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Deep Ecology in William Gilpin's Sermons

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Deep Ecology in William Gilpin's Sermons: Counter-discourse to the Picturesque

Put simply, Deep Ecology is a movement that seeks to minimize or erase human impact on the natural world. As a homilist, the late eighteenth-century picturesque travel-writer, poet, philosopher, and cleric William Gilpin (1724-1804) provides insights that contend with and complicate our understanding of Deep Ecology. Gilpin, a major theorist of the picturesque particularly in *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1792) and influential travelogues such as *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, Made in the Year 1772, on Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (1786), drove the craze for the Lake District as tourist site. Building on the work of Edmund Burke, he along with Uvedale Price (1747-1829) developed an aesthetic philosophy roughly called the picturesque, which informed Romantic notions of landscape, beauty, and the concomitant ecological ethics that they implied. What is somewhat forgotten in these formulations, however, is Gilpin's role as an Anglican cleric in Hampshire. His collected sermons and other religious works, published in four volumes between 1802 and 1810, build on, continue to define, and problematize within a Christian theological framework the ecological ethics that is developed under the primer of the picturesque in his other works.

1. The Nature of the Picturesque

I want to take a minute here to outline the theory of picturesque as described by Gilpin so that we can more pointedly explore the ethical contradictions it raises in Gilpin's theological and homiletic writings. Despite its apparently clear meaning, the term "picturesque" in the latter eighteenth century

is fraught with multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings and practices. Elizabeth A. Bohls in her article “Breaking the Frame,” writes that “[t]he picturesque is...a big tent—a collection of discourses and practices, related, yet by no means the same” (233). Gilpin provides an important and sometimes contradictory version of picturesque aesthetics, but one that nonetheless grants him authority not only to record his impressions on his various trips around Great Britain, but also to evaluate and prescribe the changing of the landscape to fit these particular paradigms. This movement from description to prescription, or what Timothy Morton labels as the fluctuation between “*excursus*” and “*exemplum*,” or example and description, in nature-writing,¹ is apparent in much of Gilpin’s writing, and provides a lacuna that we can usefully interrogate. One important example occurs in the following passage from Gilpin’s writing about a visit to Belle Island, the largest island in Lake Windermere; this passage admirably captures the underlying ethics of the picturesque.

Gilpin begins with a description of the island, writing that “nothing can be more excluded from the noise, and interruption of life; or abound with a greater variety of those circumstances, which make retirement pleasing,”² even though the island has already been made deforested to construct this atmosphere of retreat and make for a kind of panoptic view for the landowner that is a hallmark of the picturesque. Humphrey Repton in his *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1803) writes about the power of viewing a park laid out so the eye can range far and wide. He writes that:

The chief beauty of a park consists in uniform verdure, undulating lines contrasting with each other in variety of forms; trees so grouped as to produce light and shade to display the varied surface of the ground; and an undivided range of pasture. The animals fed in

¹ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 33.

² William Gilpin, *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty Made in the Year 1772, on Several Parts of England; Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland* (London: Blamire, 1786), I.143. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Lakes Tour*.

such a park appear free from confinement, at liberty to collect their food from the rich herbage of the valley, and to range uncontrolled to the drier soil of the hills. (MP 386)

Repton compares this desirable, panoptical view with the confines of the farm (and, remember, Enclosure laws had led to the extinction of many family farms) which he describes as “motley and discordant...subdivided by straight lines of fences....Instead of cattle enlivening the scene by their peaceful attitudes or sportive gambols, animals are bending beneath the yoke or closely confined to fatten within narrow enclosures, objects of profit, not of beauty” (MP 286). Gilpin, in noting the details of the changes to Belle Island, quickly moves to writing about how he wishes to advance his own plans for what the owners should do in modifying the island next, a move for Gilpin that is not unlike the panoptical power practiced by the landowners described by Repton and also Gilpin before. Gilpin authoritatively tells the owners of the island that they need to practice some forms of enhancement consisting in the reinforcement of “an elegant *neatness*,” which Gilpin defines as follows:

the simple idea [that] he [the landscaper] would desire to preserve, is, what the place itself suggests, a sequestered retreat. The *boundaries* should in a great measure be a thicket—on the eastern coast especially, which is opposed to the only cultivated part of the country: and if there be any thing in that part worth giving to the eye, it might be given [through] some *unaffected* opening. (*Lakes Tour* I.146)

