Visions of Nature in the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape Garden

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Abstract:

Relationships with what is called "nature" are often fundamental to the understanding of our experiences of the world, and therefore of our politics, our knowledges, and our everyday lives. The historical examination of these relationships and their meanings for certain people can therefore be a critically important archeological means for exploring the origins of how we today think about these relationships. The English landscape garden, intimately imbued with "natural" meanings and experiences, offers one site for such an examination. It was the product of a set of philosophies and theories—aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, and political—that were foundational to the experience of the eighteenth-century gentleman, and therefore to the history of ideas in the Western world.

A complex network of historical developments and transformations in our discursive relations is at play in the articulation of our experiences of the world. A landscape, in these terms, is simultaneously an object and domain of this articulation—"both a represented and presented space"; it is the world as an integrated "physical and multisensory medium […] in which cultural meanings and values are encoded."[1] As it is experienced, it is a "medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and other," a space constituting and constituted by "nature" as both "signified and signifier."[2] Therefore, the experience of the of the landscape occurs at the historical conversation of its particular morphology, sensation, and truth. Interrogating this experience can reveal fundamental ideas with which we define our relation to the "natural" world. This principle can be brought into the particular examination of the experience of the English landscape garden, according to its characteristic form and its articulation by the eighteenth-century sensibility within which it rose to prominence. We might thereby develop an understanding of how the English garden reveals eighteenth-century aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political experiences of "nature" appropriate to the white, Anglican, and bourgeois-colonial experience with which it emerged.

The gardens at Stourhead, Stowe, Chiswick, and Rousham are considered epitomizing examples of the

English landscape garden. While each vary in the particularity of their own characteristics, a number of more or less essential features categorize them as "English." As Maiken Umbach points out, we can definitely say that "they were not baroque"—that is, they were a departure from and rejection of the "axial formalism" of the strictly manicured lawns and hedges of the mathematical, geometric, and Newtonian-Cartesian organization "encapsulated by [the French gardens] of Versailles."[3] In contrast, English gardens (while still extensively planned) were designed to more closely resemble the pastoral landscape of Kent through a cultivation of apparently organic, irregular, Arcadian forms. They were also interspersed with quintessentially classical statuary and architecture, evoking a popular imagination of Greco-Roman antiquity. As Ann Bergmingham explains, their organizing principle was the arrangement of sightlines and views (see Figure 2) for the wandering observer, where "the theories which supported the English landscape garden movement seem to be most closely related to pictorial ideas derived from painting and literature. As the English embraced the Italianate landscapes of Claude, Poussin, and Salvator Rosa, the garden became a place to recreate these pictorial scenes

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1   W. J. T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," Landscape and Power (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1994), 5-14.

2   Ibid., 5.

3   Maiken Umbach, "Classicism, Enlightenment and the 'Other': Thoughts on Decoding Eighteenth-century Visual Culture" in Art History 25.3 (2002), 334.

in real life."[4] Integral to "the aesthetic ideal of the garden" was the construction of a series of "vistas," which married the eighteenth-century garden with "the concept of the 'picturesque,' or of the world seen as a picture where the irregularities and asymmetry of nature were charmingly inspirational."[5] Thus the English garden corresponded to experiences of the world that matched a theory of the picturesque, in which "nature" was envisioned as an aesthetic event defined in part by its spontaneous and irregular encounter.

This view was bound up within a set of understandings salient to the ideologies of the Enlightenment. The picturesque journey, first of all, corresponded to a new epistemological experience elaborated in the philosophy of empiricism. John Locke's "denial of 'innate ideas'" shaped a relation towards "nature" wherein "the visible world is registered by the eyes which transfer to the mind simple ideas associated with the images seen."[6] These assumptions of the "associationism" of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought, according to John Dixon Hunt:

> […] address the range and extent of
> associations provoked by the various
> items and the landscape in which they
> are discovered, and then the means
> by which those imaginative and mental
> experiences are made available, translated
> and so communicated. […] From this
> full repertoire [of the garden,] the visitor
> pulls his or her special idea of the whole. [7]

