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Catherine Chomarat-Ruiz

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Gregorio de los Ríos at the Casa del Campo

The influence of a gardener on the history of gardens

Gregorio de los Rs la Casa del Campo

De l'influence d'un jardinier sur l'histoire des jardins

Par Catherine Chomarat-Ruiz Publié le 20/07/2011 sur Projet de Paysage - www.projetsdepaysage.fr

From historical context to oblivion

It is in 1592 that for the first time, Gregorio de los Ríos publishes his *Agricultura de Jardines* (Los Ríos, 1592). About the man, the story remembers little, except information concerning his office. A document signed by the hand of Philippe II said he was committed to the Casa del Campo to say mass and because of «his experience on plantations and gardens» (Amezúa, 1951, p. LII). This dual office of chaplain and gardener can be interpreted differently¹. If it shows the financial difficulties that faced the sovereign throughout his reign, and refers to the economy that makes the king by no longer paying the priests of the church of San Gil, it also demonstrates that Gregorio de los Ríos was chosen because of the interest in garden he shared with the King (González Tascón, Fernández Pérez, 2001, p. 16-17).

Some evidences suggest that «his experience» has been enriched by contact with the garden of the Casa del Campo. A description of Diego Perez de Meza evokes the beauty of this garden in the south-west of Madrid under the reign of Philippe II. Protected by a wall, strangest and ingenious inventions come after beautiful flower beds : the walker, overwhelmed, met there topiaries depicting a shepherd and his sheep, pilgrims, nymphs, galleys, castles (Amezúa, 1951, p. XXXV-XXXVI). Once recovered from his surprise, the visitor can still marvel at mazes, grottos, fountains and basins (Pérez de Mesa, 1595, fol. 205-206). Through *Agricultura de jardines*, the past centuries pass the horticultural experience on which has been perfected in contact with the garden of the Casa del Campo, entirely dedicated to pleasure.

Does this mean that the story ends there ? Is it a story about a gardener forgotten for centuries, about knowledge that can be assume as obsolete and about a place as wonderful it was, nonetheless suffered the ravages of time ?

Historical facts

A consciousness of his own limits

Before despising *Agricultura des jardines*, we should perhaps concede to Gregorio de los Ríos an astonishing lucidity since he highlights the limitations of his work. In an empiricist bias, he explains that his advices are drawn from his own gardens experience and his expertise is necessarily limited to places and plants he knows. The horticultural practices to which it refers have their origins in geographical locations such as Toro, Medina del Campo, Guadalajara, Aranda de Duero : all of them are located in castellan places (González Tascón, Fernández Pérez, 2001, p. 16-18). As for flowers and plants he calls because of their colour, texture or flavour, it is likely that these are the ones he loved in the parks he frequented after long days of study and he still tasted the ornamental value in the garden of the Casa del Campo (Armada Diez de Riviera, Porras Castillo, 2001, p. 27 sqq.). Regarding the shrubs, he indicates that new species arrive « every day » from the « Indies » but he cannot deal with it because he does not have a direct experience of it.

Gregorio de los Ríos is equally aware of the difficulties involved in his choice to write in Castilian rather than Latin and selecting flowers, shrubs and trees by their vernacular names. While the terms «dragon» and «giant» are evocative, « a nun kiss » sounds libertine². Elevated to the rank of capital Madrid is still as recent as the importance of Castille and the language spoken in this region has not yet imposed on the Iberian Peninsula. Many variations affect the name of a plant from one region of Spain to another ; the names vary within a province (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 247). If their names are poetic, the gardener knows that they lose the universality that only gives them Latin.

The consciousness of his own limitations do not preclude, however, to make mistakes, his empiricist commitment and his choice of Castilian cause indeed errors. The requirements of Gregorio de los Ríos are not theoretical speculation and are often judicious ; for example he recommends planting rows of wild fig trees since the fly that comes from these «cabrahigos» facilitates the maturation of the cultivated figs (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 266-267). But his recommendations are sometimes wrong. As a man of his time, he believes in spontaneous generation, including the sudden appearance *ex nihilo* of worms in the manure. Since he considers earthworms harmful, as they nourish from the roots of plants, he discourages smoking a land where carnations are planted (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 249 v). Similarly, he is wrong when he encourages grafting cherry trees on chestnut, to produce larger cherries, on the pretext that these two trees « like » the same ground (Armada Diez de Rivera, Porras Castillo, 2001, p. 45). As for vernacular names, they are source of confusion that leads him to designate two different plants in the same appellation³.

