

Unusual Gardens: Toward a Poetics of Cultivated Earth

INTRODUCTION

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THE PROTAGONIST OF THE STORY “In the garden,” by Nicole Krauss, follows the life and career of Latin America’s greatest landscape architect. The story includes one of the most beautiful literary descriptions of a gardener’s work:

“Plan by plan, sketch by sketch, undulating bed by bed, he bent the neck of nature. Nature isn’t a daisy chain, it isn’t a pocketful of posies, he used to say. Nature bites the hand that feeds it. But he never tried to tame nature, he never removed its claws or its venom. That was his secret, what set him apart from the rest: he only bent nature’s neck, he never broke it. That was his genius and his downfall, too. He let nature keep its wildness, and one day nature turned around and struck him down. Not one day, in fact—very slowly, stealthily, but the result was the same.”¹

Literary gardeners are not just the custodians of nature, they also bend nature’s neck. We often say that gardens allow us to experience nature as controlled, designed, civilized, and relatively safe spaces. In their liminality—situated between wilderness and culture—they have come to occupy a special place in the Western literary imagination. The growing awareness of the rapid destruction of nature and humanity’s role in this process has led to a renewed interest in the way we bring nature into our towns and cities as well as to our literature and art. In the sciences, ecologists such as Gretchen C. Daily have focused on “an ecosystem service perspective on urban nature, physical activity, and health.”² In the humanities, literary scholars such as Mohammad Gharipour and Robert Harrison have celebrated literary “cultivation” and explored the many ways in which gardens disclose the human condition. Harrison’s book traces the long

¹ Nicole Krauss, *To Be a Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 149.

² Roy P. Remme, Howard Frumkin, Anne D. Guerry, and Gretchen C. Daily, “An Ecosystem Service Perspective on Urban Nature, Physical Activity, and Health,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 22 (May 14, 2021), doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2018472118.

history of thinking in, with, and through the concept of a cultivated space and the importance of gardens for Western accounts of self, place, and even time. Harrison joins other important research in the humanities that reads cultivated space as a locus of desire (or lack thereof), a meeting place, an index of eros and naivete, as heaven-on-earth (and earth-in-heaven), as agriculture's antechamber, as a laboratory for philosophy and the academy, as beauty, and much, much more.³

The articles in the present special issue form part of the broader effort in the humanities to re-examine the meaning—in environmental, conceptual, and ethical terms—and role of cultivated space in our current moment. Our hope is to demystify some of our more prevalent cultural conceptions of cultivated space. One of the most common of these conceptions is, somewhat surprisingly, that gardens can “happen” without strenuous labor. “Our human gardens may appear to us like little openings onto paradise in the midst of the fallen world,” Robert Harrison writes, “yet the fact that we must create, maintain, and care for them is the mark of their postlapsarian provenance. History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous.”⁴ In many literary traditions, gardeners and other laborers are often presented as part of a joyous, almost carefree environment. This perception can be found already in the Garden of Eden, where work is superfluous and tellingly only comes to be with knowledge and subsequent expulsion. Adam J. Goldwyn's article, “Gardens without Gardeners: (Un)narrating Agricultural Labor in the Medieval Greek Novel,” opens the issue with a study that breaks this myth and addresses the long tradition of “hiding” labor in descriptions of gardens. Byzantine literature, as Goldwyn explains, “reflects the experiences of the urban elite who comprised its patrons, authors, and audience. As a result, much of this cultural production elides the experiences of the agricultural workers whose labor in palatial pleasure gardens and vast rural farming estates supplied these aristocrats with much of their food, wealth, and leisure.” Goldwyn argues that “contemporary critical theory drawn from Chicx Studies and African and African American Studies . . . offers models for recuperating the lives and experiences of agricultural workers in Byzantium.” When these models are applied to other elements of the Byzantine archive, they can also help to demonstrate “the physical, economic, and personal hardships endured by agricultural workers, and can thus offer a corrective to a scholarly tradition that has too often reflected the bias of its sources in this erasure.”