This empiricist "version of the mind" was apprehended in the English garden through its formation as an episodic field that "privileges individual, personal vision."[8] Both "emblematic" and "expressive," a landscape formed by a series of pictorial views supported an epistemology of "the spectator's ingenuity" and the wandering experience of "a 'happening,'" which invoked meaning and knowledge through engagement with "'allusive fields.'"[9] In other words, the garden—as an experience of "nature"—was

made to be known according to assumptions about knowledge itself. As such, and as the correlate of its pictorial aesthetics, the garden facilitated a new empiricist experience of meaning, truth, and knowledge. Along these lines, consider Figures 1 through 4. In portraying the contrasting aesthetic approach to the English gardens at Stourhead and the French gardens at Versailles, they reveal the contrasting relationships that were envisioned between the nature of the landscapes and that of their occupants. At Versailles, it was order, axis, and symmetry that conferred onto the centered palace—and therefore the centrality of the king—a privileged subjectivity in the order of the world. This universal subject-position, as it were, is indicated by the view shown in Figure 3. At Stourhead, by contrast , a lack of centralized program gives way to an experience of the landscape, of "nature," and of the world that can only be apprehended with a journey through it. If you look carefully at the plan (Figure 2), the sightlines drawn into it become apparent, which—in addition to clearly connoting the picturesque philosophy in the garden's architecture—show that there is no single, and hence no universal, point from which to know the landscape. As opposed to Versailles, then, the design of Stourhead (and English gardens like it) privileges both an individualized epistemic and ontological relation to the world.

This epistemological experience was supported—in addition to the scenic and decentralized arrangement of vegetation—by the symbolism of the garden's neoclassical elements. Umbach explains that within the "visual culture of the Enlightenment," neoclassical motifs—not just simply aestheticizing "universal, mathematical laws of proportion"—actually "had a lot in common" with "natural idioms" in eighteenth-century discourse.[10] As opposed to Versailles, "seen as an attempt to impose an arbitrary, willful order onto the land, re-defining nature as political territory dominated by man," in the English experience, by contrast, "neoclassicism and the landscape garden emancipated a rational potential inherent in nature—they gave a voice to natural order, rather than supplanting it with a

