Marie Mianowski, Valérie Morisson (eds.)

SHARING AGRICULTURAL AND GARDENING CULTURES IN IRELAND: WRITERS AND ARTISTS

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IRISH STUDIES IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

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As Terence Reeves-Smyth, a landscape archaeologist and historian, explains, during the medieval period, gardens in Ireland were associated with the monasteries. Herb gardens were designed for healing and herbal lore was kept secret. Vegetable gardens, which served both culinary and medicinal purposes, are known to have existed in the vicinity of manor houses. Later on, ornamental gardens provided for cut flowers. Evidence for gardening activity in Ireland during the Tudor period remains sparse although orchards were fairly common and would include a large variety of fruit trees of diverse European origin (Reeves-Smyth 556). Gardens were not merely useful: a flourishing exchange network of seeds and cuttings throughout Europe would have allowed for stunning compositions and beautiful displays (Reeves-Smyth 557). Exotic plants started to be imported in the late sixteenth century as plant collecting, as well as a more scientific approach to botany and horticulture, encouraged a taste for remarkable specimens. Owing to the influence of the French garden, the old medieval walled garden was then replaced with geometric rows of trees and layouts, parterres, statues and topiary responding to the impressive architecture. Orchards and cultivation plots were placed in less visible parts of the demesnes so that a hierarchy between plants was established. Naturally, ordinary gardens would not include such neatly subdivided cultivation areas and offered a pleasant blend of plants, flowers and trees. The nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of an even wider range of plants as well as a boom in garden literature. Gardens increasingly became a matter of wealth and taste with the compartmentalization of gardens reflecting the botanic expertise of their owners or their gardeners. However Irish gardener William Robinson, in his book *The Wild Garden* (1870) advocated for an entirely different gardening philosophy which was less interventionist, closer to nature and inspired from local landscapes. Influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, Robinson promoted his naturalistic approach in his journal, *The Garden*, in which he advocated relying on natural plant interactions and exploring one's own wilderness. Robinson insisted that "a garden should stem from a gardener's observation of nature and experience, not an architect's plans and patterns" (Wasilewski). His interest in plant and animal interactions was spurred by post-Darwinian natural sciences. Robinson wrote that "the true gardener is an artist and not a weaver of carpets, and the day will come in due time when the laws that guide the landscape artist will guide the garden artist, and when it will be thought as barbarous to make a geometrical carpet of a garden" (Robinson 1872; quoted in Wasilewski, no pag.).

In “Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias” (1967) Michel Foucault famously proposed that:

> the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space. The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity (46).

To Foucault the garden qualifies as heterotopia, a space within society that is governed by alternative principles; a universalizing topos that can be read and experienced in different overlapping, even contradictory manners. The garden offers a temporary respite or beneficial compensation because it is visited rather than lived-in. Such a take on the idea of the garden requires critical caution. While the garden has long stood for the world as a whole and can be designed so as to allegorise larger, planetary equilibria, it is also where gardeners toil, dig, scrape, sow, mulch, water, dress beds, weed and observe plants grow, so as to adapt each human intervention to their needs. A garden exists because someone gardens; it requires acts or enactments, seasonal rituals even, before it can get interpreted as a microcosm.

Foucault’s view might easily be deconstructed by feminist environmental thinkers who advocate small-scale approaches (Anna Tsing), sensory relationality (Natasha Myers; see Evans’ interview with Myers) and situated knowledge (Donna Haraway). While Foucault claimed that in gardens “the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection”, it is crucial that we turn our gaze towards the gardeners who make the gardens, tend their patches, till their piece of land. Gardeners build up practical, embodied knowledge from the ground-up, co-constructing new epistemologies with the plants. They derive much knowledge from the biotopes they observe daily and know how to listen to the plants and collaborate with them. In his latest essay, *L’Inexploré*, Baptise Morizot connects the sense of wonder not to the abstract concept of nature but to the soil reminding us that Darwin was fascinated with the activity of local worms which he observed daily around his cottage (87). He invites us to explore and observe the wonderfully intricate inter-relations at work on the land we stroll, to marvel at what lives under our feet (88). The new *terra incognita*, he argues, is not a far-away territory but a local biotope that we have to get to know so as to acknowledge the complex contingences, the permanent negotiations and diplomatic inter-species arrangements which make our places liveable (97).

Plant science and botany were marked by political and economic interests, at times relying on colonial extractivism or involving acculturation (Schiebinger). In this book we claim that most gardens are the result of a relational engagement and sensory connectedness. Many artists and writers directly engage with plants and acknowledge their vegetal agency. The writers, poets and artists