
Abraham Cowley’s *Poemata Latina*, published posthumously in 1668 after the author’s death in 1667, has no modern translation, and has attracted very little scholarship. Despite its title, the volume is taken up almost entirely by a single important poem (or rather sequence of poems), the *Plantarum Libri Sex*, or *Six Books of Plants*. Other works included at the end of the volume, under *Miscellanea*, include a Latin version of the first book of Cowley’s unfinished Biblical epic, the *Davideis*, and a short series of Latin hymns and odes. Cowley’s *Davideis* has received some recent scholarly attention, in part for its adaption of passages from his *Civil War*. 1 In this essay, however, I will focus upon the neglected *Plantarum*. 2

The lack of interest in this work is especially surprising given its scale — the *Plantarum* runs to 362 pages in the 1668 edition — and the variety of material it contains. It includes, for instance, a highly politised retelling of the civil war and the regicide (in Book VI) and a prophecy that a post-colonisation America will rise as a new Rome (at the close of Book V), not to mention several complex and extended imitations of classical set-pieces (for instance of the ‘happy man’ topos at the opening of Book IV), and even an entire book devoted solely to the personified representation of herbs useful to women in childbirth, with mythologised accounts of their particular qualities and uses (Book II). Nor is the interest of the *Plantarum* limited to cultural, political, medical, or intellectual history. Cowley’s Latin verse is always good, often funny, and sometimes very beautiful. Moreover, the size of the work, and the variety of forms it contains, make it a show-piece of Latin verse forms, and, by implication, a powerfully optimistic — and characteristically seventeenth-century — claim to the possible unification in literary form of classical heritage and emergent scientific knowledge. A second edition of the *Poemata Latina* in 1678 (Wing C6681) and a complete translation produced in 1689 (Wing C6665) testify to the contemporary perception of its significance and interest. The almost total neglect of this work in modern scholarship is significantly detrimental to our understanding not only of Cowley, but also of the cultural, political, and aesthetic climate of his age.

Print history and translation

Although the *Plantarum* appeared in complete form only in the 1668 *Poemata Latina*, the first two books had already been published as *A. Couleii Plantarum Libri Duo* (London: J. Flesher, 1662; Wing C6678). As well as the substantial expansion from two books to six, the 1668 volume also sees a change of format, perhaps attributable to Thomas Sprat, who oversaw its publication: the extensive notes are presented at the base of the page rather than as end-notes after each poem. This distinctive format, which increases the resemblance to an edition of the Latin or Greek classics, was reproduced in the second edition of 1678 (Wing C6681).

Like the classical texts it resembles, the *Plantarum* attracted contemporary translators. Aside from short extracts translated by Cowley himself for inclusion in various essays (the beginning of Book IV appears in English in his essay on ‘Agriculture’, for instance), two important English versions of the poem were published in the latter part of the seventeenth century. The
first of these was a version of Book VI published in 1680: *A translation of the sixth book of Mr. Cowley’s Plantarum being a poem upon the late rebellion, the happy restoration of His Sacred Majesty, and the Dutch war ensuing* (London: Printed for Samuel Walsall, 1680; Wing C6692). Despite its title, this ‘translation’ actually bears little relation to Cowley’s text, and more closely resembles a grand political ode (it is arranged in four-line stanzas). Its existence, however, testifies to the interest in Cowley’s work, and in the sixth book in particular.

In 1689, a complete translation of all six books (though not of the notes, which are excluded) appeared as *The third part of the works of Mr. Abraham Cowley being his Six books of plants never before printed in English, viz. the first and second of herbs, the third and fourth of flowers, the fifth and sixth of trees now made English by several hands; with a necessary index* (London: printed for Charles Harper, 1689; Wing C6665). The ‘several hands’ involved in the translation include those of Nahum Tate (Books IV and V, as well as prefatory material), and, interestingly, Aphra Behn, who was responsible for Book VI. The translations vary in their quality and interest, but the removal of the footnotes concerned with scientific, historical, mythological, and literary references, combined with the natural expansion of the hexameters into English rhyming couplets, emphasises the poetic features of the work (the variety of lyric, narrative and epic register) and its political content at the expense of its medicinal and scientific seriousness.

