

I am far less willing, however, to banish the entire tradition of Japanese gardening from the confines of the gardening art. (The tradition is not monolithic, of course, but its historical variety does not affect the point I am about to make.) Some Japanese gardening practice, it is true, is dictated by the ambition to produce in gardens what painters produce on canvas and would therefore be subject to the considerations I have raised in connection with the English picturesque. But, in general, it seems to me that traditional Japanese gardening is gardening as art if ever gardening was. Japanese gardens inspire the observer with the feeling that gardens do when they are art: the feeling that we are in the company of other lives. This remains true of small domestic gardens in contemporary Japan that use traditional motifs. The difference from the Western tradition is that the lives are not only the lives of plants. They are also the lives of rocks and stones.

This is not a claim derived from the animistic beliefs of ancient Shinto religion, in which rocks could be considered seats of the gods and channels for their living energy. At most periods of Japanese gardening this does not seem, after all, to have been how rocks were regarded and used.²⁴ Rather, I am relying on the fact that rocks are valued in Japanese gardens for their individual-

ity and for the changes they undergo over time. Before placing a rock, the gardener must give it a “face” (*kao*). This is not to say that he humanizes the rock; rather, he appreciates its unique identity. The attitude extends, it seems, even to individual stepping stones. ‘Stone’ in the Japanese garden is not a mass term. And because of its individuality, a rock will engage over time with its environment in idiosyncratic ways. The soil will gather and the moss will grow in these crevices, not those; the fallen rain glistens longer on this flank than that. As an individual changing over time in sometimes predictable and sometimes surprising ways, it may be said to belong to the gardener’s web of lives. The rocks at Ryoanji, too, considered in these terms and not simply in terms of their relative bulk, geometry, orientation, and spacing, might constitute a work of garden art after all.

Finally, it is undeniable that a garden, particularly a garden visible from the street, may be designed primarily with a view to impressing the neighbors or in some other way sending a message about its owner, rather than with a view to constructing a society of plant lives dedicated to beauty. It may also be designed as it is simply in order to fit in with the neighborhood, rather than to send a message. All such gardens grease the gears of human society rather than serve the cause of the gardening art. A garden that is an artwork may indeed impress the neighbors, but to be a true example of garden art it must be directed not at them but at beauty.

This is not to pretend that gardening as art is somehow free of all social constraints, all influence of fashion, all concern for current trends, and exists instead in a vacuum inhabited only by the gardener and his ideal of beauty. Take, for example, the blue potato bush with which I began. Where I garden, this is a profoundly ordinary plant. It is the kind of plant that nurseries sell to beginners, knowing it to be tough, easy, and generous with its blooms. (In Britain the lavatera has something of the same reputation.) For these reasons it invites the disdain of the more adventurous and experienced gardener. To take such a plant and prune it into a standard adds insult to injury and flirts with outright vulgarity. For to some, training plants as standards is a suspect practice. Wretched shrubs these standards seem to them, shrubs tortured by pretensions of grandeur, which trail the look of suburban gardens in the 1950s. Make one from an

easy bloomer and risk the charge of aiming for a quick, gaudy tree on the cheap.

I shall not tire the reader with an extended defense of my beloved potato bush. I will say only that in the garden I made, it was a plant that worked, and worked because of how it fit with the lives around it. I have brought it back into the discussion in order to acknowledge that it is not always an easy matter to separate what in one's gardening is directed at the neighbors from what is directed at beauty. 'Vulgar' is an aesthetic as well as a social term. My critic's concern seems an uncertain blend of both. There is in it the desire to protect the seriousness of an art, but audible too are the influence of current ecological preferences, a fashionable inclination toward "less is more," and perhaps a whiff of snobbery. But this critic, of course, is internal to me. To the extent that I heard his voice as I worked with my potato bush, I was thinking not just of beauty but of the neighbors too. But I was thinking mostly of beauty. And beauty is flexible: even thoughts of the neighbors can be diverted to its cause. Concern for social appearances and horticultural fashion prompted me to mesh that plant with its fellows in an interesting way. It was in this case a concern that neither stifled beauty nor guided it, but challenged and enlivened it.

In short, the fact that service to beauty in the garden cannot be neatly segregated in practice from management of the impressions others get of you, or would if they visited, does nothing to erase the distinction between the two. When what you attempt in the garden is art, beauty will win out over other concerns.

