The Garden as Democratic Space: Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Richard Powers

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Year of the Flood* (2009), the second volume in her *Maddaddam* trilogy, in spite of its extreme originality, is reminiscent of a novel by Doris Lessing: *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974). Such a connection comes as no surprise, for Doris Lessing, similarly to Margaret Atwood, is one of the first women writers of science fiction in the second half of the twentieth century. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is not exactly a Sci-Fi novel, but rather a dystopia, yet it is a threshold for Doris Lessing that allows her to move on to the extra-terrestrial series of *Canopus in Argo*. It is exactly this labeling of genres that renders it difficult to attribute environmental concerns to novels that have attracted popular and critical attention merely as post-catastrophe, or better, apocalyptic works of fiction as Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement* (Ghosh 2016). One aspect the two writers and their respective novels have in common is the exploration of the garden as democratic space, or, more precisely, a space where democracy is put to the test (Harrison 2008). This also allows for a comparison with Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018), where the entire planet with its forests might be considered as a garden to be taken care of. Moreover, the environmental activist movements are described as democratic organizations. In this respect all the novels explore social justice, communitarian ideals, – in fact utopias – giving voice to environmental projections of engagement and *cura*. With Arundhati Roy (1999), it is possible to claim that whenever environmental issues are at stake, it is after all a matter of democracy and of the questioning of democratic principles. The aim of this paper is to disentangle the key concepts of gardening and democracy as possible environmental utopias.

Key-words: gardens, democracy, dystopia, utopia, Atwood, Lessing, powers, environmental humanities.

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In a postlapsarian reality, the gardens of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and of Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) present a way to re-create the Garden of Eden on Earth in order to fight back against a dystopian world. Thus, the garden becomes an enclosed space of communal resistance. Moreover, recently, in his novel *The Overstory* (2018), Richard Powers has shown that the entire planet – with its forests – might be considered a common garden, an open arena for practicing democracy. The aim of this essay is to provide a comparative reading of Lessing's and Atwood's novels in relation to the paradigm of the garden as democratic space, and subsequently, to focus on Powers' text in order to draw some conclusions on our present[1].

According to the American scholar Robert Pogue Harrison, in both Lessing's and Atwood's novels the garden is a sanctuary to counter the frenzy and tumult of history (Harrison 2008), for the gardens are opposed to a social and political dystopia. Richard Powers, on his part, depicts a permanent and now ineradicable dystopia, where humans are blind to the consequences of their actions and saving the forests becomes an ideal way of tending the planet/garden.

In his work *Gardens. An Essay on the Human Condition* (2008), Harrison sets his premises by working on the dichotomy: gardens vs. history. This binary opposition does not set the garden *contra* history; rather, it places gardens in history. To better visualize this binarism, the two categories can be placed alongside one another, as if on a scale, or as in Robinson Crusoe's exemplary book keeping. Thus, Harrison claims that:

[1] This paper was presented at the 8th Biennial EASLCE Conference, at the University of Wurzburg, Germany, on 26-29, 2018 (https://www.easlce.eu/cfp-the-garden-ecological-paradigms-of-space-history-and-community/).

> What makes human life bearable: our religious impulses, our poetic and utopian imagination, our moral ideals, our metaphysical projections, our storytelling, our aesthetic transfigurations of the real, our passion for games, our delight in nature. (Harrison 2008: x)

> If ever history were to become everything, we would all succumb to madness. (Harrison 2008: ix)

> In their very concept and their humanly created environments, gardens stand as a kind of haven, if not a kind of heaven. (Harrison 2008: x)

> In western cultures it has been the garden, whether real or imaginary, that has provided sanctuary from the frenzy and tumult of history. (Harrison 2008: ix)

> When Voltaire ends *Candide* with the famous declaration "Il faut cultiver notre jardin" the garden in question must be viewed against the background of the wars, pestilence, and natural disasters evoked by the novel. (Harrison 2008: x)

> History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed of history would be superfluous. (Harrison 2008: x)

