Writing in Ruins: Immediacy and Emotion in the English Landscape Garden

This collection of essays emerged in part from Luke Morgan’s contention that Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s analysis of material objects in *Anachronic Renaissance* might apply equally well—perhaps even more powerfully—to gardens, in different periods and in different nations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Focussing on the ability of art to ‘effect a disruption of chronological time, to collapse temporal distance’, the authors of *Anachronic Renaissance* make a special case for visual artefacts in the early modern period because they collapse ‘past and present with an ease and suddenness that no text could match’. Images, they argue, ‘proposed an unmediated, present-tense, somatic encounter with the people and things of the past’. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Nagel and Wood offer here an enticing account of encountering the past as, and in, the present, but as Morgan suggests, it is an account that does not need to be confined—as Nagel and Wood confine it—to the period on which they focus, nor by the material objects on which their analysis is based. In this essay I want to explore some of these same concerns with time, the body, and emotion in the context of the mid eighteenth-century landscape garden, and in particular the ways in which moments, or instants, in the garden may be experienced as at once ‘out of the flow of history’ and as a meditation upon one’s place in history. Nagel and Wood emphasise the power of the image; my concern will be with mid-eighteenth-century texts that focus on the ruin and on reverie in order to analyse and record competing experiences of time.

The cultural weight of the garden means that it is inevitably full of reminders of time passing, from seasons and flowering, to the lifespan of insects, and the infinite time of God’s creation; but the ruin is of particular significance here because, by the mid-eighteenth century, it had become an utterly conventional site in and on which to rehearse ideas of history and progress, but also therefore of absence and loss. As we will see, in much of the garden writing of the period, this notion of the ruin as an opportunity for melancholic reverie brought with it an understanding that an encounter with the past was ultimately an encounter with one’s self in the present. That formulation, of course, is close to Susan Stewart’s analysis of nostalgia as a mode which is essentially narrative in operation and in which individuals must make their own connections between a lost past and their own complex present. In this sense—as Stewart argues—nostalgia is defined by and takes part in defining the present. Such an imagining of the past is foremost an account of the present and is fundamentally aesthetic: it seeks to erase the actual past in order to replace it with an imagined past which is then available for consumption.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Drawing on Stewart’s notion of past as present, I turn in this essay to mid-eighteenth-century accounts not simply of the present, but of the present as so immediate that it is framed as an instant ‘out of time’. In particular, my focus falls on notions of immediacy in relation to the experience and imagining of one's place in larger time schemes, the multiple timeframes in which the individual might set a sense of self, contemporary theorizing of the experience of time, and the ways in which this might be played out by individuals in gardens as they confront ruins, loss, and lost time.

Two characteristic feature are at work here: a repeated shift between immediacy and a consciousness of duration and narration (which may be an individual lifespan, ‘history’, the progress of civilization, the finite time of the sublunary world, or the infinity of God’s creation); and an emotional reaction to ruins which is most often framed in terms of (an atemporal) immediacy and which become a means not only of normalising cultural myths, but of sustaining and retaining one’s position in time. Thus, this essay concerns itself with the ways in which individuals’ engagements with the ruin are figured as bodily, emotional and immediate even as they grapple with, and are framed in relation to, different—and at times conflicting—notions of historical time. And it addresses two kinds of—related—material: one, theoretic works on English gardens from the mid-eighteenth century which draw on the ruin in order to articulate a tension between immediacy and duration; the other, works in which we see that tension being played out in the form of a personal engagement with a particular location.

We can begin with one of the most famous, but also perhaps one of the most curious, responses to a ruin in a landscape garden: Horace Walpole’s claim that the ruined castle at Hagley had about it ‘the true rust of the Barons’ Wars’. The claim was made in a 1753 letter to his friend Richard Bentley—at the time one of Walpole’s advisors on the “Committee of Taste” for Strawberry Hill—and it comes in the context of more general praise for ‘extreme taste in the park’, and of a general lack of ‘absurdity’.[[4]](#footnote-4) What might seem absurd, of course, is that Walpole offers this praise for a ruined sandstone castle that had only recently been constructed. As Walpole knew, the castle was designed by Sanderson Miller and first appeared in George, Lord Lyttelton’s Worcestershire landscape in 1747. Notorious for judgements based on friendship and attachment, Walpole’s reaction might be dismissed as no more than a casual *jeu d’esprit*; but even if we consider it in such a light, it offers us a play of the mind which helps to suggest the complex relation between objects in the landscape and their imagined histories.

