Sharawadgi: Borrowing the Illimitable by Ciaran Murray

It will hardly be thought accidental that sharawadgi, understood as the naturalist asymmetry of the Japanese garden, should have been introduced to Europe at a time when the universe was seen to be subject to comparable disarrangement. Still less so when we find that the two individuals responsible for introducing the principle – the Restoration diplomat William Temple, who reported on its presence in Japan, and the Queen Anne essayist Joseph Addison, who advocated its practice in England – should also have been deeply involved in the cosmological debate.

Japanese china, Chinese japan

A preliminary question that has vexed investigators is why, though he had access to individuals in the Netherlands who had visited the gardens of Japan, Temple spoke of the latter as Chinese.

Though puzzling at first sight, the solution is in fact remarkably simple. In the geography of Temple's century lurked a hazy notion of the 'Indies', which might stretch from India proper to the Caribbean, and within which any differences between Japan and China might well seem incidental. The diarist John Evelyn described a house he had visited as abounding in 'elegancies, especially Indian; in the hall are contrivances of Japan screens... the landscapes of the screens represent the manner of living, and country of the Chinese'.

Is 'Japan' used here in its sense of lacquer, though the screens are Chinese: Chinese japan, as one might speak of Japanese china? Or are they in fact Japanese, though depicting, as Japanese artists commonly did, Chinese landscapes? We cannot tell; and it scarcely matters: because it is clear that, for Evelyn, China and Japan are simply component parts of a generic 'Indies'.

So too it is for Temple, as he winds up his account of

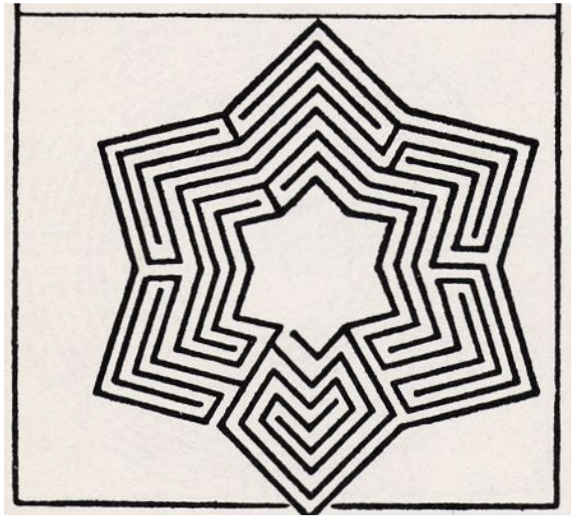

Figure 1: Star maze by G. A. Boeckler, 1664 (Azumaya Takao/W. H. Matthews, Mazes & Labyrinths, 1922).

sharawadgi with the words: 'And whoever observes the work upon the best India gowns, or the painting upon their best screens or porcelains, will find their beauty is all of this kind (that is) without order'.

Temple's 'Chineses', then, are not specifically Chinese; they are generically oriental, denizens of Cathay. Nor was he, in this instance, simply mistaken. The gardens of Japan were continually influenced by those of China, and Temple was aware of the similarity. A book that he is known to have read – Montanus' *Atlas Chinensis* – shows a naturalistic Chinese garden, with pine-trees, waterfall and jagged stonework; and he knew, too, that the Chinese imperial palace was surrounded by 'large and delicious gardens' of this type. Temple, then, was aware from his reading that Chinese gardens were as naturalistic in appearance as any that might have been reported to him from Japan.

Crisis in cosmology

Nor did his interest in the Sino-Japanese continuum cease with its gardens; he was no less involved with the philosophy that underlay them. His was no simplistic exoticism; on the contrary, it was bound up with the intimate intellectual crisis that haunted all thinking Europeans of his time.

The telescope has been thought to have arisen from the combination of two lenses, said to have occurred from the play of children in the shop of a spectacle-maker in the Netherlands. But its full significance only became apparent in another republic, far to the south. When Galileo, in Venice, looked outward into space, he saw the mountains and valleys of the moon, and went on to add thirty-six stars to the Pleiades, eighty to the belt and sword of Orion, while in the orbit of Jupiter he found 'four planets, never seen from the very beginning of the world up to our own times'.

