

Eighteenth-Century Poetic Landscapes

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THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY landscape has always seemed to offer a neatly disposed and settled scene of foreground pastoral (usually munching sheep or a crystal stream), middle distance picturesque (perhaps with a grot or ruined abbey), and a distant sublime (of mountains that are far enough away not to be threatening - and certainly not to be walked over). There is a sense of the eighteenth-century landscape as irredeemably pastoral or pastoralized, with a poetic diction to match, populating the scene with the sportive train, the feathery tribe, or Thomas Maude's fleecy bleaters.^[1] The age that invented the term landscape gardening might seem to be longing for a nature that is shaped and bounded, like the Reverend John Pomfret's prescription for his ideal country estate (it is not too deep in the country, we notice):

Near some fair Town I'd have a private Seat,
Built Uniform, not little, nor too great:
Better, if on a rising Ground it stood,
Fields on this side, on that a Neighb'ring Wood.
It shou'd within no other Things contain,
But what are Useful, Necessary, Plain . . .
A little Garden, grateful to the Eye,
And a cool Rivulet run Murmuring by:
On whose delicious Banks a stately Row
Of shady Lymes, or Sycamores, shou'd grow.
At th'end of which a silent Study plac'd,
Shou'd with the Noblest Authors there be grac'd.^[2]

Pomfret's style, like the style of his estate, is 'Useful, Necessary, Plain'. It is an exercise in strict decorum, where everything is perfectly positioned and functional, creating an emblem of poetic ease, with Horace and Virgil on his study shelf, a few steps from the riverside walk. Pomfret's landscape captures perfectly a life of learned pastoral containment, which as the poem proceeds becomes neurotic in its fastidiousness, its repeated shunnings and avoidance of excess. Even the poem's date shows its own perfect decorum: 1700. Pomfret

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is the ideal host to open any anthology of eighteenth-century poetry. But typical of the century? No. Far more representative is Robert Lloyd's mid-century picture of the retreat of Lady Thrifty and her husband, who buy a 'country box' three or four miles out of the city, where Sir Thrifty has made his pile:

Well then, suppose them fix'd at last,

White-washing, painting, scrubbing past,
 Hugging themselves in ease and clover,
 With all the fuss of moving over;
 Lo, a new heap of whims are bred!
 And wanton in my lady's head.
 'Well to be sure, it must be own'd,
 It is a charming spot of ground;
 So sweet a distance for a ride,
 And all about so countrified!
 'Twould come to but a trifling price
 To make it quite a paradise;
 I cannot bear those nasty rails,
 Those ugly broken mouldy pales:
 Suppose, my dear, instead of these,
 We build a railing, all Chinese.
 Although one hates to be expos'd,
 'Tis dismal to be thus inclos'd;
 One hardly any object sees—
 I wish you'd fell those odious trees.
 Objects continual passing by
 Were something to amuse the eye,
 But to be pent within the walls—
 One might as well be at St. Paul's.
 Our house beholders would adore,
 Was there a level lawn before,
 Nothing its views to incommode,
 But quite laid open to the road;
 While ev'ry trav'ler in amaze,
 Should on our little mansion gaze,
 And pointing to the choice retreat,
 Cry, that's Sir Thrifty's Country Seat'.^[3]

Robert Lloyd's 'The Cit's Country Box' of 1756 marks the unmistakable

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beginning of the Betjeman tradition, the poetry of the English suburbs, a landscape, physical and mental, that thankfully still survives. In Lloyd's poem, Pomfret's cultured retreat is eerily distorted by the cockneyism of Lady Thrifty, who wants to be seen by people from passing coaches and is eager to implement 'Mr Halfpenny's' latest designs for Chinese garden furniture. Their purchase could even be John Pomfret's estate, now looking shabby and dated, and in need of improvement. Eighteenth-century landscapes through the decades tell so many different stories; they inform, delight, tempt, disturb, excite, and fascinate, and in the hands of the writers of the age they are used to present arguments, or suggest nuances, of every kind. Landscapes are no mere backdrop to the eighteenth-century world, but the site for social, aesthetic, spiritual, political, and economic debate.

If a landscape is ordered, then that is for a purpose: to establish a scenario in which different forces and potentials are accommodated. Eighteenth-century landscapes bear the imprint of the minds that organise them, and of the social, political and economic factors that shape them. The

wealthy Timon in Pope's Epistle to Burlington (1731) is set out on display for us, thanks to his landscape. We walk through the sad formal emptiness of his life, wondering at the way each feature dissipates humane social energies, and everything appears stretched out or rigidified, so that nothing in Timon's landscape is in a living relationship with anything else.