We can also understand the response—in part—in the context of an antiquarianism Walpole shared with Bentley, and of Walpole's own quirky—but itself characteristically antiquarian—relationship with notions of authenticity. One of the characteristic ways in which eighteenth-century antiquarian engagement with objects of the past worked was to ignore, or at least underplay, questions of authenticity in favour of an emotional imagining of the past.[[5]](#footnote-5) The physicality of the object appeared to provide direct access to the past in a way that (as Nagel and Wood suggest) textual accounts might not. Walpole’s ‘true rust’ values an emotional response to material objects which is framed by different understandings or experiences of time and—again characteristically of antiquarianism—values cultural myth as much as historical record. That is, this seemingly peculiar response to a known ‘fake’ opens up for us a crucial feature of eighteenth-century engagements with the ruin: the imagining of the self at a point in time, and in relation to time, and an imagining which is expressed as a somatic experience of emotion.[[6]](#footnote-6) At issue here is not some notion of historical veracity, but instead an account of how one *feels* about the past.

The characteristic mode, here, is reverie, that sense of the mind temporarily freeing itself from a consciousness of the temporal world even as it reflects upon that world. Perhaps the best-known version of eighteenth-century reverie is that described by Rousseau in his *Reveries of the* *Solitary Walker* (written 1776-8, first published in 1782) not least because it influenced later English Romantic writers including Wordsworth.[[7]](#footnote-8) And while reverie has a long history (it is, for example, a notable feature in Scudéry’s *Clélie*), it is the mid-eighteenth-century English context that I want to explore and indeed to distinguish in some degree from Rousseau’s better-known account. For Rousseau, at least in the *Solitary Walker*, reverie is occasioned by movement and is in turn the occasion for an exploration of one’s sense of self. In one of the book’s more famous passages, Rousseau describes his experience of lying in a boat, listening to the water, and drifting with the current:

The ebbing and flowing of these waters, its noise continued, but roaring at intervals, striking without intermission the eye and ear, fed in me the internal movement which thought had extinguished, and caused me to feel my existence with delight, and saved me the trouble of thinking. (Walk Five)

The apparently throw-away gesture of that final clause only points the more directly to Rousseau’s insistence on the free-flowing movements of consciousness, and on the centrality of feeling in the awareness of one’s existence. But this emphasis on the felt instant is not without some sense of purpose; rather it becomes the occasion for understanding one’s place in the greater scheme of creation. As Rousseau writes in Walk Seven: ‘Nothing personal, nothing which relates to the interest of the body, can truly employ my mind. I never meditate so deliciously as when I forget myself. I feel ecstasies, inexpressible raptures, in fixing myself, in a manner, among the system of beings, in comprehending myself with all Nature.'

As these passages suggest, one hardly needs the over-determined cues provided by a ruin in order to slip into such moments of reverie. And indeed we can find quite similar moments of reverie in the letters of the famous Bluestocking, Elizabeth Montagu, long before Rousseau’s Walks appeared in print. Montagu, sitting on a garden bench in her estate at Sandleford could, for example write:

When I am sitting in my garden, I can add myself to the whole map of created beings. I consider some insects feeding on a flower which like them was call’d forth by the rising sun, & whose race & task of life will end with its decline. My imagination can travel on, till it gets to those planets whose revolution round the sun is many years in accomplishing . . . My hopes, fears, desires, interests, are all lost in the vast ocean of infinity & Eternity. Dare I find fault with the form or fashion of any thing that relates to me in the presence of him before whom all modes & forms pass away, & to whose duration all the systems of Worlds beyond World, & Suns beyond suns, are more transient than the flowers of our parterres are to us. From these thoughts I draw a philosophick peace & tranquillity for what atom in this stupendous system shall presume to find fault with its place & destination. [[8]](#footnote-9)

While we have that same emphasis on losing one’s sense of self in the greater scheme of things, and to some extent that same interest in an emotive state, Montagu’s letter also points to what I think are characteristic features of English writing on reverie at mid century. One is that reverie tends to occur at moments of stillness and arrest (whether that be sitting on a bench or standing in a ruin), and the other is that while reverie is undoubtedly used to ‘feel’ one’s place in nature, it tends to be described with a far stronger sense of moral direction. As both Rousseau’s reverie and Montagu’s musings demonstrate, the ruin is not the only occasion on which such reverie might occur; but as I will go on to suggest, the physicality of the ruin is felt to invite such moments of reverie with a particular insistence.