On the day on which his findings appeared in print, the English ambassador to Venice sent to King James I what he considered the 'strangest piece of news' that his majesty 'hath ever yet received': that Galileo had 'overthrown all former astronomy'. The ambassador was Henry Wotton; he was the lifelong friend of John Donne; and it was in the following year that Donne's lamentation appeared: 'And new philosophy calls all in doubt, / The element of fire is quite put out; / The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit / Can well direct him where to look for it'.

Donne had grasped the implications of the vision compelled by the telescope: that, in exploding the traditional cosmos, it had revealed a chaos of peculiar horror: 'And freely men confess that this world's spent, / When in the planets and the firmament / They seek so many new; they see that this / Is crumbled out again to his atomies'.

The universe of Epicurus

Here was the terrible, unspeakable secret: that the heavens, as now seen at closer quarters, appeared to vindicate the materialist philosophy, in which the world was created from a random collocation of atoms, propounded by Epicurus.

This was countered by Ralph Cudworth, Temple's tutor at Cambridge, with an appeal to an order behind appearances: human reason implied transcendent reason, and therefore design in nature. But when he came to write the essay which introduced the Japanese garden to England, Temple titled it 'Upon the Gardens of Epicurus', and a contemporary declared that he 'was an Epicurean both in principle and in practice', who 'seemed to think that things were as they are from all eternity'.

This certainly was the teaching of Epicurus: that the universe was matter in motion, uncreated and indestructible; and this it was which earned him his place in Dante's hell, where those for whom the soul perished with the body were, considered as his followers, laid living in the tomb.

For Temple, however, questions such as whether the world had been produced 'by some eternal mind…, or by the fortuitous concourse of atoms' had come to seem unanswerable. What was left was Epicurus as guide to existence, and here he was found supreme. His attitude, as Temple saw it, was 'neither to disquiet life with the fears of death, nor death with the desires of life; but in both, and in all things else, to follow nature'.

Apprehending the Dao

The critic who had denounced him as an Epicurean also declared that Temple was 'a great admirer of the sect of Confucius in China, who were atheists themselves but left religion to the rabble'. This, again, is at best an oversimplification of what Temple wrote. Their 'gross and sottish idolatry', he had stated, 'is only among the vulgar or illiterate'; but 'the learned adore the spirit of the world, which they hold to be eternal'.

Nevertheless, it is intriguing that the two should have been connected: since Confucius was indeed for Temple a kind of eastern Epicurus. 'The chief principle he seems to lay down for a foundation, and builds upon, is, that every man ought to study and endeavour the improving and perfecting of his own natural reason to the greatest height he is capable, so as he may never (or as seldom as can be) err and swerve from the law of nature'. This, however, does not belong to Confucianism proper, but to the Neo-Confucian syncretism which, in the words of Joseph Needham, 'set, by a prodigious effort of philosophical insight and imagination, the highest ethical values of man in their proper place against the background of non-human nature'.

This philosophy of nature was taken over from the Dao (Tao), in which Needham finds a 'close and unmistakable' parallel with the Epicurean quietism; and with which, certainly, Temple's affinities are to be found. 'His life', it is said of the sage in the *Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu)*, 'is like the drifting of a boat'. For the Dao is the way of water, the philosophy of continuous flow; and it is this living line that is manifest in the Chinese, and through it the Japanese, garden. In the landscape arts of Japan, writes R.H. Blyth, 'the aim is to reduce the complexity, the wild lawlessness of the material, to that point, and not beyond it, where the true nature of the thing is revealed to the poetic eye'. This might be a paraphrase of Temple's sharawadgi, 'where the beauty shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts that shall be commonly or easily observed'.

