The Search for the Picturesque in the Landscape Designs of Humphrey Repton and Lancelot "Capability" Brown

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The notion of the picturesque emerged as an aesthetic discovery during the rise of English gardening in the eighteenth century. It implied a poetic visual perception of nature, akin

to the one represented in landscape painting. Even aesthetic theorists came to define the picturesque as a term "expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture" (Ross 1987, 271). The picturesque was not only manifested historically, it was also a deep-seated concept in the theatre, and later held solid theoretical grounds, parallel to that of the Sublime and Beautiful. During the eighteenth century, the theatrical notion of "scenery" transcended into the human perception of the English landscape. Landscape designers, notably Humphrey Repton and Lancelot "Capability" Brown began observing and imitating nature as they wished to echo the picturesque in their garden designs. While Brown was concerned with shaping the landscape into an attractive whole, Repton found himself preoccupied with the ability of landscape to accommodate the social needs of his clients. To examine these diversions in interpretation, this essay explores the evolution of the picturesque from painting to landscape gardening. Then, the works of Repton and Brown are examined in light of their distinct interpretation of the picturesque and their unique integration of it in their garden designs. Further, their mutual contribution to the evolution of the English Landscape is noted. First, however, the essay begins by exploring the historical context that enabled the emergence of the picturesque movement in the English landscape.

The prevailing taste for natural beauty and scenic tourism during the eighteenth century witnessed the birth of an intimate link between the natural world and the fundamental principles of aesthetics (Townsend 1997). As the French artistic hegemony began to wane due to the institution of the Grand Tour, English gentlemen embarked on an education throughout the European continent that served to expose them to the scenic beauty of nature, such as that of the Alps and the Roman antiquity (Ross 1987). With the diversity of natural scenery, travelers grew more receptive to the landscape paintings of the French and Italian masters. The results of the Grand Tour emerged in the form of a new class in the English society–the Connoisseur–who were fond of landscape painting and sought to search for natural, picturesque scenes to portray (Ross 1987). Nature, a term that often contrasted the artificial production of things, which art entailed, grew to occupy the themes depicted in visual and literary arts. Landscape painting, poetry echoing the natural world, gardening, tour guides, and travel literature all emerged to form the empiricist aesthetic revolution of the eighteenth century. The association and profound pictorial appreciation of nature, a form of aesthetic discovery, initiated the picturesque era – an era which Christopher Hussey described as a fusion of all arts, "painting, gardening, architecture, poetry, and art of travel – into the single art of landscape" (Ross 1987, 271).

The picturesque, a universal mode of vision shared by architects, painters, and poets, was first introduced by the Reverend William Gilpin in his 1768 treatise *An Essay on Prints* (Ross 1987). In it, Gilpin defines the picturesque as a type of landscape that is ought to be framed, either as a painting or from a Claude glass view (Wenner 2006). In other words, natural

scenery that exhibited the intricacy found in painting was to be viewed as if it were a painting (Marshall 2002). Indeed, this is echoed in the theory of the picturequese, which revolves around the poetic division of vistas (Turner 2008). The vistas consist of three levels that contribute to the overall landscape composition: a foreground that is geometrical and designed for human use, a middle ground like serpentine parks, and a background representing natural scenery that exhibits little human intervention. As illustrated, the theory and practice of the picturesque offer a balanced composition from which to perceive nature.

The picturesque scenery became a deep-seated interest during the eighteenth century as it was evident in the proscenium frame and movable flat development in the theatre (Marshall 2002). In retrospect, both movements wished to frame the world and present it as a series of living tableaux. In the picturesque discussion, ideas revolved around viewing the bare landscape as a scene, implying a subtle theatrical perspective. As in theatrical scenes, where the observer is distant from the initial action and therefore relies on observation, the idea of the picturesque connotes a profound appreciation of nature's beauty and a subsequent desire for the observer to associate with it by projecting himself into the landscape. This form of projection is also evident in landscape paintings, where people are turned into miniature figures (Marshall 2002). As a method of observation, the picturesque employs distance as a tool to forge a relationship between the observer and the landscape, as articulated by Raymond Williams, "the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation" (Marshall 2002, 414).

