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## Representing the Picturesque: William Gilpin and the Laws of Nature

*This is an art  
Which does mend Nature — change it rather, but  
The art itself is Nature.*

*The Winter's Tale* IV.iv.95-97

### Misplacing Gilpin

The picturesque movement of the late eighteenth century is an important precursor of early Romantic approaches to nature, and of the drive a century later to protect and conserve natural landscape in both England and North America (Bate 132). Recent critical discussion, however, has largely focused on connecting the picturesque with concurrent social and agricultural changes that saw millions of acres of land enclosed and harsh poor laws enacted. In distancing its followers from the rural poor, argued Ann Bermingham, the picturesque "endorsed the results of agricultural industrialization"; while, by mystifying social change, it represented "an attempt to wipe out the fact of enclosure and to minimize its consequences" (75). More generally, Alison Byerly, in considering the impact of the picturesque on American landscape management, has described the picturesque as "an elitist appropriation of the environment" (53), while Ian MacLaren has castigated its "social myopia" (109). But the picturesque is a far from homogenous movement, and critical contention about what it represents is perhaps nowhere more evident than in discussion of William Gilpin's achievements. In this paper I will argue, against the grain of recent criticism, that we should take Gilpin seriously as a writer about nature.

As Kim Michasiw has pointed out (81), Gilpin is often dismissed as little more than a dilettante and popularizer, his writings pre-theo-

retical in comparison with the later work of Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight (e.g., Hippie 196). Bermingham's view is representative: "Gilpin was mainly concerned with itemizing picturesque effects" (66). Yet, despite the careful reconsideration of Gilpin that occupies many of his own pages, Michasiw himself concludes that Gilpin's picturesque is determined by arbitrary rules. These, says Michasiw, represent Gilpin's "conviction that the picturesque was and should be an external set of standards rather than a subjective apprehension leading to judgment" (92).

Gilpin's writings are, to be sure, often paradoxical, most notably in his contradictory attitude towards the relation of art to nature (cf. Whale 178). He claims on the one hand that in the picturesque we apply the rules of painting to nature (*Wye* 1) and on the other hand that nature is beyond such petty rules (*Essays* 50). Gilpin's aesthetic is unstable in several other ways too, but I will suggest that his work also contains a singular and little-remarked consistency in his approach to natural landscape. Gilpin's descriptions in his tours chart the emergence of a relationship to the natural order that is both disinterested and affective. In other words, his picturesque writing often demonstrates the correspondence of human motives and emotions to the natural scenes that seem to evoke them, yet nature itself is said to exhibit an agency that is above and beyond human comprehension (*Wye* 31). In this respect we can see Gilpin framing a view of nature that, with hindsight, we can consider proto-ecological. He repeatedly attempts, in other words, to understand the laws of nature in their own right, and often contrasts the smallness of human aesthetic considerations to the grandeur he finds in the natural scene. While Gilpin lacks the scientific knowledge of plants and animals demonstrated during this period by such writers as William Bartram (*Travels*, 1792) or Gilbert White (*Natural History of Selbourne*, 1789), I will argue that his principles of landscape appreciation are based on underlying laws that Gilpin intuitively identifies in nature through affective means. At the moments Gilpin is most impressed by a natural scene, he emphasizes that the scene is felt before it is understood. I will later suggest in more detail that this is the effect of Gilpin's development of a set of prototypes of natural forms, and that these, in the end, are what he expounds as the laws of the picturesque in a number of his writings. With some caution, given the inconsistencies in Gilpin's work, we can regard the laws of the picturesque as pointing to the laws of nature. It is worth indicating, in this context, the appeal of Gilpin for Thoreau who, a century later, remarked of Gilpin that he was "so admirable in all that relates to landscapes, and usually so correct" (*Walden* 250-52).

As a part of this discussion, it will be necessary to consider some of the problems that currently beset a reevaluation of Gilpin. Recent criticism, as I suggested, has not been hospitable to his work, although Gilpin himself frequently prevaricates and contradicts himself, making a consistent reading of his work problematic. But critical comment tends to err by making one assertion of Gilpin represent his attitude as a whole, while downplaying or disregarding other views apparent in Gilpin's work that would modify or oppose it. For a representative view of such problems, I will first discuss a commentator, Jonathan Bate, who includes Gilpin in his recent survey of ecological issues in literature, *The Song of the Earth*.

