

The Nature of Culture

and the Culture of Nature

My contribution today was written before I received a draft of Bob Cook's paper a couple of days ago. I have been able to alter a few of my remarks to take account of some of his ideas and arguments: in so doing my main concern was to try and suggest parallels between the new ecological paradigms he offers and the processes of the historian of culture and one of its fundamental expressions, landscape architecture. However, it is also perhaps worth prefacing my paper proper with a few general observations, designed to relate our two approaches.

First, my own concerns are inevitably with sites where cultural elements are more dominant than in, say, the Henry Greene Prairie in Wisconsin; my own sites are probably smaller, and their inorganic elements, especially those introduced by human hands, predominate. Second, Gombrich has been quoted on the common sensical opinion that we cannot ask Titian "what his intention was"; I would agree, but only because it seems a naive formulation, ignoring the widely acknowledged fact that great works of art yield legitimate meanings beyond the specific prescriptions of their creators who have gone on record about them; in short, it is beside the question to ask Titian what he meant.¹ As will be clear later I subscribe to a more strenuous role for the historian than TV interviewer

(surely Gombrich's model); I share Bob Cook's view of "historical complexity" and relish the task of grappling with it, with historical contingency. Thirdly, and finally, I should say one thing that I am not going to consider: the often vexed problem of deciding at what point in the temporal continuum of a site to fix its preservation or restoration. On the one hand, I actually welcome celebrating a site's different historical moments or "periods of significance"; on the other to cherish a palimpsest of cultural deposits obviously begs the question of how to treat the natural materials which surround them and which change at a different rate. No general answer seems possible; the contingencies of the specific project will determine the only worthwhile answers.

I

Landscape architecture requires three ingredients: a specific site, organic and inorganic materials (that is to say—the resources of the physical world), and the creative energies and cultural skills of human beings (their art, science, technology, “know-how”). The given or natural materials of a site, along with others introduced on to it for various reasons, are rearranged, revised or re-presented by human skills in such a way that the site is transformed, is made anew for some purpose, whether practical or aesthetic.²

The history of landscape architecture since the mid-eighteenth century has been told largely as a battle between natural resources and cultural skills and inventions for possession of the soul and body of a given site; rephrased, this becomes a battle of styles—usually (if somewhat absurdly) designated as formal and informal.³ Such a narrative also supposes that since historically the informal, irregular, picturesque or “natural” came after the formal, regular, geometrical or artificial it was a development to be applauded in the name of progress, a movement towards perfection and towards modernity, as inevitable as it was therefore “natural”.

For reasons at least explicable if not acceptable, this was a narrative developed by the English, who brought to what Walpole called “the point of perfection” the kind of landscaping that has been named after them.⁴ But what is much more puz-

zling is why the whole of late 18th-century Europe, followed hard by 19th-century America, bought into the idea that the natural or English landscape garden was the superior, prime mode of laying out grounds. True, some intelligent and critical spirits outside England resisted the teleology of such histories and the imperatives of such taste—Hirschfeld in Germany, Laborde in France; in North America, Downing, as Judith Major has admirably demonstrated, not only realized that some sort of adaptation of the English mode of landscape architecture was required for a new territory and a new society, but himself adapted his own adaptations in successive editions of his *Treatise*.⁵

The pervasive notion of a battle of opposing styles that characterizes both landscape architecture itself and the history of this art since the late 18th century disables analysis in two ways: to emphasize a battle—even, sometimes, a fight to the death⁶:—between art and nature obscures the essential fact that in all landscape architecture of whatever style these two rival elements have been collaborative not antagonistic; and, much more importantly, that the art of landscape architecture has always been dedicated to inventing or creating a nature viable for that particular time and place.

II

The arts and sciences of any given society discover and make accessible to that time and place a particular

perspective on the phenomenal world; they "invent" an idea of nature that their society can cherish. In these circumstances "nature" is never a normative, stable entity, but a view of the physical world that a particular culture creates to be able to live with (in the process it often comes to believe that its nature is indeed normative, stable, in short wholly natural). It is among the functions of culture to devise or construct a nature for its contemporaries to live in, believe in, and represent in their arts, which themselves of course participate in that devising (including landscape architecture). Devising is not faking, falsifying, lying; it is abstracting or extrapolating from the vast resources of the natural world a version of that world that is enhancing.