4   Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: U of California, 1986), 17-18. See also: Susan Groag Bell, "Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes: A Revisionist Approach to Eighteenth-Century English Garden History" in *Feminist Studies 1*6.3 (1990), 471; John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden*, 1620-1820 (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988), 31; John Dixon Hunt, "Stourhead Revisited & the Pursuit of Meaning in Gardens" in *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 26.4 (2006), 334.
5   Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology…*, 18.
6   Ibid., 35.
7   Hunt, "Stourhead Revisited," 335-338.
8   Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology…*, 35-36.
9   Umbach, "Classicism, Enlightenment and the 'Other'…," 328-331.
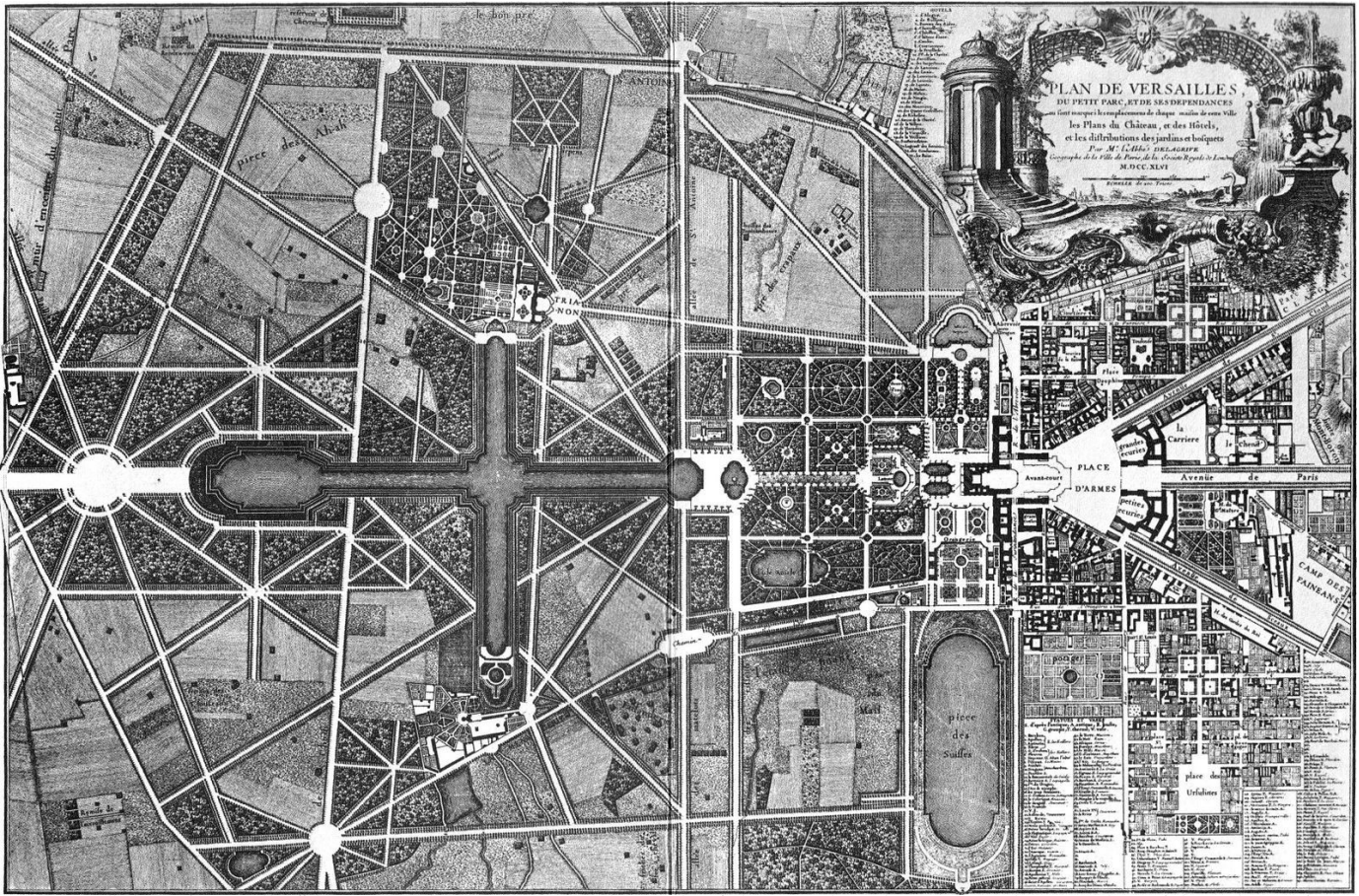10   Ibid., 334

Figure 1. "Plan of Versailles," by Jean Delagrive, 1746.[1] The gardens' design is based on a central view—that of the palace—from which to see, experience, and know the landscape, implicating a monarchic epistemology and ontology.

1   Jean Delagrive, Plan de Versailles. 1746. Maps and Plans Department, National Library of France.

man-made one."[11] Umbach elaborates:

> Like nature, eighteenth-century classicism was inherently ambiguous and combined many different associations. […] In symbolic terms, the landscape itself was classicized. Interspersed with a network of temples and statues […] and a host of classical inscriptions, the trees, bushes, and lawns of 'nature' [… in the garden] recollected another, classical, mythological landscape, that was present without being real.[12]

At Versailles, indicated by Figures 1 and 3, a relation was developed in the garden within which man (the king) was founded as the undisputable master and subject of "nature's" truth—he was centered, dominant, and unrivaled in the hierarchization and organization of the space of the landscape. This relation was neither manifested nor made to function as true within the English garden, regardless of whether or not the landscape continued to be dominated by man (it was). Rather, in its eighteenth-century experience, the formal (i.e. the human, cultural) and the "natural" interplayed cohesively in an "'allusive field,'" a manifestation of relationships and signifiers that were historically significant to the Enlightenment's multidimensional (and not merely dialectical) experience of the rational and sentimental, human and natural.[13] The garden's porticos, statues, temples—apparently arranged with "no center, no focus, no dominant aesthetic idea or message"—signified a truth that "nature" itself possessed and revealed.[14]

This simultaneously "ambiguous" and synergistic character of the classical in the garden and the discovery of its aestheticized truth by the wanderer were not only essential to its epistemological experience. Parallel to and supporting it was the notion of individualism in its ontological

11   Ibid., 334. See also: Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology…*, 20.
12   Ibid., 334.
13   Ibid., 332-336.
14   Ibid., 327.

