

**The Moralized Picturesque in England,  
1730–1811**

by

Kimiko S.R. Fraser

Supervised by

Dr Andrea McKenzie

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After returning from a walk, Edward Ferrars — of Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility* — describes to Marianne Dashwood what he has enjoyed of the various views of the surrounding countryside. As a young lady of sensibility, Marianne asks Edward about what views had made an impression on him, hoping to engage him in an aesthetic conversation. This is his reply:

You must not enquire too far, Marianne: remember I have no knowledge in the picturesque, and I shall offend you by my ignorance and want of taste if we come to particulars. I shall call hills steep, which ought to be bold; surfaces strange and uncouth, which ought to be irregular and rugged; and distant objects out of sight, which ought only to be indistinct through the soft medium of a hazy atmosphere... I like a fine prospect, but not picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight, and flourishing. I do not like ruined, tattered cottages. I am not fond of nettles or thistles, or heath blossoms...<sup>1</sup>

For all of Edward's protesting his lack of knowledge, he had a clear understanding of a number of elements that make a landscape picturesque. The term picturesque is frequently misunderstood and misused to denote a general clichéd prettiness; in the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries, however, it would have evoked more specific and complex imagery. For some it was at the centre of philosophical and even a moral debate.<sup>2</sup> The picturesque is not merely pretty; rather, it is a way of seeing that shows a preference for the striking and visually engaging elements of rough textures, line variety, "Clara-obscura," and deep emotions.<sup>3</sup> The elements of emotion, subjective preferences, and imagination allow it to fall within the realm of Romanticism. It was primarily in contrast with the characteristics of classical beauty (including "linear, plane, closed,

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1905), 84–5.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 1.

<sup>3</sup> David Watkin, *The English Vision: The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape and Garden Design* (London: John Murray (Publishers) Ltd, 1982), viii & x; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 1 and 100; Stephen Bending, "Vile Things: William Gilpin and the Properties of the Picturesque," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 80, no.4 (Winter 2017): 592, accessed 7 September 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2017.0032>; William Gilpin, *A Dialogue upon the Gardens of the Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Cobham, at Stow in Buckinghamshire* (London: Printed for B. Seeley, 1748), 5-6.

multiplicity and clearness.”), it was more closely allied with rational Enlightenment ideals.<sup>4</sup> As a “species of beauty,” the picturesque was part of the wider aesthetic debates of the time, including ideas such as the sublime and the beautiful.<sup>5</sup>

By the late eighteenth century, facsimile ruins, hermitages, and Marianne’s “crooked, twisted, blasted trees” had become some of the characteristic picturesque elements that had become common features in the natural-style gardens that were gaining popularity in England.<sup>6</sup> This was a profound change from the predominant formal design of the previous century — inspired by gardens such as Le Nôtre’s Versailles in France — where regularity and geometry were used to show man’s dominion over nature.<sup>7</sup> A shifting perception of nature itself facilitated this change, as nature was no longer seen as the product of a fallen world but as God’s divine creation.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, while Romantic aesthetics suggested that nature could not be improved by mere mortals, treatises on picturesque gardening offered a how-to guide to doing just that. In 1748, Reverend William Gilpin (1724–1804) — known by his contemporaries and subsequent scholars as the “Master of the Picturesque” — published what is thought to be the first treatise on critically evaluating a garden using the picturesque eye: *A Dialogue Upon the Gardens of the*

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<sup>4</sup> Watkin, *The English Vision*, x.

<sup>5</sup> In the preface to *Three Essays*, Gilpin addresses some of the public consternation towards his previously expressed ideas about the picturesque and its relationship to beauty. In his explanation he describes picturesque not as replacing beauty but as a “species of beauty.” William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (London: Printed for R. Blamire, in the Strand, 1792), iii; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 84–5.

<sup>7</sup> Penelope Hobhouse, *Plants in Garden History* (London: Pavilion Books Limited, 1997), 163–192; John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque, Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 60; Joan Bassin, “The English Landscape Garden in the Eighteenth Century: The Cultural Importance of an English Institution,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies II*, No. 1 (Spring, 1979): 17, accessed 11 October 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4048315>.

<sup>8</sup> Dabney Townsend, “The Picturesque,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, No.4 (Autumn, 1997): 370, accessed 4 December 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/430924>.

*Right Honourable the Lord Viscount Cobham, at Stow in Buckinghamshire* (hereinafter, *Dialogue*).<sup>9</sup> Gilpin's book was also a part of another historical first, as it was one of a number of guide books that Richard Temple, the first Viscount Cobham, had commissioned to be written on Stowe, this group of books were the first guidebooks to be written on any English garden.<sup>10</sup> The group of guidebooks in order of publication were first of all Seeley's *A Description of the gardens of Lord Viscount Cobham, at Stow in Buckinghamshire* in 1744, followed by Gilpin's *Dialogue* in 1748, and after that was George Bickham's *The Beauties of Stow* in 1750. There were three editions of the *Dialogue* published in 1748, 1749 and 1751, and this speaks to the popularity of the text and the significance of Stowe as an eighteenth-century tourist destination. Additionally, the text of the *Dialogue* was used in the aforementioned guide book by George Bickham.<sup>11</sup> which shows how influential Gilpin's text was: it was not the first nor the only guide to the gardens at Stowe, but Bickham chose to use Gilpin's text instead of Seeley's.<sup>12</sup> Gilpin's text as presented in *The Beauties of Stow* contains minimal changes from the original text, and the small changes that were made can be seen primarily in the transitions (moving from

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<sup>9</sup> Gilpin's *A Dialogue* was published anonymously, for the precise details of how it was attributed to him see *The Life and Work of William Gilpin* (1939) by William Templeman. Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 34;

Bending, "Vile Things," 585; Robert Mayhew, "William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, No.3 (Spring, 2000): 349, accessed 4 December 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30053947>; William D. Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin (1729-1804) Master of the Picturesque and Vicar of Boldre* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1939) 117.

<sup>10</sup> Francesca Orestano, "The Revd William Gilpin and the Picturesque; Or, Who's Afraid of Doctor Syntax?" *Garden History*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Winter, 2003): 169, accessed 6 December 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1587293>; Gordon Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 106.

<sup>11</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *A Description* is often attributed to Seeley, but no author's name is attached to the work. B. Seeley, was a bookseller in Buckinghamshire, who was involved with all three editions of *A Dialogue*. Of these three texts: *The Beauties of Stow*, *A Dialogue*, and *A Description*, only one is published with an author's name attached, and that is Bickham's. Despite much of the text being directly lifted from Gilpin's *A Dialogue*. The "by George Bickham" on *The Beauties of Stow* title page could also be in reference to the illustrations only and not the text but the layout does not make this entirely clear.

addressing one folly to the next) to remove the elements that indicate it was initially a dialogue, as such it could be seen as an unofficial edition of the *Dialogue*.

Although there are three official editions of the *Dialogue*, as well as the other guides to Stowe, this paper will focus on the first, from 1748, for two reasons. Firstly, the subject of this paper is Gilpin's earliest form of the picturesque. Secondly, as all of the editions were published anonymously, and there is no indication as to how much involvement, if any, Gilpin had in the subsequent editions, any changes made to the second and third editions cannot be taken as his opinions on Stowe, or about the picturesque.

