FROM TOPIARY TO UTOPIA?

ENDING TELEOLOGY AND FOREGROUNDING UTOPIA
IN GARDEN HISTORY

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Introduction, or the greening of Utopia

Utopia begs respect. More than an island, imagined or imaginary, more than a fiction, it is a word, a research area, almost a science. Utopia has lent itself to utopologia and utopodoxa, and there are utopologues and utopolists. To think out utopia is to think large and wide; to reflect on man's utopian propensity (which strikes me as deeply, ontologically rooted) is to ponder over man's extraversive or centrifugal dimension, whereby being in one universe (perhaps feeling constrained) he/she feels the need to re-authorise himself/herself as Architect, "skilful Gardener", and to multiply universes within his own universe. Utopia points to an opening up of frontiers, a breaking down of dividing walls: it is about transferring other worlds into one world as if man needed to think constantly he had a plurality of worlds at hand. Our culture today is full of this taste for derivation, analogy, parallel, and mirror-effects. A photographer like Aberlado Morell has played with his irrepressible need to fuse the world 'within' and the world 'without' by offering "views with a room".[1] Nothing new there- a recycling of past techniques of image-merging such as *capriccio* fantasies. But such a propensity to invent and re-invent a multi-universe reaches out far and wide in contemporary global society.

However, from the 1970s onwards, utopia has been declared a thing of the past - no longer a valid thinking tool of this day and age possibly because of

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[1] See the merging of inside and outside perspectives on his official website (last checked 21 April 2013), http://www.abelardomorell.net/

great communist utopias falling apart and the breaking up or cooling of communist régimes, as Jean-Michel Racault reminded us in the preface to his *Nulle part* [RACAULT, 2003]. Utopias have been at a standstill, undergoing a crisis, which Carmelina Imbroscio has studied in her *Requiem pour l'utopie* [IMBROSCIO, 1986] down to Caroline Fourest's *La dernière utopie ? Menaces sur l'universalisme* [FOUREST, 2009]. Having said that, utopology is still alive and kicking, as the 2000 exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale proved, and numerous studies since, such as Laurent Lavoie's *Utopia* (2001). There is now cyberspace, or E-Topia, as William J. Mitchell coined it, understood as the opening up of a plurality of spaces from the frame of one window. Anne Cauquelin draws attention to utopia as an apt mode in an age that relies so much on virtuality in her *À l'angle des mondes possibles*. But yet another area which may prove particularly fruitful on the utopian front is garden or landscape aesthetics generally, albeit a relatively minor object of study - utopian studies being either philosophical or literary. Gilles Clément in France, or Charles Jencks in Britain, provides wonderful illustrations of gardens informed and stretched out by utopia. The very concepts used by Clément, whether it be his *jardin en movement* (gardens moving/in motion), "places of resistance" or the "planetary garden" – are conceived as fringes where nature is left in a constant organic, mutable state. Greening the issue may therefore prove particularly enriching and I wish to offer this paper as a tentative suggestion that utopia and utopian studies have a lot to benefit from thinking out the garden.[2]

First, I will raise the problem of the relevance of utopia if not for aesthetics generally speaking, at least for garden history. At first the relevance of utopia for garden seems obvious because so many pagan, Christian, and Oriental mythologies give prominent place to the garden. Most civilisations have invested a lot in gardens precisely because gardens structure, actuate and illustrate the narrative or drama of man's perfectibility. Although there is no room here to spell out definitions or redefinitions of the multifarious acceptations of utopia, I think it is useful to identify the terms that best correspond to the idea of garden-as-utopia. Juxtaposing utopia with the

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[2] This paper was written for the 2010 Paris-Sorbonne conference on « Utopia, city and landscape in the Anglophone world » but since then, inroads have been made into "green" utopia, with a book by Annette Giesecke and Naomi Jacobs, *Earth Perfect? Nature, Utopia and the Garden* (London: Black Dog, 2012) and a symposium in June 2013 at the University of Delaware. See the interesting review by Nathaniel Robert Walker, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72- 1 (March 2013) : 117-118.

lexical field of perfectibility and perfection helps highlight a duality: on the one hand, the yearning for action, actuating, implementing, as well as making real — (or the absolute reverse, namely the failure of ever reaching, attaining, maintaining a state of things) — combining on the other hand with the yearning for progress, perfecting, betterment, ideal and improvement. Indeed there is a sense that perfection is never something/somewhere man is "in" but something/somewhere in which man has been or will be. Gardens are pretty apt to represent this hovering state, tending either towards the Garden of Eden (paradise lost) or the Elysian Fields (paradise regained). Put it simply, perfection is obtained at a huge cost- at the cost of knowledge, sexuality or life. No surprise gardens have all to do with meaning, sex or death – whether it be displaced, deferred, or transferred. One only has to think of Haround-Al-Rachid's and Shariar's confrontation with 'sex in the garden' – yet another garden potent enough to spurn the most powerful utopian fiction ever, *Alf Laila Waila*, *The Thousand and One Nights* (see *Les Mille et une Nuits*).