**Structure**

The structure of the *Plantarum Libri Sex* is rather complex: the first two books are concerned with herbs, the second pair with flowers, and the final couple to trees. This much is clear from the title page of the work, which uses brackets to distinguish the three sections; and in this aspect the poem and its presentation resembles both a reference work and many instances of didactic poetry. But the internal divisions are more complicated than this would suggest — they extend to form, genre, tone, and allusive register, as well as topic. Books I and II, the section on herbs, are in elegiac couplets (a hexameter followed by a pentameter, a metre familiar in Latin from Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus, as well as very many later Latin and neo-Latin authors). Each herb under consideration has its ‘own’ poem (several have more than one), and they regularly speak *in propria persona*: in this way their distinctive features and medicinal properties emerge from their character and actions.

While Book I is a true miscellany, only very loosely structured as a dialogue with the poet, Book II, though still devoted to herbs, is unified by dramatic narrative, a pattern maintained in the four books that follow. In this instance, the framing device is that of an assembly of plants used in childbirth (and associated matters, such as the regulation of the menstrual cycle, or in aiding conception). The assembly, led by Artemisia (Mugwort) is taking place by night in the botanical garden of Oxford, and the plants’ private discussion is interrupted when the keeper of the garden, Robert, comes looking for cyclamen to help his wife in labour. I will return to some further discussion of this remarkable section below.

The remaining books have similarly curious framing devices: in Books III and IV, set quite specifically in May 1660, Flora holds a feast on the banks of the Thames to celebrate the Restoration, and as part of the celebrations organises a contest between the flowers, thus allowing each plant to speak of her own history and attributes. That contest continues in Book IV, at the end of which Flora refuses to elect a single pair as king and queen, but instead organises a republican administration with changing officers, beginning with Lily and Rose as the first pair of consuls. The comedy — and political interest — of this scenario is obvious; but once again the poems are deeply influenced by classical models, and Cowley uses these books to display his mastery of lyric metres, indebted to Horace and Catullus.

Book V — now in the grander hexameters — also stages a kind of contest. Here the goddess Pomona presides over an assembly of fruit trees, drawn from both the Old World and the New, during which a quarrel erupts between Bacchus (naturally representing the trees of Europe and their deities) and Omelochile, the Mexican wine-god. Omelochile hurls a coconut — the most valued of the fruits of the new world — at Bacchus, and the rest of the divinities are quickly drawn in to a full-scale brawl (perhaps modelled on that between the Lapiths and Centaurs in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book XII). Apollo settles the dispute with a song on the heroism of Columbus and the future glory of America, destined, according to
Apollo, to rise as a new Rome while Europe collapses into greed and corruption. This final scene stresses Apollo’s role as healer of ills (‘medicusque malorum’, p. 309) and as prophetic poet, with a special focus upon the pacifying power of music and song (‘vis divina melorum!’, ‘Oh the divine power of song!’, p. 307), perhaps in particular imitation of Pindar’s Pythian 1.

Book VI opens with a self-conscious motif of generic escalation, indebted to Virgil:

> Come now, Muse, abandon the pleasures of bright gardens,
> Now the task that awaits you is this: to attempt instead the dark paths, rough with brambles
> (Where even Phoebus himself, who was once your guide, is shut out),
> Amid the groves, and the trackless ways of the woods.

*(Poemata Latina, 1668, p. 313)*

Although inspired by Apollo, it is the poet himself, not the god, who now speaks as a ‘vates’, a poetic prophet: ‘Phoebus has told me secrets, / And now I preach to the whole world as the prophet Of the Plants [Plantarum, a reference to the title of the work]’ *(Poemata Latina, 1668, p. 314).*

The poet describes the ruin of the English woodland during the civil war, and how in response to the crisis the Dryad of the Oak summons a council of English trees in the Forest of Dean. Each are sketched briefly as they arrive, forming a kind of epic catalogue, but the majority of this book is given over to the Dryad’s speech, in which she relates the events of the civil war and its aftermath. She focuses, predictably, upon Charles hidden in the Royal Oak at Boscobel House after the royalist defeat at Worcester in 1651. As she begins to speak, Cowley’s dense array of footnotes drops away, just as it does during Apollo’s speech at the close of Book V.

