

William Shenstone (174--63)

Shenstone's most famous achievement was, not any of his writings, but his landscape at The Leasowes (Plates 79 and 80). Though Horace Walpole found it insipid, and though it led Dr Johnson rather ponderously to dismiss landscape gardening as but an 'innocent amusement', The Leasowes was a creation that 'trusts to nature and simple sentiment' (Gray's rather disparaging comment on Shenstone's verse). And those same commitments are rehearsed in his notes upon landscape gardening, where he theorizes along lines that he put into practice at The Leasowes. Shenstone's main delight in a garden was its associationist potential, its appeal to the imagination, its promotion of ideas. At The Leasowes the visitor encountered memorial urns, dedicated to his friends, a grotto with a Latin inscription that invoked the Nereids, a grove named in memory of Virgil. In Shenstone's 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening' (first published in the second volume of *The Works in Verse and Prose, of William Shenstone, Esq.* in 1764) there is a constant emphasis upon ways to involve the mind in the exploration of a garden. Another insistence, that was to appeal to the picturesque theorists later in the century, was upon 'the irregularity of surface' that ruins or large oaks present to the sight. For the rest, 'Unconnected Thoughts' are the received ideas from a half-century of landscape theories coloured by Shenstone's very personal commitment to his own garden.

'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening' (1764)

GARDENING may be divided into three species --- kitchen-gardening --- parterre-gardening --- and landskip, or picturesque-gardening: which latter is the subject intended in the following pages --- It consists in pleasing the imagination by scenes of grandeur, beauty, or variety. Convenience merely has no share here; any farther than as it pleases the imagination.

PERHAPS the division of the pleasures of imagination, according as they are struck by the great, the various, and the beautiful, may be accurate enough for my present purpose: why each of them affects us with pleasure may be traced in other authors. See Burke, Hutchinson, Gerard. The theory of agreeable sensations, &c.

THERE seems however to be some objects which afford a pleasure not reducible to either of the foregoing heads. A ruin, for instance, may be neither new to us, nor majestic, nor beautiful, yet afford that pleasing melancholy which proceeds from a reflexion on decayed magnificence. For this reason an able gardiner should avail himself of objects, perhaps not very striking; if they serve to connect ideas, that convey reflexions of the pleasing kind.

OBJECTS should indeed be less calculated to strike the immediate eye, than the judgment or well-formed imagination; as in painting.

IT is no objection to the pleasure of novelty, that it makes an ugly object more disagreeable. It is enough that it produces a superiority betwixt things in other respects equal. It seems, on some occasions, to go even further. Are there not broken rocks and rugged grounds, to which we can hardly attribute either beauty or grandeur, and yet when introduced near an extent of lawn, impart a pleasure equal to more shapely scenes? Thus a series of lawn, though ever so beautiful, may satiate and cloy, unless the eye passes to them from wilder scenes; and then they acquire the grace of novelty.

VARIETY appears to me to derive good part of it's effect from novelty; as the eye, passing from one form or color, to a form or color of a different kind, finds a degree of novelty in it's present object which affords immediate satisfaction.

VARIETY however, in some instances, may be carried to such excess as to lose it's whole effect. I have observed ceilings so crammed with stucco-ornaments; that, although of the most different

kinds, they have produced an uniformity. A sufficient quantity of undecorated space is necessary to exhibit such decorations to advantage.

GROUND should first be considered with an eye to it's peculiar character; whether it be the grand, the savage, the sprightly, the melancholy, the horrid, or the beautiful. As one or other of these characters prevail, one may somewhat strengthen it's effect, by allowing every part some denomination, and then supporting it's title by suitable appendages --- For instance, The lover's walk may have assignation seats, with proper mottoes --- Urns to faithfull lovers --- Trophies, garlands, &c. by means of art.

WHAT an advantage must some Italian seats derive from the circumstance of being situate on ground mentioned in the classicks ? And, even in England, wherever a park or garden happens to have been the scene of any event in history, one would surely avail one's self of that circumstance, to make it more interesting to the imagination. Mottoes should allude to it, columns, &c. record it; verses moralize upon it; and curiosity receive it's share of pleasure.