Bate finds Gilpin an antagonist, assimilating him to a Cartesian view that elevates the perceiving mind and authorizes the "denigration of material nature" (137). But for Bate, Gilpin is best approached through his contemporary critics: Jane Austen and the author of the Dr. Syntax parodies (William Combe). In Jane Austen's ambivalent and often witty treatment of the picturesque, to view nature is to appropriate it: "The admirer of picturesque scenery pretends to be submitting to the power of nature, but in fact she is taking something for herself from it, using it as a source of nourishment for the spirit," and to affirm her sensibility (132). In support of this contention, Bate suggests that the picturesque viewer depends on the "station," where the spectator is raised above the scene "in an attitude of Enlightenment mastery" (132). In fact, Gilpin makes very few mentions of the station in his tours—one of his rare uses at Derwentwater (*Lakes* I, 194) makes the whole eastern shoreline a viewpoint (Bate is perhaps thinking of Thomas West's more typical nomination of a few carefully selected locations in his *Guide to the Lakes* of 1778). Bate's comment here also misrepresents Gilpin's stated preference for a position low in a scene (Andrews 61; Barbier 137). Generally, Gilpin finds elevated positions unsuitable for the picturesque (e.g., *Wye* 14; *Lakes* 81; *Western* 36).

Bate continues his criticism of Gilpin by discussing, not Gilpin's own work, but the brilliant satire on him by Thomas Rowlandson and William Combe, where Gilpin figures as Dr. Syntax in a series of ridiculous accidents and misunderstandings. This perpetuates several misreadings of Gilpin. While the picturesque tourist is supposed to be in search of nature, says Bate, "what he is actually looking for are beauties pre-determined by art" (133). This, as I will point out, is only half true. While Gilpin spoke of judging nature by the rules of art, he also spoke of art as "insipid" by comparison, expressing his sense of humility before nature, which he insisted is always greater than any of our ideas of it (*Essays* 57-58). Far from wishing to dominate nature, Gilpin's stance low in the natural scene is precisely what he requires

in order to appreciate the different scales at which the scene is represented to the eye, from the immediate detail of the foreground to the distant mountain outline.

Bate goes on to suggest that Gilpin is typical of his time in reversing the Classical premise that art imitates nature: now, nature was to imitate art—hence the redesign of gardens to fit the principles of the picturesque. Here again, however, Bate is misleading. For Gilpin nature was always the model, not art. In the long preface to his tour of the Lakes, he explained that while

examining landscape by the rules of picturesque beauty, seems rather a deviation from nature to art. Yet, in fact, it is not so: for the rules of picturesque beauty, we know, are drawn from nature: so that to examine the face of nature by these rules, is no more than to examine nature by her own most beautiful exertions. (*Lakes I*, xxii)

Thus, while Gilpin often comments on the parks and gardens he visits in the light of the picturesque, Gilpin also places strict limitations on gardens: commenting on a garden near Salisbury he remarks that “Garden-scenes are never picturesque. They want the bold roughness of nature” (*Western* 98). Returning from his tour of the Wye in 1770, Gilpin wrote to a friend, emphasizing the difference of the Wye from man-made landscape. How wonderful it was, he said, “beyond description! When I returned into England and looked into two or three pieces of ground [it] made my gorge rise at the pimple ideas of men” (Barbier 50). In contrast to Martin Price, then, we can say that for Gilpin, at least, the aesthetic categories are not “self-sufficient” (Price, “Moment” 262), since nature, as in the Wye valley, always exceeds the scope of any picturesque rules we have been able to derive from nature.

Yet Bate goes on to assimilate Gilpin to the Cartesian eye that is the master of nature, an attitude, he says, that has had “catastrophic ecological consequences” (136-37). In fact, Gilpin’s attitude to nature is quite the reverse of this. While Gilpin is happy to introduce his picturesque rules in contemplating how a particular scene might be improved, this is a mode of intellectual play; beneath it, Gilpin seems quite humble towards the powers of nature and deeply respectful of what we would now recognize as its ecological integrity. For example, he comments that “the immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension” (*Wye* 31), and that the eye of the traveller “ranges after nature, untamed by art, and bursting wildly into all its irregular forms” (*Lakes II*, 44).

While Bate dismisses Gilpin as an outmoded Enlightenment figure, other critical treatments of his work stereotype it on more local grounds. A common criticism of Gilpin’s picturesque is its supposed static quality, which seems enforced by the reading of nature in the

light of what can be pictured. A complex argument of this kind is provided by Alan Liu in his discussion of Gilpin’s picturesque and the Wordsworth of the early *Descriptive Sketches*, written under picturesque influence. Liu connects these to the stasis he sees represented in paintings by Claude Lorraine that influenced the picturesque in England (although Gilpin is highly critical of Claude; see *Western* 75). According to Liu, the central experience or “prime mover” of Gilpin’s picturesque is “a crucial arrest,” a “repose” in the presence of, for example, a lake (64-65): Gilpin describes this as “a tranquil pause of mental operation, which may be felt, but not described” (*Lakes I*, 133). A similar experience is attributed to the view of Rydal Falls reported by several writers and artists, carefully framed by its proprietor for viewing through a window in a small stone hut. Drawing on descriptions by both Gilpin and Wordsworth, Liu again finds that “repose” is central. In this case, however, Liu overlooks the energy in the account of Gilpin that he has just cited (81): here, although the view is “like a picture in a frame,” it is far from “motionless” as Liu suggests. Gilpin animates the scene remarkably by enacting the fall of the water in his description, which “hurries from the higher grounds; tumbling, in various, little breaks, through its rocky channel, darkened with thicket” (etc.; *Lakes I*, 170). It is hard to see this in terms of “repose,” and, indeed, Gilpin singles out as central to the effect of the scene the contrast of the light given by “the sparkling lustre of the stream” amidst the dark woods and rocks. Also, unlike Liu’s emphasis on “noon” as a time of repose, Gilpin explicitly disavows the noon and calls for the scene to be viewed in the morning or evening “when the sloping sun-beam affords rather a catching, than a glaring light” (171). Here, as in many other descriptions, Gilpin’s sentences recreate the active processes of perception, mirroring nature’s own activity at Rydal Falls (the passage that follows the “tranquil pause of mental operation” in viewing a lake provides another example).