The lucidity of Gregorio de los Ríos testifies in favour of his intellectual honesty, but it may not succeed in saving *Agricultura de jardines* from his fate. Is it not legitimate to abandon a book that seems less useful than any contemporary garden guide ?

A book for historians of gardens, owners and gardeners

This decision would be as premature as unjust as the vision of our man refers to something other than a moral virtue. He knows the limitations of his work that he sensed as errors in *Agricultura de jardines*; he knows they are inevitable since they result from a work, whose he sees acutely the originality. He states it very clearly from his title by combining «agriculture» and «garden». Focusing on applications of knowledge from agriculture to garden, he is the first to leave the well-known territory of treatises published by the Arabs, those of Ibn Wafid or Abu Zacharia, among other examples (Armada Diez de Riviera, Porras Castillo, 2001, p. 31). It is no longer for him to deal with food crops from an economic perspective, but flowers, shrubs and trees that can provide an equally sensual and free pleasure. And if he chooses to write in Castilian, he is the first to desert the circle of scholars who can read Greek and Latin, to leave behind him the knowledge derived from Pliny, Dioscoride, Columella, Theophrastus or Mattioli. It is to better approach gardeners and garden owners who, as simple practitioners or amateurs, will never be great botanists or fine apothecaries (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 247).

The lucidity in the description of boundaries and errors in *Agricultura de jardines* accompanies the Gregorio de los Ríos conscious to be a pioneer (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245). It is inseparable from an original work, first in a chronological point of view and, therefore, unique in its genre (Añón Feliú, 2001, p. 81 *sqq.*). This book is then the ancestor of all the works devoted to the practical art of gardens from the sixteenth century (Armada Diez de Riviera, Porras Castillo, 2001, p. 32). If the advices of Gregorio de los Ríos need to be reviewed, the historiographical value of his work is undeniable.

We should not however believe that *Agricultura de jardines* interest only historians of gardens. When Gregorio de los Ríos defines garden as opposed to orchard and farm, when he distinguishes the purpose of cultivating fruit trees or food crops, which relates to utility and economy, from the pleasure of the senses and the rest that gives the art of growing flowers and fragrant plants, he enlightens the owners about their expectation and the selection of plants that could provide pleasure (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 246). Far from concerning only historians, this definition and its corollaries can avoid many disappointments to those from the sixteenth century to today, who decide to construct a garden. Is it not the ignorance of this distinction, the ignorance of the plants suitable to garden, orchard and farm which lead many current owners, to discouragement and waste against which our gardener aims to strike ?

In general, all readers, gardeners and garden owners, agree on the wisdom or at least the anthropological value of some Gregorio de los Ríos remarks. He encourages owners to hire a gardener rather than hire a day laborer (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245). The first knows the ground and the underground of the garden to the smallest roots of shrubs and bulbs he planted while the second, who is occasionally present, stops at the soil surface and at what he sees. The gardener cultivates the garden ; the day laborer is likely to damage it due to ignorance. In addition, he should not survive economically in the garden where he works, since it is a place among others and is not emotionally attached to the plants that he treats time to time: unscrupulous, he could therefore, according to Gregorio de los Ríos, identify the best plants in the garden and steal them to sell them to the highest bidder (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245).

It is not necessary to focus on the probity of the day laborer to recognize that this extracts of *Agricultura de jardines* describes the difficult or confrontational relationship, the garden owners have with their gardener. It is related to the fact that some have properties while others have sometimes only their work force for any wealth, and is based on the idea, which may be biased, that those who command know nothing about the art of cultivating a garden, while those with the practice must above all obey. Finally, Gregorio de los Ríos suggests a solution to overcome the difficulties owners and gardeners face : they can be gathered and collaborate upon condition that both learn and share the art of « governing » a garden. The owners will give less unfounded orders and will show less of arbitrary authority. If they can also recognize the true value of the suggestions of those who are versed in the practice of garden, they even if they do not have their own property, may not feel subject to property of others, love their office and be proud of the completed work (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245).