**Genre**

In his preface to the 1689 complete translation of the *Plantarum*, Nahum Tate describes the structure of the work in a manner designed to draw attention to its range of literary register and (latterly) its political content:

> The two first Books treat of Herbs, in a Style resembling the Elegies of Ovid and Tibullus, in the sweetness and freedom of the Verse; but excelling them in the strength of the Fancy, and vigour of the Sence. The third and fourth discourse of Flowers in all the variety of Catullus and Horace’s Numbers; for the last of which Authors he had a peculiar Reverence, and imitated him, not only in the stately and numerous pace of his Odes and Epodes, but in the familiar easiness of his Epistles and Speeches. The two last speak of Trees, in the way of Virgil’s Georgicks: Of these the sixth Book is wholly Dedicated to the Honor of his Country. For making the British Oak to preside in the Assembly of the Forest Trees, upon that occasion he enlarges on the History of our late Troubles, the King’s Affliction and Return, and the beginning of the Dutch Wars; and manages all in a Style, that (to say all in a word) is equal to the Valor and Greatness of the English Nation. *(The Third Part of the Works (1689); Wing C6665, a2r–a2v)*

Both Cowley’s choice of metres, and Tate’s description of their allusive register, suggest a staged generic elevation in the course of the six books: from elegiac, via lyric, and finally to Virgilian hexameter. Tate names only Virgil’s *Georgics*, traditionally the middle stage in a poetic career from pastoral to epic; but it is clear that the content of the Dryad’s speech in Book VI, combined with the dropping away of scholarly apparatus, bring this book closely in line not with didactic but with epic. This striking sense of completeness — the whole poetic career encompassed in a single extensive work — is a feature of the *Plantarum* in many other respects, and one of the reasons for its particular interest.

But this sense of completeness — and in particular of the totalising explanatory power of the natural world — also operates within the work to exert pressure upon the tidy generic distinctions between books. The close of Book II is an example of this kind of ‘generic pressure’. The book ends comically, as we have said, with the gardener’s sudden disruption of the secret assembly; but the timing of this interruption is significant. At the moment of his arrival, he interrupts Myrrh — like the others, a ‘female’ herb, included here for her use in treating women, and linked by literature and myth to the suffering of a female protagonist — in a long and technical account of the origin and conception not only of children (as might seem fitting), but of life and indeed of the elements themselves:

> [Myrrh is addressing Artemisia (Mugwort), the presiding herb]
> Yet you I must obey; Heav’n is so kind
> To let us seek that truth we cannot find.
> This truth must be ’tth’ wells dark bottom sought,
> Pardon me, if I make an heavy draught.
> You see the wondrous Wars and Leagues of Things [*bella et foedera rerum*],
> From whence the worlds harmonious consort springs.
> This he that thinks from th’ Elements may be had
> Is a grave Sot, and studiously mad.
Here many causes [Causarum hic variis] branch [Rami] themselves around,
But to 'em all one onely Root [Radix] is found.
For those, which mortals the four Elements call,
In the worlds fabric are not first [Semina primita] of all.
Treasures in them [Thesaurus Elementorum] wise Nature laid, as store,
Ready at hand, of things that were before.
Whence she might Principles [Principia] draw for her use,
And mixtures new eternally produce.
Infinite seeds [Infinita Elementa] in those small bodies lie
To us, but numbred by the Deity [Infinita Homini, sed numerata Deo]

(This is the contemporary translation of the passage as it appears in The Third Part of the Works (1689), p. 58, H1v; I have placed the most significant Latin words in parentheses.)

Book II is concerned with female plants speaking of female matters in a metre itself associated with female characters (for instance the beloved mistresses of Roman love elegy, or the protagonists of Ovid’s Heroides). But at this point in the poem the practical medicinal applications of the herbs is raised to a recognisably medical and – in particular – Lucretian register: key elements of the Latin vocabulary in these lines (‘causa’, ‘semina’, ‘principia’, ‘elementa’) are all drawn from Lucretius, where they are technical terms of atomic theory. It is not the poet, nor the poet’s learned commentary, but the plant herself who makes the connection here between the principles of childbirth and the principles of all existence.

