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The Grove of Linnaeus. With Digressions Between Eden and Gethsemane

In my prose book, *The Garden*,¹ Carl Linnaeus is the main character. There are reflections of the great naturalist's work and of the garden of Hammarby and the surrounding countryside. But *The Garden* is not intended as a documentary work. It is a fantasy. Still, I don't regard the Linnaeus of my book as completely disconnected from discourses of knowledge and history. My book may play freely with one of the most challenging emblems of science and culture, but that does not contradict some serious efforts to interpret the world of Linnaeus. One of the topics that found its way into my book was the grove of Linnaeus, both as a vivid idea and as a concrete place. The following pages will deal with this grove, including excursions to other related places and figures – and some excerpts from my book.

It is dawn, on the 28th of January. Carl's name day. The river Sävja is a thin trickle in its bed under the ice this January, when the waxwings gather in the rowans, within easy reach of a shower of hail.

The animals, alarmed, are making themselves scarce. The horses, likewise, take fright.

¹ Magnus Florin, *Trädgården*, Stockholm, 1995.

Linnaeus, awake, steps outside, wanders to his grove. He hangs pairs of green Kungsholm glasses as bells on the branches of an oak, an elm, and an ash in order to listen to the jingling caused by the wind when it rises. They are his Aeolian beakers, his wind harps of glass. But this morning the wind is still, and the bells are motionless.

One glass he has saved. He pours wine into it, to the brim, and drains it to celebrate the name of the day.²

“From the home of death itself”, Carl Linnaeus demanded of his wife in a letter meant to be read after his death, “Keep my grove, that I planted, at stake, and if the trees do not survive, plant others in their place.” The grove was his hall of leaves at Hammarby. It is known that during the summer he enjoyed having his meals there and that he would hang glass bells in the trees and listen to the jingling sound produced by the wind moving the branches.

Linnaeus’ grove was situated at a special part of Hammarby, separated from the garden of plants, where he worked as a botanist, separated also from the fruit garden and from the so called Siberian garden, with its specific repertoire of Russian plants. His grove was the *locus amoenus* – the pleasant place, saluted by classic and medieval literature, from Homer and onward. We know it as the bright spot in the wood, with a thousand birds singing; the welcoming bed of flowers tenderly touched by a mild wind; the soft green grass shadowed by leaves, with a playful brook of soothing water running past.

It is a place to search for, and at the same time a safe and reliable resort in our literature and culture. It may pretend to be there independent of the strivings of civilisation, but it is sure to be used and populated – by Adam and Eve; by the Virgin and the infant Jesus;

² Florin, Magnus, ‘The Garden’, in: *Artes; An International Reader of Literature, Art and Music*, New York & Stockholm, 1996. Transl. by Harry D. Watson.

by the knight and his worshipped dame; by the shepherd; by the pilgrim; the loving couple; the painter; the poet; and the botanist. The inhabitants change, but the scene is the same. *Locus amoenus* is the emblem for an existence where happiness, peace and restfulness reign, and where everything a human being longs for is in reach. It is a place seemingly offered by nature and creation itself, beyond effort and utility. At the *locus amoenus*, there is no gardener, no utensil, no work.

Interestingly, the classic authors themselves soon started to doubt the innocence of the *locus amoenus*. It is striking in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, for example, how the setting is often in a place of this pleasant and quiet character, so as to produce an all-too-innocent atmosphere, suitable for a crisis or catastrophe. For example the sad story of Echo's love for Narcissus takes place in a very typical *locus amoenus*, out in the woods, at a place of peaceful solitude, with a silver-clear fountain which "cattle's mouth has never disturbed", and so quiet that it is not even accompanied by the song of birds. But Narcissus' grove soon becomes contaminated by the calamity of love.

