



Gardens & Landscapes of Portugal

The spaces in between

John Dixon Hunt

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ABSTRACT

How do we discuss gardens and landscapes without focusing entirely in the various items that elicit iconographical or literary commentary? So much analysis is focused upon the items within a landscape upon which is relatively easy to offer explanatory accounts of meaning or patronage, that we tend to forget the abundant numbers of spaces within them. How if at all do we respond to those?

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ARTICLE

Sometimes in reading poetry one is taken by their silences, by the gaps between the lines. Silence slides into the mind, for example, when moving from an octet to the sestet of a sonnet (much more so than in the slighter hesitation with which we move into the final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet). What happens in that space is crucial to the whole affect.

Once Ezra Pound had reworked T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*, it was left with breath-taking lacunae, and Pound's *Cantos* themselves are filled by the silences into which we fall from the surrounding lines. And the Italian poet Ungarreti, clearly moved by the silences in his favourite modern poets, Eliot/Pound, opened up his lines for – well, for what is not clear exactly: maybe for our own thoughts to occupy the trenches that yawn between his lines.

It reminds me of the notion that W.G.Seibald entertained of Sir Thomas Brown's MS, "Musaeum Clausum or Bibliotheca Abscondita", where, though it is probably feigned, there is the record of "King Solomon's treatise on the shadow cast by our thoughts, de Umbris Idearum, previously reported to have been written in the library of the Duke of Bavaria". Our thought's shadows fall into the spaces that open up to us as we read and leap or falter across the printed lines of many poems, and I suppose that what we think in those moments emerges, sometimes, into our commentaries. But what of the leaps or pauses or faltering moments in other arts, especially in garden visiting, for example, when so much time is spent between the items on which our mind generally tends to dwell?

It is the shadows cast by my thoughts that preoccupy me now in gardens. I seem to have exhausted what I can write about this statue, that inscription, this temple or that arcade, about the meanings of the various nomenclatures that people have used to label the garden's structures (Praeneste here, Ancient Virtue there, Apollo, or is it Antinous, somewhere else). I go photographing all these things, caption-worthy items, apt for sustaining art historical or literary enquiries. But gardens do not now easily abide my questions. They tend to escape from my analytical grasp.

Garden commentary and scholarship have, of course, largely attracted art historians and literary critics, with philosophers and geographers also participating. The result, notably in the case of the first two specialists, has

resulted in both text and imagery focusing upon items in the sites that can be discussed in the commentaries.



Little Sparta, Scotland. (Photo Emily T. Cooperman)

shape of aircraft carriers, where the birds seeking food swooped down onto the flight deck and took off into the air. The pull of these stimulating and iconic items was considerable and appealing. But even in a compact site, which largely Little Sparta is, we tried to look at what was between the various items. We were led to see things from afar, with eloquent, even empty, spaces in between, or capturing perhaps a variety of items, within one shot, yet allowing these discrete items not to impinge totally upon the intermediate spaces. We wanted to record silences in the garden. The silent photograph always allows that; but visitors to gardens do not have that evident privilege. It was, in part, an effort to escape from the thrall of the picturesque, what William Gilpin called “the scene painted in syllables, words and sentences.....”

The same photographer was with me in two other, very different gardens – Rousham, in Oxfordshire, and Bomarzo, the “Monster” park, near Viterbo in Italy. Here, too, our earlier reception of these places was determined by what we’d seen in books and articles, and in my own case by my earlier explorations of these sites, where all I did then was take photographs of discrete items – statues and a fine arcade, for example, at Rousham, or the strange figures carved in the local rock, sometimes inscribed, at Bomarzo, and construct a narrative that explained how these items were linked into some exposition of the place either for its creator/designer, or perhaps for subsequent visitors with a zest for stories (not to mention the iconography hunters). Yet gardens are NOT narratives, not least because in most cases there is no dedicated route around them; nonetheless, they tend to yield themselves in that narrative way to visiting critics and writers of articles, and the urge to escape their thrall and inhabit the spaces in-between became compelling, but also a touch frustrating.