Goldwyn's article is followed by the essay “Strange Fruit, Unusual Garden” by Vincent Barletta. “From a European perspective, gardens and power have long gone hand in hand. Much of this has to do with the surprising resilience of coloniality and the arborescent notions of personhood that support it,” Barletta writes. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, the Talmud, and Emmanuel Levinas, the paper suggests a midrash on the murder scene of a Black gardener that appears in a prose piece by Joanot Martorell.

In addition to presenting new and unusual perspectives on the study of cultivated space, this issue attempts to think about gardens across cultures and historical periods and create unusual or uncommon meetings between scholars of Hebrew, Persian, German, and English literature. Yarden Ben-Zur and Galili Shahar's “The Roses' Joyful Kingdom” looks at the poetics of the garden in the work of the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the Persian poems of Sa'di.

³ Mohammad Gharipour, *Persian Gardens and Pavilions: Reflections in History, Poetry, and the Arts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴ Harrison, *Gardens*, 30–31.

This comparative and dialogical study examines the garden as a poetic trope and as a (Eurasian) plan of world literature. Ben-Zur and Shahar argue that the poetics of the garden was used to reform human subjectivity, and that Goethe's and Sa'di's imagined gardens were dedicated to the notion of esthetic education.

Marie Huber's "The Stone Garden: Meditations on History, Experience, and the Nature of the Mystical" moves beyond the conventional and the rich contemporary discussion of gardens in the Persian poetic imaginary, which have been "the site of symbolic overdetermination for a thousand years." Huber's essay focuses on Darvish Khan Esfandiarpur's modern stone garden, which replaces the classical gardens of otherworldly desire with a space that resists domestication to the allegorical order. His garden, as Huber writes, is not a "self-contained utopia onto which our own longing for shelter from hostile forces can be projected. Instead, it stands as a sacrificial dance frozen in time." Darvish Khan's stone garden (like Parviz Kimiavi's two films devoted to it) serves as a "memento to an individual passion and the ravages wrought by history on a subject without voice." Different from Japanese rock gardens, which serve as focal points for meditation, Darvish Khan's stone garden is a suspended, swirling cry.

The metaphoric, symbolic, and mystical aspects of cultivated spaces in different periods and literatures are also at the center of Ariel Mayse's essay on "Gardens of the Spirit: Land, Text and Ecological Hermeneutics in Jewish Mystical Sources." The paper examines "the place of gardens in the interplay of theology and hermeneutics in a range of Jewish mystical sources, from the classics of medieval Kabbalah to the devotional worlds of early Hasidism and the dazzling poetry of the twentieth-century author Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky." Mayse concludes that "Jewish mystical sources offer a potential wealth of narrative, myth, and ritual that predate extractivism and carbon capitalism, challenging the mindset that has neither the values nor the vocabulary to deal with the climate disaster . . . These Jewish mystical sources assert the centrality of humanity while underscoring our fundamental, even pre-ontological, obligation to ensure the flourishing of the nonhuman world."

We placed Mary Bowden's paper after Mayse's because together they offer a multifaceted exploration of how our current perspective on the environment allows for a rediscovery of previous literary attempts to place nature at the center of things. In Bowden's article, "Cultivating Arboreal Time in Hardy's Fiction," the reader discovers Thomas Hardy's attempt to narrate through the time of the trees, or at least "to adopt coppiced and pollarded trees' recurrent tempo as the rhythm of their marriage plots." Bowden argues that "critics have recently stressed Hardy's portrayal of ecological entanglement, which is particularly apparent in his blurring of character and setting." As she argues, however, in moving the attention from character to plot, and from spatial contiguity to temporal disjuncture, we see "that by portraying the competitive interplay between human and arboreal time, Hardy's arboreal fictions teach their readers to accept the unknowability and inimitability of arboreal lives."

