

## **Mark Broughton**

### The Figure (and Disfigurement) in the Landscape: *The Go-Between*

The picturesque can be seen as a narratorial form. In terms of structure, its negotiations of natural scenery tend as much towards a diegetic mode as to mimesis. Its partial concealments offer but defer pleasure, implying a mobile spectator who will be led through the grounds. The serpentine contours of these grounds describe a forward trajectory in perspective, a line of intention which subtly detracts from any appearances of randomness in the composition as a whole. The grounds, so to speak, are plotted. As Peter Brooks points out, the 'semantic range' of the term 'plot' itself invokes a connection with 'grounds'. The plotted grounds are punctuated by screens and coulisses which not only delimit the distances of the composition, but also render palpable the gradations of a varied and surprising narratorial arc. Pacing and development of plot are thus demarcated and externalised.

Conversely, the picturesque's associationist content invokes internal, retrospective narratives by its strategic mise-en-scène. Sensibilities to past eras are awakened by gothic dilapidation. Myths and historical events are recalled by various stimuli, configured as a traversable arc. Again, a mobile figure is the intended participant. The main constant in the history of the picturesque is an emphasis on mutual exchange between figure and landscape, in which landscape is improved by, and in turn acts on, the figure. This is a tendency towards narrative.

Perhaps the most substantial response to this tendency has been the gothic novel. In the gothic novel, the unravelling of narrative is intrinsic to the representation of picturesque landscape. This can be argued most convincingly by reference to novels which satirise the picturesque cult, such as Austen's *Northanger Abbey* or Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*. Austen and Peacock's mockery of the picturesque is paralleled by their use of elliptical exposition during scenes set in picturesque landscapes. Negation of the picturesque's values clearly precludes the kind of expansive plot development found in the picturesque landscapes of Radcliffe's novels. Whereas the picturesque is a form of expatiation, the mock-picturesque entails ellipsis.

Post-Second World War British films, on the other hand, have apparently returned to the historical picturesque with expositional sympathy. They often depict picturesque landscapes with correspondingly serpentine camera movements, yet heritage critics argue that the defining formal trait of such films is a division between pictorialism and narrative. The cinematic picturesque, as categorised by them, is pictorial and therefore does not tell a story. It is simply a nostalgic fetishism which covets the landed estates of fictional pasts. For the heritage critics, landscape scenes have no diegetic value – the figure in the landscape becomes a prop in a pictorial composition rather than an active protagonist.

*The Go-Between* is a case in point. Since its release in 1971, the film's style has been widely praised. Eulogies, though, have focused on its narratorial experiments with flash-forwards from 1900 to the 1950s and back. The film's discursive merits are frequently seen as contrary to its landscapes. A recent *Sight and Sound* article argues that 'despite the picture-postcard imagery, the film-maker's real preoccupations – snobbery, sex, betrayal and violence – are always apparent.' The film's representation of landscape, it would seem, is antithetical to its narrative discourse.

However, if we interpret the picturesque as essentially narratorial, an alternative reading of the film's landscapes emerges. This can be used to re-evaluate the role of post-war British cinema in landscape historiography.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with *The Go-Between*, it is an adaptation of L.P. Hartley's 1953 novel, directed by Joseph Losey. Like many other Losey films, *The Go-Between* exposes internecine power-plays in an English setting.

The film is about a middle-class boy, Leo, who in 1900 goes to spend his summer holiday at a school friend's country estate, Brandham Hall. While there he is persuaded to take secret messages to and fro between his friend's sister, Marian, and her lover, a local farmer called Ted. Leo is unaware of the facts of life, but their affair arouses his curiosity. Ultimately, he is forced by his friend's mother to reveal the truth and to witness Ted and Marian in flagrante delicto. As we see from the 1950s scenes, the experience harms Leo for life.

I will now show the key landscape sequence from the film, in which Leo stumbles upon Ted's farm for the first time. It serves as a microcosm of the film's causal scheme between landscapes and figures. In this respect, as we will see, the sequence is ominously proleptic.

