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– *Peace is nothing.*  
– *Peace, my dear Peter, is everything.*  
– *But, sir, it's nothing more than the absence of war.*

H. G. Wells: *Joan and Peter*.

## The danger of perfection <sup>1</sup>

KNUT FÆGRI

Like Well's definition of peace, perfection can only be defined negatively, by the absence of imperfections. And what can you do with a state like that? With great gusto and inspiration Dante depicts Hell and its most imperfect inmates, but the moment he is about to describe the perfect Paradise, his inspiration fails, and with due respect for the great bard let us agree that his narrative falls rather flat.

We are all striving for perfection, and, on the whole, we may do so safely, because we'll never reach it. Very few of us shall reach the North Pole, but if we do, there is only one way to go further: southwards, unless we ascend into thin air.

Botanical gardens are public museums, and their philosophy in presenting themselves to the general public has no reason to differ, and should not differ from that of any museum. Different techniques, yes, but the same basic philosophy because both subject, our public, and object, instruction *cum* enjoyment, are the same.

Now, museums generally suffer from the ideal of trying to attain perfection. In our taxonomic collections we try to give the public everything, from the amoeba to the Heidelberg man, from the flagellate to the orchid, and if we take up economic botany, we try to bring together all possible plant products, from cloves to cotton, from *a* to *z*.

At the same level of information on the part of the listener, and of sophistication on the part of the lecture, would a lecturer ever have tried the same? Definitely not; he would know well that his audience could not assimilate it all, he would aim his projector at a small island, leaving it—hopefully—illuminated in a sea of dark ignorance.

Why do we try to do exactly the opposite in the museum/garden? Our exhibits are permanent where the spoken word is fugitive, but nevertheless, towards our public we are more in the position of the lecturer than in that of the author of a book, nay an encyclopedia, with whom we have too often identified ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution, which is submitted at the kind invitation of Professor Miège, summarises some of the author's statements in the discussions during the Geneva meeting.

Let us suppose we want to make a collection of roses, and by luck, skill, perseverance, and funds, we manage to collect all existing cultivars of roses. What then? From that moment on the collection can only go one way: Downwards (apart from the efforts of the breeders constantly creating new cultivars and thus making our collection imperfect again). The attainment of perfection marks the end. From there on: degeneration.

The perfect state is static. Only death is static. Life is dynamic, and unless there is some dynamism, some dynamic thinking in our exhibit, we shall fail to communicate with the public's feeling of life, life as the public understands it.

One may perhaps retort that this is sophisticated theory, but in actual practice there are very few possibilities for transferring these principles into reality. There are difficulties of funds, staff, and area. Well, these difficulties are always there, and it is our duty as public trustees to find the way out of them as well as we can. But there are also the difficulties caused by the inherent permanence of our garden installations. We cannot dig out our big trees because they were here last year; we cannot replace the paths simply because our visitors walked them last year. All these inherently permanent features constitute the background of our gardens, but in between there is scope for ample variations.

The features of a human face are permanent, but a face that never changes would be a nightmare, were it ever so perfect. Only the changes, and let us admit it, the small imperfections, make the human face truly human. The lesson to be learnt from this is to realize that we should not work too hard to attain perfection. The good—perfection—may become the proverbial enemy of the best—life—if we through great exertion and expenses achieve a result that is so perfect that we dare not demolish it ourselves, but in deference let it remain there, gradually decaying if not in anything else, at any rate in public interest and esteem.

Thank God we have the children! Without them our museums had been doomed long ago. But new generations of children will be just as enchanted with the stuffed lion and ostrich as were their parents, and neither of them notice how dusty and moth-eaten they in reality are. But we have—at any rate we ought to have—higher aims than to entertain children. Not that this isn't in itself an admirable and essential aim, but even so the parents should be attracted to our collections and our gardens for their own sake, too, not only to bring their children there and themselves enjoy a walk like they could enjoy in any public park of the same size.

How can we achieve this dynamism that is, according to my view, so essential? Obviously, every garden must solve the problems on the basis of local tradition, facilities, and interests. Like Dr. Fletcher in the discussion at the jubilee meeting I think most garden directors hate to be told what to do in their own garden, and what I am here putting forth, is by way of examples only, not recipes.