However, this text concerns not only historians, owners or gardeners ; its interest is not measured only in the extent of its readership. Gregorio de los Ríos insists on the idea of boundaries when he defines the ornamental garden. The garden, which belongs to someone, is closed to protect as much of the invasion of undesirable plants and animals that of the visit of those who might damage it by ignorance or stupidity (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 246). The garden should be private, protected and prohibited to all of those who are not amateurs. Unintentionally, *Agricultura de jardines* challenges some of our ideas: in this case the ideas of public garden and the opening of private gardens to ordinary visitors. Who we are, us, his readers, do not they cut us to the quick ? Do not they encourage us, even unwittingly, to learn about the art of « cultivating, governing and preserving » plants and gardens ? Anyway, these few lines make problematic the practices that we are customary since the creation of public parks in the nineteenth century and the recent development of tourism linked to gardens. Gregorio de los Ríos wonders for who gardens are developed, and questions the destination of the latter. More generally, he seems to question why gardens are created and the sense that they cover. If this is the case, it is as such that, crucially, his work deserves our attention.

Meanings of gardens

The political meaning of gardens

Our man is appointed by a sovereign concerned with his parks, and then a form of political opportunism reflects in *Agricultura de jardines*. This work is dedicated to Philippe II and the first edition ends on how to capture the nightingales in order to make them inhabiting the garden of their melodious song (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 258⁴). But the dedication is not as conventional as it seems. And we should not be more surprised by a conclusion that apparently not refers to a book devoted to plants and the art of cultivating gardens. Gregorio de los Ríos honours the authentic passion of his monarch for nature and the commitment that he expresses for this type of bird: both characters were known of his courtiers (Amezúa, 1951, p. LXII).

As a child, the heir to the throne expresses a passion for nature and hunting so close to obsession that his teacher, full of anxiety, alarms Charles Quint. The latter ordered things to be in order (Amezúa, 1951, p. XIII-XIV). Since the beginning of his reign, he continues to work at the royal gardens development inherited from his father : he brought from Flanders and France qualified gardeners and bought plants and trees in very large quantity (Amezúa, 1951, p. XVIII, XX, XXI). Some anecdotes are significant of the Philippe II knowledge about plants. Staying in Portugal from 1581 to 1583, he answers to his daughter in their

correspondence that the daffodil she mentioned in her last letter was likely savage : it could not be otherwise, given its date of flowering (Gachard, 1884 ; Amezúa, 1951, p. XLIV-XLV). Other elements of this correspondence testify in favour of the king's attachment to nightingales : he shares to his daughters his nostalgia for Spain, related to the absence of this birdsong (Amezúa, 1951, p. XLVI).

Less defined than the dedication or the conclusion, the choice of Castilian is not without political significance. The unity of Spain, initiated under the Catholic kings, cannot be achieved without administrative centralization and cultural unification, which in turn depend on the uniqueness of a written and spoken language. By adopting the vernacular language used in the gardens of Castile, Gregorio de los Ríos takes part to the political project of Philippe II. *The Agricultura de jardines* is contemporary to the linguistic and grammatical work of Covarrubias : written in Castilian, it takes sides in favour of the first dictionary of «Castilian or Spanish» which intentionally assimilates a regional language - Castilian - with a national language - Spanish - to realize the political project of the sovereign (Covarrubias, 1611 ; González Tascón, Fernández Pérez Tascón, 2001, p. 17). Gregorio de los Ríos pays tribute to his protector. But as these marks of allegiance are based on the real interest that Philippe II feels for gardens and nature, and as our man deliberately chooses Castilian, this gesture cannot be assimilated to deference from an obsequious courtier. He outlines that the garden of the Casa de Campo is political in the sense that it belongs to the king and suggests that, relayed by the *Agricultura de jardines*, in this case - this garden helps the political ambition of the sovereign. We just have to remember that Spain during the Renaissance spread to a large part of Europe and America, and to identify the biggest sponsors of parks, to point out how the political significance of some gardens has never been denied, whatever part of the world is analyzed from the Renaissance to the present.