Temple, then, had discovered, not only the aesthetic of sharawadgi, but the worldview that it implied. While he did not recommend imitating the gardens of his 'Chineses', with their underlying principle he was in inherent accord. Expenditure on gardens, he declared, was wasted 'if nature be not followed; which I take to be the great rule in this, and perhaps in everything else, as far as the conduct not only of our lives, but our governments'. The secret, he wrote at the time of the alliance he concluded with the Netherlands, of 'all that has seemed so surprising in my negotiation' was that 'things drawn out of their centre are not to be moved without much force, or skill, or time; but, to make them return to their centre again, there is required but little of either, for nature itself does the work'. He would have understood this, from the *Dao De Jing (Tao Tê Ching)*: 'The man of highest "power" does not reveal his "power"; therefore he keeps his "power"': it was what he enjoined upon Charles II. He would have understood this: 'Tao never does; yet through it all things are done': it was how he advised him to deal with his parliament.

Temple had grasped the principle of nature in government; he had grasped it in the garden. In retrospect, the next step is obvious: as in retrospect it always is. But at the time it requires a creative violence: the wrenching of ideas from their customary context; the discernment of likeness in what none had linked before. And this was the achievement of Joseph Addison.

Temple had negotiated the marriage which gave the Dutch King William III his claim upon the throne of England, in a revolution which balanced the power of the monarch with that of parliament, and Addison came to prominence as a celebrant of the resulting liberty.

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Thread through the labyrinth

This was not merely political; it was psychological – the mind, he wrote, 'naturally hates anything that looks like a restraint upon it' – and philosophical. He had been exposed to the issue already as a schoolboy at Charterhouse – still an island of the middle ages in the roar of the City of London – the master of which was obsessed with the new cosmology. The latter, Thomas Burnet, had like Temple been a student of Cudworth's at Cambridge; and, like Temple, espoused it: in such fashion as was thought to have cut short a promising career in the Church of England.

Figure 2: The falls of Terni (funkyfood London - Paul Williams/Alamy).

Nevertheless, Addison celebrated his vision in a Latin ode addressing him as 'most distinguished' (*insignissimus*); and when, in the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford, he defended the thesis that the new philosophy was to be preferred to the old, he hailed it as a liberation from constriction.

By now, however, this no longer carried the threat of disorientation. For the Epicurean moment had not endured. The frightening, chaotic prospect opened up by Galileo was returned to order by Newton. 'No other work', writes A.R. Hall, 'in the whole history of science equals the *Principia* either in originality and power of thought, or in the majesty of its achievement... Order could be brought to celestial physics only once, and it was Newton who brought order'. By delineating – an operation which required the development of the infinitesimal calculus – the power of the sun's attraction, or gravity, Newton accounted for all observable motion in the universe; and so, at the end of the century of Donne, coherence was restored.

In a play that celebrated political liberty, Addison summed up the result: 'The ways of heaven are dark and intricate, / Puzzled in mazes and perplexed with errors: / Our understanding traces them in vain, / Lost and bewildered in the fruitless search; / Nor sees with how much art the windings run, / Nor where the regular confusion ends'. (Figure 1 on Page 28). That is to say, cosmos lay behind the appearance of chaos: as in Temple's sharawadgi.

Inverting Versailles

Addison pondered these issues, with momentous results, when he travelled abroad. He found a particular satisfaction in the republic of San Marino: 'Nothing…can be a greater instance of the natural love that mankind has for liberty, and of their aversion to an arbitrary government, than such a savage mountain covered with people, and the Campania of Rome, which lies in the same country, almost destitute of inhabitants'. And when, on leaving San Marino, he stood before the great waterfall at Terni: 'It is impossible to see the bottom on which it breaks for the thickness of the mist that rises from it, which looks at a distance like clouds of smoke ascending from some vast furnace, and distils in perpetual rains on all the places that lie near it' (Figure 2). 'I think', was his conclusion, 'there is something more astonishing in this cascade than in all the waterworks of Versailles' (Figure 3, page 31).

Gradually, in the course of Addison's travels, a formula gathered force: as tyranny is to artifice, so is liberty to nature. And now he was ready to propose its corollary: if artifice was the fitting expression of continental despotism, nature was that of English liberty.

However, the role of Versailles in the story is not simply as apotheosis of the unnatural. Addison exulted in distant prospects, of a kind evocative of the new cosmology. At Capri, he saw 'a vast extent of seas, that runs abroad further than the eye can reach'; while at Tivoli was a vista which 'opens on one side into the Roman Campagna, where the eye loses itself on a smooth spacious plain': which, he observed, the 'Roman painters often work upon'.