The Irrelevance of Utopia for Gardens?

Several voices have been raised against the use of utopia and their arguments need to be recorded if only to take them on board, either to take them into account or to circumvent them one way or the other. First of all, this study stems from a feeling of frustration with the commonly-held assumption that utopia is profoundly architectural or inherently city-related. Although garden cities feature high in utopian cities as an instance of green utopias, it seems that utopias are less landscaped than built-up and one more often hears of the City of God and utopian cities (thus making the 'greening' of utopia far less of a pleonastic phrase and useless). Behind this preliminary study lies the question of the prevalence of the architectural paradigm over the gardening model. Is it that architecture lends itself to utopia better than the garden? I do not think that utopia structures architecture more than the garden but what prevails in architecture is its usefulness: it serves city-building, masonry being more useful than gardening, just as agriculture would pre-empt gardening. Architecture is instrumental in building the ideal city, albeit on an island, and the garden seems adjacent, annexical or appendical. What this first objection raises is the problem of community versus privacy. Can the garden embody a communal design, can it constitute the basis of a community project (one essential ingredient of utopia as text)? By focusing too much on the text-based definition of utopia, in generic terms, one might overemphasise the

political, legal and social dimension of utopianism, which should also be understood in aesthetic, philosophical, and spiritual terms. After all did Guillaume Budé in 1517 not describe More's *Utopia* as "un exemplaire d'heureuse vie et un arrest de vie, une pépinière d'élégantes et utiles institutions" [HUDDE & KUON : 22]. I wish to contend that eighteenth-century gardens partook both of a communal project (ideal society, U-topia) and a solitary experience (happy place, *locus amoenus*, Eutopia)

The second objection comes from the philosophical terrain, *i.e.* Michel Foucault's idea, which Monique Mosser highlighted in her introduction to the 1999 exhibition symposium *Jardin Planétaire* [FOUCAULT, 1984 and MOSSER, 1999]. While not denying the universal appeal of utopian models or concepts for gardens, Mosser used Foucault's suggestion that utopia should be exchanged for heterotopia when it comes to gardens. Indeed the etymology of utopia (no-space) points to a contradiction which is not reconcilable since gardens are real spaces *per se*, anchored in a living matter. Gardens ought to be seen as other, different *loci*, not as "non-spaces". Heterotopia, according to them, does better justice to gardens as it emphasises otherness and helps bring out the exotic dimension of gardens or even the way that they are a representation of other spaces. I would nonetheless argue that somehow heterotopia loses out on the ideal side, Eutopia understood as ideal, imaginary land. What one considers as utopia or utopian goes far beyond simply the design, project or even attempt to achieve a "nulle part" or a "non-space".

The third objection comes from a garden historian too. John Dixon Hunt's idea is that utopia is best applied to Pre-Renaissance gardens and notably to the idea that there was an urge or an impulse to embrace all botanical species within the space of the garden, a kind of live *Wunderkammer*. When such a project ceased to be feasible, the utopian dimension of gardens was killed off. But the encyclopedic urge behind botany or the use of glasshouses (culminating in encasing the trees at Hyde Park within Crystal Palace) as well as the taste for arboretum testify to the liveliness of hortulan or botanic utopianism. Hunt also implies that the political instrumentalisation of the gardens of Versailles would have extinguished the last utopian flame burning within English gentleman-gardeners:

Indeed, all over sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe royal entertainments- ballets, *intermezzi*, masques, entries, progresses – used the garden as the apt metaphor for the ruler's beneficial and creative regime. The political claims implicitly made for such gardens inevitably lost them

their utopian attraction when the political ideology with which they were associated came into question: Louis XIV's exercise of garden imagery at Versailles or Marly did not help the universal claims for a garden as utopia, at least in England. [HUNT : 132]

I would retort that it is precisely this idea of a distortion of "the universal claim of garden as utopia" that gave the English an opportunity, a *niche* as it were, for re-establishing themselves the best practitioners of gardens as utopia, the best nation at "effecting the best of all things possible" (Bacon). Finally, Hunt argued that the English garden lost its utopian impulse the moment it fed on irony and parody. He feels there is too much of a satirical or elegiac element for the garden to elicit any utopian experience in the visitor. Yet one essential ingredient of utopia is precisely a satiric dimension since Thomas More's *Utopia* itself was based on a critical appraisal of contemporary England.

