



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

David Lambert, 'William Shenstone and
the Fairy Landscape', *The Georgian Group
Report & Journal*, 1986, pp. 67-73

WILLIAM SHENSTONE AND THE FAIRY LANDSCAPE

David Lambert

When William Shenstone's name is mentioned in gardening circles, it is usually his 'Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening' which come first to mind. But there is another source which is equally illuminating about his ideas. Among the Moral Pieces in his *Works in Verse and Prose*, is a poem with the awkward title, 'The Progress of Taste: or, The Fate of Delicacy. A POEM on the Temper and Studies of the AUTHOR; and how great a Misfortune it is, for a Man of small Estate to have much TASTE.' Wry and self-deprecating, it is a charming and candid poem. As the self-portrait of one of the mid-18th century's most influential gardeners, it also throws light on how a garden was experienced at the time, as opposed to our inevitably post-romantic, 20th century attitudes. In Part the Third, Shenstone describes his, or Damon's, enthusiasm for his new creation:

In short, so charm'd each wild suggestion,
Its truth was little call'd in question:
And DAMON dreamt he saw the fawns,
And nymphs, distinctly, skim the lawns;
Now trac'd amid the trees, and then
Lost in the circling shades again.
With leer oblique their lover viewing –
And CUPID – panting – and pursuing –
Fancy, enchanting fair, he cry'd,
Be thou my goddess! thou my guide!
For thy bright visions I despise
What foes may think, or friends advise.
The feign'd concern, when folks survey
Expend, time, study cast away:
The real spleen, with which they see:
I please my self, and follow thee.
Thus glow'd his breast by fancy warm'd:
And thus the fairy landskip charm'd . . .¹

For the modern reader it is difficult to understand just what Shenstone meant by fawns and nymphs distinctly seen, by fancy's bright visions, or by the fairy landskip; but the ideas are obviously central in his approach to the landscape, and their 18th century connotations worth exploring.

Shenstone had cultivated a particular kind of imagination. In the early 18th century, imagination was almost exclusively considered a visual faculty. Addison wrote that it was the sight alone 'which furnishes the Imagination with its Ideas', and that 'we cannot indeed have a single Image in the Fancy which did not make its first Entrance through the Sight.'² The imagination meant the faculty 'of retaining, altering and compounding those Images, which we have once received, into all Varieties of Picture and Vision . . . Scenes and Landskips more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole Compass of Nature' (*Spectator*, No. 411). Drawing on Locke, Addison stresses the primacy of the image within the mind: every object in nature, he says, has 'the Power of raising an agreeable Idea in the Imagination,' and things 'would make but a poor Appearance to the Eye, if we saw them only in their proper Figures and Motions.' As a result of this intensely visual imagination, the actually visible tends to



From the frontispiece to his works in 2 vols, 1764.

become rather shadowy: 'We are every where entertained with pleasing Shows and Apparitions' (*Spectator*, No. 413). The emphasis put by Addison on this insubstantial quality recurs in other writers. It was not simply exaggeration when Pope wrote of Bristol that the 'Long Street full of ships in the Middle & Houses on both sides looks like a Dream',³ nor when Walpole described Stowe: 'the real prospects are little less than visions'.⁴ An anonymous visitor to Pope's grotto at Twickenham praised its 'undistinguishable Mixture of Realities and Imagery',⁵ and similarly, in a strange letter to John Caryll in 1712, Pope, immersed in *The Rape of the Lock*, described the 'thousand Imaginary Entertainments' through which his mind was rambling:

my Days & Nights are so much alike, so equally insensible of any Moving Power but Fancy, that I have sometimes spoke of things in our family as Truths & real accidents, which I only Dreamt of: & again when some things that actually happen'd come into my head, have thought (till I enquir'd) that I had only dream'd of them.⁶

The visual imagination was also cultivated for the garden in the early 18th century. The correct approach was literary, sentimental, and associationist. 'Imagination' is the key to these gardens. We see it returned to repeatedly in the first pages of Shenstone's 'Unconnected Thoughts.' Gardening, he writes, 'consists in pleasing the imagination by scenes of grandeur, beauty, or variety,' and his priorities are unequivocal: 'Objects should be less calculated to

strike the immediate eye, than the judgement or well-formed imagination.' Necessity has a part here of course – Shenstone simply could not afford to strike the immediate eye with expensive building in his garden – but he is also applying a theory of perception we recognise from Addison and Pope. So, in the use of objects the aim is that they should 'serve to connect ideas, that convey reflexions of the pleasing kind,' and thus ruins for example are valued less for their shape or colour, than for '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.'⁷