It was then I come upon a remark of Ian Hamilton Finlay (ironically in a book for which I had provided an introduction). In Finlay’s interview with Udo Weilacher, in the latter’s *Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art*, he called attention to “a lot of rhetorical space between the individual features” of a garden (p.102). I realized that we need to accept all these places in between the sculptures, the inscriptions and the temples, so as to respond to the interstices of the garden’s mixed media. We need to obtain space for a rhetoric that is not explicitly verbal or even visual; what a Japanese poet called the “many things.... brought to my mind / As I stand in the garden / Staring

as a cherry tree”. I was struck by the way that even in a compact garden like Finlay’s own Little Sparta we need space between items, not least because that garden requires us to meditate upon its ideas; hence the “rhetorical space”, space where words (“brought to my mind”) can take shape. And if in Little Sparta, why not elsewhere? In the equally small spaces of Rousham, and, though a more extensive parkland, in the wooded glades at Bomarzo, where we constantly confront clusters of buildings (a leaning house, a chapel), stone arcades (a nymphaeum), seats (a Mouth of Hell), outsize statues of heroes wrestling or supine goddesses, inscriptions everywhere, we need pause. We need to let our thoughts cast shadows on the ground.



Rousham, Oxfordshire (Photo Emily T. Cooperman)

In my research and writings on Rousham, I stumbled upon a new book of poems dedicated to that garden, entitled *Her Leafy Eye* (Reading, UK, 2009). It devotes 20 poems to Rousham, mostly by writing about specific features there, though it occasionally responds to a series of more general gardenist items like “folly”, “espalier”, “topiary” or “the Genius Loci”. Its author is Lesley Saunders, “an award-winning poet”. Her foreword explains that the “18th century ‘picturesque’ [sic] landscape gardens at Rousham” have “inspired” the poems: this description of Rousham as “picturesque” seems designed to encourage us to see the garden as a series of pictures, which might therefore be especially apt for ekphraseis, which are, I take it, what are offered by the poems. But the volume also contains some images by Geoff Carr, which presumably work to reify its “picturesqueness” in another medium alongside the poems. Carr’s note says that his computer-generated images “refer” directly to the poem that brought the image into his mind’s eye, “often arriving completely resolved and in no need of further thought” (sic!). Carr is a garden and design practitioner, a film maker on gardens for the BBC, and the creator of garden sculpture and garden furniture. Finally, along with an oddly miscellaneous and incomplete bibliography on Rousham, a foreword of two pages expounds the “Furor Hortensis” (the garden craze) of the 18th century, and it notes, among its picturesque elements, the loss of topiary in the 18th century. This round-up of typical “picturesque” gardening is fine, if somewhat sweeping, but little of its account is taken up in the poems that follow, and Saunders even includes a poem on “Topiary” itself (p.37), though this had been expunged (by her own account) from the furor hortensis, and anyhow does not feature at Rousham! Overall, then, the site of Rousham is overwhelmed with commentary, both discursive and imagistic, descriptive and imaginative. The whole *raison d’être* of this volume seems to be that it is based on the Rousham gardens. Even if you don’t know the site, there is a rough map, annotated with the numbers of the poems dedicated to the specific items there, and concluding with a final poem, *en face*, that is entitled “Visit”, though it could be about any visit to a garden.

Two of the briefer poems focus on specific items in the garden. The first takes its title from the Scheemaker sculpture of a Lion Attacking a Horse that graces the end of the bowling green. The poem indulges in fanciful associations - a unicorn (!), grappling lovers in the moonlight and the honey bees that will inhabit the lion carcass hereafter (only if the horse wins, I presume). Frankly, it seems a less than energetic encounter with the sculpture, evading any sense, for instance, of why it might be there.

