

Vera Alexander

Eco-Sustainable Interstices in Eleanor Perényi's *Green Thoughts: A Writer in the Garden*

Abstract I: Il saggio suggerisce di ricercare nella letteratura di giardinaggio un certo impulso verso l'eco-sostenibilità e una forma di dialogo tra l'uomo e la natura. Ponendo al centro della scena le problematiche del giardinaggio, gli scritti di giardinaggio presentano ai lettori una narrativa in grado di ricollocare l'antropocentrismo in contesti ecologici, con la soggettività umana che si limita ad emergere tra le righe. L'esempio analizzato, *Green Thoughts: A Writer in the Garden* (1981) di Eleanor Perényi, utilizza la struttura di una guida per suggerire idee alternative sulla modernizzazione della natura, presentando l'eco-sostenibilità come un processo al contempo storico e transculturale.

Abstract II: This essay suggests looking to garden writings for eco-sustainable impulses and a dialogue between a human subject and a living environment. By giving centre stage to gardening issues, garden writings present readers with a narrative that resituates anthropocentrism in ecological contexts as human subjectivity emerges from between the lines. The example discussed, Eleanor Perényi's *Green Thoughts: A Writer in the Garden* (1981) uses a guidebook format to convey alternative ideas on modernising nature by presenting eco-sustainability as a process that is both historical and transcultural.

The late managing editor of *Mademoiselle* Eleanor Perényi (1918-2009) is known aphoristically to everyone who has ever cracked a smile at her adage that "to garden is to let optimism get the better of judgment" (1). Her *Green Thoughts: A*

Writer in the Garden (1981) might seem an unlikely contributor to an academic debate on eco-sustainability narratives: it appears like little more a gardening self-help book. As a work marked by something Paul John Eakin terms a “referential aesthetic” (2), it belongs to a type of writing rarely studied in literary criticism. How much subtext, let alone transcultural contextualisation, can readers expect from a book they would consult to solve a concrete problem with their roses or artichokes?

In this essay I would like to explore the idea that *Green Thoughts* can fruitfully be regarded as life writing, following up on Michael Pollan’s suggestion that a substantial number of gardening books may be seen as ‘autobiographies written in green’ (Pollan 1996). Garden books are not merely about gardens, they are also about individuals sharing their gardening experiences, about acts of creation and processes of growth and the problems involved in representing these. Garden books reflect how an individual thinks about her role in relation to the environment and may even be read as a type of *bildungsroman* that offers an intermedial and comparative means of reflecting on human growth and artistic challenges. For Perényi, the two creative acts of gardening and writing complement one another.

There is hardly any activity more formative than attempting to shape a place, especially a living one which offers resistance and seems to possess a mind of its own. Adapting a term derived from autobiography criticism, sociology and postcolonial studies (Eakin 1988; Glissant 1997; Gergen 2009), they can be read as relational narratives that emphasize a processual notion of identity as well as interactivity between human beings and the environment. Gardens are meeting grounds not only for human beings to exchange words and plants, but also beyond the sphere of human communication. Human gardeners form an emotional attachment to the garden itself, investing it with memories and personal landmarks. The garden, in its turn, responds to care, offers resistance and provides an ever-changing living panorama of seasonal changes, growth and decay. It thereby induces human gardeners to look beyond their immediate social lifeworld

and cultivate an awareness of other, non-human lives. The fact that to the best of our knowledge only one partner in this relationship acts consciously and communicates deliberately, for instance, by writing books about the experience, does not make it any less mutually transformative.

Eleanor Perényi's œuvre is eclectic, comprising a novel about the American Civil War, *The Bright Sword* (1955), and a book on the composer Franz Liszt, titled *Liszt: The Artist as Romantic Hero* (1974). *Green Thoughts* is based on transnational gardening experiences that connect Europe and New England. Born in Washington in 1918 and having spent formative parts of her childhood in the Caribbean, Eleanor Spencer Stone married the Hungarian Baron Zsigmond Perényi in 1937 and moved to his landed estate in Ruthenia. Forced to abandon the garden, farm and vineyard during the war, she subsequently created another garden in Connecticut. Her European marriage, which ended in divorce in 1945, is commemorated in a book titled *More Was Lost* (1946), which also reflects on the estate's destruction due to war and nationalisation. Perényi went on to become an editor, working for fashion magazines *Harper's Bazaar* and *Mademoiselle*, a professional expertise reflected in her frequent irreverent comparisons between human beauty and flowers, noting their transience.