IN designing a house and gardens, it is happy when there is an opportunity of maintaining a subordination of parts; the house so luckily placed as to exhibit a view of the whole design. I have sometimes thought that there was room for it to resemble an epick or dramatick poem. It is rather to be wished than required, that the more striking scenes may succeed those which are less so.

Taste depends much upon temper. Some prefer Tibullus to Virgil, and Virgil to Homer --- Hagley to Persfield, and Persfield to the Welsh mountains. This occasions the different preferences that are given to situations --- A garden strikes us most, where the grand, and the pleasing succeed, not intermingle, with each other.

I BELIEVE, however, the sublime has generally a deeper effect than the merely beautiful.

I USE the words landskip and prospect, the former as expressive of home scenes, the latter of distant images. Prospects should take in the blue distant hills; but never so remotely, that they be not distinguishable from clouds. Yet this mere extent is what the vulgar value.

LANDSKIP should contain variety enough to form a picture upon canvas; and this is no bad test, as I think the landskip painter is the gardiner's best designer. The eye requires a sort of ballance here; but not so as to encroach upon probable nature. A wood, or hill, may ballance a house or obelisk; for exactness would be displeasing. We form our notions from what we have seen; and though, could we comprehend the universe, we might perhaps find it uniformly regular; yet the portions that we see of it, habituate out fancy to the contrary.

THE eye should always look rather down upon water: Customary nature makes this requisite. I know nothing more sensibly displeasing than Mr. T---'s flat ground betwixt his terras and his water.

IT is not easy to account for the fondness of former times for strait-lined avenues to their houses; strait-lined walks through their woods; and, in short, every kind of strait-line; where the foot is to travel over, what the eye has done before. This circumstance, is one objection. Another, somewhat of the same kind, is the repetition of the same object, tree after tree, for a length of way together. A third is, that this identity is purchased by the loss of that variety, which the natural country supplies every where; in a greater or less degree. To stand still and survey such avenues, may afford some slender satisfaction, through the change derived from perspective; but to move on continually and find no change of scene in the least attendant on our change of place, must give actual pain to a person of taste. For such an one to be condemned to pass along the famous vista from Moscow to Petersburg, or that other from Agra to Lahor in India, must be as disagreeable a sentence, as to be condemned to labour at the gallies. I conceived some idea of the sensation he must feel, from walking but a few minutes, immured, betwixt Lord D---'s high-shorn yew-hedges; which run exactly parallel, at the distance of about ten feet; and are contrived perfectly to exclude all kind of objects whatsoever.

WHEN a building, or other object has been once viewed from its proper in point, the foot should never travel to it by the same path, which the eye has travelled over before. Lose the object, and draw nigh, obliquely.

THE side-trees in vistas should be so circumstanced as to afford a probability that they grew by nature.

RUINATED structures appear to derive their power of pleasing, from the irregularity of surface, which is VARIETY; and the latitude they afford the imagination, to conceive an enlargement of their dimensions, or to recollect any events or circumstances appertaining to their pristine grandeur, so far as concerns grandeur and solemnity. The breaks in them should be as bold and abrupt as possible, --- If mere beauty be aimed at (which however is not their chief excellence) the waving line, with more easy transitions, will become of greater importance --- Events relating to them may be simulated by numberless little artifices; but it is ever to be remembered, that high hills and sudden descents are most suitable to castles; and fertile vales, near wood and water, most imitative of the usual situation for abbeys and religious houses; large oaks, in particular, are essential to these latter.

Whose branching arms, and reverend height
Admit a dim religious light.

A cottage is a pleasing object partly on account of the variety it may introduce; on account of the tranquillity that seems to reign there; and perhaps, (I am somewhat afraid) on account of the pride of human nature.

Longi alterius spectare laborem.

In a scene presented to the eye, objects should never lie so much to the right or left, as to give it any uneasiness in the examination. Sometimes, however, it may be better to admit valuable objects even with this disadvantage. They should else never be seen beyond a certain angle. The eye must be easy, before it can be pleased.

No mere slope from one side to the other can be agreeable ground: The eye requires a balance --- i.e. a degree of uniformity: but this may be otherwise effected and the rule should be understood with some limitation.