Gilpin’s sensitivity to light and the time of day is also disregarded by other critics. Wendelin Guentner states that “Gilpin does not appreciate the inherent truth value of a scene represented at a particular season and time of day” (127). This is contradicted by evidence noted by Gerald Finlay, who cites Gilpin’s claim that almost every landscape is best seen at a particular moment of the day (204; see *Wye* 62). Yet elsewhere Gilpin’s approach to time and season is far more comprehensive than Finlay’s comment would suggest. In *Forest Scenery*, for example, he provides an extended account of the shifting light effects that occur during sunrise (I, 239-41), as well as offering a closely observed discrimination between the shadows of the morning and evening hours (I, 241-42). In addition he draws attention to the differing effects of the seasons (II,

disagree illustrates the unresolvable paradox that Gilpin's work presents (although most critics since then can be aligned with Hussey: cf. Byerly, 53; Whale, 178). In practice, Gilpin frequently wishes to speculate on how a given scene might have been improved; it cannot be supposed, he says, that every scene we encounter "is correctly picturesque" (*Lakes* I, 127). He praises the view of Goodrich Castle on the Wye for meeting this requirement, which is "seldom the character of a purely natural scene" (*Wye* 30-31). Thus in drawing he will allow himself certain liberties with foregrounds: "I remove a piece of paling—a cottage—a wall—or any removeable object, which I dislike" (*Essays* 68). His most notorious proposal in this spirit is to take a mallet to the gable-ends at Tintern Abbey which "hurt the eye with their regularity" (*Wye* 47; cf. *Essays* 7). This comment might appear to elevate aesthetics over the habits of the poor, whom Gilpin also observed unsympathetically living in the grounds of the Abbey. But we should not automatically accuse Gilpin of complicity in the practices of dispossessing landlords: As Robin Jarvis has pointed out, "visual appropriation is not the same as physical appropriation" (64).

Yet in general terms, Gilpin places nature above all art: "The grand natural scene, will always appear so superior to the embellished artificial one; that the picturesque eye in contemplating the former, will be too apt to look contemptuously on the latter" (*Lakes* I, xii). So although Gilpin sets out in pursuit of the picturesque, announcing in his first published tour "a new object of pursuit: that of examining the face of a country by the rules of picturesque beauty" (*Wye* 1), he soon admits the inadequacy of the rules: "the immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension" (*Wye* 31). Art will always fall short in comparison with the unbounded expressiveness that Gilpin perceives in nature: "Artists universally are *mannerists* in a certain degree. Each has his particular mode of forming particular objects" (*Wye* 34). If Gilpin praises natural scenes that happen to accord with his picturesque rules, however, it really the case that "the rules prove nothing about the nature or the essence of the scene," as Michasiw insists (89)? Must we discredit Gilpin when he asserts that "the rules of picturesque beauty, we know, are drawn from nature" (*Lakes* I, xxii)? What Gilpin seems to appeal to in such passages is an array of prototypes for the forms of nature; thus he can claim that he learned his rules not from art but from nature herself, and will correct nature only by her own best examples. A review of other problems in interpreting Gilpin's writings will suggest that the underlying difficulty lies in Gilpin's productive but difficult conception of the prototype.

One of Gilpin's rules is his refusal under most circumstances to allow signs of cultivation in a picturesque view: "The painter never

245-47), and far from confining himself to one ideal moment to view a landscape, he points out that "a landscape of extent, and beauty will take the full period of a year, to shew itself in all the forms it is capable of receiving—and that he who does not attend to the variations of the atmosphere, loses half the beauty of his views" (II, 247). Gilpin is able to offer a more comprehensive account in this book, since unlike the various picturesque tours which gave him only a fleeting acquaintance with the scenery they describe, *Forest Scenery* is based on Gilpin's familiarity with the environment of the New Forest over a number of years. He moved there in 1778 to be the minister at Boldre church (Barbier 55), while *Forest Scenery* was not published until 1791.