An idealised, beautifully disposed landscape, on the other hand, imposes a responsibility, and we are invited to read it with equal care. Here is Henry Fielding's prelapsarian vision (in the fourth chapter of *Tom Jones*, 1749) of the landscape owned and inhabited by that good man, Mr Allworthy, where everything seems to be in place as I have described:

In the midst of the grove was a fine lawn, sloping down towards the house, near the summit of which rose a plentiful spring, gushing out of a rock covered with firs, and forming a constant cascade of about thirty feet, not carried down a regular flight of steps, but tumbling in a natural fall over the broken and mossy stones till it came to the bottom of the rock, then running off in a pebly channel, that with many lesser falls winded along, till it fell into a lake at the foot of the hill, about a quarter of a mile below the house on the south side, and which was seen from every room in the front. Out of this lake, which filled the center of a beautiful plain, embellished with groups of beeches and elms, and fed with sheep, issued a river, that for several miles was seen to meander through an amazing variety of meadows and woods till it emptied itself into the sea, with a large arm of which, and an island beyond it, the prospect was closed.

On the right of this valley opened another of less extent, adorned with several villages, and terminated by one of the towers of an old ruined abbey, grown over with ivy, and part of the front, which

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remained still entire.

The left-hand scene presented the view of a very fine park, composed of very unequal ground, and agreeably varied with all the diversity that hills, lawns, wood, and water, laid out with admirable taste, but owing less to art than to nature, could give. Beyond this, the country gradually rose into a ridge of wild mountains, the tops of which were above the clouds.

Our view of the landscape is that seen by Mr Allworthy as he walks out onto his terrace at dawn on the calm May morning on which the story begins. Fielding's genial narrator allows us to share Allworthy's own visual command, from his viewing-platform, of a scene he largely owns. Everything seems to open off from his terrace, and there is no hint of a boundary to his estate other than the terminations naturally provided by the prospect. At the apex of the view before him, All-worthy, possessor of Paradise Hall, is the Adam of a new world, the glory of creation:

and now having sent forth streams of light, which ascended the blue firmament before him, as harbingers preceding his pomp, in the full blaze of his majesty rose the sun, than which one object alone in this lower creation could be more glorious, and that Mr Allworthy himself presented—a human being replete with benevolence, meditating in what manner he might render himself most acceptable to his Creator, by doing most good to his creatures.

There is an insistent emphasis here on fullness, repletion, totality—but we are now waiting for the fissure of irony to open up, for the very comprehensiveness of 'All-worthy' to be

challenged. All at this point in the novel is composed, and suitably disposed, but being an eighteenth-century landscape this ideal organization will encounter stress and disruption; the various forces here collaborating will begin to work against each other and produce conflict and travail. Across its own broad sweep the novel will disrupt the neat arrangement, test and finally expose the truth of those who have power in this estate, especially those who govern by rule and line (Thwackum and Square). It will choose between Blifil the artful, seemingly regular, constrained, unnatural, and Tom the impetuous, irregular, yet constant and natural. And the message is all the time to be found running through the heart of the Allworthy estate, in the spring, the source of creative energy. There is no Kubla-Khan-like momentary eruption, but a continual plentiful flow finding its way over, through, round, and beyond, obstacles large and small in a variety of movements - much like the novel's own course as it follows the adventures of its hero, Tom: the gushing of the water, its dramatic fall, its irregularity, its running off, followed by many lesser falls, and yet throughout its naturalness and constancy, finding in the end a proper home.

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As readers, our own involvement in this landscape demands a certain care and thoughtfulness (Fielding heads the chapter: 'The reader's neck brought into danger by a description'). And as soon as the idealised scene is in place, the narrator turns to us: 'Reader, take care. I have unadvisedly led thee to the top of as high a hill as Mr Allworthy's, and how to get thee down without breaking thy neck, I do not well know. However, let us e'en venture to slide down together; for Miss Bridget rings her bell, and Mr Allworthy is summoned to breakfast, where I must attend, and, if you please, shall be glad of your company'. This modulation seems very eighteenth-century in character. Let us imagine Wordsworth attempting something similar with his ascent of Snowdon:

Meanwhile, the Moon looked down upon this show
In single glory, and we stood, the mist
Touching our very feet. Take care, my reader,
All unadvised have I led thee here
Up to the very summit, from whose point
We must descend to the diurnal world;
Tread cautiously, lest you do break your neck,
Sad fall for a sublime imagination,
For Dorothy, my dearest, dearest sister,
Expects us all to tea . . .

(No, it doesn't quite work. [Nearly: no-one laughed until the last line. Ed.]) But being an eighteenth-century landscape, Fielding's is to be thought about in a different way: his scene is part of a social world and is therefore about relationships and juxtapositions. With his 'Reader, take care', we are being warned to be on our guard, not to be entirely taken in by the high style or our lofty vantage-point so that we fail to attend critically to what we have been shown. The truth in this text will be the work of time, not of the moment, and it will only be found by leaving that eminence and entering the populous world beyond.