As the title suggests, the text is a dialogue on the gardens at Stowe between two men of taste and sensibility, Polyphthon and Callophilus. It is through this discussion that Gilpin presents and critiques the gardens, follies, and art of Stowe, as well as garden design and fashion as a whole. Polyphthon is generally the first to offer any form of criticism about the garden, and although the criticism is not always negative, it is often so. It falls to Callophilus to counter his critiques, addressing the merits of which particular work, the intentions of the artist, on the aesthetic value of what the object in question adds to the garden or the viewer's experience. As Stowe was one of the gardens in England which underwent the transition from the formal to natural style, starting in the 1730s, it was an ideal setting for Gilpin's *Dialogue*, as in 1748 old and new designs coexisted and facilitated aesthetic critique.<sup>13</sup>

Gilpin was not solely concerned with aesthetics, but also with the relationship between taste, beauty, and morality. Gilpin saw gardens, and other aesthetic experiences (such as fine art), as having the potential to improve people, not only as individuals and citizens, but also to inform

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<sup>13</sup> "The Landscape and Buildings of Stowe [Illustrations]," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55, No. 3 (Summer, 1992): 481, accessed 12 December 2018, <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/3817688>.

their understanding of their place in God's plan.<sup>14</sup> He used the commission from Lord Cobham as an opportunity to educate society to look away from formalism in gardening, and towards the emerging natural style, through picturesque principles. Gilpin's picturesque was intended to train the eye, not only for improved taste in aesthetics, but to see nature in a different way, both as though it were itself a work of art and as part of God's creation, thus giving the public a better understanding of God's plan and their place in it. The question, then, is how does learning to critique a garden using picturesque principles improve one's morals?

This paper is divided into six sections. The first and second section explore the origins of the picturesque, the former in the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England generally, the latter, focusing on Gilpin specifically. Parts three and four examine Gilpin's picturesque: its characteristics, its early form in the *Dialogue* and its moral implications. Parts five and six examine how Gilpin's picturesque is manifested in the physical landscape of Lord Cobham's gardens at Stowe. The result is a greater understanding of the fledgling picturesque and the potential use of gardens for the moral edification of a nation.

### i. The Origin and Definition of the Picturesque

Although Gilpin wrote the earliest treatise on evaluating a landscape using picturesque principles, the concept of the picturesque did not originate with him. He was, however, instrumental to what the picturesque would eventually become, particularly through the decision of situating his work in a physical landscape rather than only in the pictorial landscape of painting and drawing. This gave readers the opportunity to experience the picturesque, in both

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<sup>14</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 48–49; Mayhew, “William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque,” 351-3 and 361.

the *Dialogue* and Gilpin's later tours as well. Before the picturesque was associated with landscape, gardens, and travel, the word picturesque was used throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a variety of contexts, with diverse depths of understanding, and a wide range of connotations. It was influential in a substantial portion of Georgian culture — including poetry, architecture, gardening, travel, and novels — but its earliest usage was within the context of visual art.<sup>15</sup> The specific use was in describing paintings either by or in the style of the prized French and Italian artists Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin, Titian, and Salvator Rosa.<sup>16</sup> This is the painting style that was a foundation of the picturesque, and would later inspire Gilpin and other aesthetic theorists, as well as those writers and designers who were working towards a more natural English style landscape gardens.<sup>17</sup>

Before 1770, picturesque was not a commonly-used term, but was recorded as being used in England as early as 1705 in the play *The Tender Husband* by Richard Steele,<sup>18</sup> and was again used to describe painting, but not yet associated with landscape or nature specifically. A precise definition of the term picturesque was difficult to resolve and, in the few cases when it was defined, the descriptions were vague, nonspecific, or circular, as well as often varying with each

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1967), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. "picturesque," accessed October 4, 2018. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/view/Entry/143510?rskey=Na0qAa&result=1&isAdvanced=false>; Gilpin, *Dialogue*, iii; Tom Williamson, *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>17</sup> Watkin, *The English Vision*, 1; Bassin, "The English Landscape Garden," 18; Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 113 and 116; OED Picturesque; Sir Richard B. Steele, *The Tender Husband; or, The accomplish'd fools. A comedy. As it is acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane. By Her Majesty's servants* (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, 1705), 43; Walter John Hipple Jr, *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale: The Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), 185.

individual.<sup>19</sup> Picturesque began to be used to describe any image, object, or scene that would be “suitable for a Painting,” or which looked “like a picture.”<sup>20</sup> This definition facilitated a new way of looking at and understanding the world, and would facilitate one’s examination and critique of anything as though it were a work of art. Within this definition, what precisely would be considered picturesque is an abstract analytical construct. Gilpin, as one of the central writers on the picturesque, allowed his personal taste to shape what he saw as picturesque, and this in turn shaped the societal ideas about and use of the concept.<sup>21</sup>



Figure 1: Claude Lorrain, *Watermill among Trees*, ca. 1635-38.

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<sup>19</sup> Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom, eds., *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 263; Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, “Introduction,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770.*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Townsend, “The Picturesque,” 365.

<sup>21</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 105.

By 1803, a year before Gilpin's death, and after his published essays and tours had popularized the picturesque, there was a great number of definitions which still did not precisely make clear what the picturesque was. George Mason's *A Supplement to Johnson's English Dictionary* went so far as to list six definitions, all of which were variations on earlier forms. These definitions reflect an intellectual debt to Gilpin in that they do not solely focus on painting (even if four of the six definitions do invoke painting) but also apply the picturesque to a physical as well as pictorial landscape.<sup>22</sup> Both of these additional dimensions to the picturesque are due to Gilpin's work.<sup>23</sup>

The word itself has an obscure etymology, as its country of origin is highly debated by scholars. It may have originated in France or England: William D. Templeman, one of Gilpin's biographers, states that it was most likely the latter, as the first use of the word in France was not recorded until the 1730s, i.e. "pittoresque" but — as mentioned previously — the first recorded use of picturesque in England was in 1705.<sup>24</sup> However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records that the earliest form was "Italian alla pittoresca" dating it to the mid-sixteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Although the etymology is important to the definition of picturesque, it does not shed light on how the word became nearly ubiquitous in the Georgian period, nor does the existence of the debate surrounding the origin of picturesque does not undermine the association of the picturesque with the English. It was the English writers Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard

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<sup>22</sup> Definitions from Mason: "1. What pleases the eye; 2. Remarkable for singularity; 3. Striking the imagination with the force of painting; 4. To be expressed in painting; 5. Affording a good subject for a landscape; 6. Proper to take a landscape from." Mason, George. (1735-1806) *A Supplement to Johnson's English Dictionary: of Which the Palpable Errors Are Attempted to Be Rectified, And Its Material Omissions Supplied*. (New York: Printed for H. Caritat, 1803) no page number.

<sup>23</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 98; Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 113; Hipple Jr. *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque*, 185; Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> OED, Picturesque.

Payne Knight of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who shaped the picturesque into something irrevocably linked to the English.<sup>26</sup>

The picturesque, then, begins with an unclear etymology and variable meaning. What does one do with an aesthetic concept which resists succinct definition? Stephen Copley and Peter Garside suggest that the picturesque cannot be seen “as a single coherent category”; instead, it is more useful to look at and examine this concept as “multifarious versions of the Picturesque aesthetic [as] produced by William Gilpin, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight,” as well as those of the Georgian society who interacted with it and shaped their own vision and ideas about the picturesque and what it meant to suit their medium.<sup>27</sup> Gilpin’s picturesque is an aesthetic concept distinct from Payne Knight’s picturesque, which is, again, different from Price’s and others, as each individual had specific qualifications and characteristics which they saw as being particularly picturesque.<sup>28</sup> Henceforward, it is Gilpin’s picturesque being discussed, unless otherwise stated.

## ii. The Inspiration for Gilpin’s Picturesque

Gilpin’s aesthetic preferences, and therefore his picturesque, were largely shaped in the early years of his life, mainly his childhood and his years at Oxford University.<sup>29</sup> Gilpin’s biographer Carl Paul Barbier, describes how art and learning from a young age to look at the

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<sup>26</sup> Mavis Batey, “The Picturesque: An Overview,” *Garden History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, The Picturesque (Winter, 1994): 131, accessed 12 December 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1587022>.

<sup>27</sup> Copley and Garside, “Introduction,” 2–3.

<sup>28</sup> John Whale, “Romantics, Explorers and Picturesque Travelers,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770.*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 175.