Gilpin, then, is easy to satirize, as Jane Austen and William Combe demonstrate; and a reductive sense of his work is readily given by partial quotation. Yet in his picturesque practices Gilpin is undoubtedly inconsistent, making it difficult to provide a view of his work as a whole—a task that has yet to be accomplished. In his otherwise extensive history of the picturesque, for example, Walter Hipple disqualified himself from considering the range of Gilpin's work on the picturesque by deliberately omitting consideration of the tours (193); Carl Paul Barbier, who provides perhaps the most sympathetic account of Gilpin, offers helpful comments on Gilpin's theory but focuses his attention mainly on Gilpin's graphic output. I next outline some of the problems of coming to terms with Gilpin's theory, focusing in particular on three paradoxes that seem to inform his work. I will go on to claim, however, that Gilpin's difficulties, such as they are, spring from his attempt to represent nature as an independent and creative power separate from human interests, but also in correspondence with the feelings and kinaesthetic responses of the landscape viewer in a variety of ways that Gilpin repeatedly tries to demonstrate.

### Art or Nature

As Christopher Hussey remarked some time ago, Gilpin acknowledged the power of nature: "He saw her vastness, and knew that he could not comprehend it." Yet, according to Hussey, "he was a painter, in mind if not in execution ... He was thus involved in a perpetual compromise, adapting nature, which he understood only vaguely, to art, which he understood (in his generation) well" (114). In contrast, that other noted authority on the picturesque, Walter Hipple, argued that for Gilpin nature is above art, and suggests that with Gilpin we come to recognize that "our liking for the real objects is not merely from an association with painting, but has an independent basis" (i.e., nature)—albeit not one that Gilpin can identify (195). That such authorities

desires the hand of art to touch his grounds"; that is, ploughed land or cornfields are unacceptable (Wye 44). While he gives thanks for the gods of corn,

we must at the same time acknowledge, that they have miserably scratched, and injured the face of the globe. Wherever man appears with his tools, deformity follows his steps. His spade, and his plough, his hedge, and his furrow; make shocking encroachments on the simplicity, and elegance of landscape. (*Scotland II*, 112)

While Gilpin provides no adequate explanation of this preference, it seems clear that the regularity of the cultivated field imposes an order that violates that of nature. Only when "the idea of picturesque beauty coincides with that of utility" in the forest is Gilpin prepared to entertain signs of industry (*Forest I*, 43; see also I, 266-67, and Colbert's comment on these passages). But nature herself, for example, never generates the parallel straight lines of a ploughed field: Gilpin's paradoxical praise for "the simplicity, and elegance" of nature connotes a sensitivity to a natural geometry that represents diversity and relationship in contrast to the actual simplifications of human imposition.

Similarly, only certain kinds of human figure are acceptable. "In a moral view," he says, industry and labour would please. But in a picturesque view we prefer "the lazy cowherd resting on his pole; or the peasant lolling on a rock" (*Lakes II*, 44). But these only adorn a scene, he adds, suggesting here a principle that will be of importance to environmental writers: human figures that are decentered in the landscape (Mellin 73). For a sublime scene the figures must be integrated with it, hence we need gypsies, banditti, or soldiers, as supplied by Salvator Rosa (*Lakes II*, 45-46). Using terms that he elsewhere applies to nature, such figures will be "marked with some trait of *greatness, wildness, or ferocity*" (46). Here also Gilpin proposes what appears to be a prototype, since these are figures whose situation we suppose to be marked by the same forces that animate the wilder scenes or denizens of nature.

Gilpin seems less consistent when he considers the inclusion of buildings. His work is notable for describing significant ruins, such as Tintern Abbey, but principally because nature has reassumed the ruin and thus made evident the power of her reparative processes. A ruin such as Tintern Abbey, taken over by ivy, can be regarded as "naturalized to the soil"; it can be classed "among its natural beauties" (*Lakes I*, 13); "we consider it as a work of nature, rather than of art" (*Lakes II*, 188). Thus Gilpin is often uninterested in the history of the ruins he views: at Carlisle, for instance, he breaks off his brief history of the town, saying "it concerns me only as an object of beauty" (*Lakes II*, 95). But here Gilpin is inconsistent. In his essay on "Picturesque Travel" he

includes "the relics of ancient architecture" (*Essays* 46) as one of the universal objects of picturesque pursuit. Yet elsewhere, in comparing them with the beauties of nature, he remarks in the Wye tour, if we can "range at large among forests, lakes, rocks, and mountains" we can do without buildings: "they are not necessary. We can be amused without them." Abbeys and castles are only needed when the eye is confined to the frame of a painting (Wye 25).