The glass bells that Linnaeus enjoyed listening to, were not put in his hands directly from a mythological past, but part of his time's and his society's developing garden culture. We find a correspondence with the Aeolian harps that during mid-18th century became popular among competing park owners in England. The Aeolian harp was a device that made wind-produced sounds, thought of as nature's own music. These represented the characteristics of the "pleasant place" by their direct link to mythology – the classic Greek tales of Zephyr, impersonating the mild west wind caressing the groves. So, the Greek wind god Aiolos, or Eol, inhabits the glasses that Linnaeus hung upside-down in the branches of his grove. For the practical and business-like Linnaeus, this went hand in hand with the fact that he had bought these glasses as a

commercial product produced by glass workers. In his world, mythology and work live side by side. And his letter to his wife shows that he was eager that the grove would be maintained by continuous work: if one tree dies, plant another. Linnaeus' grove reminds us of how our botanist stands in the crossroads between mythological, scientific and utilitarian concepts of nature. One may even say that to Linnaeus, his grove is a pleasant *locus amoenus*, just because it is both used and the result of work. It is a temple of human conscious effort and success.

Let us go back to Eden, the grove of Adam and Eve, the garden of the original couple, before original sin. In the Bible, Genesis 4:16, one finds it to be conceived as an actual spot situated "east of Eden". In the Old Testament, Eden is called "pardes" in Hebrew, which is translated to Greek "paradeisos" in the New Testament, taking on a sense of Heaven, the place of eternal happiness after death. Thus, there is an early ambiguity between regression and utopia. Paradise receives the meaning of both before and after, original and final. This doubleness exists whenever anybody hereafter says "paradise", whether in the garden culture of the 18th century or of our days, or in the name of a box of chocolate or a perfume. The paradise garden is situated both in the future and in the past, and reaching it would link regression with utopia, as in the words of Joni Mitchell in 'Woodstock': "We are stardust / We are golden / And we've got to get ourselves / Back to the garden".

Wind. The gardener and Linnaeus are standing in the grove beside the oak, the elm and the ash, listening to the jingling of the Aeolian bells.

"Glass", says the gardener, "as a material is fluid in its natural state. At our temperature it takes on a more solid form. But it is still fluid. Is just frozen. But still moving the whole time, just a little, inside itself."

Linnaeus replies: “Then glass is related to the mussels in the seas. After all, they are nothing but a fine moisture which has acquired a shell.” (Florin, 1996)

There is another and different kind of garden in the Bible, an emblematic place of suffering and agony: Gethsemane. We learn from Mark, Matthew and Luke that, after the Last Supper, Jesus, along with his disciples, came to pray at a place called Gethsemane. He asked them to sit there and stay awake while he prayed, overwhelmed by doubt and fear. It is John that calls the place a garden: “When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples over the brook Kedron, where was a garden, into the which he entered, and his disciples.”³

Bible interpreters like to think of Gethsemane as a closed garden where Jesus liked to dwell, far away from the terrible city of Jerusalem, with its oppression and violence. Jerusalem was the evil, Gethsemane was the grove. But through the passion story of Jesus, Gethsemane is colonized by Jerusalem. The grove is contaminated with an anguish so deep that “his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground”.⁴ Interpreters of the Bible find an analogy with the grove of Eden, which was also abruptly transformed – it was there that sin had its origin, the curse was pronounced and innocence was exiled by agony and despair.

Just as we find that the *locus amoenus* of the grove, biblical or not, carries threat and agony and destruction inside itself, we shall find in the concepts of paradise and garden another matter of internal complication: this ideal space exists due to limit and closure. We can trace this phenomena through etymology. The Greek word for paradise, *paradeisos*, goes back to the old Persian Avestic word *pairi-*

³ AV, *St. John* 18:1.

⁴ AV, *St. Luke* 22:44.

daez̃a, that not only stands for an ideal state of origin or end for the human being, but also and more directly for a royal park intended for wild animals that are to be hunted by the royalties. The more exact word meaning is “closed space”, which was supposed by the needs of the hunting area. This sense of paradise as “closed space” has been transported through the centuries. No garden whatsoever is thinkable if not closed. What constitutes the garden is the border towards the outward, the other area, may it be with a fence, a ditch, a canal of water, or walls of earth or brick stones.