To sum up, with its brutality history creates the need for gardens. The term utopia is evident in Harrison's argument, since the garden is viewed as a sort of "island of utopia" in the midst of history's whirlwind. Harrison points out that Voltaire uses the plural possessive adjective "notre" to identify a collective belonging and a collective responsibility towards our Earth, our Planet, thus attributing an immediate (non-mediated) and updated ecological and democratic meaning to Voltaire's philosophical assumption, otherwise understandable as a private claim (to each of us, his/her own garden). Indeed, Harrison is open to such a democratic reading:

> The pronominal adjective used by Voltaire – *notre* – points to the world we share in common. This is the world of plurality that takes shape through

private concerns into which one escapes from the real; it is that plot of soil on the earth, within the self, or amid the social collective, where the cultural, ethical, and civic virtues that save reality from its own worst impulses are cultivated. Those virtues are always *ours*. (Harrison 2008: intr. x)

It is worth noticing how in the above-mentioned novels and in their literary gardens, both the environmental and the democratic discourses are foregrounded, and humans and nature are cooperative forces. Moreover, in the three novels, tending the garden as a form of activism – as a social practice – goes hand in hand with a constant questioning and debating around the concept of democracy and this contributes to rooting them in the western philosophical tradition.

As one more preliminary reflection, an example worthy of mention among those illustrated by Harrison is that of the "gardens of the homeless" in New York City. In his opinion: "gardens mark our separation from nature" (Harrison 2008: 41). That is to say, they satisfy and testify to a need that nature does not provide for. Proof of this is to be found in a book of photographic pictures dedicated to the gardens that homeless people managed to create in the slums of New York City: *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives* by Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton (1993).

The gardens in question are made of diverse, largely random materials: toys, stuffed animals, flags, found objects, milk cartoons, recycled trash, piles of leaves, at times a simple row of flowers. We call them gardens because they are deliberately constructed. (Harrison 2008: 41)

One might ask what moves these individuals, who lack the mere necessities of life, to perform such an activity? Indeed, it is the question raised by Harrison. First of all, gardens in general, and the gardens of the homeless in particular, are an expression of creativity. Second, they also provide a sanctuary of rest, not a shelter, but an island of utopian repose. Third, they are the result of our innate biophilia or chlorophilia, although such gardens are not necessarily areas of greenery. They are very similar to the various community gardens that have appeared in many cities around the world as proof of a:

genetic, almost organic connection between gardens and forms of conviviality, […] gardens frequently appear as sites of conversation,

dialogue, friendship, storytelling – in short, communalization. (Harrison 2008: 45)

Harrison further claims that these gardens reveal a specific agency, and that they have their proper locus in the polis: "they never exist independently from human action" (Harrison 2008: 46). Thus, he also affirms that the transitory gardens of New York are speech acts: "They speak, in a public if non-verbal mode, of the human need to make ourselves at home on an earth that does not necessarily make room for us" (Harrison 2008: 48). In other words, "the gardens of the homeless" are democratic expressions and habitations in an un-democratic and un-inhabitable world.

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On first meeting Margaret Atwood's God's Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood* and their rooftop gardens suggestively called Edencliff, the group of activists strikes the reader as a sort of *déjà vu,* for what characterizes the Gardeners as a social group and as a community, or even as a religious sect, is strongly reminiscent of a similar group of people in one of the most famous female dystopias, that is to say, Doris Lessing's partly autobiographical novel *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974).

The comparison between Atwood's and Lessing's novels could stretch to the point of including a discussion of ecofeminism, for Toby and Emily, respectively the two protagonists, might embody specific versions of ecofeminism. And yet, by privileging a discussion on democracy, I would argue here that the novels offer a vision of partnership that stresses the interconnectedness of all beings, thus allowing for a balance in the roles played by both male and female characters in their novels. This is also true for Richard Powers' novel, where couples, young males and females, are all highly engaged and committed to the common cause of saving ancient Sequoias.