It is the experience of the felt instant, the moment of reverie, as at once in and out of time, that underpins the work of two of the most insistent mid-century theorists of landscape gardens, Henry Home (Lord Kames), and Thomas Whately. We can begin with Kames, whose *Elements of Criticisms* first appeared in 1762, with numerous later editions and additions.[[9]](#footnote-10) With its attempt to develop the moral basis of a universalising aesthetic, Kames’ *Elements* makes for an easy target for modern critics. Rather than making that attack, however, I want to concentrate instead on Kames’ attempt to delineate emotional responses to eighteenth-century landscape in relation to the experience of time.

For Kames, ‘A taste for natural objects is born with us in perfection’. However, if for the relish of ‘a fine countenance, a rich landscape, or a vivid colour, culture is unnecessary’ this is only the first stage of a human development in which ‘the author of nature, by qualifying the human mind for a succession of enjoyments from low to high, leads it by gentle steps from the most grovelling corporeal pleasures, for which only it is fitted in the beginning of life, to those refined and sublime pleasures that are suited to its maturity’ (vol.1, pp.5-6). What’s striking in this account of human development and the role of the senses, is Kames’ emphasis both on an individual’s senses developing through time and on the relative significance accorded to the senses being markers of different stages in human history. Thus, like other writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, Kames maps individual development against theories of progress and civilization: what he terms ‘organic’ or corporeal pleasures of the senses remain ‘primitive’ (and like those of a child), but music, the visual arts, gardening and architecture are markers of civilization. To understand this, for Kames, is to understand God’s invitation (especially to the ‘opulent’) ‘to second the purposes of nature, by cultivating the pleasures of the eye and ear, those especially that require extraordinary culture’ (vol.1, p.6). It also means that the multi-sensual experience of the garden, the combination of ‘organic’ and intellectual pleasures, of natural objects and cultural interventions, inevitably places the garden visitor in a moralised, but also historicised, drama of the senses.

Gardens, then, occupy a peculiar position, offering on the one hand the stuff of nature and those merely ‘organic’ pleasures that Kames associates with childhood, and on the other the higher pleasures of the intellect. Kames’ garden theory assumes this kind of historical awareness is fundamental to the experience, or rather it assumes that the aesthetically aware garden visitor will inevitably historicise that aesthetic experience. To experience the garden in these terms is to experience a complex—and repeated—movement between the sensual pleasures associated with childhood and those more sophisticated pleasures of adulthood and civilisation, but also therefore between a sense of one’s developmental history as an individual and one’s recognition of that development in relation to larger historical narratives: as one reacts in the garden to different sensual experiences, one plays out different moments in one’s own development and in the development of civilisation. In this sense, then, Kames’ garden visitor inevitably inhabits shifting personal and cultural historical frameworks as they move between sensual experiences defined in terms of their own life and the recognition that such experiences may be mapped against larger historical narratives both human and divine.

If this seems rather abstract and confined to the world of philosophical theory rather than sensual experience, Kames is also keen to insist on the bodily nature of these garden experiences, and here too, time—or its absence—is a defining feature. So far I have been framing Kames’ account of garden experience as one in which the individual must constantly move between different historical imaginings and different ways of placing a sense of self in relation to time. But Kames’ emphasis on the experience of the garden as the experience of emotion means that he also repeatedly turns to the idea of the moment in time. This is not the place to explore in any depth Kames’ account of memory, but his emphasis on memory as an experience of ‘real’ or ‘ideal’ presence—on recollection as an experience of the immediate and the present rather than a journey into the past—helps us to understand perhaps his most striking claim which is that certain experiences place one outside of time imagined as duration from past to future. In a ‘complete idea of memory there is no past nor future: a thing recalled to the mind with accuracy… is perceived as in our view, and consequently as existing in the present’ (vol.1, p.89-90). What marks such moments out for Kames is that this sense of presence is *felt*: memory here becomes an emotional state and the instantaneousness of emotion means that there is no awareness of time, whether past or future.

It is in this context that we can turn to Kames' numerous gestures towards landscape throughout the two volumes of *Elements of Criticism*, but in particular to the essay on gardens and architecture at the end of volume two, an essay which makes changing emotional states the central—and peculiarly characteristic—experience of the garden, or at least of English landscape gardens in the mid-eighteenth century. Underpinning these changing emotional states is Kames’ account of the psychological experience of time, which—like Locke before him—he defines in relation to the succession of perceptions. Crucially, however, there are moments which appear to be out of time either because they are the instantaneous effect of bodily feeling—the immediacy of a reaction so sudden that there is no time for reflection to intervene—or, in the case of reverie, because the intensity of reflection occasioned by, but detached from, material objects, leaves the mind unaware of those perceptions which would mark its passage. Thus, in stressing the relation between gardens and feeling, and in focussing on those moments which seem to be out of time, Kames also draws to our attention the disjunction between felt instants and the knowledge of larger timescales; he offers us a theory of garden experience which is marked by the elisions and implicit disruptions between landscape, emotion and time.