<sup>29</sup> 1740–1744 Gilpin received a B.A. from Queen's College, Oxford, and in 1748 he returned to Oxford to work towards his M.A.; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 16; Orestano, “The Revd William Gilpin,” 169.

world with an artist's eye, had been central to Gilpin's family for generations. Gilpin's grandfather, William Gilpin, was a patron of the arts and was taught to draw by an artist he patronized, Matthias Read. That same artist went on to teach Gilpin's father, Captain John Bernard Gilpin, when he was a child. He in turn instructed his sons William and Sawrey. According to Gilpin, the style and subject matter of both his father and grandfather's art were picturesque long before the concept was a widely known.<sup>30</sup>

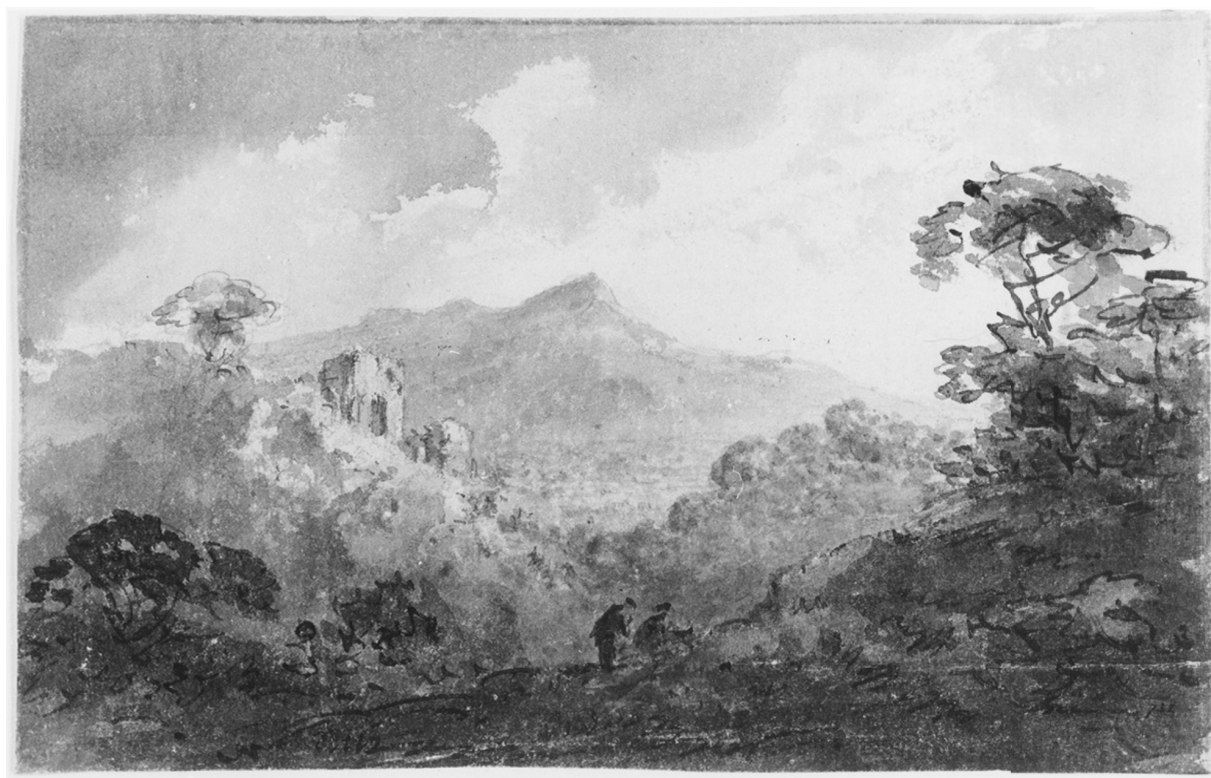


Figure 2: William Gilpin, *Landscape with ruined Castle*, mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The three generations of Gilpin amateur artists favoured wild nature and twisted trees — characteristic features of what would come to be described as the picturesque — as the subjects of their drawings.<sup>31</sup> This love for unspoiled nature was further established in Gilpin as he grew

<sup>30</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* 5, 11–15.

up in Cumberland and spent a good portion of his time studying and sketching the landscape around him.<sup>32</sup> This is the primary element which prevents Stowe from being a truly picturesque garden to Gilpin, as it has little to no wild elements, like that of the north or Scotland that were his particular favorites.<sup>33</sup> Stowe was, however, far closer to being natural than most of the gardens of the mid-eighteenth century, as it was not until some time after the 1750s that landscape-style gardens began to gain popularity.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Stowe did feature a considerable number of follies and ruins which were frequent features of Gilpin's drawings and became a recognizable feature of his picturesque.<sup>35</sup> Barbier also suggests that Gilpin's preference for ruins may have its origin in his early life, as he was born and grew up in Scaleby castle in Cumberland, which was not entirely in top condition.<sup>36</sup>

The common topics of discussion in the Gilpin house — namely “concepts of Beauty, truth, and virtue” — would become the central themes of the *Dialogue* and formed the philosophical and moral foundation for the text and for the picturesque.<sup>37</sup> Gilpin would go on to explore these topics further through his reading while he was at Oxford, and he was particularly influenced by the work of Virgil, Spencer, Locke, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, and the 3rd earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>38</sup> The last three made their opinions about gardens clear: that they were

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 23-25.

<sup>34</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 128; Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 120; Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 89.

<sup>36</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 115; Deborah Kennedy, “The Ruined Abbey in the Eighteenth Century,” *Philological Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (Fall, 2001): 503, accessed 1 March 2019, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/211158667?accountid=14846>.

<sup>37</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 21.

firmly opposed to the formal garden style popular in their time, which had not been challenged before this.<sup>39</sup>

Although the changes which they called for did not occur immediately, Stowe was one of the first gardens which began to alter its style, starting in 1714.<sup>40</sup> Stowe's early renovation may have been due, in part, to Pope's direct connection — and therefore potential aesthetic influence — to the garden, through friendships with Lord Cobham and two of Cobham's key garden designers, Charles Bridgeman and William Kent.<sup>41</sup> Pope's influence is acknowledged within the garden itself by his likeness, in the form of a bust, featured in a place of honour in the *Temple of British Worthies*, designed by Kent.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout Gilpin's work he frequently makes reference to and quotes from Pope's writing. The *Dialogue* is a prime example of this, as Pope's *Windsor Forest*, a poem which opens by praising nature and natural English wilderness over the plants of India and the history of Greece, is quoted as an epigraph on the title page, and other works are quoted throughout the *Dialogue*.<sup>43</sup> Given Pope's influence — and specifically his ideas about nature and natural gardening — on both Stowe and Gilpin, it is unsurprising that much of Stowe reflected Gilpin's personal preferences in a garden. As Stowe was one of the first to make the transition from formal to landscape style, it would have been the closest to picturesque that Gilpin had seen, or would be able to see at the time the *Dialogue* was being written. Although Gilpin does present

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<sup>39</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 59; "The Landscape and Buildings of Stowe," 480; Watkin, *The English Vision*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden*, 105; Watkin, *The English Vision*, 6; Hobhouse, *Plants in Garden History*, 192.

<sup>42</sup> B. Seeley, *A description of the gardens of Lord Viscount Cobham, at Stow in Buckinghamshire* (Northampton: Printed by W. Dicey, 1744), 17; Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, 87.

<sup>43</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, i and 45; Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 124 and note; Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest* (London: Printed in the year, 1799), 4-6.

some negative criticism of Stowe, the *Dialogue* ends with Polypthon and Callophilus being extremely pleased with the garden overall and reluctant to leave.<sup>44</sup> Pope influenced Gilpin and the wider society about more than simply the aesthetic, as he was advocating for “acceptance of a divinely created Nature.”<sup>45</sup> It is this perspective which forms the moral underpinnings of Gilpin’s picturesque.

No essay on Gilpin’s picturesque would be complete without acknowledging Edmund Burke’s *Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke’s seminal eighteenth-century work on aesthetic theory was widely influential, as it challenged many of the established ideas surrounding beauty and morality. Furthermore, Burke’s articulation of these aesthetic terms of the sublime and beautiful were far better defined than the picturesque, which allowed them to be more easily and widely invoked and adopted.<sup>46</sup> Burke’s *Sublime and Beautiful* affected the wider picturesque and, although his ideas were an influence on Gilpin’s later picturesque, they were the core of Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight’s picturesque. Price and Payne Knight were rivals debating the context, character, and significance of the picturesque compared to other aesthetic ideas.<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Price worked to make a place in people’s understanding of the picturesque somewhere between the sublime and beautiful.<sup>48</sup> Burke’s aesthetic theories on the sublime and beautiful could not have influenced any of the fledgling picturesque as portrayed in the *Dialogue*, which was published in 1748, nine years prior to *Sublime and Beauty* in 1757,

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<sup>44</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 57–60.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Kléber Monod, *Imperial Island: A History of Britain and its Empire, 1660-1837* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009), 135.

