BOOK EXCERPT:

Writing the Garden: A Literary Conversation Across Two Centuries

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers


EDITOR’S NOTE:

IT’S SPRING, and those of us who love to garden are happily sinking our fingers into the warming soil as we plant seeds, pull early weeds, and ruthlessly hunt down lurking cutworms. But after a hard day in the garden it’s time to relax with a good book, and what better than a book about some of the best garden writers (or writing garden-ers) of the past couple of centuries. In Writing the Garden, author Elizabeth Barlow Rogers presents insightful essays on the works of a diverse group of writers. Some are well known, others less so, but in their writing all present fascinating opinions about the nature of gardening and a deep love for the subject. Rogers groups the authors into sections based on their interests and importance to garden literature, such as “Women in the Garden,” “Travelers in the Garden,” and the delightful “Humorists in the Garden” (it turns out I’m not the only gardener who goes slug hunting at night with a flashlight). In the following excerpt, “Warriors in the Garden,” we are reminded that the seemingly gentle art of gardening is full of highly opinionated practitioners.
“Warriors in the Garden”

Gardening is nothing less than warfare with nature. With no respect for the cabbage or the rose, nature sends in her legions of hungry insects and foraging animals to wreak havoc. But there is another kind of warfare in the garden, one that is waged against fellow gardeners rather than garden pests. In this kind of warfare garden theory is often presented as a polemical diatribe against previous practices or contrary philosophies. For the reader, it is both instructive and amusing to argue or agree with certain opinionated writers and to refight the horticultural battles of yesteryear as they promulgate their passionate beliefs and ideas.

**William Robinson**

If [Gertrude] Jekyll was the authoritative mother of a more naturalistic English garden style, her friend William Robinson (1838–1935) was its highly influential father. He also serves as the prime exemplar of a didactic and sometimes colorfully caustic genre of garden writing. In Robinson’s view, the architect was the enemy of good landscape design, which he held to be the exclusive province of the gardener—that is, the enlightened gardener who agreed with him that mowing be forsaken in some parts of the garden so that cut lawns would transform themselves into wildflower meadows. His further ideal was to allow climbing plants to entwine themselves on trunks and branches, and he dogmatically declared that fallen leaves should be left on the ground as natural mulch in woodlands.

The White Japan Anemone in the Wild Garden.
A trained professional gardener, Robinson had a botanist’s as well as a horticulturist’s thorough knowledge of plant species and their growth habits. He was adamantly opposed to greenhouse-grown annuals planted in regimental rows or showy ornamental beds. He also detested the display of trees and shrubs in Loudon’s Gardenesque style as individual specimens, and he vigorously proselytized the overthrow of late Victorian gardening in favor of one in which bulbs were planted in drifts, herbaceous beds were composed of mixed perennials, and horticultural species appeared to merge at the garden’s perimeter with the native vegetation of meadows and woodlands. Together he and Jekyll redirected garden design in a way that gave the world what is now thought of as the prototypical English garden—a blending of wild and artificial nature; the grouping of trees and shrubs to form pleasing landscape vistas; the use of hedges to create more intimately scaled garden “rooms”; and the laying out of beds in which casually composed yet sophisticated plant combinations—based on a thorough knowledge of floral and leaf colors, blooming times, and growth characteristics—made gardens interesting throughout the entire year.

Two years after the publication of *The English Flower Garden* (1883)—a volume that eventually ran to fifteen editions and remained in print for fifty years—Robinson purchased the Elizabethan manor of Gravetye in Sussex along with its adjoining two hundred acres. He subsequently acquired additional land so that his property totaled a thousand acres, more than sufficient in size for rural nature and naturalistic garden to be melded into a unified landscape with unobstructed views of the horizon. Here, with occasional advice from his friend Jekyll, he created broad scenic effects as well as herbaceous gardens closer to the manor. The landscape theories he put into practice at Gravetye, however, had been articulated long before in *The Wild Garden* (1870).
It would be a mistake, as Robinson is at pains to point out, to assume that the wild garden is the same thing as the native-plant garden. It should, to the contrary, be considered an opportunity to naturalize the flora of other countries, for as he tells us:

Naturally our woods and wilds have no little loveliness in spring; we have here and there the Lily of the Valley and the Snowdrop, and everywhere the Primrose and Cowslip; the Bluebell and the Foxglove take possession of whole woods; but, with all our treasures in this way, we have no attractions in or near our gardens compared with what it is within our power to create. There are many countries, with winters colder than our own, that have a rich flora; and by choosing the hardiest exotics and planting them without the garden, we may form garden pictures.