To begin with, the young protagonist of Lessing's novel, Emily – who suddenly appears in the I-narrator's apartment and is entrusted with responsibility – is tailored on Jenny Diski, Doris Lessing's quasi-adopted daughter. In her memoir *In Gratitude* (2016) Jenny Diski thus reminisces on the bond between facts and fiction quoting from Lessing's novel:

> The child was left with me in this way. I was in the kitchen and, hearing a sound, went into the living room, and saw a man and a half-grown girl standing there. […] They turned to face me. […] 'This is the child.' […] I said: 'But surely…'
> 'No, there's no mistake. She is your responsibility.'
> He was at the door. 'But wait a minute…'
> 'She is Emily Cartwright. Look after her.' And he had gone.
> 'Emily's you of course,' Doris told me, handing me the final draft manuscript of *Memoirs of a Survivor* in 1973. She always let me know when I appeared in her books, or when she used something I'd told her about, events from my past or present. (Diski 2016: 26)

In Doris Lessing's *Memoirs* the fictional Emily is real Jenny, insofar as the young girl constantly questions the authority of adults over children. She finds herself growing up in a period of crisis. It is not certain whether the type of catastrophe that has affected London, where the protagonists live, is a political (war?), social, economic or perhaps environmental (nuclear?) disaster. Strictly speaking, this is not Science Fiction in the same way as *Star Wars* is – following the famous complaint about the so-called Sci-Fi genre on the part of Margaret Atwood[2] and of Amitav Ghosh (2016: 3). The catastrophe might either represent the insurgence of a dictatorial regime, a period of social anarchy, a financial break-down, reminiscent of 1929 or 2008, or, even, a post-nuclear urban scenario. At present, we may say, it might be a disaster caused by climate change, or by a pandemic.

As a result, people are abandoning their homes and neighborhoods, leaving behind a trail of rubbish dumps and decadence. As an alternative, hordes of migrating tribes move around the city, looting, camping in the streets, surviving as best they can on what they find at hand. The narrator calls those new social formations "gangs": of "kids, youngsters"; but, they "were made up of every kind and age of person, were more and more tribes, were the new social unit" (Lessing 1974: 47).

In this urban and social dystopia, "savagery and anarchy" seem to reign, cannibalism is hinted at, while no form of government is mentioned, if not in terms of "the administrating class", "the Talkers",

[2] Cf. the public debate between Ursula Le Guin and Margaret Atwood on "Sci-Fi" (29 Aug 2009) and "speculative fiction" (14 October 2011) in *The Guardian*.

or simply "they". The citizens are left to themselves; shortage of newsprint makes them buy newspapers in groups and circulate them.

The situation described in Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* is not dissimilar, it is only updated to a plausible nearer future: the year 25, after the waterless flood, in fact a lab-induced pandemic, (it is useless to say that reading this novel in times of Covid-19 was something of an unnerving experience). In Atwood's novel the pandemic annihilated humanity and what is left is a new species of humanoids, the Crakers, who succeed in surviving together with a group of God's Gardeners and criminals. In Atwood's novel, any form of government has been substituted by a paramilitary force called CorpSeCorps. Social order has disintegrated, with gated communities living within enclosed and self-protected spaces: the Corporations in their own technological fortified citadels; God's Gardeners in their own natural and self-sufficient enclave; the "pleebrats" in the "pleeblands" all around the "exfernal world". While cities have been abandoned and people are hunted by security systems, a whole range of illegal trafficking is practiced: commodification of women's bodies; consumption of meat of dubious provenance; medical and poisonous drugs tested on humans; legal or illegal splicing and genetic manipulation; even, a planned extinction of the human race through an epidemic is successfully carried out.

God's Gardeners, on their part, are a religious or philosophical sect, a community and a commune of vegetarians, who practice biological cultivations and composting, use solar energy, recycle and practice barter, effectively rejecting the capitalist and consumerist system. Their philosophy is a syncretic and hybrid mixture of various traditions: the early Christian (Franciscan and Benedictine) creed, translated into a revised routine and practice of *ora et labora*; the Anglican tradition of hymnology; the First Nations People's animism; the Buddhist ideals.

