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Liberty and the Art of Walking

I have chosen this text so as to recall the good memory of professor David Jarrett, the garden man, who inspired me to thinking about gardening, and especially about the English garden, not simply in terms of its undeniable aesthetic beauty, but also as a space which both masks and reflects social, political and epistemological conflicts. The paper reflects the hours (and miles) of walking and talking which David and I used to spend together in "England's green and pleasant Land."

Sitting in an English garden
Waiting for the sun
If the sun don't come you get a tan
From standing in the English rain
— John Lennon and Paul McCartney

Describing a gravel walk in his garden (*To a Gravel Walk*, 1795), William Mason praises it for its being an emblem of liberty. He says:

Here, as thou leads't my step through lawn and grove,
Liberal though limited, restrained though free,
Fearless of dew, or dirt, or dust, I rove,
And own those comforts all derived from thee!
Take then, smooth path, this tribute of my love,
Thou emblem pure of legal liberty!¹

What makes Mason's walk pleasurable is the guidance of the gravel walk which directs his step. His walk is in fact a guided tour of sorts, and it is the nature of the guide which gives the walker the feeling of security and pleasure. Rather than tell-

¹ William Mason, "To a Gravel Walk," in: John Dixon Hunt, ed., *The Oxford Book of Garden Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 131.

ing Mason where to go, the path protects him from aimless wandering, from getting lost among lawns and groves, for instance. Restrained freedom is thus protective and, like the law (“legal liberty”), it guarantees the absence of transgressive and threatening elements, such as “dew, or dirt, or dust.”

The paradox of guidance in Mason’s poem is, of course, that it does not lead anywhere. Mason’s tour is not even a picturesque tour in search of beautiful views as “lawn and grove” might be, but a walk upon some territory through which the rover passes without actually paying much attention to it. What is praised in the poem is, in fact, the existence of the road as the source of comforts which it offers as commodities to be owned. It is, interestingly, not the garden which, though Mason’s, is the object of Mason’s owning, not even the path, but the security of his freedom limited so naturally, that its restraining power also seems to be a part of his internal landscape. Read as a metaphor of one’s life, which is always at hand when travelling is at stake, the path is a guide to a territory citizenship which demands an aestheticization of the political system whose presence can be rendered as an object of admiration which does not intrude into the individual freedom. What makes this individual freedom possible, however, at least in the case of Mason, is that the individual actually possesses both the territory (garden) and the road. The natural nature of this possessing is so apparent that it need not even be mentioned in the text. For what Mason possesses in the poem is not land, but the commodified “comforts” derived from the properly organized space. Possessing land is as natural as being, while pleasures and comforts are rewards for the possession.

Read in the light of John Locke’s theory of property from some hundred years earlier (*The Second Treatise on Government*, 1690) a walk in a garden might be regarded as the labour of appropriating the field of comforts and pleasures. Man, according to Locke, has an undeniable property in his own person, and “his body and the ‘work’ of his hands, we may say, are properly his.”² It is not quite clear what sort of activity Locke means by work here, and for some reason he himself puts the word in inverted commas. Then he defines “work” as removal of something “out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in.”³ This removal is achieved by way of mixing labour with nature which thus becomes man’s property because he has “joined to it something that is his own.”⁴ In other words labour consists in changing nature by adding to it and thus endowing it with new properties which legitimize property as one’s possession. This addition, or “annexation,” by labour renders property as an extension of man — one is what one has, as it were. Since nature, by definition, cannot be possessed in its natural state, property also necessitates improvement, a bettering which gives it the property of property. This labour

² John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government*, quoted in: Stanisław Helsztyński, ed., *Specimens of English Prose and Poetry*, Vol. 2 (Warszawa: PWN, 1973), 82.

³ Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government*, 82.

⁴ Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government*, 82.

of improvement irrevocably separates man from nature and actually defines nature as Otherness without properties.

Mason, however, does not address himself as the maker of the gravel walk, as its designer, for instance. The walk simply is there, giving him some secure position away from lawns and groves themselves also designed to form a landscape garden. The only labour he seems to be carrying out there is observation and recognition of what is right or wrong qua the feeling of comfort. Very much like Pope's rules of "Nature methodiz'd" to be followed in *An Essay on Criticism*, Mason's gravel walk leads to the discovery of the proper, of a legal liberty which begins to speak by itself when one undertakes the labour of recognition, that is to say, of taking a walk in which there is no risk of seeing anything wrong, of being misguided. Such freedom to walk, not too far, of course, the oxymoronic restrained freedom can thus only take place within an already restricted territory, a territory annexed to one's property whose legal status politicizes it, translates it into a politically ordained social space which is simultaneously rendered as, say, aesthetically positive, as the field of agreeable pleasures and comforts of Burke's "beautiful" things.