Here it is important to pause a moment and consider again the term "garden pictures," since it is so frequently found in the writing of both Robinson and Gertrude Jekyll. For these writers, garden pictures did not imply the same thing as the Picturesque, the term commonly used to describe the earlier garden style in which designed landscapes were created in accordance with the principles of landscape painting. The garden pictures they had in mind are perhaps better characterized as vignettes, small scenes of beauty that the eye takes in as discrete discoveries rather than as panoramic scenery. Jekyll's carefully positioned camera framed many charming, seasonal vignettes within Munstead Wood, and in *The Wild Garden*, Alfred Parsons's engravings give graphic expression to Robinson's words, which are never themselves lacking in descriptive power. This does not mean, however, that such garden pictures, whether verbal or illustrational, should be considered as so many floral incidents independent

of the overall landscape composition. Rather, the term is intended to imply that gardening is fundamentally an art form in which composition, color, line, and texture are as important as botanical knowledge and horticultural expertise.

Marshaling his arguments in favor of wild gardening, Robinson points out:

Hundreds of the finest flowers will thrive much better in rough places than ever they did in the old-fashioned border, . . . look infinitely better than they ever did in formal beds, . . . [have] no disagreeable effects resulting from decay, . . . enable us to grow many plants that have never yet obtained a place in our ‘trim gardens’, [and] settle the question of the spring flower garden [since] we may cease the dreadful practice of tearing up the flower-beds and leaving them like new-dug graves twice a year. As a final point in its favor, the wild garden can be seen as a kind of paradisiacal reunion of nature’s bounty, for from almost every interesting region the traveler may bring seeds or plants, and establish near his home living souvenirs of the various countries he has visited.

Robinson’s luxuriously produced *Gravetye Manor, or Twenty Years’ Work Round an Old Manor House* (1911), is both a diary and a narrative of the successive stages of Gravetye’s creation from 1885 through 1908. He tells the reader how he went about felling trees to open up views, removing iron trellises and the kitchen garden abutting the house, eliminating “a mass of rock-work [so-called] of ghastly order,” and destroying other offensive elements left by the previous owners. The book’s beautiful engravings evince the principles put forth in *The Wild Garden* as Robinson demonstrates Gravetye to be the paradigm in which house, garden, fields, and forest are united in a pastoral work of art as quintessentially English as a painting by Constable.

As attractive as all this may sound, there were some who felt that Robinson’s garden ideal lacked cohesive structure. His peppery personality made it inevitable that he would be attacked by those who disagreed with him, most notably the architect Reginald Blomfield, whose ideas about what a garden should be were quite different.

*Reginald Blomfield*

*The Formal Garden in England* (1892) by the country-house architect Reginald Blomfield (1856–1942), with its attractive engravings by F. Inigo Thomas, is a treatise in the form of an essay on English garden history. In the preface to my second edition copy Blomfield puts forth a spirited defense against what he considers to be Robinson’s fallacious, intemperate, and untenable charges, made after the publication of the first edition. With considerable invective Robinson had taken
issue with Blomfield’s recommendations for a return to formality, and here it is Blomfield’s turn to aim a few angry verbal arrows at Robinson. Heatedly, he rebuts Robinson’s sarcastic barbs, accusing him of willful misinterpretation and ignorance of garden making as a form of art:

Mr. Robinson neither gives us the definition, nor shows us where the art is or what it consists of. The trees are beautiful, and so are the flowers, but where is Mr. Robinson’s art? What does it do for us, or for the trees or the flowers? His skill as a tree-planter, or as a flower-grower, is no doubt great, but that does not make him an artist, and by no possible wrestling of the term can he be called so on this ground only.

Blomfield maintained, “The formal treatment of gardens ought, perhaps, to be called the architectural treatment of gardens, for it consists in the extension of the principles of design which govern the house to the grounds which surround it.” Discriminating between the two views of gardening—the formal and the naturalistic—he argues:

The formal school insists upon design; the house and the grounds should be designed together and in relation to each other; no attempt should be made to conceal the design of the garden, there being no reason for doing so, but the bounding lines, whether it is the garden wall or the lines of paths and parterres, should be shown frankly and unreservedly, and the garden treated specifically as an enclosed space to be laid out exactly as the designer pleases.

