Hot and Cold: Nature Versus Human Creation

Dark. Cold. Bitter, with the hint of winter in the cutting wind. This describes the chilling night during which I ventured to Smith College to view the variety of plants from around the world housed in their botanical gardens. What it certainly does not describe is the warming atmosphere provided by the greenhouse heaters and the vibrant plants themselves, which lined the walls and central areas of the multi-roomed complex. The rooms were literally warm and touched with humidity from the exhaling plants, but it was also warming and energizing simply by virtue of the mysterious images of the sublime tropical jungle it conjured for me. The brown and withered beds of dead flowers and grasses outside the atrium, ravaged by the grip of nature beyond the reach of human control, could not compare in aesthetic to the effective teleportation into the wild of the jungle that the inner room contained. Though the outer world is just as cultivated as the inner greenhouse, tended carefully by people over the course of the year, it shows nature’s ephemeral side. Beauty in nature is fleeting. But the greenhouse exemplifies not only the wonders of nature in its different states, but the capacity of humans to control the world around them in unnatural yet not necessarily negative ways.

The first impression made on me by the tropical room in the Smith Botanical Garden was the sheer quantity of the plants. Even before closer inspection, the multitudinous shapes and colors of broad leaves and creeping tendrils suggested a great variety of species. In this respect,

1 Burke, Edmund. *Architectural Thoery* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006.) 277
upon examination of these plants it became interesting to note both similarities and differences in plants coming from either the same or similar habitats. I presumed that they were all from a generally warm, humid climate judging from the temperature of the room, but they were not all from the exact same location. A recurring pattern in the plants was the adaptation to local fauna. A clear example is the Gesneriad family which evolved long, tubular flowers to better suit the beaks of the hummingbirds that come to drink the nectar. Several other plants had large cavities pooled with water that could be inhabited by small amphibians, or flowers with long stamens for the sake of quickly pollinating insects. It was also evident that some plants were self-sufficient in regard to their propagation. Star-shaped pods of seeds waiting to scatter in the wind or cascading vines of bushy moss made clear the way the plants intended to continue their survival. This was a natural course of action, and would continue regardless of the people affecting the environment.

The vibrancy of life was such a sharp contrast from the frosty death that befell the outdoor plants; the same fate which the heaters, lights, and solid walls spared the jungle plants. In reflection it shows how dedicated and persevering the Smith botanists are to safeguard the plants every hour of the day. These are living beings, and when taken from their natural environment they are more susceptible than any to the outside world. However, this also brings to light the eternal stigma of human interference with the natural world\textsuperscript{2}. The reason the plants must be guarded so diligently is that if they were left on their own, they would die. That is only because they have been uprooted (figuratively and perhaps literally) and taken somewhere that they should never have been. The sturdy trees and shrubs in the college’s campus are the ones built to take a long cold winter, not the giant tropical magenta-leafed fronds, forested Bromeliadaceae pineapples, or tall reaching desert cacti. Although this display is beautiful and

educational, it is all artificial. It is like a zoo of plants. Even though issues of ethical treatment of vegetables are not set to cause uproars, the implications to the plants’ wellbeing as they live in this artificial environment are the same as those of animals of the plants’ regions. Tropical apes or desert lizards may live, but they will not thrive in artificial habitats. In the same way, the dedicated care of the botanists at Smith College cannot stave off the undeniable fact that these plants are all slowly dying. When they are gone their loss will be unnoticed, because new plants will replace them. In this way, the beauty of “nature” remains unblemished by reality.

For all the human intervention and arguable desecration of nature, it cannot be denied that the Smith Botanical Gardens accomplish what they seek to. The dual purposes of the garden, to awe and to educate, are fully achieved. The former goal, to astound the guest with the wonders of the natural world, is accomplished by invoking aspects of the sublime. The staggering number of plants, the variety of colors and shapes, the sensory overload of smells and feelings, and the wonders of the strange and unknown all contribute to this invocation. Because this greenhouse is a human creation, the jungle it presents can be as idealized and romanticized as suits the needs of the creators. A jungle with the exact species and arrangement of plants found in the garden would not exist in nature, but they can coexist together under the control of the caretakers. In this way, the ideal emotions of wonder of nature are elicited from the casual observer, and the mystique of nature is appreciated. The other purpose of the greenhouse is to educate. This is accomplished using the individual components of the greenhouse as opposed to its entirety. Comparing a few species at a time may prove fruitful, but on the whole the plants are best observed as unique specimens. The greenhouse provides the rare opportunity just to just witness these plants and provides an experience that otherwise the casual observer would be

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³Burke, Edmund. 277-281
unable to take part in. In this respect, it brings the joys of adventure, exploration and discovery to those who may not spend their entire lives devoted to that cause. In addition the small plaques beside many plants contain pertinent botanical information that edifies the onlooker and leaves them with a sense of accomplishment that they have learned about the previously unknown.

