

Who will I be after you? Is my body
ahead of you or behind you? Who am I?

("Mural," Joudah)

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Cole Swensen. *Greensward*. New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2010.
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Over the last decade, Cole Swensen has consistently pursued answers to unexpected questions in equally unexpected places. Most recently, *Ours* (University of California Press, 2009) wanders through the history of seventeenth-century French formal gardens, eventually concentrating on one figure, the landscape architect André Le Nôtre, and his work on behalf of Louis XIV. In the process, Swensen exposes a troubling intimacy between the demands of monarchical tyranny and the aesthetic virtues of symmetry, clarity, and orderliness. She leaves readers wondering whether a genuinely democratic polity might best be supported by ungainly, murky, and entropic art. Swensen has chosen to stick with gardens in her new book, *Greensward*, which announces a new country for inspection on its first page: "The following takes place in 18th century England; the scene is the garden of a manor house." Flipping through the volume, one will discover visuals that represent a new element in Swensen's work: reproductions of etchings, engravings, sketches, pen-and-ink drawings, and watercolors, all depicting British gardens, real, planned, and imagined. There are overhead views, schematic representations, fragmentary outtakes, and isolated enlarged details. Especially striking are the before-and-after pages from Humphry Repton's "red books," which show "the current state of a property on a flap that, once lifted, reveal[s] the same view as it would appear once transformed by his improvements." Swensen's verse evidently mirrors these pictorial counterparts: she superimposes words over images, offers creative description and commentary, and in one instance arranges words into a grid in imitation of the rows of trees in an orchard.

However absorbing these visual experiments might be, what truly distinguishes *Greensward* from *Ours* and its other antecedents is its underlying argument that humans and animals not only take aesthetic pleasure in their surroundings but, under the right circumstances, can also share that pleasure with each other. The volume begins by asserting that "whatever aesthetics is, it can only be transmitted to other species—and it can be transmitted along with other higher cognitive functions—through gardening." Swensen explains that a "garden is...an open link...a line

between humans and other species” that allows them both to experience and respond to the “aesthetic principles of balance, rhythm, motion, etc., and the ethical principles inherent in them.” This act of communication, moreover, goes “in both directions,” since gardens give animals and humans opportunities to observe each other and learn from each other. The book’s prose paragraphs document the intelligence of a range of different animals: “Elephants have shown signs of self-recognition in mirrors. Sheep can remember dozens of faces for years. Cats have walked thousands of miles just to get home. A cow can distinguish one voice among a hundred and will come to it.” If they are capable of such high-order behaviors, she insinuates, it is not difficult also to attribute to them opinions regarding form, shape, and color. Other anecdotes illustrate how this dynamic operates in practice:

For the second or third day in a row he saw a bird out of the window—a small hawk he thought—that seemed to hover over the labyrinth of boxwood, then fly in circles around it, and the next day, he noticed it again, but this time, its flight was more angular, purposive, and the next day, even more so, until several days later, he happened to be out in that part of the garden around noon and saw that the shadow of the bird was tracing a steady path to the heart of the maze.

The key word here is “purposive.” The speaker observes a hawk adjusting how it flies to match a pattern laid out on the ground below. These shifts are so pronounced and exact that the observer cannot help but attribute intentionality to the bird; its actions seem deliberate, calculated. But what does the animal seek to accomplish? “[T]racing a steady path to the heart of the maze” is hardly going to make it easier to find prey or nesting material. Swensen implies that the hawk is expressing itself aesthetically, engaging in what Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* famously called “purposive purposelessness.” An avian artist, it delights in the simple, primal act of imposing form on movement, and the speaker, its audience, admires its virtuosic performance.

To substantiate its claims about human-animal interactions, *Greensward* appeals to the historical record of eighteenth-century landscape architects such as Repton, Capability Brown, and William Kent, who took care to foster and depict reciprocity between human and animal: “John Rocque did an etching...in 1737 that includes two horses in the margin. They are standing alongside a canal, and, facing each other, they are grooming each other’s backs in perfectly reciprocal gestures that echo the perfect symmetry of the building on the far bank with its two towers and its two wings.” At times, these figures go so far as to suggest that animals instruct humans in how

best to experience a garden: “One notices throughout Kent’s drawings that the animals, whether horses, donkeys, dogs, or peacocks, are always leading the people, as if it were they who knew how to traverse the various alleys and groves and clearings of parkland in the most aesthetically propitious order.”