The keynote of many eighteenth-century landscapes, as here, is 'variety' (Fielding's river 'was seen to meander through an amazing variety of meadows and woods', Allworthy's park was 'composed of very unequal ground, and agreeably varied with all the diversity [of] hills, lawns, wood,

and water’). Variety is that crucial principle which celebrates difference and relationship, contrast and collaboration, and it is not to be mastered by an individual perspective or single vision. Variety, a serious word in the Eighteenth Century, in which aesthetics and morality meet, celebrated by Hogarth in his *Analysis of Beauty*, by Addison in the *Pleasures of Imagination* essays, and most famously by Pope in those often-quoted lines describing his youthful landscape of Windsor-Forest (1713):

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Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,
 Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,
 Not Chaos-like together crush’d and bruise’d,
 But as the World, harmoniously confus’d:
 Where Order in Variety we see,
 And where, tho’ all things differ, all agree.

(11-16)

This is a scene where difference has to be accommodated. The identity and energy of each part must be allowed to register. In post-1649, post-1688, post-1707 Britain, struggle of party, religion, or nation has to find a *modus vivendi*, a mixed society. In Pope’s lines, opposites strive against each other in an elemental strife—but one that is Heraclitean, Newtonian, not lawless anarchy where all merges into chaos, but one that becomes articulate through the very act of speaking difference. For eighteenth-century writers, the scene in which forces are organized and energetically played off against each other (that scene they called ‘landscape’) is never just a literal and external thing: it can be simultaneously physical, mental, moral, political, economic, sexual . . . Pope’s Windsor-Forest continues:

Here waving Groves a checquer’d Scene display,
 And part admit and part exclude the Day;
 As some coy Nymph her Lover’s warm Address
 Nor quite indulges, nor can quite repress.
 There, interspers’d in Lawns and opening Glades,
 Thin Trees arise that shun each others Shades.
 Here in full Light the russet Plains extend;-
 There wrapt in Clouds the blueish Hills ascend . . .

(17-24)

What is here and what is there both have a part to play; waving and displaying (open, public gestures) are followed by admittance and exclusion (fraught ideas for a young Catholic), warmth and coyness (a young man wooing the muses and his female readers), indulgence and repression (the line erotically vibrates between hot and cold). But then we move to the thin Trees that ‘shun each others Shades’—emaciated, ambitious, alone, competitive—and then out to the warm full glow of fruition in the russet Plains, but noticing the misty, lofty distance of hills and clouds. What a landscape—what a life—that could accommodate, and make articulate, forces such as these. Eighteenth-century landscape, I would argue, is about the struggle to articulate and accommodate forces—in the mind, the emotions, society, the world.

The eighteenth-century poetic landscape has been repeatedly traduced by criticism for celebrating order, decorum, correctness, restraint, a carefully set scene waiting for Romanticism to disrupt and transform it. Whereas

eighteenth-century landscapes should more truly be thought of as maps of the mind—not only that but of the mind as it weighs ideas, emotions, forces, claims, one against another, conscious of the weight of words as of concepts; where they belong, where intrude, where they create, explore, affirm, deny, suggest, hint. Eighteenth-century poetry, like its landscapes, has room for all these. It knows where in the varied scene something is best left to grow and mature, where a new idea might make a brief and witty show, where striking colours might be allowed to clash, or where they should be softened into a more harmonious composition. Like a Gainsborough canvas, an eighteenth-century poem knows where dark can brood oppressively or light select and focus, where form needs to be supported by line, or where it might be left ambiguous and suggestive; where a bold pattern might emerge (a grander generality) and where an intricate detail. Under the aegis of those much misunderstood terms, Nature and Art, the Eighteenth Century worked with energy—that often unspoken connective term (and another vital eighteenth-century concept)—energy working out organically from within (Nature), or shaped by human design and purpose (Art). And as usual the two forces were both kept in play—not compromised, but creatively combined:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
 To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
 To swell the Terras, or to sink the Grot;
 In all, let Nature never be forgot.
 But treat the Goddess like a modest fair,
 Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare;
 Let not each beauty ev'ry where be spy'd,
 Where half the skill is decently to hide.
 He gains all points, who pleasingly confounds,
 Surprizes, varies, and conceals the Bounds.[\[4\]](#)

In these lines Pope combines natural beauty and artistic skill. Taking its character from the seductive coyness of the goddess, this landscape demands that we progress through it and seek varied viewpoints. We should be prepared for surprise and discovery. The eighteenth-century landscape is primarily something to be moved through, or something across which the eye turns, to take in this vital variety and try to make sense of it.