Perhaps the most intriguing of Shenstone's Thoughts is his comparison of the garden to 'an epic or dramattick poem.' This may be understood when we realise what reading then involved. As a schoolmaster at Cheam, the young William Gilpin recorded how he tried to instil in his pupils a 'picture-making faculty'; that is, a habit of forming mental pictures, while reading descriptive poetry.⁸ 'Picturesque', in its original, early 18th century sense – as quite distinct from its later meaning – was applied not to scenery at all, but to description, to mean 'picturable'. Pope talks of the picturesque or 'imaging' parts of Virgil,⁹ and it is from the same point of view that Gilpin criticises Milton: the garden of Eden 'is unquestionably a beautiful piece of poetry: but there is scarce one picturesque idea in it. Reduce it to paper, & it will make a plan; but not a picture.'¹⁰ John Scott of Amwell writes almost like one of Gilpin's pupils in his 'Essay on Painting', when he urges artists to attend less to nature than to 'The Mind's strong Picture when we hear or read'.¹¹ A poem afforded hints to this visual imagination, which then created a mental picture or 'visionary scene'. This inner, ideal landscape was very influential in pre-Brownian gardens like Shenstone's. In *The English Garden*, William Mason wrote a subtle appreciation of Kent's gardening, in which he praises him for 'realizing' landscapes that were beyond the range of his pencil.¹² Mason's comment may be double-edged – he had no great regard for Kent's ability as a draughtsman – but the underlying assumption remains, that the landscape garden was not an imitation of painting, Kent's or anyone's, but shares with it a far deeper source, in the ideal scenes that exist only in the imagination. When Shenstone compared the garden to a poem, it was in the sense of its evoking an ideal landscape in the picture-making imagination of its viewers.

Behind the creation of an *actual* landscape, then, lay an *ideal* landscape, waiting to be conjured up in the mind by allusion, association, and carefully guided contemplation. Thomson describes the proper experience of these gardens in *The Seasons* when, addressing George Lyttleton at Hagley, he writes,

You wander through the Philosophic World
Where in bright Trains continual Wonders rise¹³

Given this visualising faculty, it seems that what was to be enjoyed was largely this vision or bright train of wonders, derived from, but superior to, the actual garden scene. When Jonathan Tyers, the proprietor of the Vauxhall gardens, inscribed the temple in his Surrey retreat, 'These scenes a momentary heav'n can show;/For contemplation's all the heav'n we know',¹⁴ he expressed exactly the spirit of the sentimental garden. Heaven, Arcadia, or Eden, it existed not in the physical scenery at all, but in the ideas raised in the properly cultivated, 'well-formed' imagination. The man of taste shared with his peers a common stock of classical and pastoral imagery, which could be drawn upon in the garden by inscription and allusion. So for example, Henry Hoare could depend on this shared education in his visitors to pick up the references that would turn the circuit walk at Stourhead into an image of the voyage of Aeneas;¹⁵ or Richard Temple could plan part of Stowe as a polemic against Sir Robert Walpole's government, depending on visitors like Gilpin to understand the landscape as 'A very elegant Piece of Satyr'.¹⁶ In a letter to Richard Bentley, 6th May 1755, Horace Walpole expresses concern that people do not 'really like' Strawberry Hill, 'that is, understand it'. It is



“Virgil’s Grove” from a drawing by Thomas Smith of Derby probably 1748.

in this spirit that Kent, in designing the Praeneste terrace at Rousham, could refer architecturally to the Temple of Fortune at Palestrina, leaving the visitor familiar with Italy through the Grand Tour to recall the Roman landscape and its associations.

The importance and effectiveness of the inscriptions at the Leasowes was often remarked upon. Robert Dodsley called them ‘the spells,/The powerful incantations, magic verse,/Inscrib’d on every tree, alcove, or urn’.¹⁷ When we read them, this may seem rather an overstatement:

Here in cool grot, and mossy cell,
 We rural fays and fairies dwell:
 Tho’ rarely seen by mortal eye,
 When the pale moon, ascending high,
 Darts thro’ yon limes her quivering beams,
 We frisk it near those crystal streams.¹⁸

The modern reader’s reaction is quite likely to be one of exasperation, both with Dodsley and Shenstone, but that may be because the 18th century significance of ‘fairy’ has been lost to us. Above all, we have lost the sense of its connection with the picturesque or picture-making imagination. Dryden makes this connection clear when he defines the ‘fairy kind of writing’ as that ‘which depends only upon the Force of Imagination’.¹⁹ It is this faculty which Shenstone is invoking in his audience, inviting their active connivance in transforming the garden into Arcadia. He requires that, as Addison wrote of the fairy way of writing, ‘we do not care for seeing through the falsehood, and willingly give ourselves up to so agreeable an imposture’ (*Spectator*, No. 419). In this mood of willingly suspended disbelief, the visualising, ‘wild creative power’ of fancy is encouraged,²⁰ and ideal illusions become, as Shenstone put it in ‘Rural Elegance’, ‘all embody’d to the mental sight’ (l. 266).