experience.[15] In the garden at Stowe, for instance,

> [T]he complex iconography of the Elysian Fields [with] statuary, architecture, and inscriptions were combined in the creation of a political emblem of Whig opposition. Juxtaposed with a well-constructed Temple of Ancient Virtue was a ruinous Temple of Modern Virtue, while separated from the two by the river 'Styx' was the Temple of British Worthies containing busts of great figures from the Whig history of constitutional liberty. [16]

Following the 'Glorious Revolution' at the end of the seventeenth-century and the oligarchization of the British political economy, allusions to Greco-Roman republicanism emerged in cultural significance. In the "allusive" experience of gardens like Stowe and Stourhead, and with the "apparent disappearance of a controlling program exerting its influence from within the garden, public discourses—discourses from which such programs constructed emblematic significance—could continue to inform the garden with meaning [so that] the garden as a whole formed a picture of English liberty."[17] "Liberty," in this way, was a notion experienced as not only essential to the English garden's being, but to that of the garden's visitors; both were made to mirror in each other an apparently uncontrived, self-governing autochthony. It might be said, then, that the English garden was directly descendent of the philosophy of Locke: both an epistemological and ontological "liberty" found their correspondence in the individualism of its experience—of its knowledge and of its being.

15 . Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860,* 20.

16   Stephen Bending, "Re-Reading the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape Garden" in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55.3 (1992), 382.
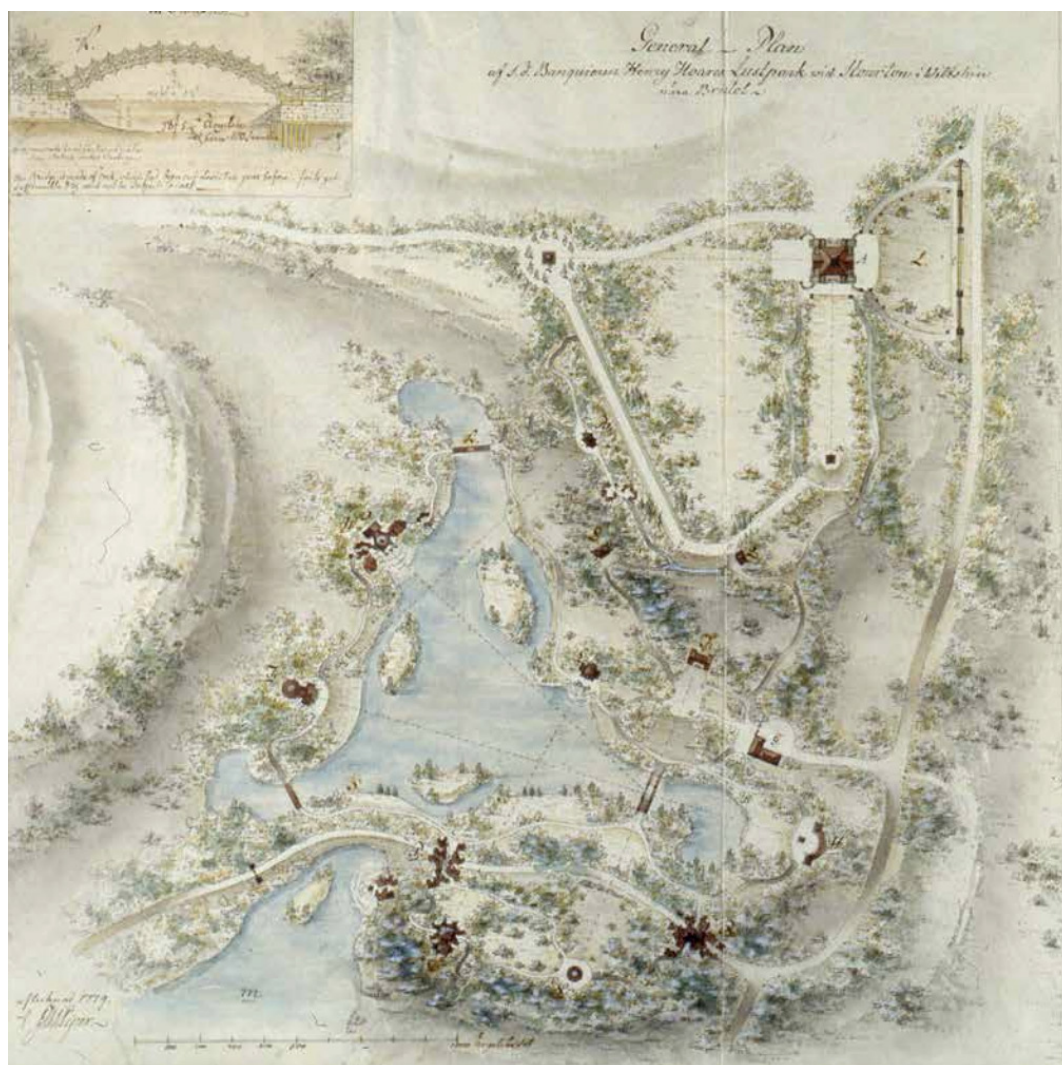
17   Ibid., 394.