Beyond its presence in the theatre, the picturesque gradually occupied solid theoretical grounds. Landscape aestheticians, Price, Gilpin, and Richard Payne Knight, advocated for the inclusion of the picturesque into the aesthetic theory as an intermediate category between Edmund Burke's Sublime and Beautiful (Townsend 1997). Edmund's Beauty denoted smoothness and elegance of form, and his Sublime associated itself with obscurity, vastness, and whatever aroused the passions of terror and awe (Ross 1987). The picturesque, as described by Price, implied rough textures, irregularity in topography, sudden variations, and elegant relics, which comes in between the sublime and the beautiful (Wenner 2006). Price believed that subtle intricacies, variety of forms, and variation in light and shadows, aroused a passionate sense of curiosity within the observer, and thus were sources of pleasure. Here we note the shift from explicit perception to imagination. For example, Gilpin noted that the incorporation of ruins in a given landscape (a resemblance of rough surfaces native to picturesque characteristics), suggested loss and decay, and invited the imagination to complete what the fragmented ruins lacked (Adams 1991).

Such characteristics were to be found in the English countryside, which was undergoing a gradual transformation by enclosure laws throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century

(Adams 1991). The vast unmanageable wilderness of nature became enclosed estate fixtures courtesy of private owners, many of whom employed it agriculturally. These political implications associated with land reform movements, such as the rising emphasis on land ownership, continued to evolve the notion of the exclusive picturesque, treating it as a commodity that is akin to a frameable possession (Townsend 1997). This shift was orchestrated by emerging landscape designers, Lancelot "Capability" Brown and Humphrey Repton, who became artists in the field of framing natural scenery by actively adding or removing features to enhance the notion of the picturesque (Wenner 2006). Leading landscape practitioner, Repton, a successor of Brown, appropriated common land through his private practice of the picturesque style in garden design (Fryer 1994). In his designs, we witness a radical departure from the geometric formality of the French gardens, and an initiation into the irregular scheme of fluid lines reminiscent of the Roman Campagna (Adams 1991).

Repton's contribution to the development of the English landscape was documented through a series of *Red Books.* The publication comprised water-coloured illustrations of the landscape's "before and after views" (Figure 1,2,3,4), along with detailed explanations of proposed aterations (Desmond 1964). The simple overlays of folding flaps inside the books proved to be an effective negotiation technique, as they assisted clients in visualising possible designs. Repton's improvement proposals were highly accustomed and individual to each of his clients, thereby completely eliminating aesthetics irrelevant to the situation (Hunt 1992). Perhaps the most distinctive element in Repton's approach was his clear understanding of the differences between landscape painting and landscape gardening (Adams 1991). While he cultivated both the sharp observations of a painter and the practical skills of a gardener, Repton understood the variables that arise during the actual translation of a perspective drawing onto the site. Light variation in the garden and constant alteration in the spectator's point of view caused Repton to examine the essential character of a given landscape from a variety of angles, including the client's personality, in order to give it a distinctive, improved appearance.

The most vital angle to examine, however, was the site's architecture in relation to the surrounding landscape, through which Repton wished to create the appearance of a united and uninterrupted property (Adams 1991). In *Observation on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening,* Repton noted that design improvements must conceal any visual boundary in order to exhibit the appearance of extent and freedom (Sanborn 2009). Repton specifically displayed a considerable interest in the middle ground vista due to its ability to frame the view without preventing the eye from passing to the distant views beyond (Sanborn 2009). Furthermore, to achieve compositional balance, Repton provided the observant eye with a single main feature–a focal point–to which all others must seem subordinate (Fryer 1994). For example, a cluster of woods and a distinguished lawn proved more masterful than the scattering of many single trees.

Additionally, he remarked that artificial enhancements exerted on the landscape must appear as if they were wholly a product of nature.

Figure 1. Before sketches at Ferne-Hall (Fryer 1994).

Figure 2. Before sketches at Ferne-Hall (Fryer 1994).

At Ferney (Figure 1,2), Repton illustrated the idea of an uninterrupted view by introducing the principle of appropriation. Appropriation is used to describe the extent of property, such as a portion of wood or lawn, which could be presumed to belong to the owner (Fryer 1994). The proposal anticipated the removal of formal terraces and the introduction of informal landscape that appeared to extend beyond the park's boundaries, thereby encompassing distant views. During the improvement, a dense bank of planting was removed to allow for the view of the valley below. Further improvements included a picturesque bridge over the narrow part of a pool below to aid in framing the view. Similarly at Garnon (Figure 3,4), Repton reintroduces the idea of appropriation by situating the estate's house in a position fit to exhibit the idea of a continuous, united, and uninterrupted view. The new improvements situate

Figure 4. After sketches at Garnon (Fryer 1994).

position as to always appear as an object at a great distance, enveloped by wood and sheltered by the hills above (Fryer 1994).