The lacuna between Gilpin’s descriptive journaling and his prescriptive landscape remodeling is the space where nature, ecology, and ideology merge to create this version of the picturesque. Isis Brook in her article “Wildness in the English Garden Tradition: A Reassessment of the Picturesque from Environmental Philosophy,” rightly defines picturesque practices as “reading the landscape as allegory,” which practices “the emulation of particular styles of painting” in the landscape and has “a great deal to do with control” (111). As Brook writes, “[a]t the heart of the picturesque is a love of wild nature in a small compass” (112); she sees it as a “transition between the human realm and the very wild realm of

nature further afield [identified as] Sublime” (116). Nature becomes in Gilpin the purportedly guiding hand, although note the *un*-natural modification Gilpin suggests under nature’s signature, including the hedge constructed to block the view of the busy seaport Bowness-on-Windermere, and thus shield the owner/viewer from the commercial roots of his empire.

The picturesque, under the imprimatur of nature, walks a thin line, avoiding the Sublime in favor of variety within “a small compass.” Variety is certainly desired in the landscape, even with some elements of surprise like a ha-ha (a recessed landscape like a wall or fence that does not break the level view), a hermitage, or a stream found bubbling unexpectedly around a corner in a garden walk. However, the elements of surprise must be appropriate, a loaded term for the picturesque, and not out-of-place or out-of-proportion. In Alexander Pope’s *Epistle to Boyle*, Pope highlights Timon’s egregious prolixity in the outfitting of his estate’s garden, which shows his lack of taste; the landscape makes “all” who visit “cry out, ‘What sums are thrown away’” (100); it has many infractions against the natural, such as “Amphitrite sail[ing] through the myrtle bow’rs” or a place where “Three gladiators fight, or die, in flow’rs” (123-24). The picturesque is meant to be orderly and harmonious, nature (in a very constructed manner), but not incongruous or excessive. Ultimately, the picturesque in landscape aesthetics seeks to subdue nature to make paintings, retreats, and the surveying eye possible for the land owners and their visitors. As a landscape practice, it thus fits powerfully within the contours of the will to power, which Friedrich Nietzsche defines as “an insatiable desire to demonstrate one’s power; or to apply and exercise it, as a creative impulse [...]” (356). It redesigns the world “for the eye” (Nietzsche 361), making the empowered in particular king of all that they survey. Nietzsche writes about this will to power that his “idea is that every specific body strives for ascendancy over all of space, to extend its power...and to defeat anything that resists its extension” (363). In a marginal note from his notebooks from the year 1887, transcribed and translated by Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche makes the point clearly that the category of the beautiful is connected to control and regularity; it “excite[s] sensuality, so that life has

the effect of pleasant feeling” (379n.88). Thus, like the clear-cutting on Belle Island limited by a planted thicket (to follow Gilpin’s suggestions) so as to suggest a rural retreat, the land owner can survey *his* beautiful and regular landscape, and own nature in all that he can see.

2. The Nature of Man.

It is therefore not surprising that there are major problems for the practice of modern Deep Ecology when it encounters subduing discourses such as the picturesque aesthetics that Gilpin prizes. However, we find some of these same concerns implicit when we turn to Gilpin as homilist. In his essay “Sermons: Themes and Developments,” Keith A. Francis argues that “a multidisciplinary approach is needed in order to understand the role and impact of sermons on British society in the period 1689-1901” (43). For that approach, Francis calls upon “the disciplines of history, theology, literature, rhetoric, psychology, sociology, and economics” (42-43); while an outlier in the disciplines of literature and perhaps theology and economics as well, ecology and eco-criticism can certainly add insights to our study of the sermon as text and its impact. Even in his direct advice to young priests in his preface to the first volume of his collected religious works, Gilpin offers as a model for young priests a practice that centers on the connections he sees between his services to the church, the world of nature, and the divinity of God revealed through Christ. Gilpin’s practice therein actually models the humility that he prescribes to his congregants and other aspiring pastors. This humility modeled in the preface may be a rhetorical means of repulsing potential criticism for printing his sermons, a practice that goes against what many in the times did; Jeffrey S. Chamberlain in his essay “Parish Preaching in the Long Eighteenth Century” note that “it was not unusual for parsons to stipulate in their wills that their manuscript sermons be destroyed” (47), not printed, as Gilpin does. Moreover, I believe, that Gilpin in his preface is constructing a humble model for others, particular aspiring parsons, to emulate, and a humility that will, as we shall see, vastly undermine the panoptical gaze of the picturesque.

