

William Gilpin (1724--1804)

This *Dialogue upon the Gardens ... at Stowe* is valuable both for its documentation of Stowe and for its early indications of Gilpin's picturesque tastes (see pp. 337 ff.). He visited Lord Cobham's gardens in 1747 and published his *Dialogue* anonymously the following year; there were further editions in 1749 and 1751. The three extracts here clearly reveal Gilpin's central concerns. At the Rotunda his two characters debate rival ideas of landscape style: Callophilus, as his name implies, loves the beauty of natural scenes that have been arranged by art; Polyphthon expresses his eponymous ill-will by rejecting the decorations of art and by affirming (as he does more lyrically in the second passage) a penchant for natural beauties. In the Elysian Fields they concur, however, in 'reading' this example of 'moral gardening', and though Polyphthon enjoys the 'satire' of the temples he still waxes enthusiastic about northern scenery outside gardens. Both visitors to Stowe enjoy the painterly suggestions of Stowe's landscape, finding *landskips* at every turn; both testify to the mental and emotional responses that places like Stowe elicit from visitors. The third extract, which concludes the *Dialogue*, makes each of those reactions quite clear; in addition, it announces an early occasion of Gilpin's finding that a scene struck him 'beyond the power of thought ... and every mental operation is suspended. In this pause of intellect, this deliquirium of the soul, an enthusiastic sensation of pleasure over spreads it.' (*Three Essays*, 1792.) As a young man at Stowe, Gilpin displays the two habits that characterize his later picturesque writings: a delight in tracing the formal, abstract patterns of a landscape, and a fascination with his imaginative involvement.

from *A Dialogue upon the Gardens of the Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Cobham at Stow in Buckinghamshire* (1748)

Calloph. I am admiring the fine View from hence: So great a Variety of beautiful Objects, and all so happily disposed, make a most delightful Picture. Don't you think this Building too is a very genteel one, and is extremely well situated? These Trees give it an agreeable, cool Air, and make it, I think, as elegant a Retreat for the Enjoyment of a Summer's Evening, as can well be imagined. --- But it is mere trifling to sit here: Let us walk towards the Rotunda. --- This little Alley will carry us to *Dido's Cave*.

Polyphth. *Dido's Cave!* why 'tis built of hewn Stone! Here she is however, and her *pious* Companion along with her.

Calloph. Those two Cupids joining their Torches, I never see but I admire extremely: they are very finely painted.

Polyphth. I think they are indeed. But let us be a little complaisant, and not interrupt these kind Lovers too long. I want to see this Rotunda.

Calloph. There then you have it: I hope you cannot complain of an heavy Building here. I do not know any Piece of Stonework in the whole Garden that shews itself to more Advantage than this does, or makes a more beautiful Figure in a Variety of fine Views from several Parts of the Garden: Several Parts of the Garden likewise return the Compliment, by offering a great many very elegant Prospects to it. There you have an Opening laid out with all the Decorations of Art; a spacious Theatre; the Area floated by a Canal, and peopled with Swans and Wild-ducks: Her late Majesty is the principal Figure in the Scene, and around her a merry Company of Nymphs and Swains enjoying themselves in the Shade.

Polyphth. I must confess I cannot very much admire ---

Calloph. Come; none of your Cavils. --- Observe how this View is beautifully contrasted by one on the opposite Side of a different kind; in which we are almost solely obliged to Nature. You must know I look upon this as a very noble Prospect! The Field is formed by that Semi-circle of Trees into a very grand Theatre. The Point of Sight is centred in a beautiful manner by the Pyramid, which appears to great Advantage amongst those venerable Oaks: Two or three other Buildings, half hid amongst the Trees, come in for their Share in the Prospect, and add much to the Beauty of it.

Polyphth. I agree with you entirely; nor do I think this other View inferior to it. That Variety of different Shades amongst the Trees; the Lake spread so elegantly amongst them, and glittering here and

there thro' the Bushes, with the Temple of *Venus* as a Termination to the View, make up a very beautiful Landskip.

Calloph. Here is a Vista likewise very happily terminated by the Canal, and the Obelisk rising in the Midst of it. There is another close View likewise towards *Nelson's Seat*.

Polyph. Upon my Word, we have a Variety of very elegant Prospects centred in this Point. I could sit here very agreeably a little longer ...

Polyph. Pray, what Building is that before us? I cannot say I dislike the Taste it is designed in. It seems an Antique.

Calloph. It is the Temple, Sir, of Ancient Virtue; the Place I am now conducting you to. You will meet within it a very illustrious Assembly of great Men; the wisest Lawgiver, the best Philosopher, the most divine Poet, and the most able Captain, that perhaps ever lived.

Polyph. You may possibly, Sir, engage yourself in a Dispute, by fixing your Epithets in such an absolute manner; there are so many Competitors in each of these Ways, that altho' Numbers may be called truly eminent, it will be a difficult matter to fix Pre-eminence upon any.