<sup>46</sup> Copley and Garside, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>47</sup> Batey, “The Picturesque,” 121-122.

<sup>48</sup> David Punter, “The Picturesque and the Sublime: Two Worldscapes,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770.*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 220–221.

although Burke was an inspiration for elements of Gilpin's later picturesque.<sup>49</sup> These influences, combined with Gilpin's many hours sketching in nature — he was known never to leave the house without returning with a new sketch — and his ecclesiastical vocation as an Anglican clergyman, combined to make his picturesque.<sup>50</sup>

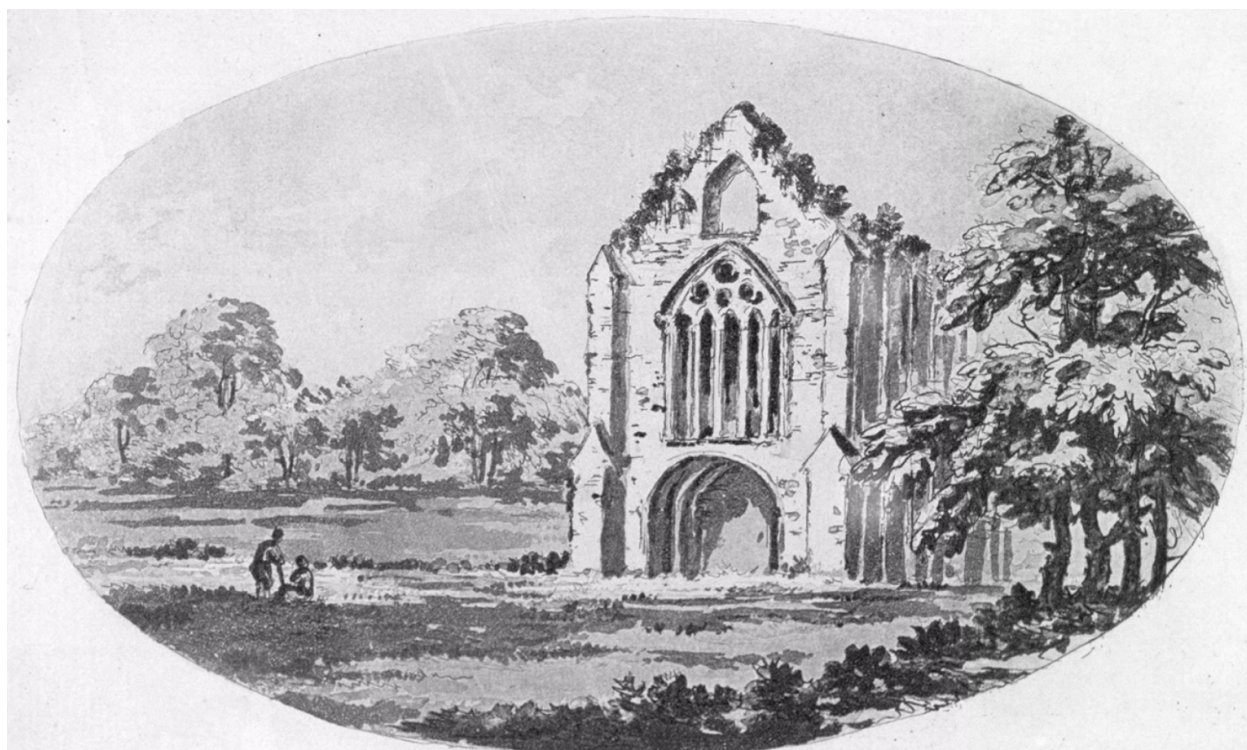


Figure 3: William Gilpin, *General View*, 1701-1776.

### iii. Fledgling Picturesque

As Stowe's landscape was populated with various follies such as temples, obelisks, a hermitage, and ruins, which were elements Gilpin favoured in his drawings and became a

<sup>49</sup> Townsend, "The Picturesque," 372.

<sup>50</sup> October, 1746, Gilpin was ordained as a curate, and in the same year that the *Dialogue* was published, June 1748 he was ordained as a Priest. Mayhew, "William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque," 349; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 16–17.

characteristic of his picturesque.<sup>51</sup> This connection between the follies, especially ruins, and the picturesque is already well established in Gilpin's fledgling picturesque of the *Dialogue*, which can be seen in one of the earliest discussions between Polyphthon and Callophilus regarding the man-made lake and the first ruin they see, and how it is "a great Addition to the Beauty of the Lake" because "there is something so vastly picturesque, and pleasing to the Imagination in such Objects."<sup>52</sup> This is the first and only instance where the word picturesque is used by Gilpin in the *Dialogue*. Within the discussion between Polyphthon and Callophilus that follows, Gilpin describes various scenes — which are not before him — that would be considered picturesque: a rock and a ruin, and explaining how each scene is picturesque because of what it offers the viewer, particularly in how it is "pleasing to the Imagination."<sup>53</sup> These rhetorical scenes are compared to their antithesis, the idea of a "regular building," by which he most likely means a building in the classical style. Later on in the *Dialogue*, Gilpin merely tolerates a building in the classical style, until it is used to illustrate a specific purpose in the *Temple of Ancient Virtue*, which we will examine later.<sup>54</sup>

The picturesque scenes set the tone for what is considered picturesque later on in Stowe and supplies a visual guide for the reader. The rock with dramatic lighting, "flourishing Bushes, Ivy and dead branches" gives more than the classical building to the viewer's eye and mind to digest as it is visually complex with a variety of textures and colours.<sup>55</sup> The ruin, "with venerable old Oaks, and Pines nodding over it," is also engaging for the viewer, and acts as a form of

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<sup>51</sup> Templeman, *The Life and Work of William Gilpin*, 120; Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 89.

<sup>52</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 19–21.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 6.

*Memento mori*.<sup>56</sup> The element of time having passed seems to be a key element of both the picturesque and the new landscape: it engages the eye and mind, as well as the viewer's imagination, and facilitates a viewer's meditation on nature — specifically God's nature — while also balancing the follies and other manufactured elements of Stowe.<sup>57</sup> It is not precisely explained why the ruin is the most picturesque, as the nearby hermitage may surpass the rock and the ruin entirely because it is so affecting to Callophilus that Gilpin writes that it pulled his attention away from the present discussion of picturesque scenes, to comment on its influence and impact in the garden. He does not return to the previous discussion even after his comment on the hermitage. The reason for the hermitage's effectiveness as a picturesque object is how it works with nature but has "not exceeded" it, allowing for a balance to be struck between man's art and God's creation, with God's creation as the element of highest importance.<sup>58</sup> The hermitage draws the eye to itself and then to nature surrounding it, making it an ideal picturesque object.

Gilpin's work made the picturesque specific. Instead of only being that which is "suitable for a Painting," Gilpin's picturesque was populated with recognizable characteristics and motifs: follies, uncultivated trees, asymmetrical compositions, use of chiaroscuro, roughness, a view or object that does not overpower nature but rather stirs the imagination and engages one's curiosity and in the process morally elevates and inspires and which became intertwined with landscape gardening, and picturesque tourism.<sup>59</sup> Gilpin does not explicitly define picturesque in the *Dialogue*; it is not until forty four years later — in a work he did not publish anonymously,

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<sup>56</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 6; Kennedy, "The Ruined Abbey," 503.

<sup>57</sup> Bassin, "The English Landscape Garden," 18.