The Utopian Potential of the Garden: Utopian Gaze, Utopian Design, Utopian Experience

I would like to present here the benefits of utopia as a working tool and methodological approach that enables to avoid a number of traps: teleology, denomination and categorisation. The first argument in favour of utopia is that it would redirect the course of garden historiography off its standard teleological course [BENDING, 1994; CHâTEL, 2006 and WELTMAN-ARON, 2001]. If one started from the premise that throughout its history British gardening was shaped by utopian constructs, or u-topianism, the temptation to portray each generation of garden makers as progressively transcending their elders would be forfeited. There is a methodological gain to be had in maintaining a constant level of awareness of utopianism in the interpretation and experience of the garden for one is thus guarded off from a progressive history whereby one style supersedes or proves better than the other. Each century, each age, each decade ought to be credited with its own manifestation of 'utopian thinking' and thus the scholar looking out for what is 'new' or 'better' need not be trapped in linguisitic or chronological classifications- rather, he is sent back to close observation of forms and typology with a greater sense of continuum. Because utopia is about self-representation, the study of garden-as-utopia reveals the 'green' images which a nation wishes to put forward. Although each age has its image of paradise, Britain tends to impose the view that after 1720 it carried out the best embodiment ever of paradise because it evolved from geometrical,

"topiary" gardens to natural, free, "utopian" landscape parks. Alexander Pope, Horace Walpole, William Mason, and other English writers, presented contemporary innovations as outdoing past attempts and reaching a climax in the hands and eyes of William Kent, "Master Utopian", as it were, revealingly nicknamed "Kentissime" by Walpole- the suffix "issime" betraying the progressive story being told. Whately could be said to have heralded the triumphant tone: "Gardening, in the perfection to which it has been lately brought in England, is entitled to a place of considerable rank among the liberal arts." [WHATELY : 1]. However, Britain never went from 'topiary' *to* 'utopia': both formal and informal gardens can be seen as two sides of the same utopian coin. Stowe, "a work to wonder at", flaunted as Britain's Versailles, was presented as Britain's translation and ownership of utopia- but to believe this at face value is to ignore the political and cultural agenda that generated the creative energy and discourse behind renewed garden creativity. Topiary may well have been left behind, but in its day and age topiary or 'formality' was an arch exemplar of utopia *à l'anglaise.* What I find enlightening is to see how well Britain lent itself readily and strategically to a rhetoric of utopia which instrumentalised gardening innovations. If one applied the term utopia to a longer periodisation — between 1600 and 1820 — two benefits would ensue: first, it would help avoid and erase the view that the "landscape garden" was the first successful re-enactment of Eden. Second, debunking the utopian trope behind garden creativity would lay bare the nationalist rhetoric, fiction and politics which prompted Britain to idealise its gardens so emphatically.

The second justification for seeing eighteenth-century gardens as informed and structured by utopian impulses can be found in the aesthetic motivations of gentlemen amateur gardeners at the start of the eighteenth century who relished a "broad view". Just as late eighteenth-century architects such as Ledoux, Boullée, Soane, Gandy have been called visionary or utopian for their grand schemes, Addison, Vanbrugh and Kent can be thought as "utopians", literally as actors of the sublime, going towards and beyond horizons (*sub-limis*). The abolition of the frontiers of the garden is signalled by the emblematical "ha-ha" which checked the walk but opened out the view. Addison exclaimed : "Why may not a whole Estate be thrown into a kind of Garden by Frequent Plantations? [...] a Man might make a pretty Landskip of his own Possessions" [ADDISON : 1712]. Just as Defoe had written *An Essay Upon Projects*, these men projected onto the garden a gamut of virtualities over which the eye was free to roam. The very lexicon used at that time to show off modernity – the discourse on *improvement* – is

