Thomas Whately (d.1772)

Written in 1765, five years before publication in London and in Dublin (from which version our text is taken), *Observations on Modern Gardening* was translated into French within the year and reached a fifth English edition by 1793. Whately (or sometimes Whateley) proposed for the art of landscape gardening what had often been accomplished for painting --- namely, a treatise on its aims, methods and achievements : what Roger de Piles, for example, had done in France at the end of the seventeenth century or Jonathan Richardson's *Essay on the Theory of Painting* in England during the early eighteenth. In fact, Whately claims in the Introduction at 'Gardening ... is as superior to landskip painting, as a reality to a representation', a remark which does much to illuminate the endeavours of `Capability' Brown. Whately's comprehensive survey of gardenist ideas and techniques together with Walpole's *History* of the art, printed in the same year, marks the maturity of the English landscape garden in theory as Brown's work did in practice. The first extracts from *Observations* concern groves and the handling of water, where Whately's characteristic (and Brownian) attention to formal composition of natural elements is made clear: as examples of each he describes Claremont and Wotton in Buckinghamshire respectively. The final extracts treat of ruins and `character', the idea that informs all his analyses of scenery. `Character' is the shaping and colouring of a particular section of a landscape in order to `affect our imaginations and our sensibility'; as another passage from Whately's book, quoted in our Introduction (see pp. 37-8), reveals, this associationism is designed to function fluidly and expressively, without the more studied and `*emblematical*' forms of the early Augustan garden.

from *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770)

But the surface and the outline are not the only circumstances to be attended to. Though a grove be beautiful as an object, it is besides delightful as a spot to walk or to sit in; and the choice and the disposition of the trees for effects *within*, are therefore a principal consideration. Mere irregularity alone will not please; strict order is there more agreeable than absolute confusion: and some meaning better than none. A regular plantation has a degree of beauty; but it gives no satisfaction, because we know that the same number of trees might be more beautifully arranged. A disposition, however, in which the lines only are broken without varying the distances, is less natural than any; for though we cannot find strait lines in a forest, we are habituated to them in the hedge-rows of fields; but neither in wild nor in cultivated nature do we ever see trees equi-distant from each other: that regularity belongs to art alone. The distances therefore should be strikingly different: the trees should gather into groupes, or stand in various irregular lines, and describe several figures: the intervals between them should be contrasted both in shape and in dimensions: a large space should in some places be quite open; in others the trees should be so close together, as hardly to leave a passage between them; and in others as far apart as the connexion will allow. In the forms and the varieties of these groupes, these lines, and these openings, principally consists the interior beauty of a grove.

The force of them is most strongly illustrated at Claremont; where the walk to the cottage, though destitute of many natural advantages, and eminent for none; though it commands no prospect, though the water below it is a trifling pond; though it has nothing, in short, but inequality of ground to recommend it; is yet the finest part of the garden: for a grove is there planted, in a gently-curved direction, all along the side of a hill, and on the edge of a wood, which rises above it. Large recesses break it into several clumps, which hang down the declivity; some of them approaching, but none reaching quite to the bottom. These recesses are so deep, as to form great openings in the midst of the grove; they penetrate almost to the covert; but the clumps being all equally suspended from the wood; and a line of open plantation, though sometimes narrow, running constantly along the top; a continuation of grove is preserved, and the connexion between the parts is never broken. Even a groupe, which near one of the extremities stands out quite detached, is still in stile so similar to the rest, as not to lose all relation. Each of these clumps is composed of several others still more intimately united: each is full of groupes, sometimes of no more than two trees; sometimes of four or five; and

now and then in larger clusters: an irregular waving line, issuing from some little croud, loses itself in the next; or a few scattered trees drop in a more distant succession from the one to the other. The intervals, winding here like a glade, and widening there into broader openings, differ in extent, in figure, and direction; but all the groupies, the lines, and the intervals are collected together into large general clumps, each of which is at the same time both compact and free, identical and various. The whole is a place wherein to tarry with secure delight, or saunter with perpetual amusement . . .