One of the peculiarities of the *Elements* is its absolute insistence that the emotional affects of natural forms are known and indisputable. And, while Kames regrets that the language of architectural form has not yet been able to articulate ‘the precise impression made by every single part’, he claims that in gardening these things are indeed known: not only are ‘the several emotions raised by trees, rivers, cascades, plains, eminencies, and its other materials … understood’, but ‘each emotion can be described with some degree of precision’ (vol.2, p.434). What underpins Kames’ confidence in this shared language is that it arises, once again, from the instantaneous reactions of the body: ‘Such is our nature’, he argues, ‘that upon perceiving certain external objects, we are instantaneously conscious of pleasure or pain: a gently-flowing river, a smooth extended plain, a spreading oak, a towering hill, are objects of sight that raise pleasant emotions: a barren heath, a dirty marsh, a rotten carcass, raise painful emotions…’ All of this happens, Kames argues, ‘without the least reflection’ (vol.1, pp.36-7), and thus the instantaneousness of the bodily response—the reaction out of time—becomes the marker of the natural rather than the culturally learned. However, if this seems like an escape from both time and culture, that is hardly the case, because central to Kames’ *Elements* is also the urge to weave these moments back into the fabric of human history. And nowhere is that more the case than in his analysis of the ruin and of reverie.

By the mid-eighteenth century it had become wholly conventional [?] to imagine the ruin as reclaimed by, and as a part of, the natural environment. Certainly for Kames a ruin is just as much a part of the emotional landscape of the garden as a rocky outcrop or a cascade. It does, however, have peculiar features which mark it out from those other natural forms and again, quite conventionally, Kames asserts the inevitability of the ruin inviting melancholic emotion and inspiring moments of reverie. With his emphasis on perception as the marker of time, Kames finds in reverie a peculiar moment of intensity and absence. ‘In a reverie’, he argues, ‘we are uncertain of the time that is past’; indeed it becomes so much an experience of the present that later reflection is both unable to recollect its detail and unable also to account for the time that has passed:

A reverie may be so profound as to prevent the recollection of any one idea: that the mind was busied in a train of thinking, may in general be remembered; but what was the subject, has quite escaped the memory. In such a case, we are altogether at a loss about the time, having no *data* for making a computation. (vol.1, p.173)

This kind of reverie is not solely the domain of the ruin—as we’ll see in Whately’s *Observations* it can become the defining mode of garden experience—but, for mid-eighteenth-century writers, the ruin’s liminal status as a man-made object reclaimed by nature, and its seemingly inevitable invitation to melancholic reflection, work powerfully to ensure a rehearsal of past and present, progress and loss.[[10]](#footnote-11) In the *Elements* Kames turns to the reconstruction of Greek and Roman ‘ruins’ in the garden and asks:

Whether should a ruin be in the Gothic or Grecian form? In the former, I think; because it exhibits the triumph of time over strength; a melancholy, but not unpleasant thought: a Grecian ruin suggests rather the triumph of barbarity over taste; a gloomy and discouraging thought. (vol.2, p.446-7)

This emphasis on melancholy and gloom characteristically frames the experience of ruins in terms of emotion, but the immediacy of emotion is framed in turn by large-scale narratives of progress and civilisation even as the *Elements*’ account of reverie would suggest their absence.