inherently utopian. The growth of interest for the capability of the land was such that it gave its name to one of the first professional landscape architects, Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, who was branded after the obsession of that age. Designing with a view to what it might become, literally designing with a vision, partakes of the utopian impulse. It may be followed by success or failure, and there is no guarantee of it being effective. In this respect Brown's projects, but also more tangibly Repton's 'red books', constitute a perfect illustration of the utopian impulse that moved these gardeners. The general enthusiasm for and ambition about the possible transformations and remapping of the landscape strikes me as utopian. But Switzer accused Bridgeman in 1742 of pursuing the idea that "true Greatness consists in Size" and of "aiming at Things beyond the Reach of Nature". This is the first indication that by flirting with utopia the garden could easily slip into dystopia. The reversability of utopia/dystopia raises the problem of interpreting the social or/and political meaning of gardens as utopia.

The widening of views across the countryside can be conceived as reflecting a moral widening of interests in agriculture, economy and utility, but it is not necessarily tantamount to a social reforming scheme. Although gardens were said to partake of a larger social and political culture of "improvement" from the point of view of landowners (and especially great estate holders), landscape aesthetics can easily also be construed as dystopian. Enclosures embodied many of the central premises of progressive ideas of improvement because it seemed that the pursuit of individual self-interest would bring about massive public benefits. But enclosures are also considered as a byword for monopoly, privilege and élitism generating opposition and a body of critical literature — Goldsmith's visionary poem, *The Deserted Village*, being the most notable example of a dystopian representation of 'modern' English rural life even before the pace of *Enclosure Acts* accelerated.[3] In view of the fact that enclosures connect emparkment with the disempowerment and impoverishment of a whole generation of country dwellers, landscaping is best conceived as leading to a complex polysemic mix of benevolent gestures and malevolent outcomes. In the wake of Nigel Everett's study, *The Tory View of the Landscape*, and Tim Richardson's Whig garden history with his *Arcadian Friends*, recent garden

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[3] Pionneering research on the dystopian dimension of landscape aesthetics, including garden design, was led by John Barrell and Ann Bermingham.

historiography is too easily tempted to focus on either political 'affiliation' as if mutually exclusive. It is best to avoid categorizing agricultural-cum-aesthetic projects with Tory or Whig labels and instead be prepared to envisage the positive and negative, open and closed, exclusive and inclusive *scenarii*. On the one hand, there was a utopia (which can also be read as dystopia) of exclusive landscapes and systematic "grand schemes" (which erased common land, villagers and villages from the longed-for-picturesque scene). The most famous example being the removal of Milton Abbas off the Milton Abbey estate in the 1770s, which shows how the word 'improvement' could be stretched to mean at once progress and decadence or loss. Tom Williamson referred to this kind of improvement as a "landscape of exclusion":

> Throughout the second half of the century landlords were keen to cash in on the opportunities offered by demographic recovery and economic expansion, and seem in general to have managed their estates with a greater eye to efficiency and profits than before. They were eager, above all, to amalgamate small family farms into larger, more productive units. [WILLIAMSON : 101]

On the other hand, there was a utopia of paternalistic "modest schemes" which took greater heed of the villagers: it is endowed with greater inclusiveness in the landscaping project but in fact it too is a utopia/dystopia as the garden rarely attempted to accommodate, school and improve the local community. On the face of it, France seems to furnish more instances of social commitment than England with Lunéville and Ermenonville as the alpha and omega of benevolence within the garden at either end of the century. Admittedly, one would also have to refer to la duchesse d'Enville's physiocratic ideas at la Roche-Guyon, where she blended her experimentation in the aesthetics of the sublime with high social views about the salvation of the poor. However, it is important not to be mistaken about the moral, social, benevolent dimension of utopia: one should not look out for for prototypes of "model farms" or "agricultural cooperatives" within Georgian landscape utopias. It is in what the British termed sentimental and philosophical gardening that the moral touchstone of eighteenth century utopia may be identified. The yearning for a moral ideal was conveyed in schemes such as Shenstone's *ferme ornée*, the Leasowes, where the opulence and speculation of some projectors was kept at bay and the right balance was found between art and nature in a philosophical and sentimental way. In *The Nobleman, Gentleman and Gardener's Recreation* (1715), Stephen Switzer thus described the practice of the *ferme ornée:*

> And by mixing the useful and profitable Parts of Gard'ning with the pleasurable in the interior Parts of my Designs, and Paddocks, obscure Enclosures, &c. in the outward: My Designs are thereby vastly enlarg'd, and both Profit and Pleasure may be said to be agreeably mix'd together. [SWITZER : xiii]

His English readers would detect, in the juxtaposition of useful and pleasurable, the classical view of the twin aims of poetry, inherited from Horace, "to instruct and to delight".