Another poem also concerns a particular move by Kent’s in designing the gardens in 1739, when he moved the Lion and the Horse to its present position, so that its location now presides over the view and leads us to it across the bowling green behind the house at the end of which we can take in a view of the Oxfordshire countryside. Kent also deliberately drew out attention to that landscape by inserting a whole series of incidents – a mill beside the River Cherwell that flows along the edge of the garden, gothicized with flying buttresses, and an “Eyecatcher”,



Bomarzo, Italy (Photo Emily T. Cooperman)

as it is called, a triumphal arch, but also gothicized, on the far hillside. The poem on the “Eyecatcher” is printed opposite one of Carr’s computerized images, but the image, and naming the actual Rousham feature itself, are really the only clues as to what the poem might be saying, and (absent those particular clues) there is nothing that ties the poem to this location: the first line of the final stanza – “I have been trying all my life / to see beyond the horizon” – might be true of far horizons in general, but in this case the Kentian arch is designed to pull our eyes out to that far hillside rather than to “see beyond” it.

It has been argued, in an article by Jas Elsner in *Art History* 33/1 (2010), that all art history is ekphrastic, and one consequence of this is that ekphrasis tends to embrace generality. While all the titles of most of these poems in *Her Leafy Eye* do refer to items at Rousham, they neglect anything local or particular; nothing about the poem entitled “RILL” intersects with the actual rill at Rousham. There is nothing about the Walled Garden or the Grotto (though I am not sure there is anything I’d call a grotto at Rousham) that speaks of or returns our interest to those specific moments at Rousham. It is certainly true that such poems may bring to bear our larger notions of garden-ness upon the Rousham visit, but they do not even do that. Are they then the kind of general thoughts that can be cast upon the ground when visiting Rousham?

Leaving aside, which is difficult (I admit), any discussion of the poetic quality of these verses, they do all seem to occupy the places in between the evident and conspicuous items in the gardens, though for the most part they pretend to focus on those items. And this contrasts with much of the modern commentary on Rousham that “suffers” from an over zealous focus by art historians and literary historians (including myself) on the “meaning” of the gardens, so that the garden seems lost within the thickets of learned discourse. Mostly, this requires privileging an iconographical narrative of items in the gardens based primarily on the specific identification of the sculptures, as if the meaning of the garden was contained only within these isolated features; many other sculptures that are elsewhere in the gardens are ignored in the commentaries; so, even more, are the spaces between all the sculptures (for what can one say about them?). Indeed little attention is even paid to the relation of one item to another by seeing one in the distance while standing beside another, and thereby speculating on the spaces in between. Moreover, in discussing specific objects like sculptures, we are often encouraged to go outside the garden rather than to dwell within its spaces, to consult emblem books, or (in one case) a “rather obscure legend” regarding Proserpina in the Greek topographer Pausanias, or accept a strained attempt to explain the topography of the garden according to cultural geography with gothic elements to the north, an “Egyptian pyramid” to the east and a classical zone or ancient Roman site to the south. Somehow the commentaries often seem at odds with

the experience of the site itself, despite the photography or woodcuts that authors supply to illustrate the place; other narratives involve internal contradictions, or miss any sense that a garden is liable and open to multiple associations, especially when the claim is based upon one obligatory route around the gardens, for there can be, in fact, no privileged circuit “intended by Kent”. In this tight, oddly shaped garden, tricks of perspective and unexpected sightlines play a crucial part in teasing the visitor, and it always seemed to me to be a whim that took me one way or another through this site.

Some items are certainly convincing and control our attention: the arcade known as “Praeneste” takes its name from a sequence of its arches derived from the multi-levelled Roman Temple of Fortune at Praeneste, the modern Palestrina. The Lion and Horse at Rousham echoes a similar sculpture at the Villa D’Este, where it overlooks the Roman Campagna, just as Rousham’s group presides over the Oxfordshire countryside. The Dying Gladiator, originally designed by Kent to be placed on a Roman sarcophagus, clearly references Rousham’s dying patron, General Dormer, and may well contribute, along with the horse attacked by the lion, to the mortuary tonality of the whole place, which other commentators make their main theme. But contrariwise, Venus, as a garden deity, presides over her valley, watched by a faun and Pan lurking in the shrubbery, which has given several commentators a plausible reason for relishing an understandably 18th-century lascivious moment.