Kames’ analysis of the ruin as an invitation to reflection is, as I’ve suggested, utterly conventional. However, what the *Elements* draws to our attention is not simply the urge to reflect upon past and future, but the peculiar status of the reflective moment as somehow out of time even as it attempts to locate the self in time, whether time is framed as human or divine. Certainly one of Kames’ more careful readers, Elizabeth Carter, plays out these same preoccupations with present experience being defined by past and future when she attempts to describe the situation of, and in, a ruin. But she also helps us to see how an awareness of the felt moment might resolve or elide conflicting desires and contradictory timeframes, how the imagining of a point in time might be at once part of, and separated from, the knowledge of duration. Thus, for example, in the ruins of West Langdon church—near her home in Deal, Kent—Carter writes of amusing herself ‘amongst mouldering arches, ivyed walls, and thick-strewn graves, in all that composure of pleasing melancholy which scenes like these so naturally inspire’, but then turns her thoughts to the ‘gloomy horrors and insupportable despair’ a view of ‘the realms of death and ruin’ would inevitably produce ‘if their devastations were to be considered as reducing things to a final state’. For Carter, Christian faith prevents such gloom because it provides ‘future hope’, but it also makes the characteristic experience of the ruin one of temporal pause, for ‘amidst the deep shade and awful silence that surround this temporary suspension of existence, the mind looks forward to that period when all shall revive to happier circumstances of being, and hears a glad voice proclaiming to the renovated world that time shall be no more’.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Framed in terms of gloomy horrors or pleasing melancholy, Carter’s insistence that the ruin is a site for an intensity of emotion which appears to take place outside of time should challenge any lazy notions we may have of the merely ‘conventional’, of the ruin as a site for no more than tired cliché. Certainly Carter can rehearse that sense of the ruin as a place of ‘melancholy repose’ which strikes ‘the imagination with awful and affecting ideas’; and she can claim—again quite conventionally—that ‘in such a situation the soul expands itself, and feels at once the greatness of its capacities, and the littleness of its pursuits’; but she repeatedly returns to an experience which is not one of comfortable convention but of emotive atemporality.[[12]](#footnote-13) Characteristically, she insists on a sense of ‘that mysterious contradiction which points its views to future being’ as she attempts to explain the powerful but seemingly unlikely appeal of dilapidation:

Objects of vast and stupendous ruin, and mournful instances of our frail condition, subdue the mad excesses of our pride, calm the hurry of disordered passions, and sober the extravagance of idle wishes. -- Thus the overthrow of the works of art makes us sicken at the folly of human schemes; and the devastations of nature awe us by the sense of divine omnipotence and justice. To allure us to this moral lesson, is perhaps the reason of that strange delight which the imagination feels in the view of objects which in themselves are so little fitted to inspire any pleasurable ideas.[[13]](#footnote-14)

Here, shifting from physical ruins to human desires, from human history to divine plans, Carter finally resolves these contradictions with a turn to the ‘strange delight’ of feeling rather than the conscious act of rational reflection.

This turn to atemporal emotion appears in Carter’s letters not only when confronted by the physical ruins of medieval structures but also as she imagines the garden’s potential always to devolve into ruin. When her close friend Bethia Palmer (the daughter of Sir Thomas D’Aeth) departed from Ripple House near Deal, Carter felt the loss both of a friend and of the garden they had shared. In a passage that starts with a celebration of feeling in seemingly endless cycles of time and ends with ruination and loss, Carter writes:

With her I used to gather the first violets of spring, and the roses of summer, and we together enjoyed all the various beauties of the varying year. And now, perhaps this sweet abode, which makes a point of view to most of my walks, and which I have so long known perfumed by the fragrance of every flower, enlivened by music, and endeared by many a tender remembrance, will soon probably be overgrown with nettles, silent, solitary, and a mere picture of ruin.[[14]](#footnote-15)

And she returns to this image of the garden’s potential for rapid decline into ruin on the death of another close friend, Mrs Gambier, when she writes of ‘a melancholy propensity to walk over the garden in which I had so often accompanied her’, and ‘feeling a tender concern at seeing a place in which she took so much delight, neglected and in ruins, and the myrtles and roses, which were still in bloom, almost covered with weeds’. As Carter admits, ‘A moment’s recollection could tell me, all this was nothing to her; but I know not how it is, instead of accompanying our departed friends in their happier state, our minds are perpetually endeavouring to keep up their connection with our own, and ... we invite them back from the unfading blooms of paradise, to a participation of mortal roses with all their thorns’. For all that Carter acknowledges and accepts the Christian timeframe of a redemptive future, what’s striking here once again is that sense in which the felt moment in the garden resists such knowledge, resists a ‘recollection’ which would frame time as a movement towards, and not a movement away. For Carter, then, ‘the immediate and natural force of sentiment will always be superior to that of conviction’; and ‘so it must ever be, while on the objects of a future world we only reason, and in what relates the present, we feel’.[[15]](#footnote-16)

This switch between temporal imaginings is a characteristic not only of Carter’s letters, I’m suggesting, but also of a wider response when confronted by the garden’s temporal cues and symbolic potential. And while Carter writes perhaps most eloquently of the garden in ruins, it is to ruins in gardens that I now want to return with the writing of two close friends and influential writers on eighteenth-century landscape, Thomas Whately and William Gilpin.