The greatest landscape poem of the century does this on a vast scale. In the fallen world of James Thomson's *Seasons* (1726-30), Nature expresses

the lost poise of the human mind and the competing forces that have since been unleashed in society. We watch how things grow and are corrupted, how human beings can work with these forces or be destroyed by them. The Thomsonian aesthetic strives all the time to increase the amount of contrasting material that needs to be accommodated, relishing the juxtaposing of contrasting elements and animated by the emotional range that articulates them. Everything is in motion across his broad canvas. Thomson's *Seasons* often gives us the verbal equivalent of a Turner painting. Describing an Autumn flood, the poet's technique is to find the meeting-point of the energy of external Nature and the energy of his own verbal Art as it registers ideas of continuity,

overlay, and juxtaposition, the flattening and swelling of surfaces, the mingling of colours and textures, all done with great boldness of effect. Turner's Hannibal Crossing the Alps, or his Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons cross the inward eye as we read:

a Burst of Rain,
Swept from the black Horizon, broad, descends
In one continuous Flood. Still over head
The mingling Tempest weaves its Gloom, and still
The Deluge deepens; till the Fields around
Lie sunk, and flatted, in the sordid Wave.
Sudden, the Ditches swell; the Meadows swim.
Red, from the Hills, innumerable Streams
Tumultuous roar, and high above its Banks
The River lift; before whose rushing Tide,
Herds, Flocks, and Harvests, Cottages, and Swains,
Roll mingled down; all that the Winds had spar'd,
In one wild Moment ruin'd . . .

(Autumn, 330-42)

No wonder that Turner and Constable quote *The Seasons* in the mottos to their paintings. Constable's Hadleigh Castle and Turner's Dunstanborough Castle ("Sunrise after a squally night") both take their motto from the same Thomson passage:

The Precipice abrupt,
Projecting Horror on the blacken'd Flood,
Softens at thy Return. The Desert joys
Wildly, thro' all his melancholy Bounds.
Rude Ruins glitter; and the briny Deep,
Seen from some pointed Promontory's Top,
Far to the blue Horizon's utmost Verge,
Restless, reflects a floating Gleam.

(Summer, 163-70)

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Thomson's reflections and projections catch the dynamic interplay of forces and emotions. Throughout *The Seasons* he is interested in movement and change as registered in the medium itself—light, language, air, sound. As a delighted Newtonian he understands that the play of forces within the system can be extreme, the contrasts stark, contradictory even (the precipice softens, the desert joys through its melancholy bounds; rudeness glitters), but the restlessness expresses both tragedy and hope, and it is this very lack of rest that guarantees the system's life.

We seem to have come a long way from Allworthy's ordered estate; but this is deceptive. The underlying principles of these landscapes in Fielding, Pope and Thomson are similar in being economies (in the wider eighteenth-century use of the term), that is, they articulate and manage competing forces within a system (whatever that system is, be it moral, political, social, emotional, horticultural, theological) to show how life is sustained. Newton's *Principia* is in this sense an economy, as is Thomson's *Seasons*, Pope's *Essay on Man* or his *Epistles to Several Persons*. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* or Malthus's *Essay on Population* are expressions of the same mind-set that produced Erasmus Darwin's *Economy of Vegetation*, or Cowper's *Task*. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as much as his earlier study of the Sublime and Beautiful, shows his fascination

with the interplay of energies that sustain the life of any system, the opposing forces of self-preservation and society, the aesthetic principles that inform the moral and political realms.

In the second half of this paper I shall consider two very different kinds of eighteenth-century landscapes as poetic 'economies' in these terms—what may be called the meditative landscape and the Georgic landscape. I shall offer a brief sketch of how these modes tend to use landscape, then turn in each case to a woman poet writing near the end of the century in whose work that eighteenth-century mode is placed under stress. I shall look at two of Charlotte Smith's poems in relation to the meditative landscape, and Anna Seward's Colebrooke Dale in relation to the Georgic landscape.

What particularly characterizes the economy of the eighteenth-century meditative poem is the way it negotiates between subjective and objective worlds, and accommodates the perceiving consciousness of the poem (the 'I' or 'eye') to the landscape through which it moves. As the barrier between internal mind and external matter falls away, solitary egotism engages with imaginative sympathy. In this mode, landscape tends to be unified by a mood or colouring, in part supplied by a particular season, weather, or time of day, and in part by the self that views it. The landscape is to some extent the creation of the perceiving consciousness. This is the subject of Edward Young's meditation in Night 6 of his *Night Thoughts* (1744). Our senses, says Young,

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Take in, at once, the Landscape of the world,
At a small Inlet, which a Grain might close,
And half create the wondrous World they see.