In his preface to the first volume of homilies, Gilpin relates his own practice as a homily writer of taking with him “a memorandum book” and “a text or two of scripture” as he “walked about his parish, and afterwards when he was able to walk into his garden and fields” (1.x). He offers that if “the young student spend two hours in a day in walking exercise, he will by this practice, save to his studies at least seven hundred hours in a year” (1.xi). Although he wants to make nature to be “useful” for the young priest, it is clear that this usefulness does not support hunting and fishing as edifying pastimes (1.xii). The natural world and the rhythms of wild nature, garden, and town form a key part of Gilpin’s meditative practice, leading him to downplay humankind’s impact on the world around them as he models in his sermons. Like Dorothy Wordsworth who, in one of her early walks in Rydale after moving to the Lake District, recorded in her journals, seeks to “juggle away the fine houses” so she can just view the wild terrain (448)—a terrain that still includes cottages, for instance, so not all man-made structures are rejected—Gilpin in his sermons seeks to diminish the man-made in seeking God. Likewise, the views he produces are not without humans as much as only containing the humble. In his sermon on Luke 2.14, “Glory to God in the highest...,” for instance, Gilpin encourages Christ’s followers to “clothe yourselves...with the holy discipline of these shepherds—their piety, and love for truth—their innocence of manners, and attention to the holy messages of God, and then conceive the same joyful tidings brought to you, which were brought to them” (3.2). He makes it clear that this self-conception goes against what the world values and calls attention to our utter “blindness” if not so graced by God (*sola gratia*).

In fact, his practice in the sermons goes much further than humility alone into something closer to Deep Ecology when he offers patterns of behavior and indeed archetypes that help situate the believer (and the aspiring parson) in the world around him in ways that do not interfere with nature and the natural world. Sermon VII on 2 Peter 2.15, (“They have forsaken the right way, and gone astray; following the way of Balaam...”) provides several key concepts in its depiction of the evil that Balaam

enacted and how his thought led to think of himself as much better and bigger than he was and thus led him into damaging practices of pride. The text discusses the appropriate way to travel with humility, a manner at some variance with what he have seen of Gilpin himself in his travelogues. In the sermon, Gilpin writes that Christians are called to travel *“like strangers and pilgrims on the earth”* (1.97). He draws out the implications of this attitude for travel, arguing that we should “not set our hearts upon anything” in the trip itself; there will be “many pleasing objects, as we pass along...but we set our hearts on none of these things...Because we know they are not ours” and “It would be ridiculous...to set our affections on what we cannot possess” (1.97-98). Because no matter how rich or poor we, we are all just traveling through as pilgrims headed toward eternity, this desire to possess must be avoided as unreasonable. We should, as Gilpin opines, “withhold our affections from the things of this world....Noting surely, of which we may be deprived in a moment, can deserve that name” of being worthy of valuing (1.98). For the true Christian, rich or poor, our attitude should be one of detached pleasure; believers “can look with tender pity on the world around them, immersed in all the folly and madness of its delusive joys; and can with hearts full of tranquility, and holy hope, thank God, they are now on the point of being removed from a scene, in which they take so little delight” (1.97).

One mistake humans make which leads to the lack of humility is not looking back to their past to see what they can learn upon reflection. Gilpin in a sermon on Psalm 119.79, “I called mine own ways to remembrance...,” opines that “a man can hardly live ill, who frequently examines his past life in this religious manner; and he can hardly live well, who neglects it” (1.227). Calling to mind the resolutions made in these acts of remembrance, Gilpin constitutes for his auditor how these remembrances lead to a type of humility that goes against the rule-and-conquer mentality of the picturesque landscaper; Gilpin posits that the

rule is, to compare [in these times of remembering and reflection] the sins you have at any time been guilty of, with the pleasure, or pain; the advantage or disadvantage, you

many have received from them. By this you get a just information of what you have already gained, or lost by sin; and may judge what you have hereafter to expect. (1.235)

Thus remembrance leads to acts of humility, at least as regards to having a reasonable and reasoning self-reflection.