In Doris Lessing's novel, the community created by Emily and her partner Gerald, two young adults, is very close to that of God's Gardeners. Indeed, "the school" is one more factual reference to Jenny Diski's real life:

> *Memoirs* concerned, in part, not just a dramatization of my arrival at Doris's, but also a fairly accurate and equally dramatic account of the time in my life, in the early 1970s, when Roger and I ran an 'alternative' school

for some local kids, who had been persistently truanting and running wild, and were now threatened with being taken into care. (Diski 2016: 26)

Similarly, the two young leaders in the novel look after a commune of children, to whom they teach all that they know, not unlike the activities that Adams and Eves carry out with their younger acolytes in Atwood's novel. In this case, too, the comparison is better illustrated as a balanced parallel reading of the two novels:

> The big house fifteen minutes' walk away had been an old people's home. It had large grounds. Shrubs and flowerbeds had been cleared and now there were only vegetables. [...] The household bought – or acquired in some way – flour, dried legumes, honey. But they were about to get a hive of bees. [...] (Lessing 1974: 94)

> She'd heard of this cult: it was said to have a garden somewhere, on a rooftop. [...] It was so beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds she'd never seen before. There were vivid butterflies; from nearby came the vibration of bees. (Atwood 2009: 43)

> The place was a conglomeration of little workshops: they made soap and candles and wove materials and dyed them; they cured leather; they dried and preserved food; they reconstructed and made furniture. (Lessing 1974: 94)

> We collected soap ends, […] to be simmered into a jelly in the black box solar cookers on the rooftop, then cooled and cut up into slabs. […] to be sold to tourists at the Gardeners' Tree of Life Natural Material Exchange. (Atwood 2009, 68) […] vinegar, which the Gardeners used for household cleaning. Ten they'd be offered for sale at the Tree of Life, along with the soap. […] everyone, including children, had to contribute to the life of the community. (Atwood 2009: 69)

> There was even a little shed in which a few fowls were kept – another illegality that went on everywhere, and to which the authorities turned a blind eye. (Lessing 1974: 94)

> The older children will have a demonstration by Zeb, our respected Adam Seven, concerning the trapping of small Animals for survival food in times of pressing need. (Atwood 2009: 125)

The first descriptive paragraph here reproduced ends with a reference to bees, which are relevant, not so much as a resource, but as an exemplary social model, besides also being an ecological spike, signaling the level of risk for our biodiversity in case of their extinction, due to biocides. The second reference points to communal cooperation, handmade products, recycling and biological productions, which are the virtuous good practices in terms of sustainability and anti-capitalism of the two communes. The last paragraph mentions the scarcity of food and the resort to animal proteins in the diet of both communes. Finally, the organizational principles in the communities of the two novels are very similar and soon democracy and equality become the core paradigms in both works, as the following juxtaposed quotations clearly demonstrate:

> Only a few days before Emily had come in late from this household, and had said to me: 'It is impossible not to have a pecking order. No matter how you try not to.' And she had been not far off tears, and a little girl's tears at that. And I said: 'You aren't the first person to have that difficulty!'
>
> 'Yes but it isn't what we meant, what we planned. Gerald and I talked it over, right at the start, it was all discussed, there wasn't going to be any of that old nonsense, people in charge telling people what to do, all that horrible stuff. [...] To obey [...] 'We decided it wasn't going to happen,' she said.
> 'Well,' I had said, 'you don't get a democracy, by passing resolutions or thinking democracy is an attractive idea. (Lessing 1974: 118)

> Figuring out the Gardener hierarchy took her some time. Adam One insisted that all Gardeners were equal on the spiritual level, but the same did not hold true for the material one: the Adams and the Eves ranked higher, though their numbers indicated their areas of expertise. (Atwood 2009: 45)
>
> It was news to Toby that the Gardeners had a truck (Atwood 2009: 184)
>
> Gardeners didn't allow computers. (Atwood 2009: 206)

In both novels, democracy is definitely put to the test; it is often questioned and explicitly debated in the two texts, where communities organize themselves around a garden in times of socio-political unrest, and environmental crisis.