## **CLIP**

Losey described the film's landscape shots and its discourse as a whole as 'subliminal'. If we unpack this term, it helpfully suggests that, at a metadiegetic level, the narrative is the product of the protagonist's mind, even if he is not self-consciously the storyteller. Unlike the novel, the film is not explicitly narrated by the older Leo of the 1950s. His metadiegetic role in the film is purely as a commentator, delivering brief maxims over the events of 1900. In the screened clip, when the younger Leo enters his bedroom, it is made clear that the camera's viewpoint is also significantly distinct from his subjective vision. The shot begins as the door of the room opens: Leo walks into frame a few moments later, as if the door were opened for him in advance by the camera's pan to the left. The camera's discrete presence as voyeur is reified at this point, as if this were a horror movie. A similar edit later in the sequence has the same generic quality. On the farm, Leo looks from the horse, across the yard. Instead of the conventional reverse shot, showing us what he sees, the next shot shows a view of Leo, from the right side of the haystack he has spotted. The cut triangulates the haystack, Leo and the camera in space. It demarcates the relationship between them: we can precisely locate Leo as intruder and the haystack he covets, just as we can isolate the camera's own implicative voyeurism.

Leo is placed at one remove from the narrating camera, yet the sequence as a whole is evidently coloured by his misinterpretation of events. In its free indirect style, the sequence equivocates between objective historical materialism and Leo's subliminated mythmaking.

One shot briefly relates Marian's supine body to the landscape. This may or may not be from Leo's perspective – we have no indication either way. We could infer that Leo equates her with the landscape and imagines his exploration of the grounds as an

exploration of her body. On the other hand, the sequence inclines towards dialectical materialism. Marian's relaxed pose suggests a confident possession of the grounds, while Leo becomes a miniscule figure when the zoom-out places him within the context of his environment; he is dwarfed by the apparatus of the outlying landscape and the Brownian gardens of Melton Constable Hall – which portrays Brandham Hall in the film. The process of enclosure, made more evident by the next shot of the deer park, is formally re-enacted by the zoom-out, as Leo is enclosed by the machinery of the 'improved' landscape. Enclosure's historical dehumanising action is re-enacted by the diminishment of Leo's body into a mere speck in the grounds.

These three shots, Marian-Leo-deer park, are followed by four shots in which Leo explores picturesque areas, winding his way across partially concealed grounds and through a dilapidated gate. Leo's relaxed performance in the landscape is contrapuntal to the energetic music. The music plays at a much faster pace than he walks, as if to convey an underlying, external drive and tension in his trajectory.

As Leo walks through the woods, this sense of determinism is also underwritten in his smiling gaze to the left of the frame and in the camera's responsive pan in the same direction. As in most picturesque landscapes, the next potential scene is always already implied and invoked. The first pan to the left reveals Brandham Hall and thus quietly implicates it in his trajectory. The fictional name of the hall itself – *Brandham* anticipates the injury Leo will sustain after sliding down the haystack.

However, like the music, this picturesque determinism works against – or, rather, beneath the staccato editing of the scene. Usually, a journey through a picturesque landscape is represented on film or in a novel with consonant, unbroken tracery. The topography of the corresponding sequence in Hartley's novel flows uninterruptedly from the water meadow to the haystack. Transposed to film, this would normally mean more cursive camera movements than montage. However, in Losey's film, picturesque determinism underpins the sequence rather than overlaying it. Its pattern is interrupted by the montage. Likewise, the narrative drive of Leo's glances to the left of the frame is contradicted by his nonchalant walking pace and the apparently random direction of his journey.

Losey's term 'subliminal' successfully evokes this dual logic of surface and undercurrents. The sequence eschews the monolithic continuity editing and motivation of classical Hollywood cinema, just as it avoids the clear exposition of Hartley's novel. Indeed, from the start, it throws conventional causality into question. It opens with an obscure, ritualistic proliferation signs: Leo unlocks a book. We see a zodiac image, like those found in astrological almanacs. However, the book is revealed to be his diary. Instead of recorded events, the diary pages are filled with curses – the viewer guesses these are the spells mentioned earlier in the film, with which Leo thinks he 'severely mutilated' some other schoolboys. Yet the viewer can find no reason why he incants these curses now.