One of the counter-strains that undermines humility is the constant practice of comparing oneself—and one's possessions—to others, wanting for instance the bigger estate or money, power, and prestige. "There are some who, instead of comparing their lives, with their duty, compare them with others," (1.231) Gilpin reflects. Instead of pursuing the duty set before them, this one comforts himself is by feeling "less wicked then his neighbor...He has gotten a screen between him and the worst. And it hard, if among the herd of miserable sinners, every man cannot find one, whose life he may think more wicked then his own" (1.231-32). Nature, unlike the farmland represented earlier in Repton, can offer "books of instruction" (1.240) that can eclipse this desire for what others have or the feeling of superiority we sometimes have in relation to others. Gilpin writes that

The man who seeks for religious wisdom, can throw [his eyes] no where without receiving it. The lilies of the field, which are *cut down, and wither*, will impress him with the great lesson on mortality. The ravens, which *sow not, nor gather into barns*, will teach him dependence in divine providence. The sluggard is sent to the ant for instruction—the intemperate man to the sow, that walloweth in the mire,—and the proud man is put in mind of the worm which is destined, one day, to banquet on him. (1.240-41).

Despite the reference above to ravens not gathering into barns, farmers come under particular consideration as being blessed in Gilpin's sermons. The farmer or husbandman is blessed because, in cultivating the land, the farmer has "the book of wisdom continually before him" (1.241). Gilpin's extended reflections on farming become the thread of Sermon XX, on 1 Corinthians 9.10, "He that

plougheth should plough in hope...” Gilpin demonstrates how to read nature—and nature’s cultivation—as material that reveals God’s will; Gilpin writes that the “very ground you cultivate, affords much instruction. Without proper tillage...it will bear nothing: and the more it is cultivated, the more it will produce” (1.241). Gilpin falls here into an assumption that is very much part and parcel of his culture and its colonialism. As early as the Renaissance and even before, land being left fallow was seen as sinful and ripe for occupation and cultivation by another. Karen Armstrong reflects that “There was a strain of ruthlessness and cruelty in early modern thought” as the “so-called humanists were pioneering a rather convenient idea of natural rights to counter the brutality and intolerance they associated with conventional religion” (237). Tacitus, according to Armstrong, provided the early modern Europeans with the theory that ““what is possessed by none belongs to everyone.”” While this idea could lead to a version of deep ecology (under the logic that we keep the land safe and untrammled), for the Europeans, it led to conquest. Armstrong quotes the Italian barrister Alberico Gentili (1552-1608) who argued, in a gloss on Tacitus, that ““God did not create the world to be empty”” and that therefore ““seizure of vacant places’ should be ‘regarded as a law of nature’” because even if the land ““belongs to the sovereign of the territory[,]”” God ““abhors a vacuum”” and thus the lands become ““the lot of those who take them”” (238). As Gilpin himself writes, “though there are many different kinds of soil...none are so bad, but it may be improved; and none so good, but without improvement, will become barren” (1.241).

Gilpin’s use of cultivation as his primary example certainly shows this biased view of the land, though the conclusions of hallowing the work of the husbandman as a primary model of the follower of God do much to undermine the view that farms are not picturesque and thus below regal notice. The Godly lessons come, Gilpin asserts, from the reading of these natural features of the land and the practice of farming allegorically. Like an allegorical reading of the Hebrew Scripture in Medieval Christian theology, the reading of the land allegorically leads to many worthwhile discoveries. “How

aply does the ground represent our minds,” Gilpin avows. It “bring[s] daily to our remembrance the need we have of culture...As the ground must be disposed to receive the seed, so must our minds to receive the truths of the gospel. A proud, self-conceited disposition effectually stops all the inlets to religious knowledge. Prejudices become arguments; and our own reason, however uninformed, become the standard of truth” (1.241-42). Gilpin later concludes that, while “to the number of you much learning would be of little use[,]...without filling your mind with religious knowledge by reading, hearing and meditating,” the mind “will be like mere uncultivated wastes” (1.243).