Why then, is democracy such a crucial issue? In the novels by Lessing and Atwood the gardens should be managed democratically by a community of equals and peers, yet in both cases leaders soon emerge and impose their authority. In addition, in Atwood's novel the leaders secretly use computers and cellphones, while a hierarchy that privileges Adams and Eves over the acolytes is quite evident.

Harrison's study of gardens seems to offer an answer to the question. The roots of the debate around democracy within a walled garden are to be found in ancient western philosophy. The American scholar is not so much interested in retracing the history of gardens in Western society, but rather in retracing the very roots of the link between gardening and democracy.

The first exemplary and classical model is Plato's school: "Plato chose as his location not the Agora but a garden-like environment outside the city walls, in a grove sacred to the hero Academo" (Harrison 2008: 60). In Plato's time the Academy was in fact a walled park, literally a *paradise*, *paradeisos* in Greek means "walled around," Harrison reminds us. Therefore, Plato chose to distance himself and his school from the polis: "Plato's decision to plant his school in a park on the margins of Athens set a pattern for the future history of academia in the West" (Harrison 2008: 61).

Hence, the garden as *hortus conclusus* takes shape, but not as a place in which the individual can find solace, shelter or consolation, but as a space to share with an entire community. This elitist detachment from city life was only apparent, because, in spite of the fact that "the Academy was a self-enclosed *paradeisos* for the privileged few, detached from the tumult of life in the city. […] the Academy was, in conception as well as in fact, a nursery for future statesmen" (Harrison 2008: 67). As a consequence, the commitment to politics and ethics is re-inscribed in the soul of the individual and encouraged by means of communal life.

As for the actual activities of the Academy, Harrison writes:

> Those admitted into the Academy's sanctuary joined in effect a sect, a cult, a quasi-secret fraternity, as it were, with its own rituals, symposia, and festival

days. "Symposia" here doesn't mean academic conferences but veritable feasts of food, drink, and conversation, which were integral part of life at the Academy. […] much attention was given to the body (gymnastics and the regulation of diet) as to the mind (geometry, mathematics, dialectic) as well as to the soul (music and poetry). […] the goal of Platonic education was the cultivation of the *whole person* […] to live in accord with the nature of the matter itself. (2008: 66-67)

Plato's Academy seems to have much in common with the communes portrayed by both Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood, since such communities are conceived as schools where the adults, or the elders – one could also say the leaders – teach the young not so much technical subjects, but rather how to behave inside a community and how to contribute to the well-being of all its members. It is no coincidence that bees are so important in both texts. Particularly in Atwood's novel, bees do not only produce honey to be stored for future times of hardships, and to "fight a war" against Gardeners' persecutors, but bees are considered a model society, metaphorically mirroring the workings of the community of God's Gardeners.

According to Stefano Mancuso, bees are examples of democratic collective behavior. He speaks of "social insects acting as a group" (Mancuso 2017: 78).

This is the case with swarms of insects or flocks of birds, which, through modalities of interaction, seem to act as a single organism. […] The advantage that can be gained is twofold. First, these structures are particularly strong […] And second, they have a simple design […] regarding the transmission of information between individual explorers. (Mancuso 2017: 78-79)

Yet, most interestingly, Stefano Mancuso binds this cooperative quality and efficiency with democracy. In particular, he defines Athenian direct democracy as "the most fruitful period in the history of humankind" (Mancuso 2017: 84), and adds:

In nature, large, distributed organizations without control centers are always the most efficient. Recent advances in biology on the study of the behaviour of groups indicate, beyond a doubt, that decisions made by large numbers of individuals are almost always better than those adopted by a few.
Bees illustrate the dynamics of behaviour by a body of animals. Their predisposition to react in a social way is so pronounced that since antiquity