It is the 23rd of July. The dog-days are here. Linnaeus is standing in the garden, sweaty, dazed by the heat, and thinking about the stone-fence he has decided to erect. Out there, in the fields, are the goats which come into his garden at night, laying it to waste and fouling it. He finds it strange that, according to the regulations, it is the owner of an estate who is responsible for fences. Surely it is the beasts’ owners who should be fenced in, not the estates’. (Florin, 1996)

The concept of the closed garden was taken over in the Christian tradition, with a starting point in the *Song of Songs* (*Song of Solomon*): “A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse”.⁵ *Hortus conclusus* is the Latin term, often standing for the Virgin Mary, the sealed garden into which the Holy Spirit entered at the Annunciation.

A typical and emblematic example of how this tradition finds its way through the centuries is a little painting from 1828 by the artist Erasmus Ritter von Engert, titled *A garden in Vienna*. It shows a woman, in her twenties or thirties, sitting in a small enclosed garden. You see a house in the background, modern for its time, the 1820s. There is a little gate leading from the house into the garden, and although only the woman is in sight you may guess the house

⁵ *Song of Solomon* 4:12.

is her home where she lives with husband and children, i.e. a typical Viennese mother. She is not working in the garden, but sitting in a chair. Her head is covered and she wears a long dress covering her body. On her small feet we see a pair of neat shoes that are clean, never touched by mud and soil. Her hands are just as clean and chastely occupied with knitting, and in her knee she has the Holy Scriptures. That is why she keeps her head down, as in obedience: she is reading. The presence of the contemporary house in the background and an almost photographic wealth of detail give the painting a realistic and everyday character. The more striking becomes the painting's allegorical character. God has written two books, it is said. One is the Bible, where the Word of the Creator comes to us in all its meaning and sharpness, if we listen rightly. The other book is the immense book of Nature, where God speaks in signs which we human beings must strive to interpret. Nature is an image, composed by signs like a text, and watching nature is to read the work of creation. This allegorical perspective and this tradition are strongly present in the painting of the woman in her enclosed garden. She sits there in a small Eden, and the way her dress folds reminds us of the classical painters' portraits of the Virgin Mary. One would not be surprised if a unicorn ate some grass next to her and a choir of angels turned up behind her. It is both an intimate family portrait and a Bible illustration. The vine clinging above her shows the way to the temples of heaven. The sunflowers growing high are looking down on her and they seem to have eyes: it is God's own gaze descending to his creation, elevating the woman to his heavenly reign.

But the closed garden did not survive only in Christian practices – such as in giving books of prayers names like “The little garden of the soul”, or building cloisters as enclosed gardens. The closed garden also had its way in philosophic garden theory. When Francis Bacon in his essay ‘On gardens’ (ca. 1600) states the principles for a

kingly garden, he stresses the element of closure, proposing the method of having a contrasting “heath or desert” next to the garden. Bacon’s essay gives an early sketch of the artificial naturalness and constructed wildness of the English garden, developed during the eighteenth century in reaction to the Italian renaissance garden and the French baroque garden. Constructed rocks, designed waterfalls, and organized rivers form the background of newly built ruins and hermit caves for social gatherings. The visitor of the garden would no longer be an admirer of a system of mythological allegories, but a viewer of an astonishing spectacle of the sublime drama of nature and history. William Beckford, one of the wealthiest people in England in his time, built his monstrous and megalomaniac estate, Fonthill (1793-1813), surrounded by a wall, tens of kilometres long and many meters high. Samuel Coleridge gave his answer to Beckford’s strivings with his poem ‘Kubla Khan’ (1798): “Five miles meandering with a mazy motion / Through wood and dale the sacred river ran, / Then reached the caverns measureless to man, / And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean: / And ’mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!”. The garden keeps getting contaminated with destruction.