The most important time to learn from, according to Gilpin, is harvest time, for “after this, the grain neither attains increase, nor suffers diminution” (1.245). This moment in the cycle of the farm should instruct us accordingly “the great consequence of mortality! We are cut down by death, like the harvest of the field...We are laid up in our last repository, the grave, till the day of judgment” (1.245-46). The human soul will be “winnowed” and its true worth will be determined (1.246). Gilpin argues that these images of the threshing-floor and the winnowing of grain are common throughout scripture. He quotes a passage from Matthew, which is replicated almost verbatim in Luke, where we hear that Christ in his role as judge will “*thoroughly purge*” the threshing floor, “*and gather his wheat into his garner; but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*” (1.247). Gilpin also points to a passage in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church where he writes of a seed being “sown in corruption” yet “raised in glory” (1.250), an analogy for the body of the believer raised from the dead.

Gilpin concludes that these farming metaphors and analogies in Scripture make the contemplation of nature in general and the study of farming in particular useful for his parishioners. Like his earlier descriptions in the preface to the volume of taking long, meditative walks in the woods with a memorandum book, Gilpin presents the work of the “tillage” of the soil as a practice that when done with thoughtfulness teaches great and holy things; he writes that

nobody has such frequent opportunities, as the husbandman [does], of adoring the over-ruling hand of God. He sees whatever seed he puts in the ground, it produces the same kind; and in the hope of this he sows his wheat, his barley, and his other grains, each in its own season; always depending on this regularity, which never fails to give the kind of produce he expects. (1.247-48)

The reflection that Gilpin draws centers on God's sovereignty and his care for humankind. The farmer must "depend solely on God" because he cannot ultimately put faith in seed or soil alone. Gilpin points out that

[The farmer] sees it is not by his own care...that the season is favorable...he cannot command rain, or sunshine, as he thinks best...For all this, he must depend solely on God. From hence therefore he should learn a thankful acknowledgement to his Maker, for all the good he receives; and should take the bad as intended to check his love for the world; and as those means of trial, which he ought to improve into religion by resignation. (1.248)

The lesson on resignation, taught from the watching and more the sense of powerlessness over the seasons, leads to Gilpin's final nature-related lesson. This final lesson is the ways that nature and farming lead to a proper appreciation of death within a Christian framework. Not far afield from the lessons taught by seventeenth-century divine Jeremy Taylor in his perennially famous work *The Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying* (1651), adequate Christian reflection on death according to Gilpin circumvents the politics of the picturesque to focus the gaze instead of the impermanence of all and the proximity of the husbandman to death. We have already noted the passages in St. Paul that reference the seed dying so that the grain can be born. The seasons of the farmer's life and harvest point most decidedly to death but also to the hope of resurrection. The farmer, according to Gilpin, "cannot turn up a clod of earth, without being reminded of his beginning and his end....The very worm that crawls

beneath his plough tells him that his flesh shall see corruption; and that *worm shall destroy his body*" (1.249). As William Empson notes in his poem "Ignorance of Death," "there is this civilizing love of death, by which/Even music and painting tell you what else to love" (1-2); yet rather than prescribe a certain attitude where people are prescribed a kind of "blankness" (19,21) on the question (as Empson desires), Gilpin focuses on the realization of death as a natural process with supernatural ends for the believer. Focusing on nature's revelation of death leads to the realization that while we think we are in control, we are not, but rather destined to become feed for the worms that our ploughs turn up. Gilpin writes that "[t]he ground [in winter] is without herbage; the tree without leaves. Nothing can give a more exact picture of death; and they, who should see all this desolation, without being acquainted with the change of the seasons, would conclude, that the world had now little longer to last" (1.249).

Death, however, as seen in the fallowness of winter, points toward rebirth and resurrection. However, this resurrection is only a gift of grace, not a right that we have to claim. In this framework—a framework of impermanence and death (as Empson says in "Ignorance of Death," a framework on which "Buddhists and Christians contrive to agree" (3)—Gilpin's congregants see that the hope of resurrection understood in this manner cannot lead to any human pride, for humans have no control over the outcome. It is a resurrection enacted by "corruption"—the dirt, the worms, etc.—and the death of the viewing body. Thus the picturesque gazer who seeks to see nature that is pleasing to the eye and with just enough variance to create variety, but still under the panoptical eye of the owner, conqueror, and possessor, cannot ultimately possess the land or even himself in the end. "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall," as the writer of Proverbs opines, or in the lyrics of the stage musical *Hamilton* (in reference to Aaron Burr), "I swear, your pride will be the death of us all / Beware, it goeth before the fall." For the picturesque viewer—and even perhaps for their advisors, as Gilpin at one point desires—the lesson is painfully clear if little understood.