(VI. 425-7)

This is a very eighteenth-century idea. (The passage is Wordsworth's acknowledged source for that crucial phrase in his own landscape meditation, Tintern Abbey, when he speaks of 'the mighty world/ Of eye and ear, both what they half-create/ And what perceive'.) In the meditative economy, as the landscape begins sympathetically to assert itself, mere physical energy becomes compromised in some way, no longer working directly, but being mediated by thought, internalized as active 'mind', with the landscape as the sensorium, registering those energies displaced from the self. Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* (1751) is a notable example of this kind of procedure, where the suppressed energies assert themselves in one detail after another, as in the phrase, 'Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap' (14). Words like molest, rouse, swells, animated, pregnant, struggling pangs, and ecstasy, build up through the poem with an increasing sense of forces displaced and held back, like the lives of those laid 'each in his narrow cell', repress'd, circumscrib'd and confin'd.

In a similar way, but to a different end, the *Nocturnal Reverie* (1713) by Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (a meditation especially admired by Wordsworth) works between self and landscape. Her night scene excludes the busy-ness, brightness and noise of the daytime world, but only to release the differently busy, noisy, and distinctly detailed activities of night. The difference lies not in the level of activity, but in the shift of initiative, the mode of perception. In her meditation, while 'Tyrant-Man' sleeps, the female consciousness can range freely through the scene and register an acutely sensitized landscape that is normally ignored. Under the trembling moonlight, the hidden and intangible things can be drawn forth—'odours, which declin'd repelling Day,/ Thro 'temp'rate Air uninterrupted stray'. Finch moves through the landscape, picking up the slightest sounds: the grazing horse slowly approaching in the darkness ('the torn-up Forage in his Teeth we

hear'), the partridge calling for her 'straggling Brood'. The poem's sensitive nocturnal consciousness is allowed to expatiate and share in the 'shortliv'd Jubilee the Creatures keep', before the 'Morning breaks, and All's confus'd again'. Finch's mental and emotional landscape has here its own period of remission and release. As in Gray's *Elegy*, the landscape simultaneously expresses, and helps to shape, the meditation of the speaker: it both accommodates and guides the subjective sensibility. Where the landscape of Gray's *Elegy* expresses repression, that of Finch's *Reverie* expresses temporary release; but neither concept can be said to be in the self or the landscape—they are created by the interplay of one with the other characteristic of the meditative mode.

In the eighteenth-century meditative elegiac poem, an excluded, or self-

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excluding, consciousness forms relationships imaginatively, with landscape acting as a medium through which emotions register. 'Sympathy' is the appropriate term for the force-field thus created. The landscapes we encounter in Charlotte Smith's sonnets of the 1780s are especially alive to this:

The Gossamer

O'er faded heath-flowers spun, or thorny furze,
 The filmy Gossamer is lightly spread;
 Waving in every sighing air that stirs,
 As Fairy fingers had entwined the thread:
 A thousand trembling orbs of lucid dew
 Spangle the texture of the fairy loom,
 As if soft Sylphs, lamenting as they flew,
 Had wept departed Summer's transient bloom:
 But the wind rises, and the turf receives
 The glittering web:—So, evanescent, fade
 Bright views that Youth with sanguine heart, believes:
 So vanish schemes of bliss, by Fancy made;
 Which, fragile as the fleeting dreams of morn,
 Leave but the wither'd heath, and barren thorn!^[5]

The gossamer thread playing across the scene connects it to the sensitive mind of the observer, and turns the landscape itself into a sensorium, criss-crossed with millions of delicate filaments. Here the spiders' webs do not symbolize poetic sensitivity; rather, it is the way the gossamer is noticed and tracked by the poet which guarantees the sensitivity the scene evokes. It is present in the finely tuned language which evokes the magic of Pope's sylphs and their world of precarious beauty, and that earlier 'fleeting dream of morn' when Belinda awoke to first love and the sylphs' embrace, only to have her dreams shattered. Smith sees how a faded landscape can suddenly come to life momentarily before returning to its underlying barrenness, just as imagination can for a while transform the commonplace. A Coleridgean fundamentalist might see the sonnet as exemplifying allegory rather than symbol, Fancy rather than Imagination, with the moralising about the 'bright views' of Youth (11) weakening the poem by its failure to unify experience. I think this would be a misreading of the sonnet: the poem is about a landscape that is temporarily transformed and unified as if suddenly woven together by a connective tissue, only for the scene to revert back to

dull scrubland. The moralising is after the event—it marks the loss of vision, the relapse into a knowing maturity that

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looks back at the experience, conscious of what Browning, contemplating the same scene in *Two in the Campagna*, will call ‘the old trick!’