– and long before expressions such as "swarm intelligence" and "collective intelligence" were dreamed up – it was clear to anyone who studied bees that their colonies are much more complex than the simple sum of the different individuals that compose them. In fact, bees show an organization that in its basic mechanism is reminiscent of the workings of the brain, with the individual playing the role of the neuron. (Mancuso 2017: 85-86)

If Stefano Mancuso uses neurobiology to explain the correlation between "Athenians, Bees, Democracy and Plant Modules" in his book on plants, it is not surprising that both Lessing and Atwood include bees in their utopian gardens. After all, environmental activists in their novels look at bees as model societies. Not dissimilarly from bees, who detach themselves from their kin and choose a new space in which to live in a communal and organic group, the Gardeners split and create new environments, the Ararats, where they can survive with members of their own sect.

Referring once more to Harrison's democratic schools: "Plato was a republican and Athens was the garden that mattered most for Plato. Those who joined the Academy entered its heterotopia on the outskirts of the city to learn to become caretakers of the state" (Harrison 2008: 68). Both God's Gardeners in Atwood's novel and the communes of youths in Doris Lessing's novel, live on a heterotopia-like island of gardening and self-sufficiency, and according to an alternative social model if compared with the rest of the society that has at that point developed into a proper dystopia. Both communities seem to incarnate the Platonic idea of "educators as gardeners of the soul" (Harrison 2008, 70).

A second classical example of the types of communities here put under scrutiny is Epicurus' Academy: it consisted of a house-cum-garden. It was small in size and was known as the "little garden" (*kepidion* or *hortulus*) (Harrison 2008: 72). The Garden School had a structure similar to Plato's Academy and to Aristotle's Lyceum:

The three schools had similar infrastructures: a private house (for residence, libraries, and dining) and an extramural side (Academy, Lyceum, and Garden) for lectures and instruction. […] The garden reflected one of the pillars of Epicureans philosophy: the affirmation of what Pericles had called "idiocy," by which he meant apoliticism, or keeping to oneself. Epicurus was in fact a militant idiot who thought of his garden as a haven from public life. (Harrison 2008: 72)

Both the literary gardens analyzed here are to some extent secluded, separate and almost secret, they too consist of buildings and of a garden, occupied by the members of the community. Wellness is not excluded, if we consider that in Atwood's novel one of the buildings is a Spa, where natural cosmetics are used. Epicurus' garden school also resembles the two gardens considered here:

> Epicurus' garden reflects and even embodies the core of his philosophy, […] it was an actual kitchen garden tended by his disciples, who ate the fruits and vegetables they grew there. […] Their gardening activity was also a form of education in the ways of nature: its cycles of growth and decay, its general equanimity, its balanced interplay of earth, water, air, and sunlight. (Harrison 2008: 73)

The purpose of this school was the attainment of happiness and *ataraxia*, that is, spiritual tranquility and peace of mind, or the state of being unperturbed. Tending the garden thus became an exercise and a practice in order to tame the wild forces of nature, while cultivating social values and friendship. The culture of the soul and the culture of the soil ended up coinciding. Happiness and pleasure (*hedone*, from *hedys*, sweet) were translated into the "Epicurean community's cultivation of personal and social virtues" (Harrison 2008: 76). The principles regulating the life of the Epicurean community were: friendship, conversation, suavity (*suavitas*), philia (*epiekeia, caritas*), and honesty of speech (*parresia*) or non-aggressiveness. Patience, hope and gratitude were also principles "cultivated" in his school.

All this is true also of Atwood's God's Gardeners, less so of Lessing's communities, where the young adult leaders encounter difficulties in 'taming' and 'educating' the new generations of wild and brutal children.