<sup>58</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 8–9, 5–6 and 34; Townsend, "The Picturesque," 365.

unlike the *Dialogue* — that he defined the picturesque as “a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture.”<sup>60</sup> This seems to be a surprisingly simple definition for an aesthetic idea which he had been working for the majority of his life, and which his writing portrays in a nuanced and complicated manner. Although Gilpin’s own definition of picturesque is clearly elucidated in his *Essay on Prints* (1792) and is almost identical to the early use of the word being related to a painting, its meaning, intent, and connotation are marked by the use of the word “peculiar.” This single word shows that picturesque is both a part of that which would be considered beautiful, while also being distinctive.



Figure 4: George Bickham, *The Hermitage*, 1750, Drawing, *The Beauties of Stow*.

<sup>60</sup> William Gilpin, *An Essay on Prints*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (London: Printed for R. Blamire, in the Strand, 1792), xii.

Despite his *Dialogue*, being described as the “birth of the picturesque,” Gilpin never explicitly defined the term in his exploration of Stowe.<sup>61</sup> He did not give his audience an “Explanation of Terms” as he did in his *Essay on Prints*. Instead he chose to show the reader the picturesque through Stowe’s imperfect example, with Polyphthon and Callophilus as guides, and the arbiters of taste. If the picturesque is the core of the *Dialogue*, why would he choose not to define it? Either he had not fully come to understand for himself what picturesque meant — preferring instead to plant the seed in readers' minds with the single mention of the picturesque, and allowing them to determine its importance — or the aesthetic qualities of the picturesque, while consequential for a guide to an art-filled garden, were either interdependent, or at minimum secondary to the moral education he wanted to provide through teaching the reader how to look properly at the gardens and the picturesque.

#### iv. The Moral Picturesque

Through the course of the *Dialogue* the exploration of the characteristics of the picturesque and of Stowe eventually leads to the central conversation between Gilpin’s two gentlemen, waiting for a rainstorm to pass. Gilpin’s ideas illustrated in this discussion are not related to any one specific characteristic or feature of Stowe, allowing the discussion to reveal themes applicable to the garden as a whole. It speaks both to the use of a garden and to the purpose of the picturesque as a means of highlighting “a very visible connection between an improved Taste for Pleasure, and Taste for Virtue.”<sup>62</sup> Although pleasure, taste and virtue are

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<sup>61</sup> Orestano, “The Revd William Gilpin,” 174–175.

<sup>62</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 45–49.

defined by Gilpin in the *Dialogue*, they seem to be linked in Gilpin's mind and are used throughout the text nearly synonymously.

Given the nature of some of the follies at Stowe (especially the *Temple of Ancient Virtue* and the *Temple of British Worthies* where busts or statues of various individuals are displayed) the idea of good men, men of virtue, and men of taste are frequently discussed and there are particular attributes which are regularly associated by Gilpin with these exemplars of virtue. One phrase, with some variation, is repeated when individuals whom Gilpin considered virtuous are mentioned; that is, those men worked for the “benefited Mankind.”<sup>63</sup> Gilpin also describes the men depicted in the *Temple of Ancient Virtue* as worthy to be included in this temple, as they were men “who made Virtue their only Pursuit, and the Welfare of Mankind their only Study.”<sup>64</sup> Overall Gilpin’s ideas about virtue were primarily concerned with using one’s life and work for the benefit of society, which seem to be his goal with this text and the picturesque. He wanted to educate and worked to do so through his books, his picturesque, and his work both as a clergyman and as a schoolmaster.<sup>65</sup>

When discussing one of Gilpin’s later tours, Stephen Copley suggests that “as a clergyman with a developed sense of his social and moral duties and obligations, Gilpin faces the problem of the moral justification of picturesque tourism.”<sup>66</sup> If this was the case, it demonstrates

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<sup>63</sup> The statues included in the *Temple of Ancient Virtue*: Homer, Socrates, Lycurgus, Epaminondas. The busts included in the *Temple of British Worthies*: Alexander Pope, Sir Thomas Gresham, Ignatius Jones, John Milton, William Shakespeare, John Locke, Sir Isaac Newton, Sir Francis Bacon, King Alfred, Edward, Prince of Wales, Queen Elizabeth I, King William III, Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, John Hampden, Sir John Barnard. Bickham, Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 29; *The Beauties of Stow*, 26-28; Seeley, *A description of the gardens of Lord Viscount Cobham, at Stow in Buckinghamshire* (Northampton: Printed by W. Dicey, 1744), 17–22.

<sup>64</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 111; Mayhew, “William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque,” 357.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Copley, “William Gilpin and the Black-lead Mine,” in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770.*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51-52.

that Gilpin was acutely aware of his position, and that he strove to balance his aesthetic interests and his religious vocation, thus establishing the moral element of the *Dialogue* and his picturesque to make it a suitable line of study for a clergyman.<sup>67</sup> However, it is unlikely that the moral element of Gilpin's picturesque was simply a way to explain or justify why he had an interest in and spent a good amount of his time thinking about, writing, and experiencing the picturesque; rather, his picturesque was moral because it grew out of his belief about God and about nature.

As the picturesque is to a degree subjective, it relies on how an individual sees and what they think should make a good painting, which may not be Gilpin's preference of nature, follies, and trees.<sup>68</sup> This would be a problem that Gilpin would come up against; perhaps this is why he wrote the *Dialogue* and his subsequent works on the picturesque. He seems to be seeking to educate on the picturesque, to inform the sensibility and taste of individuals, and to help them see nature in a way which would improve public morality. He was working to do so through the picturesque — using it as a tool, a means to educate the public on a better way of seeing and understanding nature, to do what he describes those of the *Temple of British Worthies* who chose to study nature did, to see nature in a manner which “enlarges our Notions of a God.”<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the *Dialogue*, the gentlemen's discussion and debate about the garden and its merits are used as an opportunity to highlight the moral elements in the garden and the wider culture. Moral connotations and allegory were apparent throughout Stowe — in the design, classical references, and follies — therefore it is to be expected that the *Dialogue* would have an

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<sup>67</sup> Townsend, “The Picturesque,” 369.

<sup>68</sup> Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 29.

overall moralizing tone. Even elements of a garden which seem mundane have moral connotations. For example, there is a hedge which Polyphthon complains is blocking the view, but Callophilus explains that the hedge is a visual device, a pause, like a rest in music, which allows the eye to enjoy the views even more keenly as “the Moralists observe, that a little Adversity quickens out Relish for the Enjoyment of Life...”<sup>70</sup> The discussion of the moral individuals of the *Temple of British Worthies* is another key example of the moralizing nature of Gilpin’s *Dialogue*. Polyphthon remarks that had he been alone he would not have thought of all of the moral connotations of the temple and the individuals which were discussed.<sup>71</sup> Thus the primary purpose of the *Dialogue* is to take the reader not only on an aesthetic tour of the gardens at Stowe but also on a moral one.<sup>72</sup>

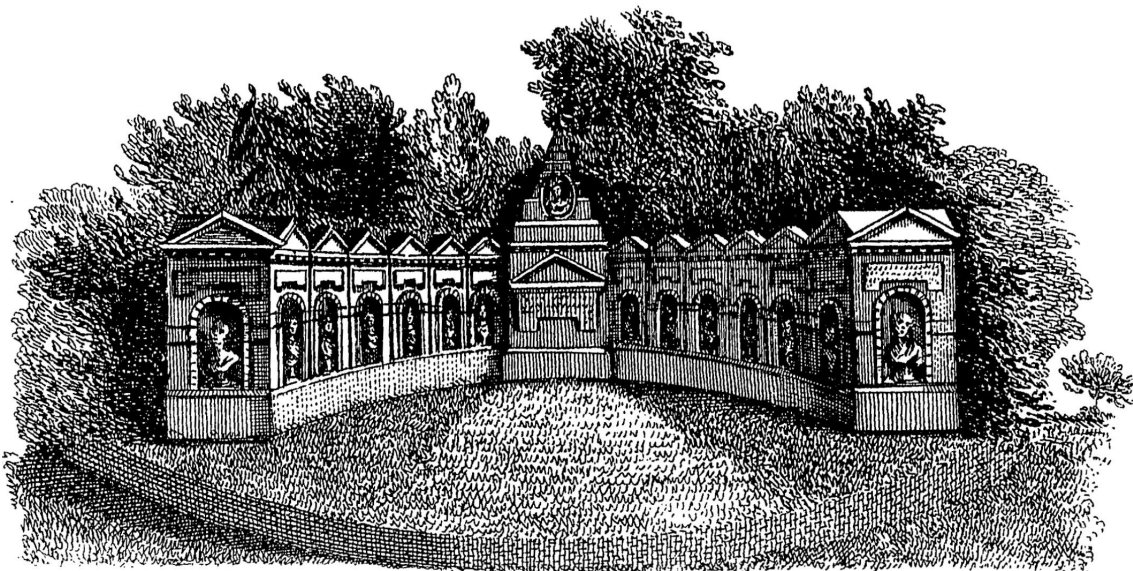


Figure 5: George Bickham, *The Temple of British Worthies*, 1750, Drawing, *The Beauties of Stow*.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 11–12.

