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The Garden and Pastoralism

Leo Marx

My attitude toward landscape gardens has been shaped by my interest in American pastoralism. Indeed, the nineteenth-century image of America as “the new garden of the world,” whose hold on the native imagination has been so compellingly described by Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land*, was an updated version of Arcadia. It figured forth the ideal of a *via media* between European overcivilization and the wilderness of the western frontier. It was a pastoral landscape in the strict sense that it resembled the characteristic setting, a middle ground between the city and the wilderness, of the classic Virgilian pastoral. There Virgil’s idealized shepherds, whose lives presumably were not unlike those of actual herdsmen of the ancient Near East, guarded their flocks and played their flutes. Herdsmen were idealized in the ancient world because, according to our best current knowledge, they did in fact serve as *liminal* (threshold) or mediating figures whose situation allowed them to enjoy relatively contemplative lives with abundant time and leisure for music and love. The shepherd’s existence testified to the possibility that human beings could achieve a certain harmony between art and nature.

It is not unreasonable, I think, to connect the

sophisticated vision of simplicity at the center of pastoralism with the aspirations to which many, perhaps most, gardens lend expression. The impulse to create a garden, an inviting and peaceful place apart, has much in common with what often has been called “the pastoral impulse.” It is the desire, in the face of the growing power and complexity of civilization, to get away, to recover at least some pleasures of the natural in a setting marked by fewer signs of human intervention. In the past that impulse often was dismissed as not being sufficiently “progressive,” which is to say that it deserved the epithets “sentimental,” “romantic,” or “nostalgic.” In our time, however, when the recovery of past conditions may mean regaining access to breathable air, drinkable water, and land uncontaminated by toxic waste, nostalgia has begun to acquire a degree of intellectual respectability. Many contemporary gardens express a similar desire to recover—or preserve what remains of—a viable relationship with the natural environment.

Given these assumptions about the character of gardens, certain principles of landscape design seem to follow. A garden, for one thing, should invite us to enter an idealized setting, and it should provide those who do with an opportunity

to enjoy, if only momentarily, an alternative to the quotidian routine. And if, as one of the landscape architects in this show suggests, a garden necessarily lends expression to a world view, it should do so indirectly or inadvertently; in any event, it ought not to impose itself on the viewer. To enjoy the meditative possibilities offered by a garden, the viewer should be invited to partake of the act of mediation between civilization and nature. To use an Emersonian term, the “natural facts” that constitute the garden are the enabling conditions for the viewer’s meditative, or symbol-making, activity. But the meaning that the facts acquire depends on what they suggest to the viewer—on the significance that he or she attaches to what is and is not to be found there. The meaning has as much to do, finally, with what the garden setting does *not* represent—the importunity and dominating power of the built environment in which most of us live—as it has to do with the discernible attributes of that setting.

For these reasons, I prefer the less formal and cerebral gardens in this exhibition. They have fewer proselytizing designs on the visitor. My favorite is Warren T. Byrd, Jr.’s “Tidal Garden: Eastern Shore of Virginia” for its tantalizing mix of the wild, the moderately ordered, and the built. This

design, with its openness to the changes of nature—especially the changing tide—allows considerable scope for the viewer’s imagination. The pastoral world view, with its focus on the tensions between art and nature, the sophisticated and the naive, the complex and the simple, is implicit in this garden. It seems to be aimed at placing the viewer in the mediating role characteristic of pastoralism. As the designer says, “there is in a garden perhaps a beginning, but no real end.” Hence “the end,” either in the sense of the meaning of the viewer’s experience or in the more literal sense of “conclusion,” is in large measure determined by the viewer.

For similar reasons, I am drawn to Vincent Healy’s

theme of “The Garden as a Healing Place.” Much of the appeal of pastoralism is contemplative, and this effort to renew the old idea of the “meditation garden” fits this tradition. Many incidental features of this garden—the pond stocked with bullfrogs, the bushes chosen to attract songbirds, night lighting—seem designed to do what a garden ought to do: invite the imagination. I also am attracted to Terence Harkness’s “An East Central Illinois Garden: A Regional Garden.” I like the idea of representing “the congruence between the landscape and the independent, practical farmers” of the region and of “demonstrating the power and qualities of a unique place.” This mix of the formal and informal, the fields and farmsteads, is

engaging and, in spite of a certain excess literalness, it also allows considerable scope for the viewers’ responses.

The gardens I have cited are not planned with a view to dominating the consciousness of those who enter them. They encourage viewers to discover the meaning of the natural facts and artful designs for themselves and thereby to share in the designer’s enticing act of mediation between art and nature. They are American gardens designed in the spirit of native pastoralism.