A YIN-YANG APPROACH TO THE VICTORIAN GARDENS AND GARDENING

O PERSPECTIVĂ YING – YANG ASUPRA GRĂDINILOR VICTORIENE

AVARVAREI SIMONA CATRINEL
University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Iassy

Abstract. *The Victorian period is famous for its series of breakthroughs, inventions, new ideas and discoveries that are skilfully and elegantly displayed by the horticultural area. An outlook over this generously endowed age would definitely focus on the elegant profiles of giant glasshouses, new species of plants and techniques of landscape architecture, the setting up of national horticultural societies, the discovery of new chemically-synthesised pesticides, the publication of revolutionary books on the evolution of species and their origin, delineating thus a very distinct and unique trail for the Victorian time and its place within the British and world history. One of the novelties this age ushers in is marked by the dawn of the affirmation of women as social actors. This paper intends to grasp, as in a double-mirrored game of yin and yang, aspects that have to do with the Victorian garden and gardening, by means of a descriptive approach.*

Keywords*: (Victorian age, garden design, plant species, landscape architecture).*

Rezumat. *Perioada Victoriana a ramas celebra prin seria de progrese, inventii, idei noi si descoperiri pe care le-a presupus si care nu au ocolit nici domeniul horticol. De la sere uriase la unelte de gradinarit, de la noi specii de plante la alte tehnici si perspective asupra arhitecturii gradinilor, de la crearea unor societati nationale de profil la inventarea unor substante sintetizate chimic pentru combaterea daunatorilor, de la publicarea unor lucrari revolutionare legate de specii si originea lor la recunoasterea oficiala a meritelor si dedicatiei unor pasionati horticultori, epoca Victoriana si-a marcat un traseu unic in istoria Angliei, devenind unul din momentele de referinta, care pregateste debutul perioadei moderne. Si daca epoca victoriana mai aduce ceva nou, timid, la inceput, dar din ce in ce mai pronuntat, ulterior, este afirmarea identitatii femeii ca actor social. Lucrarea incearca sa surprinda, ca intr-un joc de alternante, ying si yang, aspecte legate de specificul gradinii victoriene, prins intre cele doua dimensiuni, masculin si feminin.*

For much of the twentieth century and the current one the term Victorian, which literally describes things and events in the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) stands for the epitome of a most complex, paradoxical age that was a second English Renaissance. Like Elizabethan England, Victorian England saw great expansion of wealth, power and culture.

The Victorians invented the modern idea of invention – the notion that one can create solutions to problems, that man can create new means of bettering himself and his environment, for Victorianism was an age of paradox and power. If progress is one Victorian epitome, freedom is the other. Men must be free. As a result free trade replaced the protectionist policy, governmental interference in

industry and social organization was resisted, and it all amounted in Matthew Arnold's words "doing as one likes".

Victorianism embraces not only an epoch but also a whole phenomenon whose significance goes far beyond the limits of the age. It might be defined as a magic blend of opposite tendencies: individualism and temperance, material pursuits and idealization of life, the influence of science and the force of religion.

However, the Victorian age, the age of industrial revolution and squalid city slums, was also the age of a popular explosion of interest in that most British of all occupations, namely, gardening seen and perceived not just as an intimate pastime. For the first time, a concerted effort was made by authorities to provide extensive public gardens. There was a reason for this benevolent behaviour by the members of the well-off society. They believed that gardens would decrease drunkenness and improve the manners of the lower classes. Intellectuals and the upper classes also encouraged gardening as means of decreasing social unrest. Victorians believed that a free world could never be conceived without education; therefore, elementary education was instituted in 1870. Dr. Matthew Arnold was the personification of the new spirit required to restructure an old-fashioned educational system by means of establishing the rights of free speech and gaining access to culture.

In this respect, one can talk about education even when it comes to gardening, for gardening has ceased to be a simple pastime and has gradually turned into an art that required trained skills and knowledge. If up to the Victorian age gardening was just one of the other male-exclusive occupations, this is the moment that starts to melt yin into yang, by bringing the first 'feminine' touch. This is the dawn of the emergence of women in the gardening profession, which became a popular hobby among women at home. Gertrude Jekyll (November 29, 1843–December 8, 1932) became the most popular name in garden design, while two colleges began to offer courses for women to study gardening.

Swanley College was founded in 1885 as a horticultural college for training men. It started to admit women in 1891, an d by 1896 it had 39 female students. The last of the men left in 1902 leaving the college to establish itself as a women-only college for horticulture.

In 1898 the Countess of Warwick founded Warwick Hostel in Reading to offer training to 'Surplus women in the lighter branches of agriculture'. This expanded and moved to Studley Castle in 1903, becoming Studley College for Women, teaching agriculture and horticulture. This is just another proof that gardening was no longer the exclusive hobby of the upper classes. As industry and commerce prospered, a wealthy middle class emerged; Improved transport and roads made it possible for villas to be built on the outskirts of towns where there was fresh air and an opportunity to display wealth and its attributes – let us not forget that was a moment of power, mostly, and power needs to be ostentatiously displayed. There was a desire for gardens with grandiose features, following the latest fashions and themes. In this respect, the choice of a rather odd and rare evergreen species comes to illustrate the dimensions of the grandeur of the epoch.

The monkey-puzzle became the 'must have' plant of Victorian society. It was introduced to Britain in 1795 by Archibald Menzies after his visit to Chile. But the plant remained a rarity until the 1840s when William Lobb rediscovered the tree on a plant-finding mission to South America. It would be planted to be seen as part of the landscape or, in smaller, suburban gardens, as the central feature to a bedding scheme.