As Carter and Kames’ accounts of architectural ruins suggest, one of the most striking features of ruins is that, for all their historical specificity, they remain oddly interchangeable. In Nagel and Woods’ terms they appear to offer a fixed point which is nevertheless infinitely replaceable, and questions of ‘authenticity’ become less significant than the physical object’s apparent ability to offer unmediated access to an imagined past. Here, however, I want to focus on the kind of ‘fake’ ruin embraced by Walpole at Hagley; on those moments when such fakery is not embraced but rejected for the ‘absurdities’ Walpole insists are absent from his friend’s estate; and on the ruin once again as a powerful cue for historical reverie or its failure.

Gilpin, of course, is famous for wanting to knock down just a little bit more of Tintern Abbey in order to create a more appealing image of the past—or, we might say an image that more accurately reflects the present imagination of the past. But it is not Tintern and Gilpin’s published commentaries on ruins that I want to explore here; rather it is the deletions and revisions to the manuscripts that interest me, because in them we see perhaps most clearly the way in which a picturesque writer struggles to articulate his imagining of the past as at once historically distant and immediately felt. Here, I draw on the manuscript account of Park Place, the landscape garden dipping down to the riverbank opposite Henley in Oxfordshire. With its series of chalk structures, stone circles and rock work, Park Place—the estate of Henry Seymour Conway—was (perhaps inevitably) praised by the owner’s cousin, Horace Walpole. Gilpin, however, was far less complimentary, and the lengthy descriptions provided in the manuscript versions of the Lakes and Wye tours were ultimately cut from the published tours in their entirety. What troubled Gilpin, and what makes his manuscript attempts to describe the gardens of interest here, was the failure of the various garden structures to produce an appropriately emotive affect. Park Place offered ruins, but those ruins offered no instantaneous and emotional access to the past.

I’ve written of Gilpin’s reactions to Park Place elsewhere, but I want to return to it here because the manuscript tours offer us such a clear demonstration of an individual’s immediate and somatic response confronting their own larger historical imaginings.[[16]](#footnote-17) In both the Wye notebook (notebook 8) and the Lakes manuscript, Gilpin offers the mildest of praise for the garden’s natural features—its lawn, its beech grove, and so on—but when confronted by rock works and ruins, his characteristic reaction is disgust of the most visceral kind.[[17]](#footnote-18) We might frame the manuscripts’ deletions and revisions as the inevitable diminution into politeness of a published text; and we might recognise, too, that the polite voice of those published tours is necessarily accommodating itself to a public audience with its own expectations of decorum; nevertheless, in Gilpin’s first attempts to record his reactions to Park Place it is the highly charged language of disgust which takes to the fore.

Thus, for example, in the fair copy of the Lakes manuscript Gilpin writes:

From this thicket we enter a valley, adorned with a profusion of chalk-ruins at one end; and a bridge at the other. The chalk-ruins are disagreeable enough, bearing the marks neither of design, nor of composition. They resemble the ruins of nothing…

From these ruins we descended along the valley, wh., without break or variation, is a mere blanket held at the 4 corners. The farther end of it is graced by a bridge, which runs running parallel with the Thames, which flows a few yards from it. … Through the arch of the bridge we were carryed to see a piece of rock-scenery, consisting of half a dozen large stones brought together than which Nothing can be more absurd. They neither give any idea of what they mean were intended to represent; nor are they suited to the country, in which they are introduced. They are heterogeneous ornaments.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Even to reach this relatively anodyne level of description, however, Gilpin has had to work hard: in the original Wye manuscript we’re offered deletions and corrections which speak eloquently both of his disgust and of an attempt to record an immediate aesthetic—but also emotional—response to Conway’s garden. Thus, for example, the ‘disagreeable chalk ruins start life as ‘vile things; so much chalk above ground may finally be ‘very disgusting but in the Wye tour ‘disgusting’ is a replacement for ‘abominable’; the bridge ‘wh. runs parallel with the Thames’ is first an ‘absurdity’ and then ‘beyond ridicule’; and finally, Gilpin concludes: ‘this piece of rocky-scenery tho it was probably the most expensive part of the garden… is after all, instead of being an object of the imagination, an unmeaning, affected trifle’.[[19]](#footnote-20)

Combined with the Lakes manuscript’s claim that Conway’s ruins ‘neither give any idea of what they mean or were intended to represent …. They are heterogeneous ornaments’, it is these last deleted phrases from the Wye manuscript which are perhaps most helpful when we try to make sense of Gilpin’s agenda, and they form part of a conversation with his friend Thomas Whately.