Figure 2: "Study map of Stourhead in 1779 by Frederick Magnus Piper." [1] The dashed sightlines indicate a multitude of picturesque views and subject-positions. At Stourhead, to know the world is to take one's own path through it, and to see it with one's own eyes

1 . Frederick Magnus Piper, Study Map of Stourhead. 1779. From: Steffen Nijhuis, "[GIS-Based Landscape Design Research: Stourhead Landscape Garden as a Case Study" in *Architecture and the Built Environment* 15 (2015), 115

Figure 3. "Promenade de Louis XIV..." by Étienne Allegrain, ca. 1688-1695.[1] The view connotes the subjective universality at Versailles from which the French gardens' axial formalism radiates.

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1 . Étienne Allegrain. *Promenade de Louis XIV en vue du Parterre du Nord.* ca. 1688-1695. Les Collections/Historic Gallery, Château de Versailles, Versailles.

These experiences of liberty and of individualism that were granted to visitors of the English garden were not only facilitated by the espousal of such ideals in the Glorious Revolution and the turn towards classical republicanism. They corresponded as well to a shift in the formal principles of landscape architecture, and thus on a departure from the centrality and monarchy of order, composition, and view characteristizing the earlier French gardens—and the world-view they evoked. Colonial exploits in South-East Asia were the perfect catalyst, exposing the English gentry to the horticultural sensibility of the Chinese. Yu Liu explains:

> Coming from many directions, information about Chinese gardens shaped the nature of the first stages in the English landscaping revolution [whose] design can be seen as deviating from a geometrical and symmetrical design but conforming to the new goal of creating incidents and surprises ['happenings'] through the incorporation of both the formal and natural.[18]

We can connect this clearly to the interplay of formal and natural that corresponded to the marriage of empiricism to a picturesque relation to "nature" in the English garden. But a number of other eighteenth-century experiences also found their essential connection in the appropriation of the Chinese model.

First, the ethical pursuit of liberty. It was perceived that for the Chinese, "nature is beautiful even in its wildest manifestations because it is free," and therefore that "the only true aesthetic process is free and spontaneous, uninhibited by externally imposed concepts of order and reg-

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18   Yu Liu, "The Importance of the Chinese Connection: The Origin of the English Garden" in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 27.3 (2003), 84-87.

ularity."[19] Faced with this approach, "the implication for a different kind of ethics and politics [was] one of the main attractions of Chinese aesthetics to [Alexander] Pope and those English writers who introduced it to England."[20] Liu elaborates:

> In human affairs, as in gardening, the idea of irregular beauty implies a very different conceptualization of freedom. Rather than antagonism between our moral selves and our natural environment, it is defined by the possibility of perfect affinity. Instead of asserting ourselves constantly against nature as an adversary, in other words, we may actually tune into its ecological operation. Showing confidence in the independently and spontaneously acting potential of both humankind and its gardens, [irregularity] enabled the early English landscaping theorists to oppose, in effect, the lowly estimate of human nature espoused by Hobbes and Calvin and to defend human dignity several decades before Rousseau.[21]

Thus, the intentionally uncontrived appearance of the English landscape garden corresponded, apropos of Locke's epistemologico-ontological liberty, to the rise of a positive ethico-aesthetic ideology anticipating Romanticism. Even if the garden itself was altogether an arranged object of aesthetic exploitation, "affinity" to it—besides domination or production—became a prominent characterizing relation in its eighteenth-century experience. "Le jardin anglo-chinois" was a site for a proto-Romantic notion (if not fact) of a free and cohesive relation to "nature." Imperialism, and an associated Orientalism, thus occasioned a shift in the ways by which the English bourgeoisie constructed themselves as subjects (and authorities) of a republican, free, and individualistic (if nonetheless aristocratic) political economy.