The Smith Botanical Garden exists. This is perhaps one of very few definitive statements that can be made about these greenhouses because so much of the purpose is in subtle observation and personal interpretation. To label it strongly for any one cause would be doing it a disservice and limiting the options of any future visitors. An artist might appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the jungle, while a scientist might inspect with curiosity an unfamiliar species. There is a spectrum between these two viewpoints, including a neutrality of either holding both opinions or neither. These two points of view are by no means mutually exclusive, and the garden’s aesthetic and scientific virtues can be appreciated by all. This interpretation can be varied further with another axis. But there is yet another interpretation, the rift falling between perceiving the garden as a beautiful construction and a human means of maximizing the wonders of nature, or viewing it as unnatural to the fullest extent and holding disdain for the fanciful idealization of an artificial jungle. These impressions are unique to each observer in the gardens, and the final distinction is theirs alone to make. The distinction between art and science, the natural and unnatural, is never conclusive. Not for these gardens, not for biological illustration, not even for the agricultural lifestyle of an entire civilization. There is always an argument for, and always an argument against. It is up to the individual to decide what they make of the whole.

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4 Stepan, Nancy Leys. 32

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First Paragraph
Intrigued: I am pulled in by the dramatic adjectives because I felt very similarly when visiting.
Settled: You pull in a thesis about how the greenhouse can be aesthetically rich year-round due to positive human control.

Second Paragraph
Worried: To put it bluntly, your statement that the garden "exists" and that this is only what you can say about it because you can’t impose an opinion on visitors seems hard to argue when this is
an analytical paper.
Limited: I feel limited by the vagueness of the final sentences. You draw a clear distinction between science and art and make it seem as though the two cannot merge, and maintain a neutral standpoint.

In the beginning, I was very interested as to what you would focus on about the greenhouse's flexible environments and its superiority over the drab outside in conveying science, and what this says about Smith College. I feel like you could effectively pull this along as long as you uphold the greenhouse as sort of the pinnacle of Smith's dedication to the study of plants - after all, the entire campus is a botanical garden, and if your impression of the outdoors was that negative, it seems as though their extensive outdoor support of botany has failed. Within such a compelling impression of the jungle-like indoors, I hope you draw upon how Humboldt (within Stepan's article) discovered the intellectual side of the tropics, and address the history and controversies around the word "jungle" as in Stott. I wonder if you cannot carry this thesis through to the end, because to end by saying that everyone has their own opinion, and saying there are two separate sides - "there is always an argument for, and always an argument against" - but not saying what these sides are, makes it seem as though your strong opinion in the beginning doesn't matter. Hopefully you can reconcile the two paragraphs and end with somewhat more direction, because you write so elegantly and I am very curious as to what you have to say about the greenhouse!

Zuzu:

I'm confused, did you put two positive feelings for the first paragraph and two negatives for the second?

I'm glad you found the hook compelling, and I thought it might work well for people who had visited the botanical gardens. On the other hand, I worry that it might be too specific to our group. I'm also glad that it seems you find the introduction solid and that it says what it should.

I agree completely with what you say about the ending. Honestly, I was having a really hard time in my own mind to decide how I felt about the garden, so the uncoordinated hodge-podge of "some people could think this, others could think that" was kind of myself coming to terms with disagreeing with myself. I was trying to say that there's an inclusive spectrum between viewing it as art and viewing as science, and a rather more exclusive spectrum between seeing it as natural or unnatural, but it didn't really come out well in words.

I'm glad that you think the introduction carries a strong thesis, and hopefully I'll be able to take your advice and carry it through the whole paper, keeping my goal of being flexible while still making my own arguments firm. You also raise a good point, that I don't really refer to the outside in and of itself, just as an alternative to the inside if not for the human intervention. I should address its qualities as a garden as well.

Michael:
Zu Zu, SO SORRY about being late about this, i wasn't in amherst this weekend and it totally slipped my mind.

First Paragraph:
Positive- Intrigued. You have a great "story-telly" way of putting your papers that draws me in quickly from the first few words and keeps me interested till the last. Somehow you manage to put a topic as boring as botanical gardens into an adventure that I can relate to.

Negative- Unsure. This negative emotion here is only slight and I'm a bit "unsure" about it myself. Its just because your thesis is interested, iF its what I think it is: the last sentence of you intro? I feel like thats the argument you're going to make/describe but Im not positive, ya know?

Final Paragraph:
Positive- BAM. I like it! You conclude that there is no conclusion, what a twist! Didn't see that coming, I wish i could read it all cause I'm interested to find out how you back this up. Nice wrap up.

Negative- OH? I really didn't see it coming. I didn't get much of a hint that THIS was what you wanted to say from the intro, maybe you can try to sneak that in.

One thing I hope you do is provide some of your interpretations, like your own personal opinions that you decided upon, because it interests me. One pitfall I hope you avoid is to not use any written sources to back up your argument, but I'm sure you got around to some authors.

Zuzu:
Don't worry about it. I had a lot of stuff today, and unanticipated problems popped up, so I never got to editing my paper anyway. Thanks for your comments, and I'm sure I'll be able to use them well in my rewrite!