The landscape of Charlotte Smith’s *Gossamer* sonnet belongs firmly in the tradition of the eighteenth-century meditation, where a landscape becomes sensitized by an act of imaginative sympathy. But earlier she had written a poem which pushes this idea to an extreme, takes the established mode and pursues its logic to the ultimate. Smith’s *Elegy* [\[6\]](#) is a meditation set in a country churchyard at the approach of night, as a young woman visits the grave of her dead lover’s father. This parent, however, had disallowed the marriage and sent his son off to sea, where he was drowned. The maiden has come to lament her fate and that of her lover, and to curse the man who brought it about. Like Gray’s meditation in his churchyard, Smith’s is about lost opportunities and the remorselessness of death; and the scene around her accommodates and expresses her grief and frustration. But what a difference there is. This graveyard by the sea becomes increasingly threatened by the storm and the billowing waves that accompany her words: there is even a direct quotation from Gray’s ‘Sonnet on the Death of Richard West’ to increase the irony of how Gray’s mode of suppressed passion can no longer be held in check:

I pour to winds and waves the unheeded tear,
Try with vain effort to submit to heaven,
And fruitless call on him—‘who cannot hear’.[\[7\]](#)

Gray’s imagery of frustrated opportunities in his *Elegy*,

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,
The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear

becomes in Smith’s *Elegy* a nightmare vision:

‘Part, raging waters part, and shew beneath,
In your dread caves, his pale and mangled form . . .’

Here the ‘voice of Nature’ no longer cries from the tomb (in another of Gray’s images of repressed impulses), but becomes active and actualized, as the sea begins to rise and sweep across the graves. In Smith’s elegy in a country churchyard the turf heaves to conclusive effect: feelings can no longer be held in check:

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‘Up-heaves the ground; the rocky barriers fail;
Approach, ye horrors that delight my soul,
Despair, and Death, and Desolation, hail!’

The ocean hears—The embodied waters come—
Rise o’er the land, and with resistless sweep

Tear from it's base the proud aggressor's tomb,
And bear the injured to eternal sleep!

With that marvellous phrase, the embodied waters, all the thoughts and emotions of the poem are gathered up into nature's final gesture. In this text the eighteenth-century meditative mode (in which voice and landscape together shape a poem's consciousness) is pushed to its extreme. Here, rather than having the speaker's emotion projected onto it, the landscape itself rises up in indignation and takes over the scene. This is no longer description, but a literalization.

If the energies of the meditative landscape tend to be repressed and displaced, in the Georgic mode the landscape celebrates their positive exploitation, how human art harnesses the powers of nature. The eighteenth-century Georgic poem is close to being literally an economy in our modern sense, advocating the expert use of resources, the invention of new mechanisms, and the beneficial results of human skill, strength and ingenuity. Dr Johnson thought it the highest praise to say of John Philips's *Cyder* (1708) that the great gardener, Philip Miller, had recommended it to him as a guide to successful apple-growing, more useful on the subject than many a prose [\[8\]](#). The landscape of the Georgic, therefore, proudly carries man's imprint upon it, and any untouched tract of land is likely to be assessed and evaluated for its productive potential. John Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757) describes the different landscapes that are suitable for various breeds of sheep: mountainous, low-lying, windy or sheltered. He assesses the qualities of the soil, and how this can be improved (particularly recommending 'Rich saponaceous loam, that slowly drinks/ The black'ning show'r, and fattens with the draught' (I 70-1). Dyer is a connoisseur of colours, textures, sounds, whether diagnosing the health of the sheep (who tend to cough, go off-colour, or rot) or evaluating the quality and value of a fleece. He often makes an oddly sensuous poetry out of his material:

That dire distemper sometimes may the swain,
Though late, discern; when, on the lifted lid,
Or visual orb, the turgid veins are pale;

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The welling liver then her putrid store
Begins to drink . . .

(I, 267-71)

In the Georgic mode, poetic language has to become more capacious, if only to span the range of subject-matter. But poetry also has an investment in the Georgic's underlying premise that all material is capable of being transformed, however unpromising. The Georgic itself is about transformation (note the titles: *The Fleece*, *The Hop-Garden*, or *The Sugar-Cane*, in which hops become beer, the sugar-cane, sugar, and the fleece a suit), and the language of Georgic poetry similarly strains to find ingenious new forms for itself. But these inventions and transformations of the Georgic mode are at the same time continuities—celebrations of processes that enrich our lives and delight in pursuing nature to the final man-made product. This economy of continuity and transformation, needless to say, also characterizes the Georgic landscape.

It is typical of Georgic landscape, for example, that manufacturing and urban development can be seen in picturesque terms, as continuous with the rural scene. As Dyer moves from the sheep-shearing to the fulling mill we find he has jumped from country to city. But for Dyer these locations are not opposed: they form a single rich, busy and poetic landscape:

Wide around
 Hillock and valley, farm and village, smile:
 And ruddy roofs, and chimney-tops appear
 Of busy Leeds, upwafting to the clouds
 The incense of thanksgiving: all is joy;
 And trade and business guide the living scene . . .
 Thus all is here in motion, all is life:
 The creaking wain brings copious store of corn:
 The grazier's sleeky kine obstruct the roads;
 The neat-dress'd housewives, for the festal board
 Crown'd with full baskets, in the field-way paths
 Come tripping on; th'echoing hills repeat
 The stroke of ax and hammer; scaffolds rise,
 And growing edifices; heaps of stone,
 Beneath the chissel, beauteous shapes assume
 Of frize and column. Some, with even line,
 New streets are marking in the neighb'ring fields