In considering the subjects of gardening, ground and wood first present themselves; water is the next, which, though not absolutely necessary to a beautiful composition, yet occurs so often, and is so capital a feature, that it is always regretted when wanting; and no large place can be supposed, a little spot can hardly be imagined, in which it may not be agreeable; it accommodates itself to every situation; is the most interesting object in a landskip, and the happiest circumstances in a retired recess; captivates the eye at a distance, invites approach, and is delightful when near; it refreshes an open exposure; it animates a shade; chears the dreariness of a waste, and enriches the most crouded view: in form, in style, and in extent, may be made equal to the greatest compositions, or adapted to the least: it may spread in a calm expanse, to sooth the tranquillity of a peaceful scene; or hurrying along a devious course, and splendour to a gay, and extravagance to a romantic, situation. So various are the characters which water can assume, that there is scarcely an idea in which it may not concur, or an impression which it cannot enforce: a deep stagnated pool, dank and dark with shades which it dimly reflects befits the seat of melancholy; even a river, if it be sunk between two dismal banks, and dull both in motion and colour, is like a hollow eye which deadens the countenance; and over a sluggard, silent stream, creeping heavily along all together, hangs a gloom, which no art can dissipate, nor even the sun-shine disperse. A gently murmuring rill, clear and shallow, just gurgling, just dimpling, imposes silence, suits with solitude, and leads to meditation: a brisker current, which wantons in little eddies over a bright sandy bottom, or babbles among pebbles, spreads chearfulness all around: a greater rapidity, and more agitation, to a certain degree are animating; but in excess, instead of wakening, they alarm the senses; the roar and the rage of a torrent, its force, its violence, its impetuosity, tend to inspire terror; that terror, which, whether as cause or effect, is so nearly allied to sublimity ...

Water is so universally and so deservedly admired in a prospect, that the most obvious thought in the management of it, is to lay it as open as possible; and purposely to conceal it, would generally seem a severe self-denial: yet so many beauties may attend its passage through a wood, that larger portions of it might be allowed to such retired scenes, than are commonly spared from the view; and the different parts in different stiles would then be fine contrasts to each other. If the water at Wotton were all exposed, a walk of near two miles along the banks would be of a tedious length, from the want of those changes of the scene, which now supply through the whole extent a succession of perpetual variety. That extent is so large as to admit of a division into four principal parts, all of them great in stile and in dimensions; and differing from each other both in character and situation. The two first are the least; the one is a reach of a river, about the third of a mile in length, and of a competent breadth, flowing through a lovely mead, open in some places to views of beautiful hills in the country, and adorned in others with clumps of trees, so large, that their branches stretch quite across, and form a high arch over the water. The next seems to have been once a formal basin, encompassed with plantations; and the appendages on either side still retain some traces of regularity; but the shape of the water is free from them; the size is about fourteen acres; and out of it issue two broad collateral streams, winding towards a large river, which they are seen to approach, and supposed to join. A real junction is however impossible, from the difference of the levels; but the terminations are so artfully concealed, that the deception is never suspected; and when known, is not easily explained. The river is the third great division of the water; a lake into which it falls is the fourth. These two do actually join; but their characters are directly opposite; the scenes they belong to are totally distinct; and the transition from the one to the other is very gradual; for an island near the conflux, dividing the breadth, and concealing the end of the lake, moderates for some way the space; and permitting it to expand but by degrees, raises an idea of greatness, from uncertainty accompanied with encrease. The reality does