To be more objective, I shall take my first example from the museum—presuming that there is a permanent public museum. Why not take away lots of the traditional stuff and make an all out exhibit on, say cotton. Cotton from the seed to the mill. Use a manikin in a cotton dress as well as maps of distribution of cotton and cotton cultivation. Don't worry that other large sections are temporarily neglected. In half a year, perhaps even shorter (depending not least on staff) we shall make that other exhibit of marine alga and the world's fisheries or perhaps of the reproduction of angiosperms. And why not have a kind of guessing panel where the kids by pressing buttons may test their ability to recognize trees, or cereals, or whatever it may be. All this does take money, but more than money it takes

initiative and the will and ability to feel what the general public wants on visiting museums. Unfortunately the initiative of most directors is drained in the daily fights we all know too well.

My second example is based upon something I saw in the Geneva garden, and I stress that this is absolutely no criticism. The exhibits in question maintains a high standard, and I understand that there are also special reasons for its maintenance in the present form. So my remarks are more a paraphrase on a given theme, viz. the beds of plants used for medicine. There are various beds of plants used against ailments of the throat, against ailments of the digestive system, of the blood, and what-not. I assume that these are more or less permanent: the public will find the same plants as means against the same ailments in the same place each year. Why if we cut out all the beds but one, and then change this each year: one year plants against ailments of the throat, next year the digestion, etc. Many of the plants would be the same, anyhow. Would that not be the smile which changed the face of the garden from that of a statue to that of a living person? And I don't think this little innovation would cost more in labour than we would gain in dynamism in this part of the garden. But again, I point out that this is not my intention to tell my Genevese colleagues to do it this way. Their garden just happened to function as an inspiration—in this respect as in many others.

In his lecture (this volume p. 66) professor Chodat decried the obsession for names prevalent in all museums, "information soon forgotten and almost without any value" (quotation from memory). This objection is both valid and invalid. It is invalid because the name is the key to all other information existant about that plant. And for those who know the door, a key is valuable. But for those who don't know where the door is, nor how to find it, the name-key is just as useless as any other loose key picked up in the street. For those to whom we want to bring home this existant information, the sense of wonder, the name in itself is usually a rather insignificant piece of information<sup>1</sup> and might as well have been omitted—but properly treated I don't think it does any damage. Properly treated in this case means that we have to realize the lack of intrinsic information to the general public.

And this brings us to another aspect of the problem: we have a message, we have arranged our objects to communicate the message, but do they bring this communication? Let's admit that mostly they do not. Our public does not understand the language spoken by our objects, and we must translate for them. In indoor museums this problem has been discussed and solved, sometimes very successfully, for a long time. Still we are very far from having a standard, or a set of standards, or almost any solution to this problem as concerns the outdoor exhibits, the garden. We know that various gardens have tried various solutions, both with the written and the spoken word, but at any rate I know of no authoritative treatment of the subject. Would it not be a worthy task for the International Association of Botanical Gardens to establish a small working group charged with the study of this problem and—hopefully—coming up with some solution that can be standardized and consequently cheaped and more effective than the various home-knitted gadgets in use today?

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<sup>1</sup> Not always: think of names like *Linnaea* or *Quercus robur*.

It is perfectly legitimate to decide that this garden is a purely scientific establishment, it is an instrument like any atom smasher or electron microscope, and its management has to follow the rules laid down by the scientific enquiries it shall serve. Such gardens have not been my considerations here. Most others have, not only by statutes, but also by a feeling of social obligation, a role to play towards the public that pays for our expenses, the community of which we are ourselves a part. It is on the surface of interaction between the two parts: the public and the scientist that the problem arise. But a surface of interaction is also one of action.

We should not underestimate the kid's joy of seeing that old, moth-eaten ostrich (in spite of safari films and other modern gadgets), or of seeing that bananas really come off a living plant and not out of a cardboard box—however dreary and unscientific that old greenhouse may have been. It is a wonderful experience to see that joy, and we shall be very glad that we can give this to society; but, honestly, we should also aim higher up. However, this is not the same as to believe that perfection is attainable, nor even that it should be striven for. Not only because perfection is expensive, but even more so because it is entropic death.

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