Despite his veneration of ancient ruins, Gilpin is not averse to seeing picturesque beauty in some modern buildings, such as the wharf at Lidbrook on the Wye, where the activity by the river contrasts with the wooded hill above it in "a picturesque assemblage" (35-36). Similarly, he admires the hamlet at New Weir and the grandeur of the smoke thrown up at intervals by the iron forge (39; cf. the forges at Neath, 115; the Carron forges, *Scotland I*, 77-78). Since Gilpin, so far as I am aware, never drew such a scene (in contrast to the numerous ruined castles and abbeys that so often adorn his pictures), such buildings must be excluded from those that "give consequence to the scene" (Wye 26). Perhaps, despite being examples of "art," Lidbrooke or the iron-forge exhibit a type of activity parallel to that which Gilpin values in nature and for which he was willing to include banditti or soldiers in a sublime scene: both contain energies that unfold systematically in relation to their environment and are the source of contrast, variety, and force (cf. Copley 48-9), prototypical values for Gilpin when he finds them in nature (*Lakes I*, 111-12). Gilpin is not alone in admiring the industrial sublime, of course, but unlike Richard Wright or Philip de Louthembourg, he will not represent it in his drawings. For Gilpin nature is the source of the forces that interest him, and he will only represent the forces in objects of human origin when they appear to imitate the contrasts and variety inherent to nature.

### Novelty and the Picturesque

While Gilpin remains ambivalent about the relation of art to nature, he also gives conflicting guidance about how far novelty is acceptable within the picturesque. In hewing to his rules he lays it down that the picturesque eye does not deal with what is unusual: "It is fond of the simplicity of nature; and sees most beauty in her *most usual forms*." In his Johnsonian emphasis on what is typical or general in nature he rejects the singular: "The *curious*, and *fantastic* forms of nature" cannot appeal to the picturesque eye. Thus the Giant's Causeway in Ireland "may strike it as a novelty," while the glaciers of Savoy would be dismissed in favour of "the sweet vales of Switzerland." (*Essays* 43-44). His reason for this is based on the concept of aesthetic connection: as he

explains elsewhere with a quotation from his friend, the connoisseur Mr. Lock, glaciers being white "resist the discipline of every harmonizing principle" (Wye 97).

Yet Gilpin also explains that "The love of novelty is the foundation" of picturesque pleasure. For the picturesque traveller the first pleasure is the joy of the pursuit, "the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to his view." But for Gilpin's account, as in Pasteur's aphorism, luck favours the well prepared mind, since in the pursuit of nature it is the "man of taste" who hunts "after those various beauties, with which she every where abounds." Thus he will "obtain a sudden glance, as she flits past him in some airy shape" (*Essays* 47-48). And when he finds her his pleasure seems to lie in comparing the views he finds with an existing picturesque schema: "we examine them under the idea of a *wholè*"; or where this is impossible, suitable scenes being rare, "we are more commonly employed in analyzing the *parts of scenes*" and considering how they might be corrected in accord with "the rules of our art" (*Essays* 48-49). This is the activity that Wordsworth later disparaged, complaining of the "meagre novelties / Of colour and proportion" of the picturesque viewer, who gains pleasure "Unworthily, disliking here, and there / Liking, by rules of mimic art transferred / To things above all art" (*Prelude* 1805, XI, 160-61, 151-54).

Although, encouraged by Wordsworth's dismissal, much ridicule has been directed at this comparative activity, Gilpin himself shows that the picturesque may involve something more. Gilpin continues with his own relative disparagement: "it is not from this *scientific employment*, that we derive our chief pleasure" (49). The "love of novelty" also has provision for responses that seem quite radical in their effect, although such moments are not common in the various tours. Arriving at Crickley Hill on the edge of the Cotswolds, Gilpin has a first view westward over Gloucester and the Severn Vale: "we are immediately struck with the novelty, and grandeur of the scene":

The eye was lost in the profusion of objects, which were thrown at once before it; and ran wild, as it were, over the vast expanse, with rapture, and astonishment, before it could compose itself enough to make any coherent observations. (Wye 8)

After this "rapture" Gilpin goes on to assimilate the view to the picturesque, finding in "the grandeur of the descent" down the slopes immediately before him "every advantage of a picturesque foreground" (Wye 10-11). This application of the rules, however, follows as a second phase. Gilpin makes this point explicitly in his essay, indicating that a direct apprehension of nature (however we understand that) takes precedence over the rules:

We are most delighted, when some grand scene, tho perhaps of incorrect composition, rising before the eye, strikes us beyond the power of thought—when the *vox faucibus hæret*; and every mental operation is suspended. In this pause of the intellect; this *deliquium* of the soul, an enthusiastic sensation of pleasure overspreads it; previous to any examination by the rules of art. (*Essays* 49-50)

If we are to take Gilpin at his word, as the Crickley Hill episode suggests, the cessation of thought and of the comparative activity is similar to Burke's theory of the sublime, that passion of astonishment in which the motions of the soul are suspended (to which Gilpin adds the allusion from Virgil, "the voice sticks in the throat"). But what is distinctive to Gilpin here is not so much the emphasis on pleasure, which is implicit in Burke's account, but the momentary loss of self suggested by the *deliquium* (or swooning) of the soul and its bodily effects. Helen Maria Williams in her contemporaneous *Tour of Switzerland* (1798) reports a similar experience when first seeing the Rhine Falls:

never, never can I forget the sensations of that moment! when with a sort of annihilation of self, with every past impression erased from my memory, I felt as if my heart were bursting with emotions too strong to be sustained. (I, 60)