Celebrated for its progress, invention, new ideas and discoveries, the Victorian period touched the field of landscape architecture and gardening as well. In this respect, Edwin Budding's new lawnmower invention meant that people could have manicured lawns, while gadgets such as cucumber straighteners were becoming increasingly popular.

In 1841, Victorian gardener Joseph Paxton, probably the most famous of the Victorian gardeners, creates the glasshouse at Chatsworth. He was the one who designed the new conservatory at Chatsworth and later the Crystal Palace in London, for which he was knighted by Queen Victoria. In 1851, the Great Exhibition of London was hosted by it. He eventually became a millionaire because of commercial investments, such as selling small greenhouses to amateur gardeners. In 1841, Alexander Shanks of Arbroath registered a pony-pulled mower that cleared the clippings away.

1845 witnessed the abolition of the glass tax, which made greenhouses and conservatories cheaper and more popular by making them far more affordable.

Conservatories or open spaces, public gardens or secluded back gardens reunited a certain vegetal domino, a peculiar pattern that melts the same yin-yang, masculine-feminine co-ordinates.

A front and rear *lawn* were considered imperative in a formal garden. Cottage gardens and woodland gardens were more informal, and lawns were not such a requisite. The large expanses of lawn on estates were trimmed by gang mowers, drawn by horses. The push mower, for more modest lawns, was patented during Victoria's reign.

Trees were used primarily to shade important parts of the house where direct sun was unwelcome, such as a dining room or veranda. In the city, trees were often planted along the street to aid in privacy. Weeping trees and those with interestingly coloured or shaped leaves were popular and used strategically to draw the eye. Depending upon climate, one might collect exotic trees and "display" them as part of the lawn decor. Most often these exotics were kept in conservatories.

Shrubs were used mainly for delineating property lines or marking paths. They might also be used to hide an "unsightly" wooden fence or house foundation, or used to frame doorways or bay windows. It was popular to mix the species of shrubs. Most properties at the turn of the century were fenced. Cast iron was by far the most popular material because it was the most ornamental. The more elaborate the home, the more elaborate (usually) the fence and gate. In more informal settings, rustic fencing was used. This might be made of "rustic" wood bent into decorative motifs. The picket fence was to be hidden with shrubs at best, or vines if shrubs were out of the question.

The Victorian garden was highly ornamental, for it generously displayed a rather wide range of ornaments - urns, sculpture, fountains, sundials, birdbaths, and man-made fishponds - were all commonly used.

Should we consider trees the 'masculine' dimension of the garden, the 'feminine' one comes with the delicate selection of flowers that any Victorian garden displays. In 1840 the most popular plants for displays were roses, chrysanthemums and dahlias, and it is worth mentioning that by that time there were more than 500 cultivars of dahlias. In Victorian times the fashion was to have a separate formal rose garden within the boundaries of the main garden. The use of same-height flora, was popular. Most often used to depict a motif or design carpet bedding came under attack by gardeners like Gertrude Jekyll, who thought that each flower and plant should be grown for its intrinsic beauty and not as part of a "carpet." Jekyll's idea of an "herbaceous border" called for flowers of varying heights. Usually planted along a shrub border, wall, or garden path, the herbaceous border began with the shortest plants in the front. Each successive row of flowers would be taller than the last, with the tallest plants at the back. Roses were extremely popular and climbing varieties were often trained over a trellis, bower or pergola. Urban dwellers without much of a yard would often plant large urns beside the front door with flowers or small shrubs. Flowers could also be planted along the front walk underneath the shrubs, which bordered it. Window boxes were also popular. All these peculiarities are still to be observed today in the former Victorian boroughs of large cities.

The vegetal mould may have changed in some respects, but the general outline has remained the same, as if interweaving another dimension of yin-yang, perceived this time as the past and the present that melt into each other with the naturalness of an *illo tempore* that 'breathes' its freshness over the centuries. One can even talk about the so called "Victorian plants", if one comes to think of - *Acacia, Ageratum, Amaranthus, Aster, Scarlet Basil, Begonia Tuberous, Begonia, Bluebell, Caladium, Calendula, Campanula, Chrysanthemum, Cockscomb, Coleus, Dianthus, Dusty Miller, Fern, Fuchsia, Geranium, Scented Geranium, Heliotrope, Impatiens Lobelia Marigold, Moonflower, Morning Glory, Nasturtium, Oxalis Pansy, Periwinkle, Petunia, Portulaca, Primrose, Rose, Miniature Rose, Snapdragon, Sweet Alyssum, Thunbergia, Verbena, Zinnia* – as being the ones that define the 'vegetal Victorian spirit'.

This unique spirit of the Victorian garden, and not only, was to be preserved starting with 1895, the year that meant the set up of the famous British National Trust, by the very same organism, that interweaves the same yin-yang duality, for it was founded by Miss Olivia Hill and Sir Robert Hunter and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley.

Thus, the spirit of any Victorian garden appears to be a multifaceted one, reflecting the lights of time, hues of leaves and petals, symphonies of fragrances in a most intimate and delicate manner, that come to add a most peculiar trait to a even most peculiar age.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. **Drayton R. H., 2000 -** *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain and the 'Improvement' of the World*, New Haven, Yale University Press.
2. **Hoyles M., 1991 -** *The Story of Gardening,* London, Journeyman.
3. **McCracken D., 1997 -** *Gardens of Empire: Botanical institutions of the Victorian British Empire*, London, Leicester University Press.