Calloph. You will hardly, I fancy, dissent from me, when I introduce you to these great Heroes of Antiquity: There stands *Lycurgus*; there *Socrates*; there *Homer*; and there *Epaminondas*. Illustrious Chiefs, who made Virtue their only Pursuit, and the Welfare of Mankind their only Study; in whose Breasts mean Self-interest had no Possession. To establish a well-regulated Constitution; to dictate the soundest Morality, to place Virtue in the most amiable Light; and bravely to defend a People's Liberty, were Ends which neither the Difficulty in overcoming the Prejudices, and taming the savage Manners of a barbarous State; the Corruptions of a licentious Age, and the Ill-usage of an invidious City; neither the vast Pains of searching into Nature, and laying up a Stock of Knowledge sufficient to produce the noblest Work of Art; nor popular Tumults at Home, and the most threatenng Dangers Abroad, could ever tempt them to lose Sight of, or in the least abate that Ardency of Temper with which they pursued them.

Polyph. A noble Panegyric upon my Word! why, Sir, these great Spirits have inspired you with the very Soul of Oratory. However, in earnest, I confess your Encomium is pretty just; and I am apt to believe that if any of those worthy Gentlemen should take it into his Head to walk from his Nitch, it would puzzle the World to find his Equal to fix in his Room. --- That old Ruin, I suppose, is intended to contrast with this new Building.

Calloph. Yes, Sir, it is intended to contrast with it not only in the Landskip, but likewise in its Name and Design. Walk a little nearer, and you will see its Intention.

Polyph. I can see nothing here to let me into its Design, except this old Gentleman; neither can I find any thing extraordinary in him, except that he has met with a Fate that he is entirely deserving of, which is more than falls to the Share of every worthless Fellow.

Calloph. Have you observed how the Statue is decorated?

Polyph. O! I see the whole Design: A very elegant Piece of Satyr, upon my Word! This pompous Edifice is intended, I suppose, to represent the flourishing Condition, in which ancient Virtue still exists; and those poor shattered Remains of what has never been very beautiful (notwithstanding, I see, they are placed within a few Yards of a Parish-church) are designed to let us see the ruinous State of decayed modern Virtue. And the Moral is, that Glory founded upon true Worth and Honour, will exist, when Fame, built upon Conquest and popular Applause, will fade away. This is really the thing I have seen: I am most prodigiously taken with it.

Calloph. I intend next to carry you to a Scene of another kind. I am going to shew you the Grotto, a Place generally very taking with Strangers. --- I thought that Piece of Satyr would catch your Attention: I hope likewise you will be as well pleased here. This Gate will carry us into the romantic Retirement. What do you think of this Scene?

Polyph. Why really, Sir, it is quite a Novelty: This Profusion of Mirrors has a very extraordinary Effect: The Place seems divided into a thousand beautiful Apartments, and appears fifty times as large as it is. The Prospects without are likewise transferred to the Walls within: And the Sides

of the Room are elegantly adorned with Landskips, beyond the Pencil of *Titian*; with this farther Advantage, that every View, as you change your Situation varies itself into another Form, and presents you with something new.

Calloph. Don't you think that serpentine River, as it is called, is a great Addition to the Beauty of the Place?

Polyph. Undoubtedly it is. Water is of as much Use in a Landskip, as Blood is in a Body; without these two Essentials, it is impossible there should be Life in either one or the other. Yet methinks it is a prodigious Pity that this stagnate Pool should not by some Magic be metamorphosed into a crystal Stream, rolling over a Bed of Pebbles. Such a quick Circulation would give an infinite Spirit to the View. I could wish his Lordship had such a Stream at his Command; he would shew it, I dare say, to the best Advantage, in its Passage thro' the Gardens. But we cannot *make* Nature, the utmost we can do is to *mend* her. --- I have heard a *Scotch* Gentleman speak of the River, upon which the Town of *Sterling* stands, which is as remarkable a Meander as I have ever heard of. From *Sterling* to a little Village upon the Banks of this River, by Land it is only four Miles, and yet if you should follow the Course of the Water, you will find it above twenty. --- There is an House likewise that stands upon a narrow Isthmus of a Peninsula, formed by this same River, which is mighty remarkable: The Water runs close to both Ends of it, and yet if you sail from one to the other, you will be carried a Compass of four Miles. --- Such a River winding about this Place, would make it a Paradise indeed!