(III, 306-11, 321-31)

This rural-urban continuum is the new landscape poetry of the Industrial Revolution, a 'living scene' spanning the country (with its rich raw materials), and the city (with its skills and energy to transform them into finished products). The Georgic landscape merges process into product, beauty into

[-15-]

use, nature into art, the local into the national, country into city. It has an investment (in all senses) in these elisions. As Dyer tours the Halifax workhouse, the fallen world of Labour regains innocence and joy:

The younger hands
 Ply at the easy work of winding yarn
 On swiftly-circling engines, and their notes
 Warble together, as a choir of larks:
 Such joy arises in the mind employ'd

(III, 281-

5)

Child labour is naturalized. In Dyer's landscape, ironic juxtapositions become continuities: his poetry revisits the Augustan mock-heroic and transforms it back into the heroic:

Now to the other hemisphere, my muse,
 A new world found, extend thy daring wing,
 Be thou the first of the harmonious Nine
 From high Parnassus, the unweary'd toils
 Of industry and valour, in that world
 Triumphant, to reward with tuneful song.

(IV, 493-8)

Dyer's poetry is unembarrassable.

When Anna Seward, the Swan of Lichfield, wrote her poem Colebrooke Dale in 1790, she was evoking a landscape that was, more than anywhere, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. Abraham Darby had founded his ironworks there in 1709,^[9] and the neighbourhood became remarkable for the fact that all the raw materials and the stages of production were located in that single spot; as Arthur Young reported in 1776: ‘the whole process is here gone through from digging the iron stone to making it into cannons, pipes, cylinders, &c. &c. All the iron used is raised in the neighbouring hills, and the coal dug likewise’.^[10] Seward’s poem is not a Georgic (that seam was worked out by 1790), but her verses have Georgic elements. Her loco-descriptive poem both recalls and departs from the eighteenth-century Georgic mode, and her Shropshire landscape is one of discontinuities and contradictions.

It is useful in this respect to compare the opening of Colebrooke Dale

[-16-]

with the concluding passage of Book Three of Dyer’s *The Fleece*. Dyer brings to a climax his description of the process of woollen manufacture (from lamb to loom, one might say) by celebrating the rivers of Britain and their contribution to the wool trade. Twenty years earlier, in his Commercial Map of England, Dyer had proposed that the three great navigable rivers (Trent, Severn and Thames) ought to be linked by canals, and he ends Book Three with a vision of their future union in terms of a mystic marriage. The result is an example of how Dyer’s Georgic economy stretches the resources of poetry to naturalize the industrial landscape:

Trent and Severn’s wave,
By plains alone parted, woo to join
Majestic Thamis. With their silver urns
The nimble-footed Naiads of the springs
Await, upon the dewy lawn, to speed
And celebrate the union; and the light
Wood-nymphs; and those, who o’er the grots preside,
Whose stores bituminous, with sparkling fires,
In summer’s tedious absence, cheer the swains,
Long sitting at the loom.
(III. 604-13)

The canal system will bring an extra flurry of excitement to the naiads and dryads of England. With his Georgic capaciousness Dyer even imagines a new breed of coal nymphs presiding over the mine-workings. Anna Seward perhaps has Dyer’s passage in mind as she contemplates Coalbrookdale, but in a very different spirit:

Scene of superfluous grace, and wasted bloom,
O violated Colebrooke! in an hour
To Beauty inauspicious, and to song,
By Plutus brib’d, the Genius of thy shades,
Amid thy grassy Lanes, thy wood-wild Glens,
Thy Knoles precipitant, thy Rocks, and Streams
Slumbers;—while Tribes, with shoulders bent, and broad,
Keen eye, and cheek fuliginous, invade

Thy soft, romantic, consecrated scenes:

(1-

9)

No coal-nymphs here, but hunch-backed miners with soot-blackened (fuliginous) faces who invade the poetic landscape. Seward's nymphs have departed. Rather than integrating the two worlds into a single Georgic language, as Dyer did, she creates a rift in her poetic style to accommodate them separately: one in a notalgic past in the language of Milton's *Comus*, the

[-17-]

other in a terrifying sublime present in the style of Books One and Two of *Paradise Lost*:

the pearly-wristed Naiads lean'd,
Braiding their moist locks o'er thy silver flood,
Shadowy, and smooth . . .
. . . the rapt Bard in every opening Glade
Beheld them wander;—saw, from the pure wave
Emerging, all the watry Sisters rise
Weaving the fountain-lilly, and the flag,
In wreaths fantastic for the tresses bright,
Of amber-hair'd Sabrina.—Now we view
Their fresh, their fragrant, and their silent reign
Usurpt by Cyclops;—hear, in mingled tones,
Shout their throng'd Barge; their ponderous Engine clang
Thro' thy coy Dells; while red the numerous Fires,
With umber'd flames, bicker on all thy Hills,
Dark'ning the Summer's Sun with columns huge
Of thick sulphureous smoke, which spread, like palls
That screen the Dead, upon the sylvan robes
Of thy aspiring Rocks, pollute thy Gales
And stain thy glassy waters.—See in Troops
Thy dusk Artificers, with brazen throats,
Swarm on thy Cliffs, and clamor in thy Dells,
Steepy, and wild.