Considering what was a shared interest in ruins, and reiterating those conventional manoeuvres we have already encountered in Carter and Kames, Whately writes in the *Observations*:

All remains excite an enquiry into the former state of the edifice, and fix the mind in a contemplation on the use it was applied to; besides the character expressed by their style and position, they suggest ideas which would not arise from the building, if entire … and certain sensations of regret, of veneration, or compassion, attend the recollection… Whatever building we see in decay, we naturally contrast its present to its former state, and delight to ruminate on the comparison.[[20]](#footnote-21)

Alongside this conventional analysis of the melancholy ruins, however, Whately—like Kames—also insists that such responses are immediate, and felt. In the garden, Whately argues, ‘Certain properties, and certain dispositions, of the objects of nature, are adapted to excite particular ideas and sensation… and all are very well known: they require no discernment, examination, or discussion, but are obvious at a glance, and instantaneously distinguished by our feelings’. For Whately, then, ideas and sensations are to be valued because they are ‘instantaneously distinguished by our feelings’; but the demonstration of this in the *Observations* is only possible in the form of carefully rehearsed reveries which shore up the cultural values into which Whately has been educated, and on which his own position depends.

What might disrupt this, of course, is the poor imitation of nature, the ruin which cannot tell its story in an instant. As Whately writes, ‘Conjectures about the form, raise doubts about the existence of the ancient structure; the mind must not be allowed to hesitate; it must be hurried away from examining into the reality, by the exactness and the force of the resemblance’ (pp.131-2). What’s striking here is that same insistence as in Kames’ *Elements* on the mind being ‘hurried away’ on an immediate response that leaves no time for reflection. What’s striking, too, is that Whately nevertheless sets that immediacy in the context of a structured reverie which is distinct (in some ways at least) from Rousseau. ‘Such is the constitution of the human mind’, Whately argues, ‘that if once it is agitated, the emotion often spreads far beyond the occasion; when the passions are roused, their course is unrestrained; when the fancy is on the wing, its flight is unbounded; and quitting the inanimate objects which first gave them their spring, we may be led by thought above thought, widely differing in degree, but still corresponding in character, till we rise from familiar subjects up the sublimest conceptions, and are rapt in the contemplation of whatever is great or beautiful, which we see in nature, feel in man, or attribute to divinity’ (*Observations*, p.156)

The nature of Whately’s—broadly didactic—published text means that he can craft the kind of culturally-conditioned reverie that we see here, and which uses the language of feeling to reinforce Christian assumptions of divine power as natural rather than ideological. Distinctfrom Kames in that the description of reverie here insists more directly on the trajectory of ideas, Whately’s account nevertheless starts from that same sense of reverie as a moment out of time; uses reverie to imagine one’s place in larger temporal narratives; and insists that the felt moment ratifies that larger temporal imagining. For both writers, the power of reverie consists in its ability to combine the felt moment with the ability to traverse time and space. And what both valued are those moments when the culturally learned dissolves into an imagining of the authentically natural, because that imagining of the natural is an imagining of one’s self and of one’s place in time.

As an aside here, we might note of those old arguments about emblem and expression in the English garden that Whately’s expressive landscapes of reverie are not, then, about rejecting the associationism of earlier gardens; rather, association is both necessary and required to drop away from view as it produces its affects. And it is that question of what drops from view, and of what is felt, that returns us to Gilpin’s disgust. As John Macarthur has argued, disgust, or rather what he terms analogic disgust—a disgust driven by ideas and representations rather than physicalities—plays an important role in the history and imagining of the picturesque. Paraphrasing Kant, Macarthur writes that ‘while the sublime has something to tell us of reason, and beauty of morality, disgust, in which the gut can spasm in relation to an idea, tells us of the imagination’.[[21]](#footnote-22) That leads him in turn to argue that for the likes of Joshua Reynolds ‘the identification of disgust in art is an education in judgement for the individual. To the degree that it can be communicated, if not exactly shared, disgust can be the basis of a public self-recognition in taste’.[[22]](#footnote-23) That insight draws us to Gilpin too, because, just as for Reynolds, Gilpin’s disgust is best recognized both as an instance of refusal, and as a means of articulating a sense of taste as culturally shared. The physicality of reaction that Macarthur notes is once again a means of registering—and championing—the naturalness of an immediate reaction, but it is a reaction ultimately reliant upon both the chronological underpinnings of taste as progress, and on the more specific chronological imagining of the ruin as a marker of human history.