A less dramatic example is provided by Gilpin's account of the "repose" of a calm lake, cited above, which induces an "enthusiastic calm," "a tranquil pause" (Lakes I, 132-33). As at Crickley Hill, when the mind has "recovered its tone," Gilpin adds, it goes on to examine the picturesque elements of the scene before it. Such passages, though rare in Gilpin's work, provide support for his contention that "the immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension" (Wye 31), since the reversion to the picturesque frame is always in arrears of the first impression. We can see at such moments Gilpin's processes of perception at work: the affective, bodily impact is primary, helping direct the subsequent explicit interpretive rules.

Another insight on novelty is provided by Gilpin's contradictory comments on the Claude glass, which seem hardly to have been noticed. David Marshall, for instance, has recently reviewed some of Gilpin's comments on the glass, but fails to indicate how far Gilpin also disparaged it (420-21). The glass was already well-known from Gray's account of his tour of the Lakes. In a famous passage Gray wrote that one evening near Keswick he "saw in my glass a picture, that if I could transmit to you, & fix it in all the softness of its living colours, would fairly sell for a thousand pounds" (Gray 360), a comment that Gilpin paraphrases

in *Forest Scenery* and cites in a footnote (II, 225). Here he also justifies the use of the Claude glass himself at some length, where he finds it most helpful in viewing "objects at hand" rather than distances:

in the minute exhibition of the convex-mirror, composition, forms, and colours are brought closer together; and the eye examines the general effect, the forms of the objects, and the beauty of the tints, in one complex view. As the colours too are the very colour of nature, and equally well harmonized, they are the more brilliant, as they are the more condensed.

He is also enthusiastic about its use when travelling in a coach: "A succession of high-coloured pictures is continually gliding before the eye. They are like the visions of the imagination; or the brilliant landscapes of a dream" (*Forest* II, 224-25). Here, as Marshall suggests, the picturesque "places the work of art in the scene of nature" (421). More than this, however, the glass appears to trick the perceptual organs into seeing the particular combination of shapes and colours as something novel, obliging the viewer to set aside the familiar schemata for landscape—hence Gilpin's comparison of its effects to a dream.

Yet this vivid effect too can become limiting. A few pages later Gilpin also deprecates the use of the glass, noting that it has little to offer in the case of an extensive view: with its aid "it is impossible within such scanty limits to raise any of those feelings, which landscape in its full dimensions will excite" (II, 235). Elsewhere Gilpin explicitly disparages the Claude glass. He comments on the coloured glasses placed in the way of the view of a cataract at a hermitage constructed by the Tay, comparing this interposition to a Claude glass: he would rather be allowed the option of using it or not. He admits that the "soft, mellow tinge" of the glass will give "a greater depth to the shades" of a view in sunshine; but then adds that "the merit of this kind of modified vision consists chiefly in its novelty"; for viewing landscape the naked eye, he suggests, is "a better apparatus" (*Scotland* I, 124).

The difficulty with Gilpin's use of the term novelty is that what is novel can either surprise the viewer into a vivid realization of nature, or it can distract from what is universal or prototypical, as the Claude glass discussion suggests. At Tintern Abbey Gilpin mentions novelty twice in a short space in an equivocating way. Of the survey of the Abbey overall he says he "was above measure delighted with the beauty, the greatness, and the novelty of the scene." Yet the removal of the undergrowth within the Abbey and its replacement by a lawn reduces its picturesqueness, as he now comments, apparently ironically: "It may add to the beauty of the scene—to its novelty it undoubtedly does" (Wye 49-50). A comparable word of deprecation for what is both striking

and small in a view is "whimsical," which he uses twice in describing Shensone's garden, *The Leasowes*: of a series of fourteen waterfalls he says "The scenery is whimsical; but amusing"; and a bridge by a lake is called a "whimsical spot" (*Lakes* I, 58-59). But Gilpin's judgements of this kind are not confined to what is small. At the lake of Ullswater he tells us that from higher ground at the northern end "we had a view of the whole lake, and all its vast accompaniments together—a troubled sea of mountains; a broken scene—amusing, but not picturesque" (*Lakes* II, 81).

When a scene is particularly striking, however, no recall of picturesque rules can measure out its power over the imagination, as Gilpin dramatically describes:

when rough with all its bold irregularities about it; when beauty, and deformity, grandeur and horror, mingled together, strike the mind with a thousand opposing ideas; and like chymical liquors of an opposite nature, when mixed, produce an effervescence, which no homogeneous liquors could produce. (*Lakes* I, 130)

At such moments Gilpin comes close to enunciating on behalf of nature what was to be a major principle of romantic aesthetics, the power of poetic writing to defamiliarize: as Coleridge was to put it, here we have both "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (*Biographia* II, 16), and the "sense of wonder and novelty," and "freshness of sensation" (I, 81). The one feature not yet shown in Gilpin is the idealizing power attributed to poetry by Coleridge (I, 80), or later still by Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry*. But that is also suggested by Gilpin in his more imaginative treatments of nature.