This is a striking testing of generic limits, but I don’t want to overstate the solemnity of the moment. There is also both humour and provocation in a scene of this kind: that these exclusively female plants, who relate or allude to the stories of their names in Ovid, and who are described, and describe themselves, in terms of their uses for exclusively female problems, should be expounding such abstract themes; that they do so in metaphors themselves wittily related to their plantliness (Myrrh speaks of the ‘Root’ and ‘Branches’ of causes); and then that they are comically interrupted. There is a humorous literalising here of Cowley’s belief in the scientific future: that if we observe the natural world closely and carefully enough — if, as it were, we eavesdrop upon it – there is much that we can learn to our advantage.

**Scientific seriousness**
The *Plantarum* is, then, markedly ambitious in the scale and range of its poetry, the generic escalation from Books I–VI, and in the surprising ‘testing’ of those generic boundaries and expectations by the protagonists, the plants, themselves. These are, broadly, aspects of literary ambition, but it is essential to appreciate also the scientific seriousness of the project. This is the first major poetic work on botany in England, and in fact one of the earliest major didactic poems to be produced in Britain, although works of this kind had been fashionable for some time on the continent. The research involved in the project is meticulous: in preparing the sections on America, for instance, Cowley consulted several recent reference works, including de Laet’s *Novus orbis* of 1633.

Among the botanists, his references are most frequently keyed to Pliny and Fernelius, and he explains that choice of authorities in his preface:

Moreover I have been satisfied with two [authorities] (which is a reasonable number), and I have chosen in particular Pliny and Fernelius, because the first is an Author of indubitable Latinity, and the second is, among our recent authors, the best at understanding and as a result not a bad Master of language too. (*Poemata Latina*, 1668, b3v)

The footnotes in which these references are contained are often highly detailed, distinguishing between several sub-types of the plant in question, and enumerating the various uses to which it can be put (though clearly we are expected to refer to the source texts themselves for detailed instructions). A single example will suffice, in this instance three successive notes keyed to the opening lines of the poem on Aristolochia (‘Birthwort’) in Book II. As usual, the plant in question speaks *in propria persona*:

1. Pour forth, my flowers, my green berries, and my seeds —
   It is not fitting for the Womb to have a sterile Patroness.
   But on the contrary my greatest virtue is deeply buried,
   And my root is my greatest source of power, my finest fruit.
2. Cautious Nature has marked this root with the sign of the Womb,
   And she has refused to disguise its particular properties.
   This is why I am called Apple of the Earth [Terrae Malum]; not even the brilliant Garden of the Hesperides holds so noble a fruit.
3. This fruit, beautiful Atalanta, would more properly have delayed you
   As you stopped to pick it up (now you are married you will admit it!).
and in fact this is the first book in which Cowley is not primarily interested in the medicinal properties of the plants he
subject, the difficulty of his task — even his guide Phoebus cannot follow him here — and the pain and sorrow of the civil
war, the narrative of which is the main subject of the book. Apollo, the god of healing, cannot penetrate this forest book:
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excellence and prophetic power; the laurel as a plant known to resist burning; and the dramatised speech Laurel herself
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of Virgil, the Restoration and the ‘royal doctor’
The profound optimism of the Plantarum is also deeply political: this is the optimism of a Royalist writing in hope of, and
then response to, the longed-for Restoration. This political content is most evident in the final book, which we are invited
by position, register, and generic framing to read as climactic, and the generic escalation of Book VI is marked by a web
of Virgilian allusion. The book begins with a reference to the proem of Georgics, Book III. Compare Georgics III, 8–9:
‘tentanda via est, qua me quoque possim / tollere humo victorque; virum volitare per ora’ (‘I must attempt a path by
which I too can lift myself heavenward and, as victor, fly on human lips’) with line four of Cowley’s sixth book: ‘Per saltus
tenta via, & nemorum invia, restat’ (‘the task remains [to find your way] amid the groves, and the trackless ways of
the woods’).