(12-14, 16-34)

The language of the Burkean sublime comes to Seward's rescue, and with it the opposition to a vulnerable feminine beauty. Milton's Sabrina and her nymphs have gone, and the new invaders have violated the female earth. Seward casts her eye over England like Beelzebub surveying the mines of hell:

. . . see
Grim Wolverhampton kindles smouldering fires,
And Sheffield smoke involv'd!— dim where she stands,
Circled by lofty Mountains, that condense
Her dark, and spiral wreaths to drizzling rains,
Frequent, and sullied; as the neighboring Wilds
Ope their swart veins, and feed her cavern'd flames;
While to her dusky Sister sullen yields

Long desolated Ketley's livid breast
 The ponderous metal. No aerial Forms
 There wove the floral crown, or smiling stretch'd

[-18-]

The shelly sceptre;—there no Poet stray'd
 To catch bright inspirations. (85-97)

Where the economy of the eighteenth-century Georgic had embraced difference, and had stretched its poetic language to accommodate new with old, Seward is here asking whether poetry can actually work with these materials. In Colebrooke Dale there is the beginning of a feeling that it cannot. In Seward's poem, the elisions of eighteenth-century Georgic have begun to disconnect, and poetry's role becomes an uneasy one, expressing a nostalgia for a purer and more romantic vision like that of her friends the Wartons. Once the language of 'romantic' enters, the Georgic mode is immediately compromised. Unlike the world of romance, its transformations never forget the material out of which they are made, and the time and labour involved. It is as though Seward were unhappy with compromising the Poetic, and was losing confidence in the power of poetry to address any subject.

In Charlotte Smith's *Elegy* and Anna Seward's *Colebrooke Dale*, we have two very different poetic landscapes, but both stand in uneasy relation to earlier modes. The eighteenth-century meditation exploited a subtle interplay between the inner subjective world and the physical landscape, but in Smith's *Elegy* the landscape sympathetically self-destructs and carries the speaker with it. The Georgic had been able to integrate in a single poetic language the world of nature and mankind's exploitation of it, and celebrate simultaneously continuities and transformations in the landscape; but for Anna Seward, Coalbrookdale has driven them apart. In each case, the eighteenth-century poetic economy has been strained to breaking point, and landscape has begun to register emotions and social dynamics that cannot be accommodated within existing forms. Smith's and Seward's handling of these modes can help us to appreciate how eighteenth-century landscapes expressed difference and variety in a context in which human energies worked to sustain the system. In their different ways, Smith's *Elegy* (1789) and Seward's *Colebrooke Dale* (1790) locate an overriding source of power, within the self and in social forces, that resists assimilation.

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- [1] 'The bearded field, the udder-swelling plain,/ Some fleecy bleaters, and a fit domain/ For winter forage.' (Thomas Maude, *Wensleydale; or Rural Contemplation: a Poem* (1780), p. 55).
 - [2] John Pomfret, *The Choice* (1700), lines 5-10, 13-18.
 - [3] Robert Lloyd, 'The Cit's Country Box', 51-82. Text from Lloyd's *Poems* (1762), pp. 43-9. The poem first appeared in *The Connoisseur*, 135 (26 August 1756).
 - [4] Pope, *Epistle to Burlington* (1731), 47-56.
 - [5] The sonnet was first printed in the 1797 edition of Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, 2:4. In later printings dreams (13) was altered to dews.
 - [6] First printed in *Elegiac Sonnets . . . The Fifth Edition* (1789), pp. 52-6.
 - [7] Cf. 'I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear' ('Sonnet on the Death of Richard West', 13).
 - [8] Samuel Johnson, 'Life of John Philips', in *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81), ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), I, 319.

[9] 'Colebrooke Dale' was first printed in Seward's *Poetical Works*, ed. Walter Scott (Edinburgh, 1810), 2:314-9. The text below is taken from a transcript of an earlier version of the poem, Bodleian MS Pigott, d. 12, pp. 13-17. It is headed 'written Augt. 1790'.

[10] Arthur Young, *Annals of Agriculture*, 4 (1785), pp. 165-7. This is Young's report on his 1776 visit.

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