Calling "beauty a social quality," Burke talks of the pleasure of beholding beautiful things and talking to agreeable people, but also of our willingly entering "into a kind of relation with them."⁵ The space of a garden is such that one really willingly enters because man, unlike other creatures, "is not designed [...] to live at large." Neither is he guided by the general unselective passion but he connects it with "the idea of *social* qualities, which direct and heighten the appetite which he has in common with all other animals."⁶ This heightened appetite is, of course, taste as a guiding principle of selection. What one is capable of selecting, however, must already be marked by a sign of property, of commodity which can be legally transferred among the members of the society simultaneously remaining within it as an object of the aesthetic appetite for beauty which is also inextricably linked with the law. Mason's garden path, which in itself is not so much an object of admiration as a position from which a property can be viewed, grants the one who walks a feeling of pleasurable comfort exactly by invisibly marking the proper *via* its status of "emblem pure of legal liberty." A walker is legally free only provided that he follows the transparent inscription of the legal whose legality is confirmed by the feeling of comfort offered to him. The labour of walking is thus an extension of the labour of appropriating which legitimizes the latter. What is thus also produced is an identity of an ideal social individual who finds pleasure in what he has due to his full identification with the law which actually constitutes a part of his property. Private property, which divides and separates, has within it some generalized spirit of the law which, by making this property naturally secure, raises it to the common sphere of shared pleasures available to anyone who owns a property.

⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 39.

⁶ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 39.

An individual thus produced is incapable of suffering what Burke calls “the pain of absolute solitude” in which “*pain* is the predominant idea.”⁷ “Good company,” he says,

lively conversations, and the endearments of friendship, fill the mind with great pleasure; a temporary solitude on the other hand, is itself agreeable. This may perhaps prove, that we are creatures designed for contemplation as well as action [...].⁸

Temporary solitude is thus a more passive kind of social existence in which we contemplate over our active participation in the world. Burke reads both action and contemplation as pleasurable states of mind without mentioning any labour which would be hard to classify as either sublime or beautiful. The labour of having a property seems to have been already done and the time has now come to an agreeable coexistence of friendly creatures who only actively exchange ideas or have agreeable solitary walks in their gardens. A solitary walker, like Mason, cannot go too far or get lost unless he should give up following the gravel walk and thus experience the pain of absolute solitude. An individual is secure both in the company of his neighbours as well as away from it, he is free from the threat of loss, of losing and being lost at the same time.

Such a well balanced way of living in which the individual is an extension of the social is somehow reminiscent of Rousseau’s “chosen country” in which he would like to live in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. He imagines it as “a free nation situated among several different nations, none with any interest in invading it — in short, a republic that did not tempt the ambitions of its neighbours [...]”⁹ The grounding principle of such a society is exactly freedom from loss which is granted by the lack of desire to possess what is not mine projected upon others. Such a disinterestedness is possible only provided that full satisfaction of desire is granted to an individual who can now virtuously, without desire, enjoy the pleasures offered by the world in which one’s harmonious inside is a reflection of the equally harmonious outside. The ideology thus produced is one which meets Terry Eagleton’s prerequisites for its efficiency: it is “pleasurable, intuitive, self-ratifying: in a word, aesthetic.”¹⁰ What is, quite symptomatically, also aestheticized in Rousseau’s state is the military which, though really unnecessary in his ideal republic, will remain there as the sphere of aesthetic cultivation of taste:

⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 40.

⁸ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 40.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 41.

It follows that in such a fortunate situation it would have nothing to fear but itself, and if its citizens were trained in arms, it would be more for the sake of maintaining that soldiery spirit and noble courage that are so well suited to freedom and cultivate the taste for it rather than from the necessity for the citizens' actual defence.¹¹

The pleasure of free citizenship is thus also accompanied by a soldiery spirit, perhaps a reminder of the threatening other with which the individual had to fight in order to forge both himself and others. A walk in a garden, like Mason's, can also be read as an act of cultivation of a once courageous spirit which has overcome its partiality and self-interest thus transforming what Eagleton calls "structures of power" into "structures of feeling," "property" into "propriety."¹² It is the feeling of being proper, and thus of being oneself, which makes Mason enjoy the comforts of legal liberty in his poem. It also makes him feel "fearless" of the outside, which noble courage is offered to him by the absence of the outside which he owes to the guidance, or command, of the path which he identifies as his own nature. Legal freedom needs a soldiery spirit, an aestheticized soldiery which can be noble only as long as there is nothing to fight for or against, as long as it can remain an agreeable sport, an exercise or an outing within a territory without an outside.