We conclude the issue with "Custodianship of the Earth," a conversation between Robert Harrison and landscape architect Thomas Woltz. This conversation brings together the "scholar" and the "gardener" in a discussion of current visions for gardens and the way that they reflect and react to literary history as well as to the current moment.

For this issue's artistic contribution, we feature Saar Magal's dance theater and opera performances, entitled "Extinction / I'm Still Here / A Tale of Longing and Return: Performing Ecologies of the Future and Histories of Tomorrow." The trilogy is inspired by Harrison's book



Extinction / I'm Still Here—Futurity Trilogy Episode 1. Concept, Directing and Choreography: Saar Magal

Co-produced and co-funded by: KONZEPTBÜRO ROTE FABRIK ZÜRICH, Kyros Kikos & Dagmar Lorenz. Premiered at the AKTIONSHALLE ROTE FABRIK, March 20, 2018. Photos: Niklaus Spoerri



Concept, Directing and Design: Saar Magal. Created as research and development for “Futurity Episode 3.” Performed by the dancers of the Maslool professional dance program in Tel Aviv at Tmua Theater and the Suzanne Dellal Center. Photos: Efrat Mazo. Performed at the Suzanne Dellal Center, Tel Aviv, June 2019.

on gardens, mentioned above, and by Amir Eshel’s *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past*,⁵ as well as by conversations with Vered Karti Shemtov. While Magal’s work is deeply rooted in her experience as an Israeli artist, her gardens are quite far from the aesthetic, political, and environmental aspects of the Zionist project of “making the desert bloom.”⁶ Magal’s gardens present contemplations on the contemporary moment. In the setting of a garden made from bottles, Magal asks in “Extinction / I’m Still Here—Futurity Episode 1,” “What if

⁵ Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁶ See Miki Zaidman and Ruth Kark, “Garden Cities in the Jewish Yishuv of Palestine: Zionist Ideology and Practice 1905–1945,” *Planning Perspectives* 31 no. 1 (2016): 55–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2015.1039051>; and Irus Braverman, “Planting the Promised Landscape: Zionism, Nature, and Resistance in Israel/Palestine,” *Natural Resources Journal* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 317–65 (49 pages).

the end of world as we know it is happening now? What does extinction produce? What is the substance of the fantasies that sustain the natural order and reality of the world? What happens when these fantasies lose their grounding in a living tradition? What forces move us towards or against changes? What might these transformations incur?”⁷ At the end of this same piece and in “What is Compromise?” she creates a garden that is made out of plastic trees and uses it as a space for exploring “the potential development of love, eroticism and human relationships in a future shaped by the influence of new technologies, post-humanism and the Anthropocene Era.”

In an interview with Magal for this issue, she explained her concept: “We wanted to create here on earth a garden of Eden, we wanted the garden to be a utopia, but instead we created something lifeless that can sustain itself only in a state of stillness, like an ongoing death. In this kind of garden everything is artificial; all the trees are plastic, there are plastic toys and guns and inflatable tents that turn into graves. Little by little the dancers put on one layer of clothes on top of another and become different characters.

“I bring into the garden violence. It is no longer a comfortable place, because sometimes it is in these cultivated spaces that the most horrifying violence takes place. At the same time, the garden is a primordial space—a place in which things can still be turned around and changed, a place of origins.” As is the case of many literary gardens, Magal’s gardens of bottles and of artificial objects on stage mirror our ecological ethics and our human nature. Unusual gardens and unusual perspectives to the study of gardens can reflect to us how “our desires remain open to the future, but our obsessions are dead ends.”⁸ A

⁷ Saar Magal, “Extinction / I’m Still Here / A Tale of Longing and Return: Performing Ecologies of the Future and Histories of Tomorrow,” 2018, <https://www.saarmagal.com/collection.php?InnerCol=70&Col=8>.

⁸ Saar Magal in an interview with Vered Shemtov, Tel Aviv, July 2021.