But many things don’t “fit”. Gardens can certainly be melancholy places, and we may, if we like, take the River Cherwell at the bottom of the garden slope to be an allusion to the River Styx that bordered the classical Elysian Fields. But there are also happier prospects: not just the dying Gaul or the savaged horse, but the luscious & lascivious Venus, and views out towards a “triumphal” arch and a Temple of the Mill, which feature in what Horace Walpole called Kent’s “prospect, animated prospect” [my emphasis]. Items that are said to be “inappropriate” to the theme of the Elysian Fields, are nonetheless skewed so that they fit the holistic narrative of the relevant iconography. Many other sculptures that do not fit the narrative are either ignored, or explained by saying they give the garden an antique air (which is a more likely gloss, apt shadows for our thoughts to throw upon the garden there). Confronted with the statue variously described as Apollo, or as Antinous, or simply as a “colossal” figure, commentators choose to reject Antinous, the beloved of Hadrian, because (i) it is nowadays presumed to have been “rather meaningless” as a Renaissance attribution and (ii) because Apollo would anyway better fit the Rousham profile.

That there was a River Styx, so called, in the Elysium Fields at the neighbouring garden of Stowe, where Kent designed the buildings but arguably was not involved in the overall landscape, does not make it reasonable that the same identification works at Rousham: there is no inscription at Rousham to point the way. It might have been Kent’s whim (he was quick to be whimsical), but it remains a whim, and the argument that here at Rousham we have a real Styx that fits into the iconography of other items, like the Cold Bath, which is envisaged as Pluto’s realm where Proserpina spent half the year, is a stretch too far. Now the person who did see the Cold Bath in those terms was the gardener or steward, called Macclary or Clary, writing in a 1760 letter, where he says he originally designated it as Proserpina’s Cave himself and embellished it with figures, but “my Master not likening [one of the figures], I chopt them all down”. But it is difficult to see how this whim of the steward’s, which clearly displeased General Dormer, hardly suffices as a basis for creating yet another River Styx in Oxfordshire.

Macclary’s lengthy and somewhat naïve commentary of Rousham was written in the 1760s to tempt its absent owners to come back and enjoy its pleasures (this important text was published as “A Description of Rousham”, in the British journal *Garden History* in 1983). Macclary acknowledges some of the items in the grounds, and also gets some of them arguably “wrong” - he misses the Apollo statue, just as he also does not name the “Praeneste” terrace, though we know from the house accounts that this was how it was called; but neither “Apollo” or “Praeneste” have inscriptions, so he was presumably left on his own. So he was, I’d say, improvising as he walked around, or imagined himself walking around, letting his thoughts fall upon the ground, especially between the spaces of the garden that intervened between the sculptures. He does faithfully note almost every sculpture by name or description, though without any commentary on them, and he lists far more items than are conventionally cited by modern commentators. Yet what Macclary (or Clary, as he later called himself) does spend considerable time on is what usually gets neglected in modern discussions, because it seems to play little role in the design of the garden.

Instead he emphasizes three key elements: views throughout and outside the garden – what you see around you as you walk or sit; a whole range of agricultural and country matters, which he lists with far greater enthusiasm than the statues; and finally his endless celebration of its planting. These emphases do most emphatically speak to the effect or the reception of the garden as he and the absent owners would find it, and it surely needs to have an impact on how we respond to the gardens.

Clary's insistence on the planting was, we know from other sources and contemporary contacts, William Kent's signature effect; it seems routine for us now in visiting gardens, but McC's insistence should make clear how innovative and astonishing was Kent's rich and careful under-planting of all sorts of trees. He notices "Oaks, Elms, Beach, Alder, plains and Horsechestnuts" as well as evergreens throughout, where walks were "backt with all sorts of Flowers and Flowering Shrubs", with "a great variety of evergreens and flowering shrubs", and remarks that "here you think the Laurel produces a Rose, the Holly a Syringa, the Yew a Lilac, and the sweet Honeysuckle is peeping out from every leaf" (there are other references along these lines). Plantings change over the years, obviously, but we still need to respond to a similar "infrastructure" of planting.

Macclary is also passionate about the essential, rural ambience: we look out beyond the garden to "five pretty Country Villages" and a "pretty Corn Mill", to meadows with "all sorts of cattle feeding, which looks the same as if they were feeding in the Garden"; within the estate itself he notices a paddock stocked with "two fine Cows, two Black Sows, a Bore, and a Jack Ass", "as pretty a sett of pig Stighs as aney is in England", kitchen and flowers gardens where the fruit is lovingly detailed, fishponds, a dairy yard, and the church. *Mutatis mutandis* these elements are still all there today, and the adjacent farmyard still very much in use.