Though seemingly already a perfect source of security and innocent pleasures, such a territory can still be improved, though not by extension. Rather, the improvement is thinkable in terms of further elimination of the outside, in terms of domesticating the outside without, however, enclosing it within one's own territory. An example of such a practice comes from Joseph Spence's letter on gardening to Rev. Mr Wheeler (1751) in which a sand walk is seen as an improvement of a gravel walk. "I can go all round my little territory in half an hour after a shower or rain," he says,

without being wet: for sand dries soon and is much easier hoed and kept clean than gravel, besides its being much cheaper, especially to me: for God help us, we live in the neighbourhood of one of the most dreary, sandy heaths in Europe.¹³

The dreary heath, in itself useless and unwelcome, provides means for cheap improvement of Spence's garden walk thus partaking of the aestheticization of his "little territory." This dreary neighbourhood is one that, from a distance, spoils the pleasure ground of Spence's garden, threatens with lack of properties. It is a neighbourhood with which nobody wants to either socialize or walk in, but it is also

¹¹ Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, 5.

¹² Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 42.

¹³ Joseph Spence, "Letter to the Rev. Mr Wheeler," in: John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, eds., *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620—1820* (London: Paul Elk, 1975), 271.

a neighbourhood which is simultaneously made familiar by its reduction to usefulness. The task of the improvement, on the other hand, is to open up an easier access to Spence's territory, even when the weather, for instance, is not favourable. This improvement of the garden walk is also a step towards the elimination of any displeasure and effort of movement, of the travail of travel, as Anne D. Wallace phrases it, whose absence transforms landscape garden into a sphere of purely visual aesthetic contemplation.¹⁴

The invisibility, or reduction, of the outside from the perspective of the garden is not seen as art in the 18th century. Rather, it defines the realm of the natural whose aestheticism is read physiologically as a matter of taste which classifies those who classify as properly human to the exclusion of others. For "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,"¹⁵ as Pierre Bordieu puts it. In this way taste becomes the decisive factor in establishing social distinctions on the basis of capability to see within the world of an aestheticism which, to quote Bordieu again, "presents the aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle and takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit."¹⁶ This principle, as in Mason's reading of the law, is not even seen as a principle, but as a natural predisposition to seeing the already organized as the limit of the perceivable beyond which there is nothing social, nothing, say, ethically aesthetic. And ideally there is no limit to Mason's garden world, and there is no way out of it. Nor is there a way for others to participate in the pleasures of walking unless they are already endowed with his classifying taste, with the ability to see what should be seen. A walk in an English garden is an endeavour undertaken not quite in order to see things and places, but in order to see that they are there, in order to confirm the propriety of property. Sitting in an English garden, even without walking, one takes part in a guided tour through one's own nature which is so purely natural that no doubt as to the presence of anything artificial is possible. For art, like wildness, is a threat to legal liberty, and, as William Shenstone teaches us, it can come to one's garden only at night, when nobody sees it. In his "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening" (1764) he says:

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.¹⁷

¹⁴ Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 46–49.

¹⁵ Pierre Bordieu, "Distinction and the Aristocracy of Culture," in: John Storey, ed., *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 448.

¹⁶ Bordieu, "Distinction and the Aristocracy of Culture," 448.

¹⁷ William Shenstone, "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening," in: John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, eds., *The Genius of the Place. The English Landscape Garden 1620–1820* (London: Paul Elk, 1975), 293.

This nightmare of art, of construction and destruction at the same time, is an unwelcome visitor returning from the past which threatens with questioning the classificatory judgement of taste, with compromising the difference which is constitutive of the natural aesthetics of the garden — art should be equally unpleasant as rain and cold. But art also figures here as a woman, a secret lover who comes at night, but who must not be allowed to appear in daylight. The darkness of the night is thus the only marginal sphere in one's garden, the sphere where the visibility of the world is suspended along with the guidance of garden walks. The art of designing is a secretive activity which must not be seen by others. Shenstone sees this art as artless planting and compares to overtly artful art of building. "The works of a person that builds," he says,

begin immediately to decay; while those of him who plants begin directly to improve. In this, planting promises a more lasting pleasure, than building [...].¹⁸

Planting is thus a preferable kind of activity as it produces development and growth rather than decay and ruin. "Trees," as he teaches us, suit our taste not because of some stable quality, but due to their having a "circumstance" of "annual variety."¹⁹ Building breeds pestilence and decay because this decay is inscribed as an artificial foundation within the very activity of building. Trees annually change and grow while buildings as it were diminish to debris — their rise is marked, or contaminated with destruction. What, on the other hand, situates and legitimizes planting within "the province of nature" is the absence of the artificiality of design achieved by way of concealment of any kind of labour and by rendition of planting as a natural act of procreation. This, at least, can be read in one more unconnected thought of Shenstone's which he adds to the paragraph on the superiority of planting: "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."²⁰ Dying, say, gardenless is thus like dying childless.