G. R. F. FERRARI

Department of Classics

University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California 94720

INTERNET: gferrari@berkeley.edu

1. For stylistic reasons, I use "he," "him," and "his" throughout this article not only as masculine pronouns but also as pronouns of indeterminate gender.

2. It was already a theme of her first book, *Wood and Garden* (1899; repr., London: Longmans, 1981); see especially pp. 159–162, 281–282. She later dedicated an entire book to the subject: *Colour in the Flower Garden* (1908; repr., ed. Graham Stuart Thomas, Portland, OR: Sagapress, 1995).

3. "Garden-making has often been closely identified with horticulture, but to make a garden is, first of all, to shape a space." Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell, and William

Turnbull Jr., *The Poetics of Gardens* (MIT Press, 1988), p. 26. They elaborate their position on pp. 26–47. Christopher Tunnard's formalism, too, has a similar emphasis, rejecting Jekyll's color-planting in favor of spatial expression. See *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (London: Architectural Press, 1938). Mara Miller spends most of two early chapters of *The Garden as an Art* (SUNY Press, 1993) discussing the spatiality of gardens—a discussion she deepens with an appreciation of their temporality also. (In general, her book is too diverse to be held to the advocacy of a single view.)

4. The distinction is absent from Susan Stewart's opening salvo in "Garden Agon," *Representations* 62 (1998): 111–143: "In making a garden one composes with living things, intervening in and contextualizing, and thus changing, their form without determining all aspects of their development or end" (p. 111).

5. William Robinson, *The Wild Garden* (Portland, OR: Sagapress, 1994 [5th ed., John Murray, 1895]).

6. Robinson, *The Wild Garden*, pp. xiv–xv.

7. An appreciation of wild gardening has in recent years, by contrast, often gone hand in hand with a worshipful tendency toward native plants. Michael Pollan provides an effective antidote against this tendency in his "Against Nativism," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 15, 1994.

8. Stewart, "Garden Agon," p. 111, and Miller, *The Garden as an Art*, p. 26, also compare gardening to politics, but only in passing.

9. Thomas More, *Utopia: Latin Text and English Translation*, ed. George M. Logan, Robert M. Adams, and Clarence H. Miller (Cambridge University Press, 1995; William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. Krishan Kumar (1890; repr. Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 75).

10. Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), see especially chaps. 9, 11; Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton University Press, 2007), especially pp. 92–93.

11. The elision of garden labor contributed by subalterns is a major theme of Simon Pugh's *Garden-Nature-Language* (Manchester University Press, 1988).

12. Miller writes on p. 59 of *The Garden as an Art*: "the garden . . . has the dependency of a living being; in this it is unique among the arts." But she is thinking of the entire garden as a single living being, not as a society of living beings, and her point concerns only the garden's dependency on the environment, not its defining characteristic as an art. When she does acknowledge that plants are individual living beings (p. 26), it is in order to find in their similarity to living human beings a basis for "the metaphorical significance of gardens." But what matters for the art, it seems to me, is that plants are actual living beings, with lives that could be their own.

13. Extended discussions of this garden can be found in Moore et al., *The Poetics of Gardens*, pp. 136–144, and Stephanie Ross, *What Gardens Mean* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), chap. 3 passim (especially pp. 63–66).

14. Moore et al., *The Poetics of Gardens*, p. 137.

15. Compare Roger Scruton, *Perfection in Colophon* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2000), p. 83.

16. The route of comparison between gardens and arts universally recognized as aesthetic is taken by John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (MIT Press, 1992), and by Ross,

What Gardens Mean. That such comparison gains what effectiveness it has by virtue of assimilating the familiar to the unfamiliar is a point made by Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, pp. 25–26. (In thinking about gardens, I have found myself in dialogue with Cooper’s important book at many turns.)

17. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §51.

18. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, remarks on this phenomenon (p. 79).

19. The argument I summarize in this paragraph is Cooper’s in chap. 4 of *A Philosophy of Gardens*.

20. This second claim is made by Cooper on p. 136 of *A Philosophy of Gardens*.

21. Preston Houser, foreword to Marc P. Keane, *Japanese Garden Design* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1996), p. xii. I owe the reference to Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, p. 141. (Cooper, however, misattributes the citation to Pound himself.)

22. See Jiro Takei’s introduction to Jiro Takei and Marc P. Keane, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 2008).

23. The comparison to a mandala is made by Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*, p. 43.

24. See Keane, *Japanese Garden Design*, pp. 15, 146. This paragraph as a whole is much indebted to Keane’s account of the use of stone in the Japanese garden.