Second, a classicist nostalgia. Chinese gardening was discursively synthesized into the ancient Greco-Roman literature with which the English were so deeply concerned:

> The provocatively different Chinese designs

had a huge influence on the creative new way in which the horticultural ideas of the classical writers [Homer, Epicurus, Pliny, Virgil, Horace] were read in England. [… C]elebrating the works of Homer as [portraying] 'a wild Paradise' rather than an 'an order'd Garden,' [Pope] is later able to see surprise and freedom as the essence of not only nature but gardening and poetry. While helping to sanctify the exotic novelty of the Chinese horticultural ideal into […] 'the gospel of irregularity,' the reputation of Homer and others also made it sound like part of an already existent native tradition. [22]

Hence the presence of classical temples, replicas of the Pantheon, and busts of Hellenic deities were, in the English garden, not only recollections of many of the English aristocracy's "Grand Tour" to the ruins of Rome and Greece. They "also functioned as an invented tradition," working to "inculcate certain values and norms of behavior [implying] a continuity with the past" and "membership in the exclusive club of nationhood."[23] As such, a nationalist experience was developed in part through a "natural" relation to a picturesque landscape, classicized with Greco-Roman motifs, that was recognized within a discourse "significant in the constitution of the eighteenth-century […] notions of 'Englishness' and English identity."[24] The English garden's aesthetic morphology and classical symbology thus not only mirrored a political economy of supposed republican virtue, but also a discursively constructed sense of historical righteousness.

Third, and similarly, this discourse overlapped with that of Christian iconography. Milton's Paradise Lost was a common referent, wherein "an embryonic version of the ferme ornée [ornamented farm] [… was] important in making it easier for the English […] to feel sympathetic towards and assimilate the new Chinese design ideas."[25] In Milton, we see the grounds for this connection, evident in such Arcadian descriptions as the following:

> "Flow'rs worth of Paradise which not nice art
> In beds and curious knots, but nature boon
> Poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain"[26]

19   Ibid., 87-88
20   Ibid., 89.
21   Ibid., 90-91.
22   Ibid., 76-79.
23   Anne Helmreich, *The English Garden and National Identity: The Competing Styles of Garden Design, 1870-1914* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 4.
24   Eve Darian-Smith, "Legal Imagery in the "Garden of England" in *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 2.2 (1995), 397.
25   Liu, "The Importance of the Chinese Connection…", 73; 90.
26   John Milton, and Merrit Y. Hughes. Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books (New York: Odyssey, 1962), 4.263-43.

Figure 4. Watercolor view over the lake at Stourhead by Sir Copplestone Wawick Bampfylde, ca. 1750-1770.[1] This is one of Stourhead's many picturesque views, whose vagueness and multiplicity indicate a more individualistic experience and knowledge of "nature."

1   Sir Copplestone Wawick Bampfylde. Stourhead: *The Lake, looking towards the Temple of Flora with the Church and Market Cross.* ca. 1750-1770. British Panoramic Landscapes Collection, RISD Museum, Rhode Island.

Imbuing the English garden with this resemblance and significance of "Eden […] Paradise, [and] the classical Elysium" subjected it to an experience of "an idealized form of nature, corresponding to an ideal state of man […] drawing on both a body of classical literature and the psychological ideal of the innocent past."[27] The eighteenth-century English garden, then, in its "uncontrived" design, was made to represent and produce a politico-aesthetic experience of a relation to the "natural" (and thus historically and aesthetically "true") world characterized by liberty, tradition, and ordained innocence.