It is easy to greet Swensen’s more fanciful claims with skepticism. One could reply—à la Wittgenstein—that humans and animals share neither a language nor a mode of living, and hence it is illogical, indeed laughable, to ascribe meaning to animal behaviors whose motivations and ends must remain inscrutable. The book’s first epigraph, attributed to Dr. Gisela Kaplan, gives us a similar view: “Mainstream science has yet to be convinced that animals have an aesthetic sense.” This statement, though, is immediately followed by a second epigraph, taken from Wallace Stevens’s “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,” that subtly rebuts skeptics by shifting the grounds of the discussion: “And nothing is left except light on your fur.” *Fur* is a word reserved for animals, like *pelt* and *wool*. Stevens’s poem addresses a non-human “you.” In doing so, he could be tempting us to step imaginatively into that role, to picture ourselves becoming-animal, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has put it. Alternatively, Stevens could in fact mean what he says. He could be talking to an honest-to-goodness rabbit. And anyone who has witnessed a pet or other domestic animal luxuriating in the strong slanted western light of late afternoon can certainly imagine it taking a pleasure in such a moment that goes beyond mere physical well-being. Either way, the second epigraph suggests that “mainstream science” and Wittgensteinian cynics have yet to match poets and artists as students of the human/animal divide. Science and analytic philosophy continue to valorize rational thought; the aesthetic thinking of poets and gardeners brings us closer to the beasts of the field.

While this argument might resonate in a contemporary context, it is not altogether clear that Swensen’s eighteenth-century poetic forbears would have agreed with her on the value and centrality of reason. She does not appear to be particularly concerned by this problem. Midway through *Greensward*, she flagrantly misreads one of the best known and most influential statements on gardening written in the period:

When Alexander Pope spoke of “the genius of the place” he meant the collective mind composed of the shifting presence of all animals present at any given moment, giving it the volatility of mist, a fragility that will not acquiesce. This is what, he says, we must consult, which is not to ask but to branch continually outward, a delta of nerves and rift.

The poem to which Swensen refers, Pope’s “Epistle to Lord Burlington,” in

fact says nothing about a “collective mind” made up of “all animals present.” There, the phrase “genius of the place” (an Englishing of the much older Latin term *genius loci*) serves as neoclassical shorthand for the subtle combination of traits that renders a site unique. The poet advises a would-be gardener to work not against but with this underlying spirit:

Consult the genius of the place in all;
That tells the waters or to rise or fall;
Or helps the ambitious hill the heavens to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the vale;
Calls in the country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades;
Now breaks, or now directs, the intending lines;
Paints as you plant, and as you work designs.

Pope’s landscape here is depopulated, empty of animals, and, as far as we know, wholly silent. Swensen projects her own ecological sensibility onto a writer with entirely different goals, in this case to advise readers how to turn their country estates into “work[s] to wonder at.” In *Greensward*, the imagination not only reconstructs but reinvents the past in accord with the author’s greater aim, to bring humans and nature into a harmonious relationship.

Occasionally, Swensen does acknowledge the limits of her efforts to give voice (and attribute interiority and aesthetic sensibility) to nonhuman animals. At such times, the prosy style that predominates in *Greensward* gives way to the syntactically complex, disjunctive mode typical of her previous collections of verse:

If humanity is the only species to have a sense of aesthetics, who
in a field of open things, who taught towered of acclimation, the
one cell turned toward a gulf breath-holden; we blind by the tinder
and then by believe me: hail up’em, down lauding; all things have
a scent we embark on, justly indebted to the unended I’m owed to.

As this passage unfurls, “humanity” ceases to be only one of many “species” (a biological and taxonomic way of thinking) and is gnomically reinscribed in existential terms. To be human is, like it or not, to stand “in a field of open things,” forcibly (as if in a “cell”) made to face the daunting “gulf” that is the vast unmeaning expanse of the world. Our vertiginous positioning renders us “blind” if we contemplate it too closely and at length, just as looking at a bright light would (a fire lit by “tinder”). We unhesitatingly respond to the sublime encounter with an attitude of faith (“believe me”) and prayer (“hail

up’em, down lauding”). This primal scene might be forgotten or obscured but its “scent” pervades all human action: consciousness itself is “indebted” to our awareness that the “gulf” will reclaim us one day, that we will become mere matter, part of “the unended” that is the world in its everlasting, mute quiddity.

Such thoughts do not lead toward the affirmation of a collective mind that unites humans and animals. They lead in another direction entirely, toward the deconstructive insight that humans are forever trying to speak as if the world were full of what it manifestly lacks—namely, value, purpose, and intent. To see a face where there is none, as Paul de Man once described it. Or, as *Greensward* itself states in a revealing moment, we see the “collection of faces that all animals comprise, and we love them categorically, utterly, is it just envy, the ache out for presence that worries us and why the endlessness.” If humanity in the twenty-first century has lost its god, might other, more proximate beings, such as pets, grant us the companionship that we desperately seek, as consolation for the “endlessness” of a disenchanted universe? “Repton was determined to make the earth live up to art,” Swensen writes, and if that proved impossible, he wanted it “to fall apart, to break your heart.”

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