The incantation process itself is odd: it is effected, not by verbal recitation, but by Leo stroking the page. A shot of this from Leo's perspective cuts directly to Leo standing in the landscape, reading a thermometer. The edit suggests that Leo perceives the surface of the page to be similar to the landscape, as if the page is an effigy and the curse on the page becomes what is found in the landscape. The incantation of the unreadable curse is continued by the inaudible reading of the temperature. Both shots precede the otherwise unmotivated shot of Marian in the grounds, as if in a direct causal relationship to it: she appears to have been conjured up by the incantation.

It is also implied that Leo's injury at Black Farm is predicated on the incantation process. In Leo's bedroom, we see a model horse on the window sill while the soundtrack strangely emphasises a horse neighing outside. Together, they foreshadow his discovery of Smiler, Ted's mare. It is when Leo pats Smiler that he notices the haystack. Moreover, the causal chain of unreadable signs is picked up by the chain of picturesque determinism in the glances, pans and music, and therefore leads directly from the curse to the haystack and the axe that it hides.

Like the camera's voyeurism and its representation of violence in a picturesque setting, this causal chain is in the gothic horror tradition. An occult relationship is implied between Leo's incantation, Marian's eroticised body, the landscape and Leo's injury. However, the relationship is ironised. The curse is self-evidently part of a child's fantasy and therefore it is unlikely to have caused the injury. Distance is irony. The landscape sequence which links the incantation with the injury also separates the

two, ironically distancing them. The staccato editing and Leo's nonchalant walking pace gradate and stress this ironic distance. The sublimated, gothic implication is that Leo's spell is responsible for the injury. However, the interpolation of the landscape scenes suggests on another level, that the landscape is in fact the precondition of Leo's injury.

The shot which depicts the power-relation between Marian's body and the landscape significantly precedes the shot in which Leo's body is effectively diminished by enclosure. The hidden axe and the haystack are the results of a cultivation which is both determined by, and maintains, that enclosure. An alternative causal chain therefore subtly links the sequence, from Marian as possessor of the landscape, to the process of enclosure, to Black Farm, to Leo's injury and finally to Ted's arrival on the scene. Ted is portrayed in georgic labour, as he cultivates the landscape owned by Marian's family. The cultivation perpetuates the landscape and its enclosure. At different points in the chain, Marian, Ted and Leo are all implicated in and affected by this process.

The violence of cultivation is visited on Leo as figure in the landscape. The violence paradoxically embraces both Leo's gothic myth and the underlying historical materialist emphasis on power relations. The sequence and the film as a whole subliminally present Leo's misreading: that the catastrophic events can be attributed to his magic. However, it is Leo's misguided linkage of his curse and his injury with the landscape that makes available a materialist representation of landscape power relations. The gothic tradition is redeployed by the film to make the dark side of the landscape visible. The gothic voyeurism of the camera paradoxically concretises this sense of an alternative point of view.

Leo emerges as a new, human incarnation of the genius loci: he performs within and thus alters the landscape, while he himself takes on elements of that landscape. That is, he is wounded in the landscape but at the same time unwittingly exposes its apparatus of cultivation. In this way, *The Go-Between* presents its historical landscape as a socio-economic construction which is ultimately instrumental in the downfall of the genius loci. Just as at the microcosmic level, Leo's disfigured knee is the result of the machinery of the harvest, so at a macrocosmic level, Leo is reconstituted in a

disfigured form in the 1950s, as an old man Marian describes as being 'all dried up inside'. Leo's knee wound is proleptic, as it anticipates this later disfigurement.