We need to accept all these – local contexts like the farm and the countryside that enters into our awareness of the garden, as well as both sculptures and the temples and what we find between them as we walk. Because gardens are difficult works of art – fragile, changeful, ever resistant to our ekphrastic desires, then we need another mode of response that has validity in our thoughtful discussions of them. Hegel even said that the more thought and language that enter into our representation of things, the less do they retain their "naturalness, singularity, and immediacy". That is especially true of landscape architecture.

The one writer I know who tries to deal with this issue is James Elkins in his remarks in "Some Ways of Thinking About Gardens" (in *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, 1997). He begins by listing some schema for talking about gardens (from representations of history and nature, to mixing of polarities and disciplines, to narratives, "open-ended sites of desire"). He clearly wishes for a way of responding to gardens (their "unusual diversity") that did not copy or duplicate how art historians would approach pictures and sculpture, so he takes up the idea of reverie to talk about the "quality of thought that gardens induce". Reveries have, of course, shades of Rousseau's *Les Reveries du Promeneur solitaire*, and it may well be an apt reference for dealing with the spaces in between. Since Elkins values "the lack of purity in garden responses", for a single response would be meaningless, he invokes a discussion of genius loci from another work, *The Poetics of Gardens* (1988) by Charles Moore, William J. Mitchell & William Turnbull, Jr., in a section that he calls "Writing That Wanders down the Garden Path". From here, he moved to his final claim that "gardens are like mild soporifics... over which observers have limited control". And there our garden paths divide sharply.

I am much preoccupied with what I have elsewhere called the 'afterlife' of gardens, how visitors respond to places that they visit, whether originally or in subsequent times or today. But on the one hand, we cannot rely upon Addison's appeal to gardens "natural" aptitude "to fill the mind with Calmness and Tranquillity" (that Elkins cites), for that is too anodyne and ultimately mere sentimentality; nor yet, I think, on the equally generalized ekphrastic manoeuvres in *Her Leafy Eye*, though it was that collection that forced me to look at the spaces in between.

The three photographs in this essay are all of very specific moments in Rousham, Bomarzo and Little Sparta, where we are not invited to see some special item, no sculpture or inscription in close up - indeed I have chosen ones with none of that (It is customary to illustrate statues when discussing gardens, but these images deliberately are excised from these opportunities). They are simply of places in between. But two of them are images of paths (this is easier to offer the reader here; yet any path that an individual takes in a garden, whether marked or not,

would serve my argument; equally a view taken across a pond). Now what the photographs cannot show here are what even ekphraseis fail to reveal - smells, sounds (to a huge extent), the physical impression of what one sees or whatever surface one is walking on (gravel, moss, grass), the simultaneity of sensations (the awareness of the air and breeze), the time of day and of season, and our natural ability to observe a landscape in a wide-angle gaze (we don't all look through the viewfinder of a camera). It is these elements that we need to involve in our discussions of gardens, however difficult it is to do this without falling into the blither and cosiness of "green fingers" garden writing. We ignore at our peril this varied and scattered attention. It repays attention to Northrop Frye's literary proposal about understanding a play, that our "progress in grasping the meaning is a progress, nor in seeing more in the play, but *in* seeing more of it" (my italics).

It can be easier sometimes to grasp garden history as a narrative of set routes, iconography and literary references, not least because they allow us to grasp the 'meaning' of a place like Rousham. But Finlay's rhetorical spaces also need to be filled at Little Sparta (or in any garden and perhaps even in Portugal). He wants us to think and be provoked not only by what he shows us, but what we take away from his inscriptions and by how he affronts his visitors (he wanted gardens to be attacks not retreats). Our thoughts are shadows on which we tread in gardens, on the interstices of a garden's mixed media. And what, Robert Irwin asks, 'if there were no shadows, what then? Actually we could not see as we do without shadows'.