Perényi's entire garden book is in fact marked by her knowledge of transitoriness, change and loss: her writing about garden matters reflects a preoccupation with the evanescence of all human efforts, environmental and otherwise. Perényi stresses that gardens are enclosed in time as well as in space and subject to history and changing trends, for instance, in culture and technology. She presents her book as a legacy commemorating a 'labor intensive' gardening tradition whose gardeners, "belong to a vanishing species" (Perényi 1981: xx). She writes herself into a specific horticultural history, claiming, from the preface onwards, that the kind of 'labour-intensive' garden she owned belongs to a bygone age. Perényi's observations thus acquire the undertone of an obituary for a particular kind of gardening life-world:

Why, then, presume to write a book about gardening? The simplest answer is that a writer who gardens is sooner or later going to write a book about the subject – I take that as inevitable. One acquires one's opinions and prejudices, picks up a trick or two, learns to question supposedly expert judgments, reads, saves clippings, and is eventually overtaken by the desire to pass it all on. But there is something more: As I look about me, I have reason to believe I belong to a vanishing species. Gardens like mine, which go by the unpleasing name of 'labor intensive', are on their way out and before they go, I would like to contribute my penny's worth to their history (Perényi 1981: xx).

Despite its opening classification as a swan song (strengthened by Perényi's nod to Andrew Marvell's poem 'The Garden' from 1681 from which she derives her title), *Green Thoughts* is a practical collection of gardening ideas with few sentimental moments. For Perényi, the garden is far too political a space for frills and romance. It constitutes a vantage point from which to observe modernity at work and from which to criticise the capitalist global rampage of a male-centred anthropocene. She advocates stubborn individual thought in garden matters and beyond, encouraging readers to resist globalising and homogenising trends. Individual thought leads to relational responsibilities, as when Perényi poses sustainability dilemmas for readers to ponder, e.g. "What if you happen to know that a certain area is threatened with 'development' and the wild flowers in it are sure to be destroyed?" (Perényi 2002: 258). Between her green lines, what comes across as a conservative approach often proves to be innovative on account of its comparative and historicist scope. Being conservationist is a radical pursuit, and often, seeming progress may lead into backwardness: "We are where we were in earlier centuries when the designer and the plantsman lived in different worlds" (Perényi 2002: 270).

Innovation certainly shows in the book's unusual format. Whereas most garden books are structured according to thematic clusters or the chronology of

the gardener's year, Perényi eschews any conventional arrangement that would induce readers to traverse the book from cover to cover. Unlike most life writings, it is structured like a lexicon, with cross-references between the chapters. From 'Annuals' to 'Woman's Place', Perényi's seventy-two essays work their way through the alphabet. The book's form overtly questions the authority of linear plots and prioritises a more rhizomatic format. Instead of imposing an overarching theme, Perényi's garden alphabet covers a variety of garden-related micro-plots and travels through a multiplicity of moods: individual plant portraits of 'Endive', 'Garlic' and 'Peonies' are discussed alongside gardening equipment from 'Belgian Fence' to 'Seed Tapes' or technicalities such as 'Mulching', 'Pruning' and 'Making Notes'. 'Night' and 'Partly Cloudy' draw the weather and climate into her range of topics, and chapters on 'Longevity' and 'Tree Houses' conceptualise the garden as a site of dreams and extend the narrative beyond the merely practical plane of advice. Through her aphoristic style and extensive rather than systematic array of themes she revives the romantic genre of the literary fragment, highlighting an aesthetic of incompleteness that subtly underlines human fallibility. Perényi's title is interactive in that it draws readers' attention to thinking. Through their choices, readers become highly conscious of the act of reading. Like a book of recipes, *Green Thoughts* thus extends to readers the executive role of becoming agents who turn the words she has planted in their minds into actions and plots.

If the achronological reading path makes it hard to keep an overview of whether one has actually covered the whole, this, too, may be understood as a metatextual comment on the incommensurability of engaging with the environment. This is an interpretation subscribed to in the book's introduction. Here, Allan Lacy celebrates Perényi's format as a postmodernist device which not only engages readers in a serendipitous activity but also recreates the holistic physical, psychological and intellectual effects of gardening:

the alphabetical arrangement is absolutely perfect. There is no beginning, no middle, and no end to this book. Like some of the experimental, aleatoric novels

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of the 1980s, it can be read in any order. And it is like gardening – a matter of total immersion at all times (Lacy 2002: xiv).

Perényi's alphabetical sequence is in part a critical comment on human beings and their obsession with order and control, as when she ironically notes a preponderance of lawns in spite of the fact that she has "yet to meet anyone who enjoys mowing" (Perényi 2002: 108) and advocates letting some plants grow wild: "We gardeners needn't kill ourselves in the name of order. Some plants should be allowed their way" (Perényi 2002: 106), and "nature left alone will strike a tolerable balance among the predators" (Perényi 2002: 166).