In the specific case of Epicurus' school, Harrison insists that retreat from city life does not mean renouncing the political and ethical dimension:

> Epicurus' retreat from the public realm was not a retreat into "privacy," as we understand that concept today. It may have been a retreat into idiocy, but not privacy. […] yet the intensely communal life of the Garden School belies the notion of privacy […] Epicurus did not retreat into a fortress of solitude; he retreated into a garden that, through the communal

participation of all involved, blossomed into one of the most vital and most life-affirming schools of the ancient world. (Harrison 2008: 80)

His school was removed, but not detached, from the world. Its principles and values were cultivated communally and constituted both social and political ideals. Similarly, both communities in Atwood and Lessing are concerned with social and political issues, such as democracy within the community and environmental activism in the face of a crumbling world order. In these communities the "cultivation" of the soul and of the soil is practiced as a way that echoes Voltaire's motto *il faut cultiver notre jardin*, intended as an ethical, collective effort, a moral task to be achieved all together, sharing both the efforts and the fruits.

Undoubtedly, a great distance separates the early philosophical schools in ancient Greece from the contemporary fiction considered here, but the roots of the debate around democracy are there, as Harrison well illustrates. The garden in its historical development from ancient Rome to the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance and Enlightenment up to its Romantic interpretations has not always been the center of such a debate; not always, it has been connected with social well-being and communal goals. Historically, the garden is mostly a private and elitist construct. But the two novels so far discussed seem to engage and evoke these ancient philosophical roots. Today, the cultural background has changed enormously and utopias do not easily take roots. During the Covid-19 pandemic and its subsequent lockdown, we all experienced claustrophobia, in our own enclosures and even private gardens, terraces, and balconies, which, indeed, provided solace, oxygen, and green rest from our anxieties but reduced social contact, conviviality, sharing and communal caring.

In the above-mentioned volume on the gardens of the homeless, it is clear that the squatters show "a great distrust of government agencies, bureaucracies, and rules, […] in spite of the danger of having their unsanctioned gardens destroyed" (Balmori and Morton 1993: 30). In truth, most of the gardens documented in the volume "have been destroyed." For others destruction was imminent, when the volume was published, back in 1993.

God's Gardeners experience a similar persecution: when faced with the accusation of ecoterrorism, they have to flee. Suddenly

"The Garden is destroyed. Adams and Eves gone dark" (Atwood 2009: 271). In the community, a schism has transformed Zeb into the leader of his own new group. This epilogue echoes what Amitav Ghosh wrote in his essay *The Great Derangement* (2016): "This is one area in which governments and corporations around the world have grown extraordinarily skilled, and there is every reason to believe that the investments that they have made in surveilling environmental activists would have paid off to enforce exclusions" (Ghosh 2016: 157).

> I'd been a Gardener, and now that they'd been outlawed and the Garden destroyed we had a duty to look after one another. […] I'd been in touch with the Gardeners through Amanda before I'd lost my cell, and I didn't know anything about the Garden after that. (Atwood 2009: 297-298)

In this passage, it is evident that the authorities have intervened to stop Gardeners' activities and their democratic approach to the tending of the garden. However, the reference to "the cell" and to the fact that, once outlawed, the Gardeners have to look after one another seems to indicate the need to re-constitute the living organism of the commune as if they have had to gather and connect all the surviving cells.

In conclusion, neither Lessing nor Atwood seem to be optimistic about the possibility of practicing an ever-lasting democracy within enclosed, hidden gardens governed by communes of young people, sharing the same ideals of environmental activism. The time that separates the two novels does not seem to interfere with such a pessimistic view of our contemporary world and rather creates a continuum. In these cases what is at stake is not so much the tradition of anthropogenic private gardens, nor large-scale agriculture or intensive farming. What is at stake is a form of community gardens and an alternative communal life: a utopia which is difficult to accomplish.

Democracy is put to the test also in another, more recent novel, in very similar terms. Zooming out of the comparison between the novels by Lessing and Atwood and turning to analyze Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, a similar pattern is to be detected as far as activism is concerned. Powers' novel deals with trees and centennial forests in the US, where activists fight to save them from

deforestation. In a sense, Powers seems to enlarge our vision to a more universal ideal of our planet as one huge garden to be tended, guarded, and defended by all. He describes our reality, a historic moment when deep scientific knowledge and love for trees – for the entire planet is considered as a huge garden to be preserved and taken care of – push people to organize into environmentalist movements.