not disappoint the expectation; and the island, which is the point of view, is itself equal to the scene; it is large, and high above the lake; the ground is irregularly broken; thickets hang on
the sides; and towards the top is placed an Ionic portico, which commands a noble extent of water, not less than a mile in circumference, bounded on one side with wood, and open on the other to two sloping lawns, the least of an hundred acres, diversified with clumps, and bordered by plantations: yet this lake, when full in view, and with all the importance which space, form, and situation can give, is not more interesting than the sequestered river, which has been mentioned as the third great division of the water. It is just within the verge of a wood, three quarters of a mile long, every where broad, and its course is such as to admit of infinite variety, without any confusion. The banks are cleared of underwood; but a few thickets still remain; and on one side an impenetrable covert soon begins; the interval is a beautiful grove of oaks, scattered over a green-swerd of extraordinary verdure. Between the trees and these thickets the river seems to glide gently along, constantly winding, without one short turn, or one extended reach, in the whole length of the way. This even temper in the stream suits the scenes through which it passes; they are in general of a very sober cast; not melancholy, but grave; never exposed to a glare; never darkened with gloom; nor by strong contrasts of light and shade exhibiting the excess of either; undisturbed by an extent of prospects without, or a multiplicity of objects within, they retain at all times a mildness of character, which is still more forcibly felt when the shadows grow faint as they lengthen; when a little rustling of birds in the spray, the leaping of the fish, and the fragrancy of the woodbine, denote the approach of evening; while the setting sun shoots its last gleams on a Tuscan portico, which is close to the upper basin, but which from a seat near this river is seen at a distance, through all the obscurity of the wood, glowing on the banks, and reflected on the surface of the water. In another still more distinguished spot is built an elegant bridge, with a colonade upon it, which not only adorns the place where it stands, but is also a picturesque object to an octogon building near the lake, where it is shewn in a singular situation over-arched, encompassed, and backed with wood, without any appearance of the water beneath. This building in return is also an object from the bridge; and a Chinese room, in a little island just by, is another; neither of them are considerable; and the others which are visible are at a distance; but more or greater adventitious ornaments are not required in a spot so rich as this in beauties peculiar to its character. A profusion of water pours in from all sides round upon the view; the opening of the lake appears; a glimpse is caught of the upper basin; one of the collateral streams is full in sight; and the bridge itself is in the midst of the finest part of the river; all seem to communicate the one with the other; though thickets often intercept, and groupes perplex the view, yet they never break the connection between the several pieces of water; each may still be traced along large branches, or little catches, which in some places are over-shadowed and dim; in others glisten through a glade, or glimmer between the boles of trees in a distant perspective; and in one, where they are quite lost to the view, some arches of a stone bridge, but partially seen among the wood, preserve their connection. However interrupted, however varied, they still appear to be parts of one whole, which has all the intricacy of number, and the greatness of unity; the variety of a stream, and the quae animation of water ... To this great variety of a stream, and the quantity of a lake; the solemnity of a wood, and animation of water ...

To this great variety must be added the many changes which may be made by the means of *ruins*; they are a class by themselves, beautiful as objects, expressive as characters, and peculiarly calculated to connect with their appendages into elegant groupes: they may be accommodated with ease to irregularity of ground, and their disorder is improved by it; they may be intimately blended with trees and with thickets, and the interruption is an advantage; for imperfection and obscurity are their properties; and to carry the imagination to something greater than is seen, their effect. They may for any of these purposes be separated into detached pieces; contiguity is not necessary, nor even the appearance of it, if the relation be preserved; but straggling ruins have a bad effect, when the several parts are equally considerable. There should be one large mass to raise an idea of greatness, to attract the others about it, and to be a common centre of union to all: the smaller pieces then mark the original dimensions of one extensive structure; and no longer appear to be the remains of several little buildings.

All remains excite an enquiry into the former state of the edifice, and fix the mind in a contemplation on the use it was applied to; besides the characters expressed by their style and position, they suggest ideas which would not arise from the buildings, if entire. The purposes of many have ceased; an abbey, or a castle, if complete, can now be no more than a dwelling; the memory of the times, and of the manners, to which they were adapted, is preserved only in history, and in ruins; and certain sensations of regret, of veneration, or compassion, attend the recollection: nor are these confined to the remains of buildings which are now in disuse; those of an old mansion raise reflections on the domestic comforts once enjoyed, and the ancient hospitality which reigned there. Whatever building we see in decay, we naturally contrast its present to its former state, and delight to ruminate on the comparison. It is true that such effects properly belong to real ruins; but they are produced in a certain degree by those which are fictitious; the impressions are not so strong, but they are exactly similar; and the representation, though it does not present facts to the memory, yet suggests subjects to the imagination: but in order to affect the fancy, the supposed original design should be clear, the use obvious, and the form easy to trace; no fragments should be hazarded without a precise meaning, and an evident connection; none should be perplexed in their construction, or uncertain as to their application. Conjectures about the form, raises doubts about the existence of the ancient structure; the mind must not be allowed to hesitate; it must be hurried away from examining into the reality, by the exactness and the force of the resemblance ...

Another species of character arises from direct *imitation*; when a scene, or an object, which has been celebrated in description, or is familiar in idea, is represented in a garden. Artificial ruins, lakes, and rivers, fall under this denomination; the air of a seat extended to a distance, and scenes calculated to raise ideas of Arcadian elegance, or of rural simplicity, with many more which have been occasionally mentioned, or will obviously occur, may be ranked in this class; they are all representations; but the materials, the dimensions, and other circumstances, being the same in the copy and the original, their effects are similar in both; and if not equally strong, the defect is not in the resemblance; but the consciousness of an imitation, checks that train of thought which the appearance naturally suggests; yet an over-anxious sollicitude to disguise the fallacy is often the means of exposing it; too many points of likeness sometimes hurt the deception; they seem studied and forced; and the affectation of resemblance destroys the supposition of a reality. A hermitage is the habitation of a recluse; it should be distinguished by its solitude, and its simplicity; but if it is filled with crucifixes, hourglasses, beads, and every other trinket which can be thought of, the attention is diverted from enjoying the retreat to examining the particulars; all the collateral circumstances which agree with a character, seldom meet in one subject; and when they are industriously brought together, though each be natural, the collection is artificial.