If we return briefly to a moment before the hegemony of the art-nature conflict was established, we can see what such invention or creation of nature entails. Around 1700 there can be found throughout Europe many engraved topographical views which represent a mansion surrounded by a highly artificial landscape; yet as the eye moves outwards from the gardens across orchards, paddocks and agricultural land, the landscape seems to grow less and less controlled, less worked, organized and managed, until usually it ends in some distant mountains, waste land or wilderness that is apparently beyond human control or exploitation. These engravings are usually invoked to demonstrate the human domination of the natural world through

horticultural art and agrarian technology.

But I suggest that we read these images with too modern a regard; their contemporary viewers saw them differently. Here in two similar frontispieces we can perhaps get closer to their significance: again we look across the spaces of a garden, decorated schematically with a fountain at its centre and flowerbeds, towards fields where labourers plough and sow, towards a cragged and steep mountain, out of the bottom of which a spring gushes. Yet a moment's reflection will also show that this scene is jointly presented to us by two figures, who are positioned on rough, unworked ground this side of the garden—the figures of Nature, the fecund, abundant, many-breasted Diana of Ephesus, and the figure of Science or Technology, holding an armillary sphere. And their joint and collaborative responsibility for introducing us to the landscape beyond is made all the clearer when we also register what is taking place on the craggy hillside in the background. It is in fact populated with figures of the nine Muses along with Apollo, traditionally their conductor and manager.

Muses are personifications of those arts that interpret aspects of the world for us in their various ways; they re-present for us in their own terms—as history, poetry, music, whatever—the physical (and indeed the metaphysical) world. So, too, Science here in the foreground with her sphere, understands and inter-

prets for us the myriad universe of nature. The careful population of this scene by the artist begins to explain the rudimentary signs that have also been incorporated into the landscape: the fountain in the centre of the garden is a reworking in artful, gardenist forms, of the natural spring at the base of the hill; the flower beds reorganize the happenstance of natural growth in different parts of the world into coherent, localized format. Almost all the elements of a contemporary garden would have been interpreted in this way, as we know from many contemporary sources, including John Evelyn's unpublished manuscript of garden history and theory: there, for example, he explained that grottoes were the representation of natural caves and dens, mounts were hills, labyrinths, the bewildering unmediated natural world, and so on.⁷

Now there were two essential corollaries of this view of art as reformulating natural events. First, the reformulation was designed to help humans better to understand the natural world, as they learnt to access it in situations where accidents and contingencies had been eliminated; but such perfected images, such abstractions, were by no means meant as a substitute for the "real thing". Second, not everybody needed the same kind of education in natural phenomena that was afforded by a geometrical garden—some people could understand and enjoy the spring gushing from the mountain without seeing its representation as a

garden fountain.

Towards the end of the 17th century such people were thought of as visionaries, enthusiasts, dubious solitaires, even slightly zany or mad; but their perspective on nature was allowed. It was a time of unprejudiced relativism and tolerance among gardenists, a time that historians have totally marginalized in their subscription to the latter-day story of nature triumphing over art. Different styles or modes of landscape architecture were seen as fitting different classes of people, different temperaments of client and/or designer, different uses and functions, different local conditions (topography, ecology, geomorphology). It is, I suggest, no accident that this was also the period in which both a scientific empiricism was dominant and in which a new explanation of the mind's formation that privileged the individual sensibility and mind-set was being elaborated.

Only rarely does such relativism reappear in landscape architecture history—it flashes through the theoretical work of Hirschfeld, Laborde, and Downing, but rarely shapes their concepts or their judgments of actual landscape architecture. And we are today, in my view, urgently in need of a new history of landscape architecture that explores the changing cultural needs of given societies, even the cultural needs of different segments of the same societies, to identify, express and re-present ideas of their natures in garden format. Such a new history would, for instance, be able to con-

front the whole cycle of the 19th and 20th centuries afresh instead of being forced to live with the strange predicament that—since the English, picturesque or “natural” garden was deemed to be the inevitable climax, the long-awaited apotheosis of good landscape architecture, there was in a literal sense nowhere to go after Capability Brown. At best it was a question of opting for styles as if in some shopping catalogue, which the new breed of eager garden journalist willingly provided.