Ornament as a goal

We would however be wrong to forget that the work of Gregorio de los Ríos is explicitly devoted to ornamental garden. The plants described are chosen for the charm they have on the sight and smell because of their colour, texture of foliage and fragrance they spread. The nightingale is mentioned because his song touches us from the moment it sounds in our ears. Gregorio de los Ríos points out the owners of gardens and suggests that among them some take part to political project but he indicates with his definition of «garden» that, contrary to orchards or vegetable farm, gardens design has for specific purpose the pleasure they provide. In other words, he asserts that the aesthetic significance of garden is vital and original. By giving primacy to the aesthetic significance, would our author neglect the scientific scope that we might be tempted to give to gardens (Baltrusaitis, 1977) ? Gregorio de los Ríos acknowledges the role that botanic gardens play in disseminating knowledge relating to plants; in all likelihood, he knows the botanic garden realized by Simon Tovar in Seville (Amezúa, 1951, p. LI). However, he focuses exclusively on the ornament, and, therefore, he does not write more for botanists than for apothecaries (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 247). He also defends good gardeners against the *traçadores* (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245 v), that is to say, the landscape architects. The layout of flowerbeds and walkways seems to him secondary, the regularity of garden is less for itself than for seduction : the geometry is a means used to achieve the aesthetic purpose of the garden. Moreover, this discipline mobilizes our ability to calculate area of lawns, and measure length and width of aisles... It says absolutely nothing about how to maintain and preserve a garden because it does not rely on the ability to observe flowers, plants and shrubs, which, because it affects the plant health and the beauty of a place, can satisfy aesthetic reasons.

From aesthetics to science

There is thus, in Gregorio de los Ríos, a tendency to consider negligible, what is in the art of gardening, referring to botany, pharmacology, and mathematics. However this inclination is challenged by the empiricist tendency of our author. It is because he thinks that all knowledge comes from experience that he never stops experimenting on his own account and encouraging its reader (Fernández Sanmartín A and E., Valero Sánchez, 2001, p. 63-65). But this experimentation differs from a simple observation (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245). A simple observation only identifies symptoms of disease or signs of a healthy garden. In some ways, it is passive, recording the facts more than explaining it, sees nature as a kind of big book to decipher. Active, experimentation is proposed to provoke nature, and tries to graft shrubs and trees in order to test the beauty of hybrids ; it intends to report the successes and failures. The garden reflects an aesthetic point of view ; it is, in essence, linked to the pursuit of pleasure. But for Gregorio de los Ríos, it represents no less an occasion for sciences since it constitutes a privileged field for experimentation and, ultimately, for explanation of natural phenomena.

There are many examples showing the struggle that led *Agricultura de jardines* against some popular beliefs, even against common opinion. He explains, referring to his own experimentations, that inserting spices in the roots of carnations have no positive influence on the flavour of these flowers (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 249). It does not just report as inevitable the sterility of certain plants ; it does not stop either to the observation of this phenomenon. Here again, he experiments and relates the sterility of plants to the cause that created it : he reveals the existence of male and female plants, that is to say the existence of dioecious species in which pollination is mix (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 260 and 262 ; Fernandez Sanmartín A and E., Valero Sánchez, 2001, p. 71.). In general, the scientific scope of gardens justifies some comments and style : in the *Agricultura de jardines*, our author breaks with the tradition of literature, primarily descriptive and narrative, as he seeks less to describe than identify plants and that his speech does not tell anything about the Casa del Campo garden (Añón Feliú, 2001).

If our gardener does not highly esteem mathematicians, his relationship with botanists and apothecaries is, given few details, of another nature. He does not turn away from them because of the discipline they practice, but because of how they proceed: he wants to experiment, explain and define. He therefore anticipates a time when, to establish a «natural history», they no longer will limit to « collect rumours and echoes of experience ». He then announces the *Novum Organum* of Francis Bacon which will not be published until 1620. Thus, he prefigures the beginnings of the Classical Age (Bacon, 1620, § 98).