These terms make clear the utterly political elements in the experience of the English garden. It is important to recognize that this experience is distinctly male, white, and bourgeois. For in the political economy of the time, "the landscape garden presented a particularly attractive means by which the landowner could represent himself as part of a civic humanist elite" and "[denote] a worthiness to own land and a concomitant worthiness to the political rights it bestowed"—e.g. the right to vote.[28] Integral, then, was the inculcation of the notion and sense

of a political innocence through a legitimizing relation with the landscape, for the emergence of the English garden was predicated directly on the forcible enclosure of the British common lands and the violent dispossession of the peasantry.[29] So, for the landed gentry, the "garden landscape naturalized, and in a sense disguised, England's intrinsically […] anti-democratic system of common law."[30] Ann Bermingham provides an insightful analysis of how the English garden's morphology produced a construction of a self-justifying relation with "nature" in the experience of the aristocracy:

> As the real [enclosed] landscape began to look increasingly artificial […] a natural landscape became the prerogative of the estate, allowing for a conveniently ambiguous signification, so that nature was the sign of property and property the sign of nature. [Thus] the landscape garden collapsed the opposition between nature and the cultural (social, aesthetic) processes that appropriated it[.] [T]he class dominating the countryside

27   Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology...*, 28
28   . Bending, "Re-Reading the Eighteenth-Century English Landscape Garden," 393-395. See also: Bell, "Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes…", 473
29   See: Darian-Smith, "Legal Imagery in the "Garden of England"," 404; Berminham, *Landscape and Ideology*…, 13; and Karl Marx, "The Secret of Primitive Accumulation," "The Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land," Capital. Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 878-889.
30   Darian-Smith, "Legal Imagery in the "Garden of England"," 404.

and directing its transformation could see itself, at the most intimate level, as acting naturally.[31]

Whereas the inevitability of French nobles' claim to the land could be read in the obviousness with which they managed their gardens, it was the history of English patrons' claim to their lands that was fabricated in their intentionally unmanaged appearance. By concealing the forcible dispossession of the land beneath Chinese gardening principles and classical statuary, aesthetics were a means to infuse normality, truth, and justification into the relationship between landowning men and the English garden. In this way, "nature signifie[d] class while class signifie[d] a universal, classness nature."[32]

It is therefore also important to note that the eighteenth-century landscape garden "is a particular historical formation associated with European imperialism."[33] The appropriation of a Chinese horticultural ontology, encountered through the Jesuit mission, is easy enough to recall.[34] But in focusing on the experience of the garden itself, W. J. T. Mitchell explains that "landscape might be seen more profitably as something like the 'dreamwork' of imperialism," engaging particular discourses and ideologies which support "utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect." [35] The garden "symbolized the ideal of history"[36] through which the use of classical and Christian motifs in "the invention of tradition [was] a method for using collective memory selectively by manipulating [suppressing, or elevating] certain bits of the national past."[37] The English garden was therefore the crutch of a discourse on "nature" which omitted a political problematic "by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature" in the experience of the landowning men who enjoyed it[38]. The garden's aesthetic effects were the corollary of a discourse in which the ruling class of men had to reconcile their position with the blood, dispossession, and exclusion of their history.

Ultimately, then, we can see indeed that the experience of the world—and of "nature"—is articulated within a network of discourses projected into and evoked by a cultural relation to the landscape and its form. The interplay of a number of ideological developments constituted such a network in relation to the eighteenth-century aristocratic experience of "nature" through the English landscape garden. The picturesque became the central notion of an aesthetic experience following a rejection of the unified formalism of the French garden, in favor of discretely arranged sights and pictorial episodes. This connected with an empiricist epistemological experience developed in the philosophies of the Enlightenment, privileging—through these pictorial episodes—the personal and visual journey as a way of knowing. Accordingly, individualism was at the heart of an ontological and proto-Romantic experience which linked the correspondence of an irregular aesthetic and an individual epistemology to an ontological and aesthetic ideal. Finally, a British national identity and sense of innocence characterized a political experience derived from legitimizing discourses which invoked the continuity and rights of classicism and Christianity. All of these experiences of "nature" found their representation, expression, and correspondence in the form of the English garden. As such, it stands at a point of intersection in the historical development of an array of ideologies, discourses, and spaces significant in the history of the Western experience of the world.

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31   Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology…,* 13-15.
32   Ibid., 15.
33   Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5.
34   Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5.
35   Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5-10.
36   Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 5-10.
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