<sup>71</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Stephen Bending, eds., *A Cultural History of Gardens: In the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 587.

That Gilpin's picturesque was linked to morality would not have been surprising to contemporaries, indeed, as Townsend observes "initially, the moral and aesthetic were understood in the same terms."<sup>73</sup> It is generally accepted by scholars studying Gilpin that the *Dialogue* was more than a guide book, and had philosophical elements, but there is a debate as to whether or not Gilpin's picturesque was concerned with morality.<sup>74</sup> This debate can be seen in the contradicting presentations of Gilpin's picturesque by Francesca Orestano in 2003, Robert Mayhew in 2000 and Stephen Bending in 2017.

Throughout Francesca Orestano's *The Revd William Gilpin and the Picturesque*, the concept of the picturesque is presented as a secular theory based on "pure aesthetic rules, deprived of any moral associations."<sup>75</sup> Orestano's primary piece of evidence for this argument is a quotation from Gilpin's *Observations on the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (1786), that "Moral, and picturesque ideas do not always coincide."<sup>76</sup> However, Gilpin's views of the relationship between the picturesque and the moral are more complex than this short statement can portray. Gilpin's words here are directed towards the issue of the picturesque in comparison with the rural or pastoral aesthetic. While evidently picturesque scenes such as ruins and asymmetrical trees could serve a moral purpose, Gilpin considered the industry and aesthetics of the rural to be moral, but seldom if ever picturesque. Although something may be practical and efficient, it is not picturesque if it is seen as doing little to inspire the imagination. This debate between the picturesque and the rural is also a part of Gilpin's

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<sup>73</sup> Townsend, "The Picturesque," 370.

<sup>74</sup> Orestano, "The Revd William Gilpin," 172.

<sup>75</sup> Orestano, "The Revd William Gilpin," 167–8.

<sup>76</sup> William Gilpin, *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty, made in the year 1772, on several parts of England; particularly the mountains, and lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland*, Vol.2 (London: Printed for R. Blamire, Strand, 1786), 44.

*Dialogue*, which is not resolved but leaves the reader with the question “cannot you make a distinction between natural and moral Beauties?”<sup>77</sup> Gilpin neither answers this question nor distinguishes which type of beauty describes which aesthetic theory, which Orestano points to as Gilpin divorcing his picturesque from “morals or benevolence.”<sup>78</sup> However, this lack of explanation by Gilpin does not mean that the picturesque is entirely separate from moral ideas. Moreover, rural usefulness, although not picturesque, does not mean all picturesque is not moral. Indeed, much of what is discussed in the *Dialogue* would suggest that Gilpin’s picturesque is linked to virtue through the ideas of taste and pleasure, but that not everything that is necessarily picturesque is moral. Although Orestano gives a detailed description of Gilpin’s *Dialogue*, no mention is made of the moral discussions and in the description and analysis of the aforementioned hedge — being used as a moral as well as a visual device — the discussion of the moral element is not a part of the quote used by Orestano. The visuals are the primary focus throughout the essay.

In contrast to Orestano’s views on Gilpin’s picturesque, Robert Mayhew in *William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque* and Stephen Bending in *Vile Things* state that Gilpin’s picturesque is irrevocably set and inspired by issues of morality and specifically his Anglican view of nature.<sup>79</sup> Mayhew describes Gilpin’s Anglicanism as inspired by “low-church Anglican apologetics” also called, Latitudinarianism, which is marked by the belief of the “natural world as evidence for the existence of God.”<sup>80</sup> This links clearly Gilpin’s faith and his picturesque: the

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<sup>77</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Orestano, “The Revd William Gilpin,” 174.

<sup>79</sup> Mayhew, “Latitudinarian Picturesque,” 349–350, 361.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 349 and 351.

latter is a tool by which one gains a means of viewing and appreciating God's nature through the changes made in the landscape by man.<sup>81</sup>

Mayhew opens his essay with an explanation that, although Gilpin is widely associated with his picturesque art and the literature of picturesque tourism, these were not the vital pieces of his life and work. Instead, it is his work as a religious adviser and teacher for which he most wanted to be remembered.<sup>82</sup> As Gilpin is primarily associated with the picturesque, he and his work have been examined primarily through the lenses of politics and aesthetics, leaving his ecclesiastical motivations largely neglected until Mayhew's analysis, and Bending's response seventeen years later.<sup>83</sup> It was, therefore, Gilpin's goal to use the picturesque as an educative tool to highlight God's creation in a manner which is comprehensible to and affective upon mankind.<sup>84</sup>

#### v. The Original Gardener and the First Garden

Before ideas such as natural law and Gilpin's picturesque, nature was viewed as a part of the fallen world, which should be shaped and controlled by mankind so as to be "beautiful, regular, and fruitful."<sup>85</sup> Now, it was, as Mayhew describes, viewed as proof of God's existence and sees Him as being the first gardener and the first artist.<sup>86</sup> With this comes ideas about the limits of human understanding, specifically in regards to being able to comprehend God and his

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<sup>81</sup> Mayhew, "Latitudinarian Picturesque," 343 and 361; Bending, "Vile Things," 585.

<sup>82</sup> Mayhew, "Latitudinarian Picturesque," 350.

<sup>83</sup> Mayhew, "Latitudinarian Picturesque," 350.

<sup>84</sup> Bending, "Vile Things," 585 (Bending primarily echoes Mayhew's argument and expands it out to Gilpin's later tours).

<sup>85</sup> Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 113.

<sup>86</sup> Townsend, "The Picturesque," 369–370; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 22; Mayhew, "William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque," 351; Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, 77.

work.<sup>87</sup> With Gilpin's Anglican view on nature it is understandable to see how he believed that the "Improvement of public Taste" could be achieved through the viewing of the landscape with the picturesque eye, which leads to a more virtuous nation.<sup>88</sup>

Throughout history, gardeners and land owners have been trying to recreate Eden, the original garden, striving to create their own version of paradise; Stowe was no exception.<sup>89</sup> Although the Elysian Fields (designed by Kent and completed in 1738) are never named in the *Dialogue*, many of the follies which were discussed were in this eastern portion of the garden.<sup>90</sup> The name is a classical reference to Greek mythology, and was commonly used as a synonym for Eden.<sup>91</sup> In Gilpin's *Dialogue*, during a discussion about the Serpentine River, it is described what element Stowe is lacking which hinders it from being a true paradise — that is, being a stream of running water, as the Serpentine river is not much more than a thin man-made lake.<sup>92</sup> Within this discussion, Polyphthon acknowledges that to truly make Stowe into paradise was impossible, as one "cannot make Nature, the utmost we can do is mend her."<sup>93</sup> The phrasing of this sentence does give the initial impression that Gilpin's primary goal for the picturesque was to teach how to improve nature. As described by Mayhew and Bending, this is not the case: Gilpin was advocating to improve nature in a manner which allows humans to best perceive God and his

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<sup>87</sup> Bending, eds. *A Cultural History of Gardens*, 585.

<sup>88</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 48–49.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Laird, *A Natural History of English Gardening 1600-1800* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015), 171; Hilles and Bloom, eds., *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 63.