Latinity in these poems brings all the emotional, artistic, and political resonance of classical literature into a stimulating
unity with emergent knowledge — of the New World and the new science. There is no contradiction, for Cowley, between
the mythological figure of the laurel in the form of Daphne; the laurel tree or crown as an ancient emblem for poetic
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Virgil, the Restoration and the ‘royal doctor’
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tenta via, & nemorum invia, restat’ (‘the task remains [to find your way] amid the groves, and the trackless ways of
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At the opening of Georgics III, Virgil resolves to set aside tired Greek mythological themes and promises to explore new
(literary and political) terrain. In Cowley’s poem, the modulation of ‘tentanda via’ to ‘nemorum invia’ evokes Virgil’s
declaration of originality, and adds to it — Virgil’s ‘via’ (‘paths’) become the ‘via […] invia’ (‘pathless ways’) of Cowley’s
woods. As the poet moves from the nut and fruit trees of Book V to the grander woodland trees and dense undergrowth
of the forest, he is hampered by the darkness and density of the thorns and bushes: ‘obscura […] aspera dumis’, ‘[paths]
dark and rough with thorns’ (Book VI, line 2). This sense of hampering and obstruction evokes both the novelty of his
subject, the difficulty of his task — even his guide Phoebus cannot follow him here — and the pain and sorrow of the civil
war, the narrative of which is the main subject of the book. Apollo, the god of healing, cannot penetrate this forest book:
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1. In English: Birth-wort. Aristolochia is useful in several ways. For it induces both menstrual periods and the
delivery of the afterbirth, and when mixed with myrrh and pepper, either as a drink or applied directly, it expels
unborn children who have died in the womb; it also prevents prolapse of the womb, as a warm poultice, or by using
the fumes, or by direct application, especially the slender variety, Plin. Book 26.15. Our authorities call it ‘Earth
Apple’ and record four sub-types — all of them are the colour of boxwood, with slender stems, and a purple flower;
they bear small berries like that of the caper. Only the root is powerful — the scent of each type is medicinal, but
more effective in the type with the oblong and more slender root: the chief glory of the oblong variety is this: that if
it is applied to the womb mixed with raw beef immediately after conception, it ensures male offspring, so it is said;
Plin. Book 25.8. That last point is more appropriate to this poem than a work of Philosophy; this is certainly the more
fitting context for it. Fernelius sees fit to add that both types of Aristolochia help to expel menstrual blood, the
afterbirth and the foetus when prepared with myrrh and pepper; the same plant is best when applied from below,
and it purges filth from the womb.

2. Crollius, who is much experienced in the distinctive features of plants, has observed this resemblance between the
shape of the Uterus and that of the root of the round Aristolochia — and I think he was the first to do so. What power
these marks have in fact I do not know; but they are certainly poetic.

3. A well-known story: see Metam. 10.
(Poemata Latina, 1668, p. 107 [translation mine]. These notes are not included in the complete English translation of
1689.)

Even this brief example testifies to the curious blend of (carefully referenced) scientific, medical, literary, and
mythological material. The combination of notes and poetry is a powerful one: the vivid (often humorous)
characterisation of different plants, and the accomplished and allusive style and tone of the Latin verse (in this book most
often reminiscent of Ovid) is an achievement in itself. But combined with the detailed notes, the reader is encouraged to
see not just this dextrous appropriation of the classical literary tradition, but that tradition itself (even for instance Ovid’s
version of the story of Atalanta) as continuous with, or even — it now appears — predictive of the new science. And
Cowley’s Latin verse itself, like the classical tradition more broadly, proves remarkably adaptive and absorbent of this
new material: consider for instance his extraordinary ‘Mexican’ hexameter at V.1010:

[... brutum rudit ille [Omelochile],
Oi Camacalli, camatli, natastlits, Intelolocti,
Vociferans patrio sermone;
[...] He [Omelochile, enraged at Bacchus’s attack] roared incomprehensibly,
Oi Camacalli, camatli, natastlits, Intelolocti,
Crying aloud in his native language;
(Poemata Latina (1668), p. 305)

Latinity in these poems brings all the emotional, artistic, and political resonance of classical literature into a stimulating
unity with emergent knowledge — of the New World and the new science. There is no contradiction, for Cowley, between
the mythological figure of the laurel in the form of Daphne; the laurel tree or crown as an ancient emblem for poetic
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makes in Book II, in which she accounts for the mystery of female menstruation. These various types of knowledge are
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describes. That concern with healing is transferred instead to a pervasive metaphor: it is not the healing of individuals with which this book is concerned, but the healing of the nation.