--- Each alley has it's brother,
And half the plat-form just reflects the other.

LET us examine what may be said in favour of that regularity which Mr. Pope exposes. Might he not seemingly as well object to the disposition of an human face, because it has an eye or cheek, that is the very picture of companion? Or does not providence who has observed this regularity in the external structure of our bodies and disregarded it within, seem to consider it as a beauty? The arms, the limbs, and the several parts of them correspond, but it is not the same case with the thorax and the abdomen. I believe one is generally solicitous for a kind of ballance in a landskip, and, if I am not mistaken, the painters generally furnish one: A building for instance on one side, contrasted by a group of trees, a large oak, or a rising hill on the other. Whence then does this taste proceed, but from the love we bear to regularity in perfection? After all, in regard to gardens, the shape of ground, the disposition of trees, and the figure of water, must be sacred to nature; and no forms must be allowed that make a discovery of art.

ALL trees have a character analogous to that of men: Oaks are in all respects the perfect image of the manly character: In former times I should have said, and in present times I think I am authorized to say, the British one. As a brave man is not suddenly either elated by prosperity, or depressed by adversity, so the oak displays not it's verdure on the sun's first approach; nor drops it, on his first departure. Add to this it's majestic appearance, the rough grandeur of it's bark, and the wide protection of it's branches.

A LARGE, branching, aged oak, is perhaps the most venerable of all inanimate objects.

URNS are more solemn, if large and plain; more beautiful, if less and Solemnity is perhaps their point, and the situation of them operate with it.

BY the way, I wonder that lead statues are not more in vogue in our modern gardens. Though they may not express the finer lines of an human body, yet they seem perfectly well calculated, on account of their duration, to embellish landskips, were they some degrees inferior to what we generally

behold. A statue in a room challenges examination, and is to be examined critically as a statue. A statue in a garden is to be considered as one part of a scene or landskip; the minuter touches are no more essential to it, than a good landskip painter would esteem them were he to represent a statue in his picture.

APPARENT art, in it's proper province, is almost as important as apparent nature. They contrast agreeably; but their provinces ever should be kept

WHERE some artificial beauties are so dexterously managed that one cannot but conceive them natural, some natural ones so extremely fortunate than [*sic*] one is ready to swear they are artificial.

CONCERNING scenes, the more uncommon they appear, the better, provided they form a picture, and include nothing that pretends to be of nature's production, and is not. The shape of ground, the site of trees, and the fall of water, nature's province. Whatever thwarts her is treason.

ON the other hand, buildings and the works of art, need have no other reference to nature than that they afford the εὐσθε μῦθον with which the human mind is delighted.

ART should never be allowed to set a foot in the province of nature, otherwise than clandestinely and by night. Whenever she is allowed to appear here, and men begin to compromise the difference --- Night, gothicism, confusion and absolute chaos are come again.

TO see one's urns, obelisks, and waterfalls laid open; the nakedness of our beloved mistresses, the naiads, and the dryads, exposed by that ruffian winter to universal observation; is a severity scarcely to be supported by the help of blazing hearths, chearful companions, and a bottle of the most grateful burgundy.

THE works of a person that builds, begin immediately to decay; while those of him who plants begin directly to improve. In this, planting promises a more lasting pleasure, than building; which, were it to remain in equal perfection, would at best begin to moulder and want repairs in imagination. Now trees have a circumstance that suits our taste, and that is annual variety. It is inconvenient indeed, if they cause our love of life to take root and flourish with them, whereas the very sameness of our structures will, without the help of dilapidation, serve to wean us from our attachment to them.

IT is a custom in some countries to condemn the characters of those (after death) that have neither planted a tree, nor begat a child.

THE taste of the citizen and of the mere peasant are in all respects the same. The former gilds his balls; paints his stonework and statues white; plants his trees in lines or circles; cuts his yew-trees four-square or conic; or gives them, what he can, of the resemblance of birds, or bears, or men; squirts up his rivulet in jetteaus; in short, admires no part of nature, but her ductility: exhibits every thing that is glaring, that implies expence, or that effects a surprize because it is unnatural. The peasant is his admirer.