In this regard plants and nature differ from the human lifeworlds Perényi comments on. Not much in the modern gardening world of new breeding techniques and plant marketing trends should be allowed its way, as far as she is concerned. Several of her chapters contain To Do Lists, not only of gardening matters but by extension, of larger problems she deems worth weeding out, for instance hybridising and fertilising methods, and often her suggested modification is, unfashionably, to go back to earlier, time-honoured ways. The garden thus becomes complicit in her rebellion against industrialising trends. *Green Thoughts* documents Perényi's determination to set up gardening as a living monument to individuality and local identity and against a globalised lifestyle of big corporations and levelling developments in plant design and hybridisation.

It is green thoughts, environmental concerns, of campaigning for diversity, sustainability and individuality rather than any formal criteria that hold her book together as a narrative. Perényi unapologetically describes herself as an elitist who looks down on many of the 'debasing' trends in both European and American gardening, and she calls upon nonconformists like herself to resist the tendency towards mechanising and uniformity. To minimise any class bias, she painstakingly delineates how to save money by investing time, as when she recommends holding on to old collections of hardy peonies (Perényi 2002: 161). As a gardener who sees writing about her topic as a logical, inevitable consequence of her

passion for the subject, Perényi positions herself as a didactic translator who makes Europe and America known to one another and who reminds her present-day readers of gardening techniques past and forgotten. Seed corporations are part of a *zeitgeist* Perényi sees at work in both England and America and exhorts readers to be wary of. Gardening gives access to a quality of life distinguished by a taste for variety and historicity which she sees as disappearing fast, and she makes its textual preservation her intellectual legacy. Writing about gardening is thereby defined as an eco-sustainable act.

For her, the garden is both a space for her individual Self and a laboratory of ideas from which to address and rally kindred souls. The Self that speaks from the pages of *Green Thoughts* actively influences and changes her surroundings. Perényi describes herself as 'cantankerous and opinionated' and makes it quite clear that the unpleasant task of weeding out unproductive growth is not confined to flower beds and vegetable patches. In her often unflattering self-portrait she constructs the garden into a heterotopian space of resistance which clashes with naïve idealisations of surface beauty. Between the lines of concrete gardening experience, she addresses numerous social, economic and political 'weeds' worth attacking, and many of those relate to the depersonalised role of large corporations.

Perényi's first essay is programmatic in that it introduces the garden as a space of changing fashions, not all of which for the better, mirrored by the eponymous 'Annuals':

Their ready-made air is a sad advertisement of the fact that ours is a throwaway culture, and that I suspect is their charm. A garden of store-bought annuals is as temporary as a plastic pool and can be abandoned without a qualm when the owner moves on.

If that is the situation, it is abetted by those in charge of the mass market, where annuals far outnumber perennials and standardization is total. Only a few years ago it was possible to find a considerable variety of annuals at garden centers,

many of which had their own fields out back: white zinnias, tall snapdragons, schizanthus, nasturtium, salpiglossis. Today, most seedlings are trucked in from a central source, wear identical labels and are confined to the fewest possible varieties in mixed colours (Perényi 2002: 6).

To Perényi, the garden is a microcosm of something fundamentally wrong with society. In this dystopian extract, gardening concerns are interlaced with notions of human mobility: the rootedness of plants is set against the restlessness of societies on the move. But even the plants, anthropomorphised for sympathy, have become implicated in mobility: “Many plants – wax begonias and geraniums among them – we call annuals in the North are actually perennials in their native South” (Perényi 2002: 4). Human interventions in the shape of plant transportation and adaptation have turned enduring into disposable plants. Perényi ends her opening chapter on a rebellious note, inviting readers to join her boycott of annuals.

Besides sharing a good deal of subjective opinions, Perényi relates a wealth of garden information gleaned from books. From her first essay onward, Perényi introduces herself as a reader in addition to being a gardener when she points out that the trend of changing fashions is not confined to the historical present. She turns to an American classic to make this point:

In *Little Women*, Beth grows ‘old-fashioned flowers,’ and I always supposed this was part of Alcott’s goody-goody emphasis on out-of-date virtue. This isn’t the case. The sweet peas and larkspurs and pinks beloved of Beth actually were old-fashioned by the middle of the nineteenth century – having been superseded by the newer, smarter, tender annuals imported from the tropics and subtropics of Mexico, India and South America (Perényi 2002: 4).

Perényi rounds off her example of American garden reading with cases from England, notably Gertrude Jekyll, weaving a critique of carpet bedding and

ribbon borders into a green connective thread that comparatively considers gardens both sides of the Atlantic.