III

In anticipation of such an ambitious new history, let me look at what might be some of its consequences for our concerns on this occasion. The landscape historian's responsibility is to try and understand the cultural interpretations and representations of the physical world at given moments in the past (in my view the past includes yesterday, even today as it slips into being tomorrow's yesterday). Myself, I see this enterprise as our having to learn how a particular society's mind worked, how it looked and thought, how it responded to whatever were its dominant concerns, what varieties of response were subsumed within larger units; we need to know not only what a society or some segment of it deemed necessary to spell out and explain, but what went (as it were) without saying; I want to be in the position to second guess those who intervened upon the ground and created works of landscape architecture in the light of, or

despite, their ideas and habits of mind. The French conveniently call this the study of *mentalité*, mental habit, but it sounds perhaps too rarified, too indeterminate, simply too vague for our purposes, though I have no alternative formulation to offer.

It is a challenging task to try and be such a historian. The past is indeed a foreign country, the languages of which are not easily learned with all their proper vocabulary and idiom. Yet, as A J Downing told the readers of his *Horticulturist* in 1852, “when a man goes into a country without understanding its language, he is likely to comprehend little of the real character of that country”.⁸ Historians are currently much exercised by the extent of their incomprehension: Simon Schama wrote *Dead Certainties* (1991) as a mixture of recoverable fact and imaginative fiction about two historical events in 1759 and 1849; yet his disarming subtitle, (*Unwarranted speculations*), did not wholly conceal his delight in muddling the modes of “fact” and “fiction” as he chronicled the deaths of General Wolfe at the battle of Quebec or Dr. George Parkman in Cambridge, Massachusetts. More to our own purposes is a similar meditation on the impossibilities of historical recovery & explanation in Tom Stoppard's new play in New York at the Lincoln Center, *Arcadia*. Much fun is generated for the audience from the absurd inabilities of modern researchers to penetrate the intricate trivialities of both Regency love affairs and Reptonian landscape archi

ecture.

We do not need the theatre to be reminded of such difficulties. Throughout the 1970s the Dutch government researched and prepared for the restoration of the late 17th-century gardens at the Paleis Het Loo outside Apeldoorn. Armed with a wealth of engraved views, drawings, written descriptions, blessed above all with a site that—although stripped of its statuary, urns and fountain work—had simply been covered with sand and grassed as a so-called English landscape garden and could therefore by the removal of the sand be laid bare in its skeleton form, the learned and experienced team got at least one crucial thing wrong: though they planted it exactly as the engravings, paintings, drawings and verbal descriptions claimed it had been in the 1690s, and though they grew vast quantities of specially prepared species to match exactly the original planting schemes, the modern experts simply forgot to learn how to tend and maintain this old planting style. So that after only a few years much had to be redone, and meanwhile the gardeners were sent back to school with Jan van der Groen, William III's original gardener, to re-learn lost horticultural skills.

But such difficulties should not deflect the historian. Neither Stoppard nor—above all—a professional academic historian like Schama (who has, by the way, just produced a new book entitled *Landscape and Memory*) can escape the compulsion to hope, to posit the idea, that the past is

a foreign country whose language may be learnt to more or less perfection. Some are more adept at cultural bi-lingualism than others; but it is a skill not to be wished away for whatever reason.

There are two methods of wishing it away. One is to insist so much that our own interpretation colours the historical object that we convince ourselves it is unknowable. Another is to argue that nothing important changes, that (as a philosopher has recently written) garden history is governed largely by universal perspectives:

The environmental nature of gardens, coupled with our nature as biological organisms of a particular kind, provides a range of significance, orderings, and values that precedes and transcends cultural differences and makes gardens to a large extent (though not completely) universally intelligible and meaningful. This level of meaning is neither representational nor symbolic, and neither culture-dependent nor culture-specific.⁹

What truth may subsist in that statement seems to concern such a residual part of our subject as to concern us very little. It is, in effect, the old, rather sentimental appeal to unchanging human qualities, an appeal that forgets how much men and women are themselves the product of nature and culture and therefore changing according to the times and places they inhabit. Indeed, there is a striking similarity between landscape

architecture itself and human beings, the only animals to create gardens—namely, that both are intricate dialogues between nature and culture; this perhaps explains our enduring, though changing need for the bi-focal (natural-cultural/cultural-natural) world of landscape architecture.