The disfigured, older Leo is the product of the same power relations that configure the landscape. At the end of the film, the young Leo is dragged by Marian's mother, Mrs. Maudsley, to witness Ted and Marian having sex in a picturesquely dilapidated outhouse. Mrs. Maudsley forces Leo to imagine himself responsible for the act that he witnesses in this fabrique. This involves blinding him to the truth, as is made manifest when she covers his eyes after he has seen the lovers. Mrs. Maudsley reclaims the landscape. She reclaims it from the subversive sexual relationship that takes place there, by exposing the couple. She also reclaims it from Leo's imagination, when she pulls him past the deadly nightshade that has preoccupied his fantasies. Until this point, he has often displaced his curiosity about the facts of life onto the deadly nightshade and the landscape. Mrs. Maudsley makes him witness the truth in the outhouse that lies geographically and metaphorically beyond his imagination, but then hides it from him. Leo is thus fatally persuaded to conflate his magical and objective interpretations of what takes place in the landscape. As a result of the reclamation, a myth is perpetuated. The older Leo hears that Ted and Marian's grandson 'feels that he is under some sort of curse or spell'. At this point, Leo's facial expression conveys that he still believes in the power of his curse. Like the grandson, he is clearly unable to interpret events objectively.

Various other disfigurements become the corollaries of Leo's performance in, and the owners' reclamation of, the grounds. Ted's suicide leaves his body slumped by a gun, devoid of its once upright and powerful frame. Marian's face, like Leo's, is marked with the corruption of an old age which seems the immediate result of the events of 1900, since we are given no glimpse of the intervening years. Marian's grandson's face discloses the features of his biological grandfather, Ted, rather than features which might support the convenient lie that his grandfather was Hugh, the gentleman Marian weds.

Hugh himself, we are told, was 'gored by the Boer'. Boer means farmer. Like Hugh's scar, all of these disfigurements can be identified as products of a landed culture and its power relations. Just as Hugh was scarred by a war which sought to further the

economic ambitions of the empire, so on smaller scale the other characters are marked by a social stratification which necessarily prohibits Marian and Ted's sexual relationship.

*The Go-Between* utilises the narrative arc of the picturesque to expatiate on the power relations produced by the ownership of land and their consequences. Moreover, it exploits the picturesque's traditional association with the gothic to emphasise exactly how a landscape's narrative can mystify those power relations. If we return to the distinction between structure and content in the picturesque: the external narrative structure of the picturesque corresponds to the sequence's materialist equations between figure and landscape. The internal, retrospective narrative of the gothic corresponds to Leo's mystification of events. The ironic concurrence of the two emphasises the real distance between Leo's tragic self-accusation and the actual socio-economic construction of landscape.

*The Go-Between* provides a strong example of the union of narrative and pictorialism in a British film based around a landed estate. It can be seen as one in a series of films and television programmes from *Kind Hearts and Coronets* in 1949 to *Brideshead Revisited* in 1981. This genre deploys an ironic, picturesque narrative to deconstruct an arriviste's artistic performance in an historical landscape. It is both a continuation and a subversion of the picturesque tradition. At the same time, it can be argued that *The Go-Between* foreshadows and complements the revisionist developments in landscape historiography which emerged throughout the 1970s.

*The Go-Between* is as much history as myth. L.P. Hartley acknowledged that the novel was based on his real childhood experiences at Bradenham Hall. Losey responded with his choice of location, Melton Constable Hall, which is situated only twenty or thirty miles from Bradenham Hall.

This personal history can be read as a continuation of a trend Raymond Williams relates in *The Country and the City*. Williams identifies several country poets who are born in a lower class, but exist as outsiders, mainly because of their artistry. Leo is not a poet, but his extraordinary imagination makes him stand apart. His artistic death occurs at the point his imagination is petrified: his unending belief in the power of his



curse prevents any development in his imagination. As Williams points out, the common fate of such outsiders is to receive patronage from a country estate and, as a result, to lose their artistic vitality. Indeed, *The Go-Between* suggests that the interaction between grounds and figure described by John Dixon Hunt in *The Figure in the Landscape* is not exclusively an aesthetic process, but can necessitate a brutal substructure. Through Leo's gothic imagination, *The Go-Between* charts an historically specific power relation between a picturesque landscape and its violent underside. John Barrell's *The Dark Side of the Landscape* argues that across a changing historical climate during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the pastoral and the georgic's respective roles of mystification and social observation became reversible. *The Go-Between* at once ascribes the same double potential to its updated version of the gothic.