What Powers has in common with Lessing and Atwood is an evident concern with democracy in his *The Overstory*. This paradigm emerges when the author introduces activists – also echoing the "Occupy Wall Street Movement". All these groups are represented as a commune based on democratic principles: "We don't have leaders here" (Powers 2018: 335). This sentence echoes Emily's in Lessing's novel, when she blames leadership, and Toby in Atwood's novel, when she realizes that Adams and Eves are effectively leaders.

In Powers' novel, such movements are based on democratic principles, but are soon suppressed by the authorities. The activists are tortured by the police force even before being arrested and, as happens in Atwood's novel, they are accused of home terrorism and some of them end up in prison with a double life sentence. The risk in both Atwood's and Powers' works is that peace-born activism turns into violent actions, and therefore the movements are soon extinguished. This very sad and pessimistic parable – from peaceful activism to violent intervention and a similarly violent reaction on the side of the authorities – characterizes the writings of Atwood and Powers, but also the conclusions of Amitav Ghosh's essay. Particularly, his last chapters dedicated to activism and the Anglosphere:

> It goes without saying that if the world's most powerful nations adopt the politics of the 'armed lifeboat,' explicitly or otherwise, then millions of people in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere will face doom. Unthinkable though this may appear, such a Darwinian approach would not be in conflict with free market ideology: that is why it has a long pedigree in the statecraft of the Anglosphere. […] Climate change may itself facilitate the realization of this plan by providing an alibi for ever-greater military intrusion into every kind of geographic and military space. (Ghosh 2016: 144-145)

This progressive militarization of civil life, this armed response, or better, 'politics of attrition' – as Ghosh calls it (2016: 147) – particularly

against environmental activism is a new threat in our contemporary world and this is exactly what Atwood and Powers dramatize in their novels, and what Doris Lessing implicitly foreshadows.

There is a further similarity between Atwood's and Powers' works. The importance of bees as animals acting in swarms, which can be equated with the root systems in trees, whose apexes work as a net (Mancuso 2017, 77), is substituted in Richard Powers' novel by the presence of ants. Ants take the place of bees in representing the perfect form of social behavior: "the colony possess something; Adam doesn't know what to call it. Purpose. Will. A kind of awareness – something so different from human intelligence that intelligence thinks is nothing" (Powers 2018: 54).

Moreover, in Powers' novel a man dedicates himself to land art, like Amanda, a character in Atwood's novel. Nick, one of the activists, writes the word STILL with fallen tree trunks and boughs, well-readable from satellites high above, whereas Amanda writes the word KAPUTT in the desert with the bones of dead animals, best visible only from a helicopter. In the latter case, the word indicates both the end of the world and the extinction of animals. On the contrary, the word "still", the last one in this "over-abundant" novel, ("the word life has been saying, since the beginning" Powers 2018, 502) might hint at resilience and resistance, alluding not only to the capacity of nature to reproduce and regenerate itself, to be always, eternally, still there, but also to the possibility for new waves of activism to fight against human blindness: "What keeps us from seeing the obvious?" (Powers 2018: 430). Yet, "still" might also allude to still life as artistic genre.

If the final metaphor used by Atwood in *The Year of the Flood* is that of various cells, that although split and separate, can still re-aggregate and contribute to the life of a whole organism, as previously mentioned, in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, the closing metaphor is that of seeds: the seeds of awareness and consciousness spread by activism, but also the seeds treasured in the seed-banks that one day might be used to repopulate the Earth with lost species.

It becomes clear, therefore, that Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Richard Powers teach us that we have to take care of *notre jardin*; they all hint at the idea that, likewise, it is urgent to cultivate and to defend the democracy we are allowed to enjoy, no matter how imperfect it might be.

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