In Whately’s account of the instantaneously felt, the looked-for moment of reverie is the moment at which ideology seems to dissolve into ‘nature’; in Gilpin’s notebook revisions, we see the reverse of this. The vile, the absurd and the disgusting prevent Gilpin from being ‘hurried along’, prevent the imagining of landscape as something other than ideology, the imagining of ideology as no ideology at all. Finally, then, as Whately’s model of culturally-conditioned reveries suggests, the sensational affects both writers prize—that experience of the immediate as the unmediated—is inevitably articulated as narrative, and as a narrative which can align itself with larger cultural narrations, with histories which frame themselves in terms of religion, nation, and nature. Thus, just as these responses to the ruin are reliant on the felt instant—on an experience of emotion that appears to be both outside of time and a part of nature—the felt instant is in turn a means of reiterating the historicizing myths of modern culture.

There are other stories that might be told here, not least of the continuing ability of the garden inscription to offer moments of temporal arrest and emotive transport; or, in quite different ways, of the experience of the garden as a place of indolence which for many eighteenth-century writers must then also be framed as a moment out of time because it is ‘wasted’ time; but I have focussed on the ruin because it so insistently demonstrates both for us and for eighteenth-century garden visitors the affective moments made possible by physical objects, and the sense that those moments might be at once in and out of time. If ruins confront the individual with radically different time frames, those time frames must be at once merged and separated in order that the prized immediacy of an apparently unmediated reaction can be experienced. What is shared by Kames and by Carter, by Whately and (if only in exasperation) by Gilpin, is a concern for immediacy which is at once an emotional response and a response which—characteristically—must be framed historically. Confronting the ruin, we see in these various accounts an attempt to embrace the unmediated moment, the moment made natural by its instantaneousness; but to turn that around, we might also say that this moment even as it is a celebration is also found to be wanting, because a moment out of time is not enough, and gains its significance only as it is narrated into larger and more complex histories.

1. My thanks go especially to Luke Morgan for his careful reading of this essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York, 2010), p.32; in writing of emotion I draw on William Reddy’s historicized account of ‘emotives’ rather than assuming ahistorical emotional states authenticated by the body, for which see Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (Cambridge, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore, 1984, p.143. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Horace Walpole to Richard Bentley, September, 1753, in W.S. Lewis et al, eds., *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence* (New Haven, 1973), vol. 35, p.148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For my earlier attempt to explore antiquarian responses to ruins, see, 'The True Rust of the Barons’ Wars: Gardens, Ruins, and the National Landscape', in *Producing the Past: Aspects of Antiquarian Culture and Practice, 1650-1850* ed. Martin Myrone & Lucy Peltz (Ashgate, 1999), pp. 83-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note, too, of course, that the response is hardly peculiar at all: part of the thrust of Nagel and Wood’s account of Renaissance art is that under the logic of substitution, fakes occupy the same conceptual space as 'originals.' Thus, there is no hierarchy derived from a notion of 'authenticity’, and the physical antiquity of an object is of less importance than its capacity to evoke some notion of antiquity (real or imagined). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of J. J. Rousseau: with the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, *Translated from the French*, 2 vols. (London, 1783). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Elizabeth Montagu to the Earl of Bath, Sandleford, August 8th 1762, Huntington Library Manuscript, MO4533. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Here I quote from Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 6th edition, with the Author’s last corrections and additions, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1785). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For an account of the ruin as the result of nature’s transformation of 'the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served as material for art', see Georg Simmel, 'The Ruin,' in *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy, and Aesthetics*, reprint (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Elizabeth Carter to Elizabeth Vesey, 15th July, 1776, in [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Carter to Vesey, 29th September 1764, in *A series of Letters*, vol.3, pp.244-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Carter to Vesey, 20th June 1766, in *A series of Letters*, vol.3, pp.289-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Elizabeth Carter to Elizabeth Montagu, 12th January 1761, in [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Carter to Montagu, 21st October 1763, in *Letters from Mrs. Elizabeth Carter*, vol.1, pp.205-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. ‘Vile Things: William Gilpin and the Properties of the Picturesque’ (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. A fair copy of Gilpin’s description of Park Place appears in his *Lakes Tour* manuscript, Bodleian Library Ms. Eng.Misc.e.488(1), the fair copy follows the corrections made in the Wye tour fairly closely, Ms.Eng. misc.e.486(8), ff.162-70 and Ms.Eng.Misc.e.488(1), ff.3-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Bodleian, Lakes Tour, Ms. Eng.Misc.e.488 (1), ff.4-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Bodleian, Wye tour notebook, MS.Eng.misc.e.486(8)]f.162-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. *Observations of Modern Gardening* (London, 1770), pp.131-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. John Macarthur, *The Picturesque: Architecture, Disgust and Other Irregularities* (London, 2007), p.71. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Macarthur, *The Picturesque*, p.88. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)