IV

Two final observations. First, any analysis of our present cultural perspectives on the natural world must also be properly historical: that is to say, that we must try and see how and why our own perspectives upon the natural world are constructed. No less than in previous eras, our ideas and the forms they take upon the ground are conditioned by the specific time and place of their occasion.

Currently, the lawn has something of a bad name, a contemporary battleground every bit as contested as once were terracing, parterres or axial avenues. Those who cherish a lawn can be reviled for their willful imposition of abstract order upon the natural element of turf, for their invocation of an arsenal of chemicals, or for the wasteful use of water in its irrigation. But there are climactic and geographical conditions in which a lawn need not be contentious, and it is well to recall how its predecessors—the “flowery mead” of the late Middle Ages, the parterre à l’anglaise or the *boulingrin*, or the green sward of Capability Brown—were each a version or representation by a specific culture of a certain natural feature—a herbiage sprinkled with flowers, a

zone of grass—none of which is any more “right” or “correct” except as a particular society chooses to determine the rules by which—in that time and place—such judgments are made.

A second observation concerns the restoration and preservation of historical sites. Grant (for my argument¹⁰) that we can count upon bringing to such work a detailed knowledge of the past—a conspectus of archaeological, geomorphological, horticultural and architectural information, the result of which would be the complete recovery of the physical shape of a given site. How do we then mesh the historical habits of mind that informed such a site with our own contemporary ones? This is in part, but only in part, resolvable by programmes of interpretation.

There could be many illustrations of this conundrum, but let me offer you the example of the Elysian Fields at Stowe, Buckinghamshire, responsibility for which has recently been assumed by the National Trust. It is a site that exists virtually as it was created in the 1730s (some statuary is missing from one of the temples, but its location is now known and it could be replaced or duplicated); tree growth and other plant changes have in relatively minor ways altered our experience of the valley—most importantly now hiding the parish church the sight of which was an essential element of the ensemble. And we may with some confidence, I believe, say that we can penetrate the mind-set that created this ensemble of

temples scattered on both sides of a pastoral valley. Immersing ourselves in a whole range of texts and engravings—some offering specific commentary on the site and its landscape architecture, others opening for us contemporary attitudes and ideas on a range of matters not connected with garden art, we can fairly confidently recover a detailed sense of how these Elysian Fields were experienced at the time of their creation.

I can on this occasion only suggest how this landscape architecture organized a juxtaposition of native English scenery, carefully contrived to elicit its pastoral potential and perfection, and augmented with rival representations of those cultural processes by which that very pastorality had been constructed, was understood and was challenged. A Temple of Ancient Virtue, a heap of rubble (supposedly a Temple of Modern Virtue in false classical style), a parish church, a Temple of British Worthies that deliberately excludes the priesthood and challenges its own celebration of eminent British figures with a satire on moral excellence in foxhounds—all these invite the visitor to engage in various dialogues on the relevance of the antique world to the modern; of classical mores, conventions and wisdoms to the political and cultural exigencies of contemporary Whig England.¹¹

Now, if you object that these concerns have nothing to do with land-

scape architecture, I'd reply: that (i) most gardens and parks address issues beyond their own concerns, for their cultural perspectives extend beyond the materials of the physical world from which they are made and (ii) the very location of such issues within an abstracted and perfected landscape, redolent of English rurality, makes the site itself a stage and therefore a subject for debate (Stowe is in the nation's heartland and therefore in this context stood for England herself). An emerging modern England of the early 18th century needed to ask itself what use was the classical past, how it could or should be invoked, why it should be considered of significance. Given the associations of that classical past with landscapes in Italy and Greece (actual landscapes, painted or written about landscapes), a landscape garden was as apt a location as any to dramatize such questions.¹²

But in the final resort I confess to be puzzled how the intricacies of a recovered mentalite, so illuminating of Stowe's historical potency, can be accessed by the modern visitor in a fashion that justifies the historian's endeavours. Perhaps they should not need justification, for they are their own reward. Yet in our ongoing debates, the voice of the historians of culture, including the culture of nature, should be heard distinctly and with all its concern for the complexities of the past.