For Repton, the notion of the picturesque represented one element in his design, not the central philosophy (Fryer 1994). While his early proposals identified with the traditional picturesque cult in their use of excessive trees to hide the house's base in a garden, Repton later came to revise his picturesque taste when he realised that the house and the garden were seen by the inhabitants who move around and for whom the bases are not always hidden (Hunt 1992). This shift in visual thinking prompted Repton to alter his design philosophy in order to incorporate the perspective of his clients. His composition continued to incorporate elements attributed to the picturesque aesthetics, such as light and shade, effects of time and age, roughness and decay, and progression of perspective (Adams 1991). What differed, however, was the shift in his outlook on landscape from being static, like in a landscape painting, to being

constantly in motion, whether through the movement of the people or through the process of aging inherent in its trees.

Perhaps to gain a better understanding of Repton's distinctive approach to landscape design, one is ought to examine how he differed from his predecessor, Lancelot "Capability" Brown. While Brown chose not to document his process in books, his design principles appeared to be completely straightforward and devoid of complex philosophy, relying on a coherent understanding of the landscape's physical and visual elements (Adams 1991). He emerged at a time when physical obstructions, like garden walls and hedges were beginning to be removed in favor of broad unification of the park with the larger landscape. While this shift expanded Brown's canvas, it also reaffirmed nature's role as the ideal model for his designs (Hunt 1992). His approach focused on enhancing the natural features inherent in the English landscape, hence his professional title "improver". To further illustrate, Brown would artificially incorporate water into the English garden in a manner as to appear natural, like enhancing an old, formal basin by transforming it into a natural lake (Adams 1991). Other basic elements native to Brown's designs included belts and clumps of trees, smooth range of grass meadows stretching up to the house walls, and serpentine lakes (Topp 2015). At Blenheim (Figure 5), Brown transformed the appearance of River Glyme by damming it to form two large lakes into an idealised river, producing a view that is highly reminiscent of the Roman grandeur of Vanbrugh palace and bridge (Adams 1991). Additionally, he built a natural-looking cascade to assist Glyme in resuming its proportions as it departed from the park. Similarly at Chatsworth, Brown exerted his force on nature when he replaced the existing geometric parterres with smooth lawns. Furthermore, he leveled the ground to allow for a view of the river, which he also dammed and widened.

Figure 5. Blenheim Palace (CountryLife 2010).

As evident from the examples above, Brown did indeed enhance the existing natural features, however one can argue that his "naturalness" required just as much effort, planning, and design strategy (Adams 1991). Whereas French garden designers exhibited geometric patterns and fashioned man-made machinery to form complex fountains with spouting water display, Brown chose to conceal his artificial intervention with a natural disguise. The reconfigured slopes at Chatsworth and the remodeled rivers at Blenheim reveal a similarity between Brown and the French, that being the autocratic command employed over nature.

There exists a range of similarities and differences in the designs of Brown and Repton. When we examine Repton's aesthetic preferences, we are ought to acknowledge the inconsistencies present in his design principles (Hunt 1992). While he identified with Brown's ideas in theory, such as continuity, grandeur, appropriation, order, and variety, his practices were considerably different and appeared to adjust to the given landscape, instead of following a set of strict rules (Adams 1991). For example, at Welbeck, he employed Brown's smooth lawns that spread up to the house. Hunt (1992) suggested that Repton did so to create the representation of elevation that the mind requires for a building with such scale, even though Repton once expressed his disliking them. In contrast to Brown, Repton's main territory for improvement tended to be smaller, mainly investing in the area around the house (Hunt 1992). Whereas Brown concerned himself with morphing the landscape into an attractive whole, Repton's interest revolved around altering the garden surrounding the house to better suit the client's usage. For example, he modified Brown's sweeping meadows surrounding the house into garden beds with exotic flowers. Repton also chose to reintroduce features from earlier styles into his gardens, such as hedge borders and trellis walkways, as to introduce a level of variety that induces mental pleasure, similar to that present in nature. Here we find Repton drawing on Brown's ideas, but deviating from them to accommodate modern times.

Both designers contributed to the formation of a new identity for the English landscape through their different interpretation of the picturesque. Their individualistic approaches, which aimed to enhance natural features, implied variety as a key element in the picturesque landscape. Represented, albeit differently in the designs, picturesque variety was seen in the density of textures, variation in shape and size, contrast in textural patterns, such as in rough trees against smooth lawns and in succession of near and far vistas (Lowenthal and Prince 1964). Such features were employed differently by the designers. Whereas Brown was invested in the whole, Repton found himself immersed in the particulars. As illustrated throughout the

essay, Brown set the foundations, however it was Repton who drew on Brown's principles and elevated the English landscape with his distinctive modern gestures.

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