As we are got into the North, I must confess I do not know any Part of the Kingdom that abounds more with elegant natural Views: Our well-cultivated Plains, as you observed before, are certainly not comparable to their rough Nature in point of Prospect. About three Years ago I rode the Northern Circuit: The Weather was extremely fine; and I scarce remember being more agreeably entertained than I was with the several charming Views exhibited to me in the northern Counties. Curiosity indeed, rather than Business, carried me down: And as I had my Time pretty much to myself, I spent it in a great measure in hunting after beautiful Objects. Sometimes I found myself hemmed within an Amphitheatre of Mountains, which were variously ornamented, some with scattered Trees, some with tufted Wood, some with grazing Cattle, and some with smoaking Cottages. Here and there an elegant View likewise was opened into the Country. --- A Mile's riding, perhaps, would have carried me to the Foot of a steep Precipice, down which thundered the whole Weight of some vast River, which was dashed into Foam at the Bottom, by the craggy Points of several rising Rocks: A deep Gloom overspread the Prospect, occasioned by the close Wood that hung round it on every Side. --- I could describe to you a Variety of other Views I met with there, if we *here* wanted Entertainment in the Way of Landskip. One, however, I cannot forbear mentioning, and wishing at the same time that his Lordship had such Materials to work with, and it could not be but he would make a most noble Picture. --- The Place I have in view is upon the Banks of the River *Eden* (which is indeed one of the finest Rivers I ever saw). I scarce know a fitter Place for a Genius in this Way to exert itself in. There is the greatest Variety of garnished Rocks, shattered Precipices, rising Hills, ornamented with the finest Woods, thro' which are opened the most elegant Vales that I have ever met with: Not to mention the most enchanting Views up and down the River, which winds itself in such a manner as to shew its Banks to the best Advantage, which, together with very charming Prospects into the Country, terminated by the blue Hills at a Distance, make as fine a Piece of Nature, as perhaps can any where be met with ...

Polyph. notwithstanding the sour Humour he had given so many Evidences of in his Walk, began now to relent, and could talk of nothing but the agreeable Entertainment that had been afforded him. Sometimes he would run out into the highest Encomiums of the many beautiful Terminations of the several Walks and Vistas; and observe how many Uses each Object served, and in how many different Lights it was made to vary itself.

"For Instance, says he, the Pavilion you shewed me from the Temple of

"*Venus*, terminates that Terrace in a very grand Manner; and makes likewise

"a very magnificent Appearance, where it corresponds with another of the

"same Form, at the Entrance into the Park: Yet the same Building, like a
 "Person acquainted with the World, who can suit his Behaviour to Time and
 "Place, can vary itself upon occasion into a more humble Shape, and when
 "viewed thro' a retired Vista, can take upon it the lowly Form of a close
 "Retreat." --- When he had enlarged pretty copiously upon this Subject, he would next launch out into
 the highest Praises of the vast Variety of Objects that was every where to be met with: "Men of all
 Humours, says he, will here
 "find something pleasing and suited to their Taste. The thoughtful may meet and
 "with retired Walks calculated in the best Manner for Contemplation: The
 "gay and chearful may see Nature in her loveliest Dress, and meet Objects
 "corresponding with their most lively Flights. The romantic Genius may
 "entertain itself with several very beautiful Objects in its own Taste, and
 "grow wild with Ideas of the enchanted kind. The disconsolate Lover may
 "hide himself in shady Groves, or melancholy wander along the Banks of
 "Lakes and Canals; where he may sigh to the gentle Zephyrs; mingle his
 "Tears with the bubbling Water; or where he may have the best Oppor-
 "tunity, if his Malady be grown to such an Height, of ending his Despair, and
 "finishing his Life with all the Decency and Pomp of a Lover in a Romance.
 "In short, says he, these Gardens are a very good Epitome of the World:
 "They are calculated for Minds of every Stamp, and give free Scope to
 "Inclinations of every kind: And if it be said that in some Parts they too
 "much humour the debauched Taste of the Sensualist, it cannot be denied
 "on the other hand, but that they afford several very noble Incitements to
 "Honour and Virtue." --- But what beyond all other things seemed most to please him, was the amicable
 and beautiful Conjunction of *Art* and *Nature* thro' the whole: He observed that the *former* never
 appeared stiff, or the *latter* extravagant.

Upon many other Topicks of Praise *Polyphthon* run out with great Warmth. *Callophilus* seemed
 surprized, and could not forbear asking him, By what means his Opinions became so suddenly
 changed? "Why, says he, Sir, I have
 "said nothing now that contradicts any thing I said before. I own I met with
 "two or three Objects that were not entirely to my Taste, which I am far
 "from condemning for that Reason; tho' if I should, it is nothing to the
 "purpose, because I am now taking a Survey of the whole together; in which
 "Light I must confess I am quite astonished with the View before me.
 Besides, I hate one of your wondering Mortals, who is perpetually breaking
 "out into a Note of Admiration at every thing he sees: I am always apt to
 "suspect his Taste or his Sincerity. It is impossible that all Genius's can
 "alike agree in their Opinions of any Work of Art; and the Man who never
 "blames, I can scarce believe is qualified to commend. Besides, finding fault
 "now and then, adds Weight to Commendation, and makes us believed to be
 "in earnest. However, notwithstanding what you may think of my frequent
 "Cavils, I assure you, with the greatest Sincerity, I never before saw anything
 "of the kind at all comparable to what I have here seen: I shall by no means
 "close this Day with a *Diem perdidit*; nor would the *Roman* Emperor himself,
 "I believe, have made the Reflection if he had spent his condemned Hours in
 "this Place."

By this time the Gentlemen were come to the Gate, thro' which *Polyphthon* assured his Friend he
 passed with the greatest Reluctance, and went growling out of its delightful Garden, as the Devil is said to
 have done out of Paradise.