Metaphysics

These analyses outline the importance of the Gregorio de los Ríos work. The gardens have however another meaning, a signification that our man considers supreme since it determines the importance of the scientific, aesthetical and political

dimensions. When he reports on experimentations, grafting for example, the gardener does not defy the laws of nature, which would make plants no more related to known species. If he explains how to amend the soil to improve its properties, it rather encourages choosing plants according to the specificity of the soil (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 262). It is the same for watering : he meticulously notes the plant needs in order to select plants according to the regions pluviometry and the climates⁵. Gregorio de los Ríos does not intend to play demiurges : the agriculture that he elevates to art of gardening is less against the nature that it exploits its potential. He does not aspire to dominate plants and soils ; he only wants to «govern» them, to drive them with the best of his knowledge, skills and their own possibilities. This project reminds some contemporary ecological principles as the question of the finitude underlies the design of nature that falls within the *Agricultura de jardines* (Clément, 2001). However, the finitude of nature is also for Gregorio de los Ríos related to the perfection of divine creation. It is because nature is perfect, and constitutes a finished work that bears in itself the resources necessary for its regeneration, that the gardener is not a creator but a modest successor, a facilitator whose task is to maintain and enhance the masterpiece (Clément, 2001, p. 270). In other words, the scientific scope of the garden depends closely, such as the principles defining experimentation and horticultural practices, on the religious significance that Gregorio de los Ríos gives to nature. This also applies to the aesthetic character that motivates the development of gardens. These are created because they speak to senses and bring pleasure. However, their beauty and enjoyment that it provides are, to our gardener, a tribute to the grace which God has adorned the nature. Nature has been created so that we survive but generous, God has also ensured that we enjoyed the lavish colours, shapes, textures, and scents of plants (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245). It is therefore not surprising that the religious significance of the gardens also prevails on the political dimension. When he justifies the writing of his book and explains the importance of garden art, Gregorio de los Ríos gives several examples of sovereigns who, in the twilight of their life, abandoned their political responsibilities, benefits and satisfaction they could withdraw from their positions in order to devote themselves to their garden. In addressing the question of the purpose of human existence, and replying that the power is not enough to carry a life, Gregorio de los Ríos suggests that the use of garden to a political project is not necessary, or at least incidental given the wisdom to which it allow to access: cultivating his garden, it is watering his heavenly garden, also named «soul». And as our gardener has chosen examples of politicians among Christian and pagan, it is not forbidden to understand that this wisdom concerns every man, whatever his religion: therefore, strictly speaking, it is a metaphysical meaning that Gregorio de los Ríos recognizes to garden (Los Ríos, 1592, fol. 245).

A careful reading

The *Agricultura de jardines* requires then, a careful reading. This work, dedicated to all amateurs, tells them not to consider the garden in terms of pleasure only, not to reduce it to its scientific significance, not only retain its political significance, since it highlights the metaphysical significance that, in a supreme way, gardens cover. In addition, it outlines its uniqueness with sufficient clarity that our interest is enhanced on the Casa del Campo garden in which Gregorio de los Ríos has worked and lived. Doesn't it lead us to share the affection of Madrid inhabitants for a garden they have never ceased to attend, despite the vicissitudes it has been through ? It even encourages them to continue the rehabilitation, which began under the aegis of the team that published the facsimile in 1991, and has unfortunately been stopped (Armada *et al.*, 2001, p. 193 sqq.). May this article help to restore the influence that Gregorio de los Ríos should have played in the history of gardens, to attract the attention of public authorities and to gain as many defenders of a rehabilitation of what was and remains a wonderful garden !

Notes

1. Extract from *Cedula real* published in 15th November 1589. The latter can be found in the *Cedulas Reales*, volume VII, folio 196 v. et 197, in Madrid, Archivo del Palacio Real.
2. The translations are literal and designate the snapdragon (*drag*), sunflower (*giganta*) and pea heart (*besico de monja*).
3. The term *maravilla* designates worries and step-to-night.
4. The reproduction of frontispiece of the first edition of the *Agricultura de jardines* can be seen in *A proposito de la Agricultura de jardines de Gregorio de los Rs*, p. 18.
5. All definitions of flowers, shrubs and trees end with advice on watering. The water requirement is a criterion for selecting plants for the owner and the gardener.

Catherine Chomarat-Ruiz

Philosophe, historienne des jardins et des paysages.

Mare de confences l'ole nationale supieure du paysage de Versailles.

Directrice du Larep (Laboratoire de recherche de l'ole du paysage de Versailles), chercheur de l'uipe Proximit, SAD-APT - UMR 1048 (Inra), et chercheur correspondant du Centre AndrChastel - UMR 8150 (universitParis-Sorbonne Paris IV, CNRS, Dapa)

Courriel : c.chomarat@orange.fr

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