Wind. Suddenly October. Linnaeus braces himself to go outside, led by the old assistant gardener, Lövberg. Linnaeus is wearing his nightshirt and the red velvet skullcap.

They stand in the grove by the oak, elm, and ash to listen to the jingling of the hanging Aeolian bells of green glass. But no sound is heard. They think the jingling is being drowned out by the whistling of the wind and go right up to them. They sense the swaying of the leaves, each and every one of them. But from the glass bells they can distinguish only a muffled sound, dry and short, quite dull, like wood against felt.

Lövberg unhooks one of the bells and holds it to the light. It

was formerly clear and completely transparent, but is now hazy, smudgy, watered. Linnaeus, when he looks very carefully, can make out within the material fine grey threads stretching round the surface.

“The glass has stopped”, Lövberg says. “It is the glass disease.”

He moistens one of his fingertips and rubs the rim of the glass. There is no sound. He flicks a finger off the side.

“They will not be saying any more. They have stopped.”
(Florin, 1996)

In literature, the soul often finds a mirror in the landscape. The passive contemplation of nature makes way for secret messages from the wanderings of the heart. More seldom the relations between emotions and topography are a result of landscape architecture. But just this connection we find in Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809, *Elective Affinities*). The commentary to the 1964 Swedish translation notes that the reader of today has certain things to overcome, especially the book’s strange and carefully described garden and park constructions, which could hardly interest all readers. However, the reader soon finds that these descriptions are not at all a whimsical aberration on Goethe’s part. Instead, what happens between the story’s four characters is in direct relation to the ongoing transformations of the place they are in (the impressive park of a castle). The four characters are two couples: on the one hand, Edvard (baron and castle proprietor) with his wife, Charlotte, on the other hand, Edvard’s friend from youth, the Captain, and Otilie (Charlotte’s young relative). Goethe soon lets risky forces of attraction work between the “wrong” couples, i.e. between Edvard and his relative Otilie and between his wife Charlotte and the Captain. The title of the book is the chemical term for attractions that may lead different substances to

dissolve into each other. But this critical process can begin only when the ground is prepared in the right way. The Captain rejects the plans that Charlotte just has made for reconstructing the castle park and suggests a completely different and new proceeding. There is no lack of money and workers, and the four characters soon find themselves in a park under reconstruction, a work-in-progress that has nothing of the grove's innocence, but everything artificial and chancey in the human mind's imaginative talent. If Adam and Eve had been in a landscape of this kind, anything could have happened. It is as if a wind of illusions from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had swept over the figures. And when the four characters consider further construction plans, it is as if they are consciously occupied with preparing changes in their own psychés. Goethe writes that Charlotte quite calmly lets the Captain "destroy a beautiful place of rest that stood in the way of his plans". We recognize the *locus amoenus* in this castle park, the classic pleasant place that cannot stand up against the forceful Captain's grand enterprise. The result is a waste and destruction of the place and of the interrelations between the four characters, but also an unveiling from Goethe's side of any claimed independence of the *locus amoenus* from human efforts. Mythology unmasked.

Goethe wrote his book under impression of the great garden Wörlitz near Dessau, created 1764-1800 by prince Friedrich Franz von Anhalt, who wanted to construct a "sublime" landscape in line with the English garden ideas and in contact with Edmund Burke's distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. But the readers of Goethe's book would also associate its park project with the grand architect of English parks and gardens, Lancelot Brown (1716-83),⁶ and it may have been one of his projects that the figures of *Die Wahlverwandschaften* were copying, through there were at the

⁶ Probably better known to English readers as Capability Brown.

time widely and intensely studied books with instructions and illustrations: see this and do it yourself, if you can afford it! Here, we have journeyed quite a distance from the first images of the grove of Eden.