IT is always to be remembered in gardening that sublimity or magnificence, and beauty or variety, are very different things. Every scene we see in nature is either tame and insipid; or compounded of those. It often happens that the same ground may receive from art; either certain degrees of sublimity and magnificence, or certain degrees of variety and beauty; or a mixture of each kind. In this case it remains to be considered in which light they can be rendered most remarkable, whether as objects of beauty, or magnificence. Even the temper of the proprietor should not perhaps be wholly disregarded: for certain complexions of soul will prefer an orange tree or a myrtle, to an oak or cedar. However this should not induce a gardiner to parcel out a lawn into knots of shrubbery; or invest a mountain with a garb of roses. This would be like dressing a giant in a sarsenet gown, or a Saracen's head in a brussels night-cap. Indeed the small and circular clumps of firs, which I see planted upon some fine large swells, put me often in mind of a coronet placed on an elephant or camel's back. I say a gardiner should not do this, any more than a poet should attempt to write of the king of Prussia in the style of Philips. On the other side, what would become of Lesbia's sparrow should it be treated in the same language with the anger of Achilles ?

Gardiniers may be divided into three sorts, the landskip gardiner, the parterre gardiner, and the kitchen gardiner, agreeably to our first division gardens.

I HAVE used the word landskip-gardiniers; because in pursuance of our present taste in gardening, every good painter of landskip appears to me the most proper designer. The misfortune of it,

is, that these painters are apt to regard the execution of their work, much more than the choice of subject.

THE art of distancing and approximating, comes truly within their sphere: the former by the gradual diminution of distinctness, and of size; the latter by the reverse. A strait lined avenue that is widened in front, and planted there with ewe trees, then firs, then with trees more and more s[h]ady, still they end in the almond-willow, or silver osier; will produce a very remarkable deception of the former kind; which deception will be increased, if the nearer dark trees, are proportionable and truly larger than those at the end of the avenue that are more s[h]ady.

To distance a building, plant as near as you can to it, two or three circles of different coloured greens -- - Ever-greens are best for all such purposes --- Suppose the outer one of holly, and the next of laurel, &c. The consequence will be that the imagination immediately allows a space betwixt these circles and another betwixt the house and them; and as the imagined space is indeterminate, if your building be dim-coloured, it will not appear inconsiderable. The imagination is a greater magnifier than a microscopic glass. And on this head, I have known some instances, where by shewing intermediate ground, the distance has appeared less, than while an hedge or grove concealed it.

HEDGES, appearing as such, are universally bad. They discover art in nature's province.

TREES in hedges partake of their artificiality, and become a part of them. There is no more sudden, and obvious improvement, than an hedge removed, and the trees remaining; yet not in such manner as to mark out the former hedge.

WATER should ever appear, as an irregular lake, or winding stream.

Islands give beauty, if the water be adequate; but lessen grandeur through variety.

IT was the wise remark of some sagacious observer, that familiarity is for the most part productive of contempt. Graceless offspring of so amiable a parent! Unfortunate beings that we are, whose enjoyments must be either checked, or prove destructive of themselves. Our passions are permitted to sip a little pleasure; but are extinguished by indulgence, like a lamp overwhelmed with oil. Hence we neglect the beauty with which we have been intimate; nor would any addition it could receive, prove an equivalent for the advantage it derived from the first impression. Thus negligent of graces that have the merit of reality, we too often prefer imaginary ones that have only the charm of novelty: And hence we may account, in general, for the preference of art to nature, in our old fashioned gardens.