### Picturesque Rules and the Imagination

What are the picturesque rules, then, to which Gilpin so often adverts, yet which he seems also to belittle in favour of nature? Again, Gilpin offers apparently contradictory accounts of his rules. In several places he announces that the picturesque is defined as "that kind of beauty which would look well in a picture" (*Western* 328). If this were all Gilpin claimed, it would justify Martin Price's criticism that the picturesque approach tends to divorce itself from any values other than the aesthetic: "Since the picturesque defines itself from the outset ... by aesthetic categories (which are meant in turn to attract new sentiments and feelings) it lays itself open to the misunderstanding that it neglects other values" (Price 261). Yet Gilpin also claims, as I noted earlier, that the source of the picturesque is no other than nature itself:



for the *rules of picturesque beauty*, we know, are drawn from *nature*: so that to examine the face of nature by these rules, is no more than to examine nature by her own most beautiful exertions. (*Lakes* I, xxii)

The central value of the picturesque for Gilpin, introduced early in his theoretical discussion, is roughness, used to discriminate the picturesque from the beautiful (which is neat and smooth). When represented in a drawing, however, he will call this "ruggedness" (*Essays* 6). While Gilpin almost immediately confuses his terms, this distinction indicates two sources of picturesque rules: those due to the aesthetics of representation (wholeness, form, variety, light and shade, etc.) and those due to the direct perception of nature in its various forms. In his tour of the Lakes, for instance, Gilpin devotes three preliminary chapters to analyzing the picturesque qualities of mountains, lakes, and foregrounds (wood, rock, dells), followed by a fourth chapter on the rules of composition, where he allows himself to suggest the kinds of improvement that the picturesque eye might make in a given scene (*Lakes* I, 127-29). Later on, too, he distinguishes between a "scene of mountains" and a "mountain scene," pointing out that in the former the objects may be grand, "but they are huddled together, confused, without connection"; whereas in a mountain scene "nature itself hath made these beautiful combinations—where one part relates to another" (*Lakes* I, 168). In other words, while the picturesque viewer may bring an aesthetic frame to bear on a mountainous landscape, he may find that nature has anticipated him (as he reports of the scenes between Ambleside and Keswick). But Gilpin also allows for the opposite process: "Even the wild scene of nature, however pleasing in itself, is still more pleasing, if the eye is able to combine it into a whole" (*Lakes* I, 64).

Thus in many of Gilpin's descriptions of landscape it is difficult to distinguish what the source of his judgements might be and what status to grant them. Perhaps a key to the problem lies in how Gilpin describes the workings of the imagination. I will suggest that what we see here is a process: Gilpin represents the forces of nature in a series of images in imagination (as he often tells us), which in turn become his archetypes for eliciting the picturesque criteria that he attributes to nature. Through this process the various forms of nature become prototypes. As Gilpin makes clear, giving priority to nature over art: "We criticize a building by the rules of architecture: but in judging of a tree, or a mountain; we judge by the most beautiful forms of each, which nature hath given us" (*Forest* II, 261). But in understanding this process, the imagination is the medium in which the forms of the beautiful are distilled. Gilpin gives us only the end result in describing this process:

we learn the shapes and forms of nature when "the *same kind of object* occurring frequently, is seen under various shapes; and makes us, if I may so speak, more learned in nature. We get it more by heart" (*Essays* 50). In other words, repeated experience allows us to induct the underlying laws that go to make (say) an oak tree what it is, whatever particular form a given oak tree before us may take.

Yet his references to the imagination show that another process is also at work. This is most evident in a passage in the *Essays*. Having just told us that in our ideas of landscape, "Nature is the archetype" (*Essays* 53), Gilpin then offers this interesting description:

Often, when slumber has half-closed the eye, and shut out all the objects of sense, especially after the enjoyment of some splendid scene; the imagination, active, and alert, collects it's scattered ideas, transposes, combines, and shifts them into a thousand forms, producing such exquisite scenes, such sublime arrangements ... [as] foil description .... (*Essays* 54)

Although Gilpin gives us no precise detail of his physical condition, his account of being half in slumber suggests a hypnagogic state during which what are known informally as "waking dreams" occur. Their function appears analogous to sleeping dreams and they appear to share with them some of the same creative, transforming powers (McKellar; Sherwood). Gilpin himself refers to "waking dreams" in another account during his visit to Scotland. While near Dunkeld he reports:

There is something very amusing even in a hasty succession of beautiful scenes. The imagination is kept in a pleasing perturbation; while these floating, unconnected ideas become a kind of waking dream; and are often wrought up by fancy into more pleasing pictures; than they in fact appear to be, when they are viewed with deliberate attention. (*Scotland* I, 112)

To make clear the source of his waking dreams, in another account he describes the "active power" that embodies "half-formed images," noting that "They are formed indeed from nature" (*Wye* 62). Thus, in these several accounts of the imagination, we can see an active power at work, and can infer that from this emerges the prototypes of natural forms that eventually determine the rules of the picturesque.

