

William Gilpin (1724—1804)

Gilpin's visit to Stowe in 1747 (see p. 254) inaugurated his application of picturesque principles to landscape gardens. But his first use of the term 'picturesque' occurs in the *Essay on Prints* (1768), where it is defined as 'that kind of beauty which would look well in a picture'. The word had been used before mainly to imply *graphic* or *pictorial*, but by 1801 a supplement to Johnson's *Dictionary* allowed a range of meanings which include what is pleasing to the eye, what strikes the viewer as singular or appeals to him with the force of a painting, what is expressible in painting or would either afford a good subject for a painted landscape or help in conceiving one. Gilpin's publications had assisted enormously in extending this definition. Encouraged by Thomas Gray and William Mason, he brought out his first picturesque tour in 1782, *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales &c. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty*; others followed --- that on the Lake District in 1786, on the Highlands in 1789 --- until the final, posthumously published volume of 1809. It cannot be claimed that Gilpin initiated this vogue for travel in search of picturesque experience, but he did extend its popularity, thereby educating the sight of innumerable readers, and he did attempt to provide it with firm principles. The three originators of picturesque travel as a genre of writing were probably Thomas Gray, whose published letters of 1775 included his remarks on a tour to the Lakes; Arthur Young, whose *Tours* began to appear in 1768 and although ostensibly concerned with agriculture devoted much space to 'picturesque elegance'; and Dr John Brown. This last's famous letter on the Lakes was widely known even before its publication in 1768: it argued that the 'full perfection' of the scenery around Keswick 'would require the united powers of Claude, Salvator and Poussin'. In the same landscapes Gray made frequent use of his Claude-glass, a convex mirror on darkened ground in which scenery appeared as if painted and therefore, one deduces, much more agreeable. That Gilpin shared these predilections is immediately apparent in the oval plates to his volumes which present landscapes as generalized compositions (see Plate 95). His delight in picturesque scenery corresponds to, because it has grown out of, his absorption in tracing surprises, variety and distant discoveries in a painted or engraved landscape. The extract here relates to park scenery, that ambiguous territory between the 'polished' or beautiful gardens near the house and the rough or picturesque (the terms are identical for Gilpin) scenes beyond. Gilpin, as the final sentence makes clear, prefers the latter. But what draws him to the former is its *composition*; for he considered Nature's great defect be in the ordering of her elements, which could be remedied equally by the landscape gardener or the picturesque traveller who was encouraged to re-assemble the various features of a scene into a more pleasing whole.

from *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1791)

FROM *clumps* we naturally proceed to *park-scenery*, which is generally composed of *combinations of clumps*, interspersed with lawns. It is seldom composed of any large district of wood; which is the characteristic of forest-scenery.

The park, which is a species of landscape little known, except in England, is one of the noblest appendages of a great house. Nothing gives a mansion so much dignity as these home demesns; nor contributes more to mark it's consequence. A great house, in a course of years, naturally acquires space around it. A noble park therefore is the natural appendage of an ancient mansion.

To the size, and grandeur of the house, the park should be proportioned. *Blenheim-castle* with a paddock around it; or a small villa in the middle of Woodstock-park, would be equally out of place.

The house should stand nearly in the centre of the park; that is, it should have ample room about it on every side. Petworth-house, one of the grandest piles in England, loses much of it's grandeur from being placed at the extremity of the park, where it is elbowed by a church-yard.

The *exact spot* depends intirely on the ground. There are grand situations of various kinds. In general, houses are built first; and parks are added afterwards by the occasional removal of inclosures. A great house stands most nobly on an elevated knoll, from whence it may overlook the distant country; while the woods of the park skreen the regularity of the intervening cultivation. Or it stands well on the side of a valley, which winds along it's front; and is adorned with wood, or a natural stream hiding, and discovering itself among the clumps at the bottom of the vale. Or it stands with dignity, as Longleat does, in the centre of demesns, which shelve gently down to it on every side. --- Even on a dead fiat I

have seen a house draw beauties around it. At the seat of the late Mr. Bilson Legge, (now lord Stawell's) in the middle of Holt-forest, a lawn unvaried by a single swell, is yet varied with clumps of different forms, receding behind each other, in so pleasing a manner, as to make an agreeable scene.

By these observations I mean only to shew, that in whatever part of a park a house may have been originally placed, it can hardly have been placed so awkwardly, but that, in some way or other, the scenery may be happily adapted to it. There are some situations indeed so very untoward, that scarce any remedy can be applied: as when the front of a house immediately urges on a rising ground. But such awkward situations are rare; and in general, the variety of landscape is such, that it may almost always be brought in one form, or other, to serve the purposes of beauty. The many improvements of the ingenious Mr. Brown, in various parts of England, bear witness to the truth of these observations. --- The beauty however of park-scenery is undoubtedly *best* displayed on a *varied surface* --- where the ground swells, and falls --- where hanging lawns, skreened with wood, are connected with vallies -- - and where one part is continually playing in contrast with another.

As the park is an appendage of the house, it follows, that it should participate of it's neatness, and elegance. Nature, in all her great walks of landscape, observes this accommodating rule. She seldom passes abruptly from one mode of scenery to another; but generally connects different species of landscape by some third species, which participates of both. A mountainous country rarely sinks immediately into a level one; the swellings and heavings of the earth, grow gradually less. Thus as the house is connected with the country through the medium of the park; the park should partake of the neatness of the one, and of the wildness of the other.