Fairy is the world pictured in the mind. It is in this sense that the word was being used by a visitor to Mount Edgcumbe, who wrote that, overlooking Plymouth Sound from the terrace, 'one might retire from the world and yet be a Spectator to all its bustle . . . and in a fairy mirror behold an epitome of the World',²¹ and again when Lord Macartney compared the Chinese Emperor's park at Gehol to the 'fairyland of Paine's Hill'.²² And when Horace Walpole wrote rapturously of Hagley's 'enchanting' scenes and 'fairy dale', it was because as he walked round, he was continually being led on to envisage the ideal world of his dreams, a composite of 'an Albano landscape', Parnassus, Sadeler's prints, and 'a landscape of Nicolo Poussin's'. In return for his compliance, Walpole was enabled to steal peeps into a glorious world, partly natural but largely ideal.²³ This was the 'enchantment' for which Dodsley praised Shenstone, the spell which the 'magician' gardener weaves.²⁴

So Damon dedicated himself to Fancy and the fairy landscape, and chose to live for his bright but elusive visions of the ideal. The imagination, for Shenstone as for Addison, could 'fancy to it self Things more . . . Beautiful than the Eye ever saw' (*Spectator*, No. 418). So distinct could the envisaged world appear, that he once dismissed his garden as no more than 'Meadows and Streams, from which little can be expected, but a Group of rural Allusions'.²⁵ Shenstone's real creation was not the Leasowes at all, but the fairy landscape which the garden could evoke.

This visionary approach belonged almost exclusively to the first fifty or sixty years of the century, and its supersession by the more spectacular – in the sense of appealing to 'the immediate eye' – gardening of Capability Brown, divides 18th century landscape into two quite different camps. It is difficult to suggest reasons for the change: faith in the associationist psychology on which these gardens depended, waned; perhaps the classical ethos in which fawns and nymphs could be seen, similarly faded: certainly as landscaping became more popular and gardens were created to order by professionals, the personal closeness which was essential to Twickenham or Stowe, and to the Leasowes, was lost. Under Brown's influence, appearance came to predominate over the literary, 'emblematic' quality; the merely visual over the visionary. But perhaps disillusion was inevitable in the conflict summarised by John Scott's cautionary 'Verses to a Friend, Planting':

Know, each fair image form'd within thy mind,
Far wide of truth thy sickening sight shall find!

The world of visionary beauty had, as Addison suggested in *Spectator*, No. 413, its darker side. The shows and apparitions that can be conjured up out of the raw material of nature, will also prove transitory:

our Souls are at present delightfully lost and bewildered in a pleasing Delusion, and we walk about like the Enchanted Hero of a Romance, who sees beautiful Castles, Woods and Meadows: and at the same time hears the warbling of Birds, and the purling of Streams: but upon the finishing of some secret Spell, the fantastick Scene breaks up, and the disconsolate Knight finds himself on a barren Heath, or in a solitary Desert.

Shenstone's pastorals are haunted by just such a disillusioned landscape:

O'er desert plains, and rushy meers,
And wither'd heaths I rove:
Where tree, nor spire, nor cot appears,
I pass to meet my love.
(*Song* xii, 1744).

He had dedicated himself to a fickle goddess whose nymphs, seen distinctly but momentarily, left him forever in restless pursuit of their fleeting shadows. And as the ideal scenes faded and the nymphs fled, the actual scenes were left the more desolate. Hence that bleak landscape always at the back of Shenstone's mind – no one is more eloquent on the barrenness of winter

– and its inevitable relation to the picturesque. His devotion to the world of rural allusions left him ‘Dull to the sense of new delight’ (‘Ode to Memory’) in mere meadows and streams:

Tedious again to curse the drizzling day!
Again to trace the wintry tracks of snow!
Or, sooth’d by vernal airs, again survey
The self same hawthorns bud, and cowslips blow!
(Elegy xi)

Later visitors were often disappointed with the Leasowes. Partly because Shenstone’s personal guidance had been so important in realising the garden’s allusions, but partly because of the change in attitude under Brown’s influence, they were surprised at its modest appearance. The reaction of William Gilpin, out in search of a Picturesque which now meant ‘agreeable in a picture’,²⁶ is particularly vehement, which seems ironic coming from one who understands so well the allusive spirit of the sentimental garden:

In the use of water he has been too profuse. He collects it only from a few springs, which ooze from his swampy grounds. It was a *force therefore on nature*, to attempt either a *river*, or a *lake*. A cascade or a purling rill, should have satisfied his ambition. Besides, like the water of all swamps, the water of the Leasowes wants brilliancy. Frothed by a fall, or in a quick descent, the impurities of it are less observed; in gentle motion they are striking; but in a lake they are offensive. It was ridiculous to see Naiads invited, by inscriptions, to bathe their beauteous limbs in crystal pools, which stood before the eye, impregnated with all the filth, which generates from stagnation.²⁷

Gilpin’s description is surprisingly bitter, as well as wrong-headed. More humorously, Richard Graves highlights the same gap between ideal and actual in his satire *Columella*, in which the recluse (a portrait of Shenstone) is found, not reclined under a shady tree and reading *The Seasons* as his guests expect, but frantically chasing a neighbour’s pigs from his grove.



The Leasowes

Charmed by the fairy landscape, by the garden which he had, as Pope said of Bathurst at Cirencester, peopled with nymphs, Shenstone wandered through the Leasowes like Addison's enchanted man of taste. But he was trapped in his garden by an unresolvable paradox. His pastoral fantasies were its inspiration: in the pursuit of those elusive nymphs and fawns, Damon caught his glimpses of Arcadia. But his woods were so much the more desolate for their disappearance. The fairy landscape, on continual evocation of which his garden depended for its effect, cast long, derisory shadows across the empty lawns as Autumn fell. The sense of an ideal landscape haunted the gardens of the first half of the 18th century, and Shenstone, tracing the fate of delicacy, gives it its most lyrical expression.

NOTES

1. All quotations are from *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone, Esq.*, 2 vols, (London, 1764).
2. All quotations are from *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols, (Oxford, 1965).
3. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols, (Oxford, 1956), IV, 201, to Martha Blount, 19 November, 1739.
4. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols. (Oxford and New Haven, 1937–1983), x, 314, to George Montague, 7 July, 1770.
5. *The Newcastle Magazine*, 1748, reprinted in Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City* (Toronto, 1969), Appendix A.
6. Correspondence I, 163.
7. *Works in Verse and Prose*, II, 111–114.
8. See Mavis Batey, 'Gilpin and the schoolboy picturesque', *Garden History*, vol II, no. 2 (Spring 1974), 24–26. Gilpin's early definition of the Picturesque, significantly different from that of the later 18th century, was 'precisely nothing more than such ideas as could be formed into a picture'. (*ibid.*)
9. See Pope's Postscript to *The Odyssey* in the Twickenham edition of Pope's *Poetical Works*, X, 390.
10. Bodl. Mss. Eng. misc. e 519 (3) ff. 65–67.
11. All quotations are from Scott's *Poetical Works* (London, 1782).
12. William Mason, *The English Garden* (London, 1772), 11, 510–514.
13. *The Seasons*, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford, 1981), 'Summer', 11, 923–924.
14. Quoted in the anonymous *Box-Hill, a descriptive poem* (London, 1777).
15. See Kenneth Woodbridge, *Landscape and Antiquity: Aspects of English Culture at Stourhead 1718 to 1838* (Oxford, 1970), 30–37.
16. From *A Dialogue upon the Gardens . . . at Stow* (1748), reprinted in *The Genius of the Place* (London, 1975), ed. John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis.
17. 'Verses by Mr Dodsley', printed at the end of Shenstone's *Works in Verse and Prose*, II, 328–330.
18. Printed in Dodsley's description of the Leasowes: see Shenstone's *Works* II, 289.
19. See the Dedication to his *King Arthur* (1691). This quotation is from *The Dramatick Works*, ed. Montague Summers, 6 vols. (London, 1931–1932).
20. On Fancy's 'wild creative power,' see Mason, *The English Garden*, Book I, 1, 134.
21. John Swete, 'diaries' (unpub. Devon Record Office), IV, 141. Thanks to Mavis Batey for this reference.
22. John Barrow, *Travels in China*, 2nd ed. (London, 1806), 130.
23. *Correspondence*, XXXV, 143; 148–149, Walpole to Richard Bentley, September 1753.
24. 'Verses by Mr Dodsley.' See note 17.
25. *The Letters of William Shenstone*, ed. Marjorie Williams (Oxford, 1939), 364, Shenstone to the Duchess of Somerset, 23 June, 1753.
26. See his *Essay Upon Prints* (London, 1768), 2.
27. See his *Observations . . . on Several Parts of Great Britain, Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland*, 2 vols. (London, 1786), I, 54.