The peculiar advantages which gardening has over other imitative arts, will not, however, support attempts to introduce, they rather forbid the introduction of characters, to which the space is not adequate. A plain simple field, unadorned but with the common rural appendages, is an agreeable opening; but if it is extremely small, neither a hay-stack, nor a cottage, nor a stile, nor a patch, nor much less all of them together, will give it an air of reality. A harbour on an artificial lake is but a conceit: it raises no idea of refuge or security; for the lake does not suggest an idea of danger; it is detached from the large body of water; and yet is in itself but a poor inconsiderable basin, vainly affecting to mimick the majesty of the sea. When imitative characters in gardening are egregiously defective in any material circumstance, the truth of the others exposes and aggravates the failure.

But the art of gardening aspires to more than imitation: it can create *original* characters, and give expressions to the several scenes superior to any they can receive from allusions. Certain properties, and certain dispositions, of the objects of nature, are adapted to excite particular ideas and sensations: many of them have been occasionally mentioned; and all are very well known: they require no discernment, examination, or discussion, but are obvious at a glance; and instantaneously distinguished by our feelings. Beauty alone is not so engaging as this species of character; the impressions it makes are more transient and less interesting; for it aims only at delighting the eye, but the other affects our sensibility. An assemblage of the most elegant forms in the happiest situations is to

a degree indiscriminate, if they have not been selected and arranged with a design to produce certain expressions; an air of magnificence, or of simplicity, of chearfulness, tranquillity, or some other general character, ought to pervade the whole; and objects pleasing in themselves, if they contradict that character, should therefore be excluded; those which are only indifferent must sometimes make room for such as are more significant; many will often be introduced for no other merit than their expression; and some which are in general rather disagreeable, may occasionally be recommended by it. Barrenness itself may be an acceptable circumstance in a spot dedicated to solitude and melancholy.

The power of such characters is not confined to the ideas which the objects immediately suggest; for these are connected with others, which insensibly lead to subjects, far distant perhaps from the original thought, and related to it only by a similitude in the sensations they excite. In a prospect, enriched and enlivened with inhabitants and cultivation, the attention is caught at first by the circumstances which are gayest in their season, the bloom of an orchard, the festivity of a hay-field, and the carols of harvest-home; but the chearfulness which these infuse into the mind, expands afterwards to other objects than those immediately presented to the eye; and we are thereby disposed to receive, and delighted to pursue, a variety of pleasing ideas, and every benevolent feeling. At the sight of a ruin, reflections on the change, the decay, and the desolation before us, naturally occur; and they introduce a long succession of others, all tinctured with that melancholy which these have inspired: or if the monument revive the memory of former times, we do not stop at the simple fact which it records, but recollect many more coaeval circumstances, which we see, not perhaps as they were, but as they are come down to us, venerable with age, and magnified by fame; even without the assistance of buildings, or other adventitious circumstances, nature alone furnishes materials for scenes, which may be adapted to almost every kind of expression; their operation is general, and their consequences infinite: the mind is elevated, depressed, or composed, as gaiety, gloom, or tranquillity, prevail in the scene; and we soon lose sight of the means by which the character is formed; we forget the particular objects it presents; and giving way to their effects, without recurring to the cause, we follow the track they have begun, to any extent, which the disposition they accord with will allow: it suffices that the scenes of nature have a power to affect our imagination and our sensibility; for such is the constitution of the human mind, that if once it agitated, the emotion often spreads far beyond the occasion; when the passions are roused, their course is unrestrained; when the fancy is on the wing, its flight is unbounded; and quitting the inanimate objects which first gave them their spring, we may be led by thought above thought, widely differing in degree, but still corresponding in character, till we rise from familiar subjects up to the sublimest conceptions, and are rapt in the contemplation of whatever is great or beautiful, which we see in nature, feel in man, or attribute to divinity.