Whereas at the beginning of *Georgics* III, Virgil promises to build a temple on the banks of the Mincius in honour of Augustus, Cowley in these lines sets up an oak tree for King Charles:

[the poet addresses King Charles]
Be near me now as the guardian spirit of a branched song,
Be close to me, and, if you will, inhabit your oak here:
The long-lived oak I set up for you.
(20–22)

Not only does Cowley’s poem align Charles with Virgil’s Caesar, but the role of the poet in both passages is similarly exalted: it is the poet himself who has set up this tree as a monument and place of safety.

Described in this way, however, there seems to be a rather stark transition between the scientific and pharmacological concerns of the first five books, and the political material of the last one. In fact, the idyllic Golden Age which, according to Cowley, was disrupted by the Civil War and reinstated by the Restoration, has a marked medicinal feel. He describes the years before the Civil War as follows:

Justice and Faith and Plenty with her single Horn — single but filled with treatments known to cure many ills. I would have believed that such an age was under the rule of Saturn.

[...]
The doctors agree that no other threat of death and disease is more pressing than when all seems well, and the patient is in the full flush of health, without a wound of any kind, but his strength and well-being becomes itself wearisome and displeasing, and begins to fail although no particular toil is sapping his vigour.

Such was the situation of the English people — a people who appeared fine and well, but were sick, if they failed to recognise the blessings of their own excessive good fortune.

(VI. 53–55; 61–67; *Poemata Latina*, pp. 315–16)

The flaw in this idyllic England, its sickness, lies not in any shortage of natural provisions, but in a failure to appreciate those resources for what they are, or to recognise their own good fortune. Pre-regicide England was sick through lack of knowledge of and attention to the riches she already had — including the wealth of herbs and plants that was hers.

Accordingly, the restoration of Charles II, once more accompanied by language derived from Virgil of a new Golden Age, hails the returning king as both doctor and gardener: in fact precisely a good doctor, able to heal the land, *because* he is a careful gardener, knowledgeable and respectful of the country’s flowers, herbs and most of all its forests and woodland trees:

Next, most just among Princes, you should apply your mind to the true task of a Monarch: to soothe the many terrible deep wounds of war, seal up the gaping holes with your tender hand, and little by little heal even the scars; restore too proper power to the Law, and its former Sovereignty.

[...]

Neglected gardens will welcome back their Master; he is horrified to find them all overgrown with revolting weeds; but soon he prunes the excessive growth with his careful knife, raises up drooping stems, and ties back sprays that have worked loose. He busies himself with planting and digging up, and with his care renews the whole garden — an enormous undertaking, but a sweet one, and as the glory of the garden increases it gradually repays all the gardener’s work.

[...]

You will extend into future ages the rule of the woodland empire, and a blessed host of descendants will lie (*O our best Defender!* beneath your Shades.

(*Poemata Latina*, VI. 1089–1093; 1096–1101; 1109–1111, p. 359)

The returning King, binding up the wounds of the nation by his carefully judged pruning, binding, and grafting, emerges as a personification of the combined wisdom of the work as a whole. Just as the *Georgics* work to associate the challenges and benefits — both practical and moral — of the country life with Augustus himself, and the poet’s praise of him, *so do Cowley’s Six Books of Plants* ask us to associate the fruits of the new science, including those of the New World, with the virtues of the Restoration.

**Conclusion**

The *Plantarum Libri Sex* is a large and complex work, and its range of interest is very wide: it deserves attention, as I hope to have shown, from the perspectives of politics, science, medicine, and cultural and intellectual history, as well as for the literary interest of its accomplished Latin and impressive intertextual range. Its powerfully optimistic vision of the scientific and political future as a unified and continuous progression of the classical and more recent past undoubtedly
deserves more scholarly interest than it has gained. I hope this essay may interest a few new readers in this strange and fascinating poem, and that it may go some way towards suggesting possible avenues for future research.

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