<sup>91</sup> Bassin, "The English Landscape Garden," 28; Watkin, *The English Vision*, 17.

<sup>92</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 22–23; Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 63.

<sup>93</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 23. This is true to the technique used to make the Elysian Fields themselves, as to erase the former formal layout, the field was simply left to grow for a period of time, God's nature took control of the new design. (Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, 77.)

creation.<sup>94</sup> The picturesque is, then, that tool — the means to alter nature, or gardens, to be seen and understood by men, in order to bring them to a better understanding of divine creation, God's plan, and God himself. The picturesque then was not about making God's nature better, because no one can improve God's work.<sup>95</sup>

As with the argument about what is moral and what is natural beauty, Gilpin also uses the technique of obscuring or leaving out details to advance his message. The oak tree is one plant that is most frequently mentioned by name in the *Dialogue*, at an underwhelming total of three times, compared to ivy mentioned once, pines once, and moss once.<sup>96</sup> All other mentions of plants or trees are without specifics and are described merely as “tree,” “bushes,” or “woods.” Flowers are also mentioned only one time, but not by name or in reference to real flowers. Instead they are used within a metaphorical context, where they stand in for the idea of any art or aesthetic object.<sup>97</sup> Why then, would a guide to a garden, where plants are a feature, not have more than minimal discussion on the plants themselves, especially where man-made objects such as the follies, art, and statues are discussed and critiqued at great length?

By 1745, when Lancelot “Capability” Brown joined the Stowe gardening team, the following trees were added: “beech, elm, Scots pine, as well as exotics such as cedars, and the American *Taxodium distichum* and *Robinia pseudoacacia*.”<sup>98</sup> This shows that there were more plants at Stowe than just oaks when Gilpin wrote the *Dialogue* in 1748. Should not the plants, as God's creation, have pride of place in Gilpin's picturesque if it were intended to be a tool for

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<sup>94</sup> Mayhew, “William Gilpin and the Latitudinarian Picturesque,” 361; Bending, “Vile Things,” 585.

<sup>95</sup> Bending, “Vile Things,” 585.

<sup>96</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 6 and 17.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 55.

<sup>98</sup> Hobhouse, *Plants in Garden History*, 195.

moral education? It is perhaps for the very reason that Gilpin wanted to encourage a virtue-based reading of nature that he did not mention plants in great detail. As plants were God's creation, he did not have any authority to critique God's work, and it could not be improved with his suggestion. He does have authority to critique man's work, and often frames his critique in the frame of being well done or poorly executed because of how it relates to the nature around it.<sup>99</sup> Man's work can be improved to better display the work of God.



Figure 6: Jacques Rigaud, *A General Plan and Prospective of Lord Viscount Cobham's Gardens at Stowe*, ca. 1739.

Furthermore, specific plants had particular associations and meanings. Oak trees began with being associated with landed families but, by the end of the seventeenth century, oak trees

<sup>99</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 6.

were associated with the British nation as a whole.<sup>100</sup> This further points to the overall theme of Stowe as a patriotic British garden.<sup>101</sup> Another possibility is that the plants were left out of his description as he was writing from memory and sketches.<sup>102</sup>

## vi. The Use of a Garden

To return again to the discussion in the *Dialogue* that occurred during the rainstorm, one of the other themes of this discussion is the Garden's place in society. As they wait under some shelter, Polyphthon decides to argue against such gardens as Stowe, stating their uselessness and how if he had a garden everything in it would be put to the use of society, namely in prosperous farms, instead of wasting his money on follies and temples. His garden would be pastoral and rural rather than picturesque. Callophilus is surprised at his companion's opinion and ardently defends gardens like Stowe as being of great use to society, not only to those who own them, who could use the money spent on the garden for far more selfish purposes, but also to the public, as they are able to experience and enjoy the beauties of art. Also, it gives work to craftsmen and artists who would not be paid if all the land was used for farming.<sup>103</sup> One may suggest that this argument also means that writers, like Gilpin, would not be commissioned to make guide books. This being the case, it is not surprising that Callophilus ends the argument with what he believes to be the unalloyed use of a garden and of public art, to educate "a Nation's Taste" and therefore increase the country's virtue.<sup>104</sup> Polyphthon reveals that he was

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<sup>100</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 128.

<sup>101</sup> Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, iv.

<sup>103</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 45–47.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 47–51.

being deliberately contrary to pass the time and his opinion is exactly what Callophilus argued, which removes any ambiguity to which side a reader should take.<sup>105</sup>

The *Dialogue* was written at a time when the natural or landscape style gardens were not yet fully embraced in England. Stowe was, therefore, still an exception rather than the norm. Gilpin saw the formal gardens of England as completely lacking in taste, which sent a poor message to any other country about the state of England and its people.<sup>106</sup> He equated good taste and an appreciation of aesthetic experiences with increased virtue.<sup>107</sup> He saw Stowe as a garden moving in the right direction which he hoped “may work some Reformation” for gardens and society as a whole.<sup>108</sup> There are still elements in Stowe of the older style, such as the Palladian Bridge, and the Octagon Lake, which would not be softened to make them more natural until after 1799.<sup>109</sup> As it was many gardens would remain in the formal style for quite some time after the 1730s, either because of personal preference, the message the landowners wanted to send, or the cost of renovation.<sup>110</sup> Many gardens and country houses had become popular tourist attraction, and Stowe was both well renowned in Britain and Europe and always open to the public.<sup>111</sup> This made them ideal platforms for any message the landowner might wish to present. Gardens at the time were commonly used by landowners for a multitude of purposes and were often ideal platforms to spread philosophical messages, display wealth and authority, or to proclaim political allegiances.<sup>112</sup> The latter of which is what Lord Cobham chose to do at Stowe

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 48 and 51.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>109</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 35; Watkin, *The English Vision*, 23.

<sup>110</sup> Bassin, “The English Landscape Garden,” 24; Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 7.

<sup>111</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 66–73; Campbell, *The Hermit in the Garden*, 105.

<sup>112</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 65–70.

from 1733 to the 1740s, which resulted in the four temples in the Elysian Fields: the *Temple of Modern Virtue*, *Temple of Ancient Virtue*, *Temple of British Worthies*, and the *Temple of Friendship*.<sup>113</sup> Often the intention of ruins and follies in gardens like Stowe was to inspire contemplation and reflection.<sup>114</sup>

The *Temple of Ancient Virtue* contains a display of celebrated classical thinkers who Gilpin presents as worthy of being considered “Heroes of Antiquity” for similar reasons as were presented for the *Temple of British Worthies*; that is, that they pursued virtue, morality, and worked for the overall betterment of humanity.<sup>115</sup> Gilpin uses this temple as an opportunity to describe all of the benefits a moral man can provide to the society. He is highlighting the moral message in Lord Cobham’s political statement, as the building beside it was designed in contrast with this ideal of moral society with the state of the ruined *Temple of Modern Virtue*. It is made purposely to be in ruins and includes a headless statue which was believed to be the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, whom Lord Cobham — himself a Whig — and some political friends had formed a coalition against, calling themselves the Patriots.<sup>116</sup> This conversation about the *Temple of Ancient Virtue* and *Temple of Modern Virtue* highlights a seeming paradox in landscape gardens, country houses, and more specifically in the picturesque, as well as wider Georgian culture. One of the key characteristics across multiple iterations of the picturesque is the element of roughness and irregularity, as it is what gives scenes visual interest, and is the

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<sup>113</sup> Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 63; Watkin, *The English Vision*, 22–23.

<sup>114</sup> Bassin, “The English Landscape Garden,” 18; Bending, “Vile Things,” 587.

<sup>115</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 19–20.

<sup>116</sup> Watkin, *The English Vision*, 20; Williamson, *Polite Landscapes*, 64.