Some hundred years earlier, towards the end of the 17th century, Richard Ames, one of numerous authors of satires on women wanted to live on "some *Island* vast and wide" where he, "with a Score of *Choice Selected Friends*" could

Live, and could [...] procreate like Trees,
And without Woman's Aid —
Promote and Propagate our *Species*.²¹

¹⁸ Shenstone, "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening," 293.

¹⁹ Shenstone, "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening," 293.

²⁰ Shenstone, "Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening," 293.

²¹ Richard Ames, "The Folly of Love," in: *Satires on Women* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1976), 26.

In Shenstone, as we have already seen, woman (at least in the form of art), is allowed to enter the garden, but only secretly, at night. Her invisible aid in planting trees, in the aesthetization of the territory, promotes and propagates a species which, like Mason, finds pleasure and comfort in cohabitation with nature thus already constructed and, in a sense, in cohabitation with itself. Cohabitation with a woman is shameful, immoral and actually unpleasant compared to the pleasures of contemplating the legal liberty of a Mason's garden. Since this legal liberty is also a representation of the moral order, this order has very little to do with women. The aesthetization of law and order excludes the feminine, paradoxically, by including it within its very structure. Law, as a source of agreeable pleasure is beautiful, like a woman, and it needs this femininity in order to efface the possibility of authoritarian, masculine imposition. The law must remain "undesigned" — artless and authorless at the same time. "Beauty," as Eagleton says in his discussion of Burke, "is necessary for power, but does not itself contain it; authority has need of the very femininity it places beyond its limits."²² The secret presence of art/woman in the design of Shenstone's "province of nature" renders this nature attractive and lovely provided that it/she remains unnoticed in the daylight, during one's walk in one's garden. Hence the appearance of decency of the social space reflected in the figure of the garden where there is nothing either seductive or threatening to the civic spectator.

This concealment of sexual desire *via* the absence of the feminine actually fashions the virility of the virtuous, civic subject. This virility, as John Barrell notices, "is not confirmed but wasted by his sexuality."²³ Sexual indulgence testifies to inability to resist desire and thus to an effeminate weakness of character. What confirms virility and virtue is the art of abstaining, of impartial admiration of the aestheticized world with one's eyes closed to its originary carnality.

It is perhaps for this reason that one of the walks in Shenstone's garden at the Leasowes leads to the statue of the Venus de' Medici. Once freely guided to see it, however, one sees the meanings usually associated with Venus already "policed" by epigrams and inscriptions informing that she is not the goddess whose "amorous leer prevail'd/To bribe the Phrygian boy." Shenstone's Venus, half-revealing and half-concealing her nakedness, is, as John Barrell puts it, "an emblem of good taste, of taste absolutely opposed to the luxurious, effeminate, and meretricious display which may be taken to characterise the goddess in some of her other manifestations."²⁴ In a sense Venus also stands, perhaps paradoxically, for Pallas traditionally represented as a "virilized" woman — armed, with a manly face — to symbolize virtue. Though virtuous, Pallas is unsuitable an object in one's garden as her figure is reminiscent of androgyny, unaestheticized soldiery, and, as a goddess

²² Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 59.

²³ John Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (Houndsmills and London: MacMillan, 1992), 82.

²⁴ Barrell, *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge*, 22.

of painting, she is also reminiscent of art. Since being virtuous consists in resistance to desire, there is nothing in the figure of Pallas which offers itself to resistance. The virtue of Shenstone's Venus, on the other hand, is also based on the lack of seduction achieved by way of covering her both with a veil, and with a writing telling the viewer that what he sees is not what he sees and thus positing desire beyond accomplishment.

An accomplished subject, at least in the 18th century, is one who follows the guidance of a walk from which he cannot be seduced as long as he follows its guidance.²⁵

Source

Tadeusz Rachwał and Tadeusz Sławek, eds., *Word — Subject — Nature. Studies in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 1996.

²⁵ Interestingly, what Thomas Jefferson used as his guide in England was Thomas Whatley's *Observations on Modern Gardening* (1770). Also interestingly, what he admired, were not so much the gardens which he visited, but Whatley's natural resistance to seduction: "I always walked over the gardens which his book in my hand, examined with attention the particular spots he described [...] and saw with wonder that his fine imagination had never been able to seduce him from the truth." Thomas Jefferson, "Memorandum Made on a Tour to Some of the Gardens in England," in: John Dixon Hunt and Peter Willis, eds., *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620—1820* (London: Paul Elk, 1975), 333.