ART, indeed, is often requisite to collect and epitomize the beauties of nature; but should never be suffered to set her mark upon them: I mean in regard to those articles that are of nature's province; the shaping of ground, the planting of trees, and the disposition of lakes and rivulets. Many more particulars will soon occur, which, however, she is allowed to regulate, somewhat clandestinely, upon the following account --- Man is not capable of comprehending the universe at one survey. Had he faculties equal to this, he might well be censured for any minute regulations of his own. It were the same, as if, in his present situation, he strove to find amusement in contriving the fabrick of an ant's nest, or the partitions of a bee-hive. But we are placed in the corner of a sphere; endued neither with organs, nor allowed a station, proper to give us an universal view; or to exhibit to us the variety, the orderly proportions, and dispositions of the system. We perceive many breaks and blemishes, several neglected and unvariegated places in the part; which, in the whole would appear either imperceptible, or beautiful. And we might as rationally expect a snail to be satisfied with the beauty of our parterres, slopes, and terrasses --- or an ant to prefer our buildings to her own orderly range of granaries, as that man should be satisfied, without a single thought that he can improve the spot that falls to his share. But, though art be necessary for collecting nature's beauties, by what reason is she authorized to thwart and to oppose her? Why, fantastically endeavor to humanize those vegetables, of which nature, discreet nature, thought it proper to make trees? Why endow the vegetable bird with wings, which nature has made momentarily dependent upon the soil? Here art seems very affectedly to make a display of that industry, which it is her glory to conceal. The stone which represents an asterisk, is valued only on account of it's natural production; Nor do we view with pleasure the laboured carvings and futile diligence of Gothic artists. We view with much more satisfaction some plain Grecian fabric, where art,

indeed, has been equally, but less visibly, industrious. It is thus we, indeed, admire the shining texture of the silk-worm; but we loathe the puny author, when she thinks proper to emerge; and to disgust us with the appearance of so vile a grub.

BUT this is merely true in regard to the particulars of nature's province, wherein art can only appear as the most abject vassal, and had, therefore, better not appear at all. The case is different where she has the direction of buildings, useful or ornamental; or, perhaps, claims as much honor from temples, as the deities to whom they are inscribed. Here then it is her interest to be seen as much as possible: And, though nature appear doubly beautiful by the contrast her structures furnish, it is not easy for her to confer a benefit which nature, on her side, will not repay.

A RURAL scene to me is never perfect without the addition of some kind of building: Indeed I have known a scar of rock-work, in great measure, supply the deficiency.

IN gardening it is no small point to enforce either grandeur or beauty by surprize; for instance, by abrupt transition from their contraries --- but to lay a stress upon surprize only; for example, on the surprize occasioned by an aha! without including any nobler purpose; is a symptom of bad taste, and a violent fondness for mere concetto.

GRANDEUR and beauty are so very opposite, that you often diminish the one as you encrease the other. Variety is most a-kin to the latter, simplicity to the former.

SUPPOSE a large hill, varied by art, with large patches of different-colored clumps, scars of rock, chalk quarries, villages, or farm-houses; you will have, perhaps, a more beautiful scene, but much less grand than it was before.

IN many instances, it is most eligible to compound your scene of beauty and grandeur --- Suppose a magnificent swell arising out of a well-variegated valley; it would be disadvantageous to encrease it's beauty, by means destructive to it's magnificence.

THERE may possibly, but there seldom happens, any occasion to fill up valleys, with trees or otherwise. It is for the most part the gardener's business to remove trees, or ought that fills up the low ground; and to give, as far as nature allows, an artificial eminence to the high.

THE hedge-row apple-trees in Herefordshire afford a most beautiful scenery, at the time they are in blossom: But the prospect would be really grander, did it consist of simple foliage. For the same reason, a large oak (or beech) in autumn, is a grander object than the same in spring. The sprightly green, is then obfuscated.

SMOOTHNESS and easy transitions are no small ingredient in the beautiful; abrupt and rectangular breaks have more of the nature of the sublime. Thus a tapering spire is, perhaps, a more beautiful object than a tower, which is grander.

MANY of the different opinions relating to the preference to be given to seats, villas, &c. are owing to want of distinction betwixt the beautiful and the magnificent. Both the former and the latter please; but there are imaginations particularly adapted to the one, and to the other.

MR. ADDISON thought an open uninclosed champain country, formed the best landskip. Somewhat here is to be considered. Large unvariegated, simple objects have the best pretensions to sublimity; a large mountain, whose sides are unvaried with objects, is grander than one with infinite variety. But then it's beauty is proportionably less.

HOWEVER, I think a plain space near the eye gives it a kind of liberty it loves; And then the picture, whether you chuse the grand or beautiful, should be held up at it's proper distance. Variety is the principal ingredient in beauty; and simplicity is essential to grandeur.

OFFENSIVE objects, at a proper distance, acquire even a degree of beauty: For instance, stubble, fallow ground.