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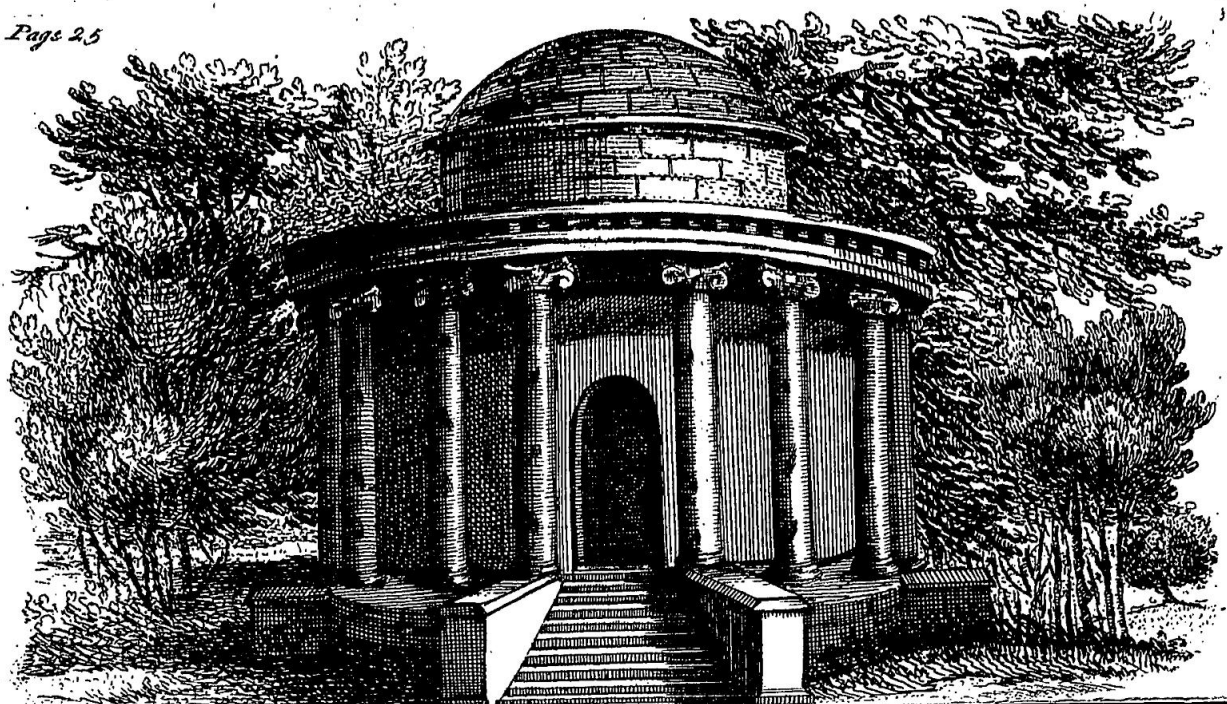


Figure 7: George Bickham, *The Temple of Ancient Virtue*, 1750, Drawing, *The Beauties of Stow*.

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Figure 8: George Bickham, *The Temple of Modern Virtue*, 1750, Drawing, *The Beauties of Stow*.

opposite of classical structures which value regularity and symmetry. In spite of this, many of the follies in picturesque gardens and art are in the style of, or inspired by, classical Greek and Roman architecture. Additionally, many of the country houses were still being built in the classical style.<sup>117</sup> Gilpin explains in the *Dialogue* that, like the Temples of Ancient and Modern Virtue, these classical styles only have a strong visual impact when they are in contrast with their opposite, the picturesque.<sup>118</sup>

*The Temple of Ancient Virtue, The Temple of Modern Virtue, and the Temple of British Worthies*, were designed by Kent. All three were designed to be read for visual meaning, and hopefully understood, by the viewer. Kent was an advocate for the natural style gardens but was also a trained artist with experience as a stage designer. Each of his works were particularly crafted with an audience in mind and a story to tell.<sup>119</sup> This is unlike the formal gardens where the viewer's experience is much less important to that of maintaining geometric perfection.<sup>120</sup>

*The Temple of Friendship* was designed by Gibbs for Lord Cobham and his patriot friends as a place to meet to discuss politics, and on first glance Polyphthon and Callophilus do not have much to say about the building as there is nothing extraordinary, viewed from the outside, although they mention in passing the busts which depict Cobham and his Patriot friends.<sup>121</sup> Within the building, on the ceiling is a painting in which is depicted a cleverly crafted political statement, hidden in plain view. The painting is of Britannia: she holds annals of Queen

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<sup>117</sup> Bassin, "The English Landscape Garden," 15.

<sup>118</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 5.

<sup>119</sup> Marshall, "The Problem," 414; Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, 3.

<sup>120</sup> Bassin, "The English Landscape Garden," 20.

<sup>121</sup> Cobham's patriots depicted in Busts: The Prince of Wales, Earl of Westmorland, Earl of Chesterfield, Earl of Marchmont, Lord Cobham, Lord Gower, Lord Bathurst, Richard Grenville, William Pitt, and George Lyttelton. Bickham, *The Beauties of Stow*, 53–54; Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque*, 85; Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 33–34.

Elizabeth and Edward III, in pride of place. In her other hand is an annal entitled “the Reign of ————,” the name is covered by her hand and she “frowns upon” it.<sup>122</sup> Bickham suggests it is easy to guess who is referred to here, but neither Gilpin, Bickham, or Seeley, do so.<sup>123</sup> As Cobham was against Walpole it is possibly meant to be George II. Polypthon applauds this painting as he sees the message to be that corruption will never be tolerated and art such as this will remind the public of this. The whole garden of Stowe, having been designed to portray a particular message of virtue and politics, is a well suited setting for Gilpin’s fledgling picturesque as morality is a key subject of the garden.

### Conclusion

Even though much of the discussion in the *Dialogue* is to do with nature, Stowe is not a natural landscape; it is made to look natural, with many gardeners and designers working with this goal in mind. This is not, however, contrary to Gilpin’s ideas about the picturesque, as he presents it as a way of making God’s nature observable to human sensibilities. The picturesque was to educate and improve the taste those of his contemporaries, who were accustomed to formal gardens, so that they might begin to learn to see nature within a context that facilitated an understanding of God’s glory, His plan and man’s place in it.<sup>124</sup> The function of the works of men was to add to and highlight the works of God, so as to inspire a taste for and a habit of seeking out divine things. Gilpin’s picturesque is about balancing nature and artifice — God’s work and man’s follies — to train the eye to see nature and evaluate it as one would a work of art.

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<sup>122</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 34.

<sup>123</sup> Gilpin, *Dialogue*, 34; Bickham, *The Beauties of Stow*, 54; Seeley, *A Description*, 26.

<sup>124</sup> Mayhew, “Latitudinarian Picturesque,” 361; Bending, “Vile Things,” 585.

After his work on Stowe, Gilpin would go on to write more about the picturesque throughout his life and explored what made it different from other forms of beauty. His work would continue to inspire a great number of people throughout the country and beyond, including further theorists on the picturesque such as Burke, Price, and Knight, and authors such as Austen, and inspiring an increased interest in domestic travel among the middling sort as they used his tours as guides across the country.<sup>125</sup> The relationship between nature, gardens, and morality were key elements in Gilpin's fledgeling picturesque.

The picturesque began as an entirely subjective idea, encompassing any subject that would make a good painting, and perhaps it was for many individuals nothing more than simply pretty. In Gilpin's writing, however, it evolved into a complex and highly-debated aesthetic theory. Gilpin's *Dialogue* was a guide book, a critique of what was considered one of the best gardens in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but it was above all a treatise on morality, a how-to guide to improve your garden in order to improve the morality of the nation, as well as how to make God's creation perceivable by humans. Gilpin was able to educate readers on nature and virtue, he taught that one must "reverence, and admire the works of God; and look with benevolence, and pleasure, on the works of men."<sup>126</sup> His purpose was realized and expressed in a form close to his heart through exploring and observing art. His picturesque did, indeed, affect the taste of the British public.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Lucy Worsley, *Jane Austen at Home* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 58; Townsend, "The Picturesque," 365; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 100.

<sup>126</sup> Gilpin, *Three Essays*, ii.

<sup>127</sup> Seeley, *A Description*, i; Barbier, *William Gilpin*, 1; Hussey, *The Picturesque*, 66.

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