He strongly refutes the notion that the landscape gardener has a monopoly on nature:

The clipped yew-tree is as much a part of nature—that is, subject to natural laws—as a forest oak; but the landscapist, by appealing to associations which surround the personification of nature, holds the clipped yew-tree to obloquy as something against nature. Again “nature” is said to prefer a curved line to a straight, and it is thence inferred that all the lines in a garden, and especially paths, should be curved. Now as a matter of fact in nature—that is, in the visible phenomena of the earth’s surface—there are no lines at all; “a line” is simply an abstraction which conveniently expresses the direction of a succession of objects which may be either straight or curved. “Nature” has nothing to do with either straight lines or curved; it is simply begging the question to lay it down as an axiom that curved lines are more “natural” than straight.

For Blomfield, it was not the Italian style of formal gardening that was instructive for contemporary gardeners; rather it was the old gardens of England that had not succumbed to the fashion for Baroque ornamentation or,
Valley in Somersetshire, with Narcissi, Marsh Marigolds, and Primroses.
subsequently, the Picturesque. Nor did formality imply a great expanse as in the French garden, for “some of the best examples of [the English garden] are on a comparatively small scale.” However, Blomfield does not merely sing the praises of old English formal gardens. With an architect’s eye for composition and detail, he criticizes these as well as the later gardens designed in the Picturesque style, his principal objects of censure. He maintains that the white marble statues of Bacchus and Flora at Wilton were a mistake: “To attain its full effect [marble] wants strong sunlight, a clear dry light, and a cloudless sky. In the soft light and nebulous atmosphere of the north marble looks forlorn and out of place.” An integrated overall plan is what counts most, so in discussing public parks he comes down hard on “the spasmodic futility” of Battersea Park where, without a dominant idea controlling the general scheme, “merely to introduce so many statues or plaster casts is to begin at the wrong end. These are the accidents of the system, not the system itself.”

Blomfield is united with Robinson, however unintentionally, in despising the Gardeneisque style and the gardener who would have the specimen dahlia banish the hollyhock and other simple, old-fashioned flowers. He equally hates plants in beds that “make the lawn hideous with patches of brilliant red varied by streaks of purple blue.” Taking sarcastic aim at the Victorian head gardener, he asks, “Would he plant them in patterns of stars and lozenges and tadpoles? Would he border them with paths of asphalt? Would he not rather fill his borders with every kind of beautiful flower that he might delight in, and set them off with grass and pleasant green?”

In Blomfield’s mind, the desired relationship between the architect and the horticulturist should not end in a standoff, nor would it, if their responsibilities were divided thusly: “The designer, whether professional or amateur, should lay down the main lines and deal with the garden as a whole, but the execution, such as the best method of forming beds, laying turf, planting trees, and pruning hedges, should be left to the gardener, whose proper business it is.”

In this regard, it is worth noting that Gertrude Jekyll achieved some of her most notable gardens in collaboration with the architect Edwin Lutyens. Their sympathetic marriage of brick terracing and hedge-enclosed garden spaces created an Arts and Crafts landscape idiom that influenced Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson at Sissinghurst and many other gardeners up to the present day. Providing an architectural frame uniting house and garden and giving structure to seasonal borders of sophisticated horticultural artistry, this type of design might be viewed as a synthesis of Robinson and Blomfield. The harmonizing of their opposing but ultimately complementary theories resulted in a style that made a virtue of formal structure as a foil for loosely composed “garden pictures.” In this way these important late-nineteenth-century garden writers can be said to have assisted in the redirection of English garden style at a critical time when vast estate grounds were beginning to become a thing of the past.

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Elizabeth Barlow Rogers is a writer on the history of landscape design and the cultural meaning of place. She is the president of the Foundation for Landscape Studies and was the founding president of the Central Park Conservancy. Writing the Garden recently won a 2012 Book Award from the American Horticultural Society.

Note: The images that accompany this excerpt are engravings by Alfred Parsons from William Robinson’s The Wild Garden, 1881 edition.