The gardener shows Linnaeus a leaf from a maple tree. On it are a number of black spots of varying shapes with yellow edges. The gardener knows that it is a parasitical fungus which attacks maple leaves. He holds the leaf close to his ear and listens: "Fungi are funny things, he says. "You do not know what they are doing. You do not know if they are animals or plants. You do not know anything."

"*Rhytisma acerinum*", Linnaeus says, after a while.
(Florin, 1996)

The contaminated garden also finds its way into Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale *Rappaccini's Daughter* (1844, dramatized by Octavio Paz: *La Hija de Rappaccini*, 1956) Rappaccini is a medical doctor with an enclosed garden of herbs and fruits and mushrooms, used in his profession. Actually what grows in the garden is all poisonous and dangerous. Rappaccini's garden is to himself a wonderful dream, but to others a lethal nightmare. The most striking flower in this garden is his own daughter, Beatrice, who is never let outside the garden. She is fantastically beautiful, but as she has been brought up in this toxic environment she has become poisonous and fatally dangerous herself. Anyone who touches her will fall ill and die. Hawthorne's story is said to go back to an old ninth-century Indian tale, in which a beautiful girl is raised and nurtured with poison and then used in an intrigue of power to kill an opponent. When the opponent touches the desirable girl, he dies. I give this literary example from Hawthorne to point to a phenomenon: how the *locus amoenus* in all its ideal pureness and innocence seems to produce contrary stories. As soon as the *locus amoenus* is imagined, we see

how another garden emerges from its inner centre, the *locus terribilis*.

Speaking of Linnaeus' grove at Hammarby, I remarked that the letter requesting his wife to maintain the grove shows us the scientist at a crossroads between science, utility and mythology. There is an often-quoted passage from the *Journey in Lapland* where the 25 year-old Linnaeus is irritated and disturbed from walking in windy rain and in perpetual swamps and with his boots full of water – he says that the land of the Lapps is worse than the Hell described by priests, and worse than the underworld river Styx described by poets, including a Lapp woman whom he calls a Fury from Styx. He is in a wild land, a waste land, very far in time and space from the grove that he later designed and enjoyed at Hammarby. But in my eyes, he already is at the start of creating and inhabiting a grove, or something like a grove, and that is his scientific project, focused on the usefulness of nature, a project aiming to be productive and economically rewarding for his country's finances. And if one reads further in that famous Styx passage, one will find that Linnaeus soon comforts himself in finding a certain beneficial and useful plant that saves both him and the Lapps from being permanently stuck in Hell or in the underworld.

Linnaeus calls out: "Gardener!"

There is something he wants to tell, to assert, exultantly. But the gardener looks worried, and it flags. The gardener shows Linnaeus the palm of his hand. In it are a number of black spots of varying shapes, with yellow edges.

"I feel nothing", he says.

Linnaeus sees how the spots are creeping inside the cuff of the gardener's shirt.

"Nothing", says Linnaeus.

It is meant as a question, a question in response, but he can hear that it does not sound like a question.

“I do not feel like raking any more just now”, says the gardener. “Not raking. Not just now.”
(Florin, 1996)

The system was Linnaeus most beloved and maintained grove. He, who sometimes would be called the second Adam, built his own Eden, and he tried to enclose it the best he could. He knew it was not natural, but regarded it as legitimate, useful and reliable a solid basis for knowledge.

But then there is the story of the new herb species, that at first seems to be a certain species belonging to a certain class, but proves to be something else. He gives it a Latin name. He calls it *peloria*, after the Greek *pelor*, meaning monster, the incarnation of strangeness. The system was challenged and proved to be wrong at a point. New species do emerge. The system was contaminated. And more monsters kept leaping into his system. He created new classes for micro-organisms, naming them Hydra, Furia and Chaos. The system could not hold. Or is it the other way around? By keeping up the name-giving, he also keeps the system going, by integrating the monstrous, maintaining the system, his grove.