Endnotes

- 1 However, I am not sure quite where Bob Cook stands on this: he implies the contrary to Gombrich when he uses the phrase, "a different object than the painter intended", yet also avers that "the intentions of the creator are always seen through the lends of our own times and may therefore be essentially unknowable".
- 2 And from that moment the different elements age and alter in different ways and at different speeds.
- 3 The absurdity, of course, is to imply that "informal", whether referring to Capability Brown or the wearing of jeans and t-shirt, doesn't itself employ forms. But that aside!
- 4 See Walpole's *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, with an introduction by John Dixon Hunt (NY., 1995), p.55.
- 5 Judith Major's University of Pennsylvania PhD thesis, soon to be issued in revised form as a book, was "To Live in the New World': Adaptations for America in A.J.Downing's Theory of Landscape Gardening" (1992). For Hirschfeld, see the best English introduction to his theory in Linda Parshall, "C.C.L.Hirschfeld's concept of the garden in the German enlightenment", *Journal of Garden History*, 13 (1993), 125-171; A-L. J. Laborde, *Description des Nouveaux Jardins de la France.....* (Paris, 1808).
- 6 This battle of style reached its apogee in the confrontation of William Robinson and Reginald Blomfield, for which see David Ottewell, *The Edwardian Garden* (New Haven and London, 1989), pp. 5-38.
- 7 It follows then for the restorer that, since the larger context of the specific site often belonged to it, much may be lost by focusing only upon the site itself and not also on the surrounding landscape of fields or wilderness that was an essential element of the garden's representations. I have elaborated this in my report on historic gardens for the French Ministry of the Environment: see Yoshio Nakamura, Dirk Frieling & John Dixon Hunt, *Trois Regards sur le Paysage Francais* (Seyssel, 1993), pp. 233-40.
- 8 *Horticulturist* 7 (June 1852), p.249.
- 9 Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (Albany, NY, 1993), p.124.
- 10 I put to one side the often contentious issues of how we should restore or conserve some site from the past: what new, perhaps better or more environmentally sound materials to substitute for the old, what to do when we do not really know enough about the past, or when our predecessors clearly got it wrong (or passed on information that could not possibly have been true).
- 11 The mid-18th century visitor would have encountered a fine, perfectly round classical temple—in fact, a modern completion here at Stowe of a ruined antique model far away in Tivoli; this was juxtaposed to three other edifices—a gothic parish church, somewhat hidden in the trees, a somewhat shapeless heap of rubble, adorned with a headless statue, that appears to be a modern attempt to build something classical, and (across the limpid stream that flows through this pastoral valley) a rather odd structure, a hemi-cycle of busts in squat niches. Since it is a spot that encourages lingering and relaxation, the visitor would have doubtless compared the four, full-length sculptural representations of exemplary classical figures that were (then) to be discovered within the Temple of Ancient Virtue (for that is its name, as any guidebook would have explained) with the more numerous, but squat figures in the Temple of British Worthies. He or she would have read the inscriptions, maybe even—for sufficient numbers of visitors to Stowe would have been learned enough—realized that in the one Latin inscription on the centre of this latter structure a line of Virgil's that praised priests must have been deliberately omitted, and certainly would have (on the back of the same building) enjoyed a long inscription in English that praised what first seemed set to be an epitaph on a fine Italian gentlemen,

Signor Fido, who could obviously not be admitted into the front of this sanctum of British worth, but who gradually transpires, as the epitaph unrolls, to have been a quite exemplary greyhound.

- 12 These questions probably still need to be posed, given the continuing grip of neo-classicism. The work of poet and landscaper Ian Hamilton Finlay would be a fine example of a designer who continues to provoke such debates in landscape architectural terms.



John Dixon Hunt, *Chairman, Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*