

William Shenstone (1714--63)

The following interview between Shenstone and Thomson in 1746, published in the *Edinburgh Magazine* of 1800, provides a valuable glimpse of how *cognoscenti* actually responded to a garden. Shenstone's garden at The Leasowes (Plates 79 and 80) was among the most notable gardens of the mid-century and its creator's 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening' among the most important writings (see pp. 289 ff.) This interview reveals not only the social pastimes (and crudities) for which a garden provided space, but also its poetic or associationist role: Shenstone and his guests discussing how to improve the 'idea' of Virgil's Grove; Pope proposing to create the image of a Gothic cathedral among the trees of a garden. Thomson's remarks further suggest that to his ability to read pictures in landscape he has also added an appreciation of the importance of movement *through* a garden, the three-even four-dimensional experience of submitting to scenery. His account of Lord Lyttelton in the second extract from *The Seasons* (see pp. 194'5) also described this experience.

'Account of an Interview between Shenstone and Thomson' (1746)

MR William Lyttelton and Mr Thomson, Author of the Seasons, found me reading a pamphlet in one of my niches at the Leasowes. Mr Lyttelton introduced his friend by saying he had undertaken to shew that gentleman all the beauties of the country, and thought he could not complete his promise without giving him a view of my situation. Thomson burst out in praise of it, and appeared particularly struck with the valley and brook by which he had passed, as they came the foot-way from Hales Owen. After some little stay in the house, we passed into the green behind the house. Thomson wished the garden to be extended, so as to include the valley on the left hand; not considering that I meant no regular garden, but to embellish my whole farm. The French, it appears, have their [*P*]arque ornée; and why is not *Ferme ornée* as good an expression? He was much pleased upon observing how finely the back landskip was bounded. I took him to a seat near my upper pool, where he immediately mentioned Farmer's Hill as the principal beauty of the place. He seemed pleased also with the study on the bank of the water, since removed. As we were returning, Mr L. told me, "that I might not perhaps know that gentleman, tho' he was assured I was perfectly well acquainted with him in his writings. That it was Mr Thomson." My behaviour was a little awkward, and better calculated to express the satisfaction I took in the honour he did me, than to give him any idea either of my understanding or politeness. Being limited in point of time, and conscious of an hare upon the spit at Hagley, he could not stay to see my upper wood: "You have nothing to do (says he) but to dress Nature. Her robe is ready made; you have only to caress her; love her; kiss her; and then --- descend into the valley." Coming out into the court before the house, he mentioned Clent and Waw-ton Hill as the two bubbies of Nature: then Mr L. observed the nipple, and then Thomson the fringe of Uphmore wood; till the double entendre was work'd up to a point, and produced a laugh. Thomson observed the little stream running across my gate, and hinted that he should avail himself of that also. We now passed into Virgil's Grove. What a delightful place, says he, is this for a person of a poetical genius. I don't wonder you're a devotee to the Muses. --- This place, says Mr L. will *improve* a poetical genius. --- Aye, replied Mr T. and a poetical genius will improve this place. I should think of nothing farther. Your situation detains us beyond the time appointed. How very valuable were this stream at Hagley! --- I told him my then intention of building a model of Virgil's Tomb; which, with the Obelisk and a number of mottoes selected from Virgil, together with the pensive idea belonging to the place, might vindicate, or at least countenance, the appellation I had given it. Thomson assented to my notion of taste in gardening (that of contracting Nature's beauties, altho' he somewhat misquoted me, and did not understand the drift of my expression. Collecting, or collecting into a smaller compass, and then disposing without crowding the several varieties of Nature, were perhaps a better account of it, than either was expressed by his phrase or mine.) He denominated my Virgil's Grove there Le Vallon occlus. --- Sombre, says Mr L. --- No, not sombre occlus. --- This must evidently be the idea of Petrarch's Valclusa. He recommended a walk *up* that valley from Virgil's Grove. Mr Pitt (the Secretary) had done the same before. He was wishing at my Upper Pond to turn the water into a running stream. I mentioned the inconvenience; to obviate which, he proposed a bridge. I went with him to Hale's Mills. Thomson asked

if I had seen many places laid out in the modern way ? --- No --- Asked if I had seen Chiswick? --- Yes. --
- He mentioned it as a sublime thing in the true Venetian taste. He supposed me to come often to town; and desired to wait on me at Richmond, Mr L. commending Richmond prospects, he said they were only too rich in villas. He begged a pinch of snuff; and, on passing by the Abetes, near the Mill Pool, mentioned that Pope had a scheme in his head of planting trees to resemble a Gothic Cathedral. Hearing the Dam there was made by the Monks, O! says he, this is God-dam, the wit of which I could not see. I directed them to scape Hales town, and to go up the lane by the pool side, not without an eye to the pleasing figure my house makes across that pool; where Mr L. advised me to have a boat, and was much struck with the appearance it must have from my wood. Here Mr Thomson shaking hands with me, we all parted, *omnes omnia bona dicentes, et laudentes fortunam mean.*

The year after I met Mr Thomson, as I returned from Church, at Hales Mill, in a hired two-wheeled chaise, with a black horse and a white one length wise. We accosted each other with much cordiality, and he promised earnestly to come and see me (as he *had* done the year before,) when I expected a longer visit. But 'twas then, as I remember, that the park improvements there engrossed the family's attention, and Mr T. could not be spared from any projects of that sort.

August 27, 1748. --- The very week he was again expected at Hagley appeared this paragraph in the Birmingham paper: "This morning, at four, died, of a violent fever, at his house in Kewlane, the celebrated Mr James Thomson, Author of the Seasons, &c." I have heard he waited too long for the return of his friend Dr Armstrong, and did not chuse to employ any other physician.

He had nothing of the Gentleman in his person or address. But he made amends for the deficiency by his refined sense and spirited expression; and, as I remember, a manner of speaking not unlike his friend Quin. He did not talk a great deal or fluently; but, after pauses of reflection, produced something or other that accounted for his delay.