As the park is a scene either planted by art, or, if naturally woody, artificially improved, we expect a beauty, and contrast in it's *clumps*, which we do not look for in the wild scenes of nature. We expect to see it's lawns, and their appendages, contrasted with each other, in shape, size, and disposition; from which a variety of artificial scenes will arise. We expect, that when trees are left standing as *individuals*, they should be the most beautiful of their kind, elegant and well-balanced. We expect, that all offensive trumpery, and all the rough luxuriance of undergrowth, should be removed; unless where it is necessary to thicken, or connect a scene; or hide some staring boundary. In the wild scenes of nature we have grander exhibitions, but greater deformities, than are generally met with in the works of art. As we seldom meet with these sublime passages in improved landscape; it would be unparadonable if any thing disgusting should appear.

In the park-scene we wish for no expensive ornament. Temples, Chinese-bridges, obelisks, and all the laboured works of art, suggest inharmonious ideas. If a bridge be necessary, let it be elegantly plain. If a deer-shed, or a keeper's lodge be required; let the fashion of each be as simple, as it's use. Let nothing appear with ostentation, or parade. --- Within restrictions however of this kind we mean not to include piles of *superior grandeur*. Such a palace as Blenheim-castle distributes it's greatness far and wide. There, if the bridge immense, or the obelisk superb, it is the only what we naturally expect. It is chain of ideas properly carried on, and *gradually lost*. My remarks regard only on such houses, as may be rich indeed, and elegant; but have nothing in them of *superior magnificence*.

One ornament of this kind, I should be inclined to allow; and that is a handsome gate at the entrance of the park: but it should be proportioned in richness, and elegance to the house; and should also correspond with it in stile. It should raise the first impression of what you are to expect. Warwick-castle requires a mode of entrance very different from lord Scarsdale's at Kettlestone; and Burleigh-house, very different from both. The park-gate of Sion-house is certainly elegant; but it raises the idea of a stile of architecture which you must drop, when you arrive at the house.

The road also through the park should bear the same proportion. It should be spacious, or moderate, like the house it approaches. Let it wind: but let it not take any deviation, which is not well accounted for. To have the convenience of winding along a valley, or passing a commodious bridge, or avoiding a wood, or a piece of water, any traveller would naturally wish to deviate a little; and obstacles of this kind, if necessary, must be interposed. Mr. Brown was often very happy in creating these artificial obstructions.

From every part of the approach, and from the ridings, and favourite walks about the park, let all the boundaries be secreted. A view of paling, tho in some cases it may be picturesque, is in general disgusting.

If there be a *natural* river, or a real ruin in the scene, it may be a happy circumstance: let the best use be made of it: but I should be cautious in! advising the *creation* of either. At least, I have rarely seen either ruins, or rivers well manufactured. Mr. Brown, I think, has failed more in river-making than in any of his attempts. An artificial lake has sometimes a good effect; but neither propriety, nor beauty can arise from it, unless the heads and extremities of it are perfectly well managed, and concealed: and after all, the success is hazardous. You must always suppose it a portion of a larger piece of water; and it is not easy to carry on the imposition. If the house be magnificent, it seldom receives much benefit from an artificial production of this kind. Grandeur is rarely produced.

Seldom art

Can emulate that magnitude sublime,
Which spreads the native lake; and failing there,
Her works betray their character, and name;
And dwindle into pools

The most natural inhabitants of parks are fallow deer; and very beautiful they are: but flocks of sheep, and herds of cattle are more useful; and, in my opinion, more beautiful. Sheep particularly are very ornamental in a park. Their colour is just that dingy hue, which contrasts with the verdure of the ground; and the flakiness of their wool is rich, and picturesque. I should wish them however to wear their natural livery; and not to be patched with letters, and daubed over with red-ochre. To see the side of a hill spread with groups of sheep --- or to see them through openings among the boles of trees, at a little distance, with a gleam of light falling upon them, is very picturesque.

As the garden, or *pleasure-ground*, as it is commonly called, approaches nearer to the house, than the park, it takes of course a higher polish. Here the lawns are shorn, instead of being grazed. The roughness of the road is changed into an elegant gravel walk; and knots of flowers, and flowering shrubs are introduced, yet blended with clumps of forest-trees, which connect it with the park. Single trees also take their station here with great propriety. The spreading oak, or elm, are no disgrace to the most ornamented scene. It is the property of these noble plants to harmonize with every species of landscape. They equally become the forest, and the lawn: only here they should be beautiful in their kind; and luxuriant in their growth. Neither the scathed, nor the unbalanced oak would suit a polished situation.

Here too, if the situation suits it, the elegant temple may find a place. But it is an expensive, a hazardous, and often a useless decoration. If more than one however be introduced in the same view, they crowd the scene, unless it be very extensive. More than two should in no case be admitted. In the most polished landscape, unless nature, and simplicity lead the way, the whole will be deformed ...

FROM scenes of art, let us hasten to the chief object of our pursuit, the wild scenes of nature --- the wood --- the *copse* --- the *glen* --- and *open grove*.