One other notable suggestion of Gilpin's, extending this account to the production of art, indicates how Gilpin anticipates Shelley's conception of the creative imagination. Referring to genius thwarted by lack of ability, he remarks:



The love of beauty may exist without a hand to execute the images it excites. It may exist the more strongly perhaps for being only *felt*; for the conceptions of genius never rise in value from their being embodied. The *embodied form* is always below the *original idea*. (*Western* 320)

As Shelley was to put this later in his *Defence of Poetry*, “the mind in creation is as a fading coal” (294). It is here, fostered by the images that Gilpin’s waking dreams have produced, that we can see the beginnings of that ideal view of nature, imbued by feeling, that Coleridge was to develop more systematically. For example, returning along Lorton Vale over wild country in the dark, Gilpin remarks that “Every great and pleasing form, whether clear, or obscure, which we had seen during the day, now played, in strong imagery before the fancy: as when the grand chorus ceases, ideal music vibrates in the ear” (*Lakes* II, 19). If the picturesque rules are generated out of such “ideal” experience, it is also evident that the rules are only a human approximation, or reduction to how nature herself is taken to work: as Gilpin puts it, having contemplated the mountain scenery of Grasmere, “Nature’s vistas are never formed by rule, and compass. Whenever she deviates towards a regular shape, she does it with that negligent air of greatness, which marks sublimity of genius” (*Lakes*, I 178).

If this reading of Gilpin is correct, then it also points to another conception that was to be elaborated later by Coleridge: that of *eloignment* (cf. *Whale*, who disallows this possibility for the picturesque: 181). In a previous paper on “Tintern Abbey” I suggested that the key idea of Wordsworth’s poem, contemplation in withdrawal, seems to be described by Coleridge in one of his lectures. I noted that

To master the essence of nature, the *natura naturans*, Coleridge argued that “the Artist must first *eloign* himself from nature in order to return to her with full effect,” just as Wordsworth has done in the five years between his two visits.

It is as though Gilpin glimpses some of the same laws that Coleridge thought he saw, underlying the forms of nature that he admired—variety, roughness, its negligent greatness, its energies. These laws, which Gilpin persistently pursues through his various tours, are perhaps only able to emerge in retrospect, through the imaginative reveries in which Gilpin seems regularly to engage. They help to animate and explain the prototypes underlying the picturesque rules by which he then pretends to correct many of the views he sees. If so, his ambivalence over his picturesque rules is hardly surprising: they encapsulate the “fading coal,” the spirit of nature that he knows to be immeasurably above and beyond him. As he points out:

the immensity of nature is beyond human comprehension. She works on a *vast scale*; and, no doubt, harmoniously, if her schemes could be comprehended. The artist, in the mean time, is confined to a *span*; and lays down his little rules, which he calls the *principles of picturesque beauty*, merely to adapt such diminutive parts of nature’s surfaces to his own eye, as come within its scope. (*Wije* 31)

Among the laws of nature that Gilpin believes we might glimpse here, his respect for nature’s intrinsic workings suggests a respect for its ecological integrity. While Gilpin has little conception of the interdependence of plants and animals elaborated by ecologists, his concept of “roughness” suggests that the picturesque eye is attracted by the richness and variety of natural habitat, what ecologists term “high patch convolution.” This signifies “a high amount of surface area for the potential exchange of species, energy, and materials” (Emerging). That is, “a convoluted boundary with a high perimeter-to-area ratio is characteristic of systems with considerable interchanges of energy, materials, or organisms with the surroundings” (Forman & Godron 177). Variety, for instance, characterizes Gilpin’s account of the picturesque forest, which will contain glades, recesses, or openings caused by a sandy bank or “a piece of rocky ground” (*Forest* I, 213-14). Here, although Gilpin does not mention it, the range of habitats for plants and animals will be maximized.

Gilpin’s picturesque also (unlike that of his followers Price and Knight) emphasizes the natural over the human scale, the wild, extensive landscape over the garden, promoting in this way attention to the diversity of natural phenomena beyond human grasp or control. Gilpin’s interest in the natural order is shown by his historical account of the environmental destruction of forests around the world and in Britain (*Forest* I, 285-99). Even his dislike of signs of cultivation and his somewhat absurd criticism of mountain shapes anticipates the ecological observation that natural environments are most often characterized by curves and gradients rather than lines and angles (e.g., *Forest* I, 230). While it would be inaccurate to attribute an ecological awareness to Gilpin, the sensitivity to natural processes and forms shown by his picturesque principles (so influential on later generations, including Thoreau) suggests that his work is ancestral to the ecological vision that emerged in the following century.

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