Books, like gardens, connect continents and different times, and in drawing readers' attention to this, Perényi proudly inscribes herself into a tradition that includes Alexander Pope's 1713 satire on topiary, *The Essay on Verdant Sculpture* (Perényi 2002: 182). The mutual dependency of gardening and writing functions as a *leitmotif* for Perényi. Gardening practices, she complains, are too much in the present and too much about innovation and short-sighted modernisation. Writing about gardening enables the author to be mentally present on more than one plane, the present as well as the past. Empowered by her knowledge of various European locations, her reading and her hands-on experience, Perényi sets herself against the trends towards hybridisation and homogenisation which she observes in plant nurseries and catalogues, at times resorting to anthropomorphisation for emphasis: "A garden entirely stocked with the newest, showiest hybrids is as depressing as a woman with a face-lift: the past is erased at the expense of character" (Perényi 2002: 54). Garden writings give Perényi and her readers access to a historical vision of environmental relations, one which she finds lacking in gardening culture in the USA, and she proposes seeing garden writings as an archive of great sustainability potential.

The garden and garden books are lenses through which she envisages an alternative modernity. Writing is her way of reminding her readership of the importance of history and of learning from the planting traditions of other countries. She does so in a manner which reflects a historically-founded sense of sustainability: she exhorts readers to resist the tendency to sacrifice variety to short-sighted motifs. For her, sustainability involves consideration of unfashionably large time frames and a willingness to resist trends, however compelling they may be. It is part of a lifestyle that involves individual thought and relational contemplation both of which need time and study.

The cheerful rebellion against global uniformity leads Perényi to critically

revise the anthropocentrism of the human gardener. In his preface, Michael Pollan relates having come to Perényi's book in search of useful tips on pest control. Where many garden writers expend considerable amounts of ink defeating pests rhetorically at least (e.g. Celia Thaxter and Charles Dudley Warner), Perényi considers the gardener as potential cause and suggests that many so-called pests or weeds are indicators of gardening mistakes. While refuting globalising tendencies in nursery culture, she looks beyond the immediate space of her Connecticut garden to place strategic warnings about ecological worries and sustainability:

The green revolution may yet turn into a green nightmare; for not only do the new hybrids lack the resilience of the older native strains with their built-in adaptation to local conditions, they depend for their success on chemical fertilizers and pesticides – which, aside from other disadvantages, are for the most part manufactured by western conglomerates that are in turn dependent on that other scarce resource: oil (Perényi 2002: 85).

Perényi's practical-poetic anthology of essays is a unique example of an eco-sustainability narrative that puts the garden writer into the relational position of an ambassador between different environments and societies, and even between past and future. The garden is full of relations, and observing these unlocks valuable lessons for other linkages: "A garden is a world, and its parts are not separable" (Perényi 2002: 175). The idea of connections function as a mantra throughout her book. Perényi challenges comfortable ideas of selfhood in various ways, by embedding individuality in a form which encourages generalisation, stressing that for her the garden is a source of teachings which she transcribes for her readers. The literary impulse contained in the text is a performative one which incites readers to think of garden books as a hypertext where they eventually take over the role of scriptwriters: the text with its use of examples and illustrations of past successes constitutes a concrete, practical, 'how-to-utopia'. The combination

of utopian features and concrete, hands-on advice ensures an eco-sustainable narrative trajectory that avoids escapism and instead makes something paradisiac attainable by drawing attention to the relations within the garden and beyond.

NOTES

1. The original saying is more poetic than aphoristic and forms part of her chapter on asters: "The charm of asters is their fluffy heads and ravishing colours dusty pinks and powder-blues, strawberry reds and amethyst purples – and the way they arrange themselves in a bowl. I can't resist them and invariably let optimism get the better of judgment, which come to think of it may be the first principle of gardening" (Perényi 2002: 14).
2. This aesthetic challenges the reader's process of immersing herself in a narrative. Referential aspects of history, geography, biography and authenticity pose unsettling questions about the relationship between fiction and autobiographical modes of writing and different reading conventions, as well as distinctions between autobiographical or confessional writings and fiction (Spengemann 1980). Life writing criticism has moved on from a focus on self and identity as monolithic constructs to analysing modes of relationality (Eakin 1992: 29-53; Sarkowsky 2012).

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Vera Alexander currently teaches at Copenhagen University. She has published extensively on issues of migration, education, identity formation, postcolonialism, diaspora, South Asian writing in English, life writing as well as Canadian literature. She is the author of *Transcultural Representations of Migration and Education in South Asian Anglophone Novels* WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2006. She has edited books on Romanticism and the Indian diaspora and has recently completed a monograph on the representation of gardens as relational spaces.

v.alexander@hum.ku.dk