Finally, gardens can be said to be utopian in a moral sense: they reflect the universalist aspirations of the Enlightenment, owing perhaps to the incidence of freemasonic ideas, namely two – the first, brotherhood and the second one, microcosm. James Anderson's 1723 constitutions put forward a discourse of equality which was diffused at large through masonic speeches such as that of Codrington in Exeter in 1770: "We wish to unite all men of an agreeable humour and enlightened understanding" [JACOB : 141]. And the alchemical basis of masons' speculation was the alchemical Emerald Table, or the Secret of Hermes, or *Secretum Secretorum*, which Newton had lately translated: whatever is below on earth reflects all that is above in heaven. This means that the itemisation and miniaturisation of the world was a familiar idea which the garden embodied in a physical way as a microcosm encompassing and mirroring the macrocosm at large. While the study of traces of freemasonic symbols in gardens – akin to detective work at times- has often failed to convince, there undoubtedly was in what Pope called the "Science of Landscape" an underlying trace of alchemical ideals- a spirit experienced in lodges which gentlemen amateurs translated or projected on their land. It is precisely the universalist 'utopian' bedrock of freemasonry that saw architecture and garden reconciled.

Another essential dimension of utopianism in British modern gardens I wish to include in this brief overview is the philosophical, epistemological and psychological element. In the wake of Baconian and Evelynian precepts, Royal society experiments and Lockean ideas, the eighteenth-century garden became a seat for the progress of the self. The moral import of Lockean epistemology is now well-known thanks to Michel Baridon's research [BARIDON : 1989]; the manifestations of such an exploration of interiority are also well-known, often encapsulated teleologically in the 'emblem to expression' phrase. The garden experience evolved from an emblematical to an expressive apprehension of the self. The motifs of the English garden as interiority are the hermitage, the grotto, and the tower. What a utopian

reading of the garden reveals is that the taste for ruggedness, roughness, heaps of misshapen rocks is not simply picturesque but also takes on a spiritual value and has all to do with the sublime. The crossing of the grotto transmutes the self into philosophical man, thus effecting in real terms, the utopian didactic schemes imagined by Bacon. The embedded structure of the grotto, rocks above rocks, yielding one cavern after another, mirrors the way moral sentiments dilate, expand and grow. In spelling out the symbiosis between mind, heart and garden features, Thomas Whately pointed to a spiritual reception of garden experience which is all too-often overlooked:

> Even without the assistance of buildings, or other adventitious circumstances, nature alone furnishes materials for scenes, which may be adapted to almost every kind of expression; their operation is general, and their consequences infinite: the mind is elevated, depressed or composed, as gaiety, gloom, or tranquillity, prevail in the scene; […] when the passions are roused, their course is unrestrained; when the fancy is on the wing, its flight is unbounded; and quitting the inanimate objects which first gave them their spring, we may be led by thought above thought, widely differing in degree, but still corresponding in character, till we rise from familiar subjects up to the most sublime conceptions, and are rapt in the contemplation of whatever is great or beautiful, which we see in nature, feel in man, or attribute to divinity. [WHATELY : 155-156]

Finally the ultimate declension of utopianism is the aerial and eery quality of areas within some gardens or specific gardens themselves. Some gardens indeed succeed in suggesting within one space such an intimacy with nature as to transport the creator and visitor 'anywhere out of this world'. Meditative, contemplative, melancholy qualities which ultimately lead to oniric qualities. This capacity to generate enchantment, magic and wonders was exemplified in gardens such as Painshill, Hafod, Hawkstone and Fonthill.

Conclusion

Therefore, utopianism turns out to be a pregnant framework for garden history. To me, gardens are all the more utopian as they are real spaces. Because their flesh is deciduous and not evergreen, they hover between dreams of perfection never attained or lost and dreams of being one day restored. Such a suspension is not over and above time but in the hands of

time, decay and death. The fragility of gardens makes the projection of an ideal tentative, both 'concrete' and 'ephemeral' - perhaps this is the reason why gardens disseminated meaning and feeling around follies (thus using architecture as a more resistant prop). William Chambers ought to have the concluding word, "their productions [should] always demonstrate, that they knew the road to perfection, had they been enabled to proceed on the journey". [CHAMBERS : 93].

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