Though the reference is generic, none of the Roman painters worked upon that landscape with greater intensity than Claude Lorrain; and the 'real subject',

Figure 3: Fountain of Apollo, Versailles (Delphotos/Alamy).

Figure 4: Imaginary view of Tivoli by Claude Lorrain, 1642 (Artefact/Alamy).

writes Marcel Röthlisberger, of Claude's early paintings, 'is the dramatic effect of the sun, the atmosphere as it changes from hour to hour, and what can truly be claimed Claude's greatest invention – the painting of the sun itself' (Figure 4). 'Strange as it may seem', he comments, 'this is unprecedented'.

The strangeness may abate a little when it is recalled that Claude lived in the Rome of Galileo, being already settled in the area of Trinità dei Monti when the astronomer was lodged there during his trial: a trial which revolved around the centrality of the sun. It may not be thought coincidence, either, that the Sun King showed himself avid for the paintings of Claude, that the creator of his views had some in his possession, and that Louis appropriated them.

At Versailles the elaborate parterres, the lavish pools, are gathered into a vista by the woods on either side; while, amid the emblematic fountains, presumptuous commoners are transformed into frogs, or Apollo lashes his horses through a shattering brilliance of broken light. 'There is' wrote Christopher Thacker, 'an extraordinary and intended emphasis on the Apollo-sun-god allegory: not only are there many features related to different aspects of the mythology connected with Apollo, but they dominate the gardens, from the statues of Apollo and Diana set by the central window of the Galerie des Glaces to the group of Apollo and his chariot at the head of the canal, and the Latona fountain midway between the château and the canal (Latona or Leto was Apollo's mother). The east-west axis of the gardens, marked by these memorials of the sun god's power and progress, seems to be united to the axis of the sun itself, as it rises beyond the château, and sets at the far end of the great canal'.

Louis, moreover, refused to have any terminal point to his avenue: there is no obstruction to the sweep down the green tapestry in the centre, and out over the long water to the horizon. It is a vista without limit; and there can be little doubt as to whose pretensions it expressed. With an arrogance of cosmic dimensions, Louis had translated the new astronomy into terms of himself.

Addison was undeniably impressed. 'I could not believe', he wrote of the royal gardens, 'it was in the power of art to furnish out such a variety of noble scenes'. And yet, while lauding the magnificence of Louis' creations, in a single deft formula he inverted their meaning. A 'spacious horizon', he declared, 'is an image of liberty'.

Shakkei in England

And so, it may be thought inevitable that, when Addison adapted Temple's principle of sharawadgi, thereby inventing the English landscape garden and giving it internal liberty, he should also bestow upon

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it external freedom from constraint, so that it borrowed from its surroundings as assiduously as its Japanese prototype.

Or that it should consciously create visions redolent of Claude. As in the scattering of classical temples at Stourhead (Figure 5): forlorn in the woodland, these are intimations of a vanished past, an evocation of Vergilian melancholy over the inescapable procession of nature: the tears of things, *lacrimæ rerum*.

To which Ivan Morris has posited a correspondence with *mono no aware*. A more specific counterpart might be found in Buson: 白梅や墨芳しき鴻鸕館: *shiraume ya sumi kanbashiki kōrokan*; 'White plum-blossoms; / in the Kōrokan, the aroma / of ink'. This in the rendering of Blyth, who notes that the Kōrokan was a Chinese Office which had disappeared centuries before, as Homer's Troy had for Vergil.

Figure 5: Temple of Apollo, Stourhead (Murray).

The poignant juxtaposition of vanished past and vivid present is heightened by the contrasts: the flower, with its sweetness, white; and the ink, with its astringency, black. And the two in combination may perhaps suggest the whirling of yang and yin, the revolution of the worlds.

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Figure 6: Carlow from the site of Temple's house (Murray).

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Author's note

The Romantic English garden was involved from the outset with the elegiac in Vergil, Temple having 'spent the last years of the Commonwealth in Carlow, where his house looked out over the town' (Figure 6), 'laying out his lawns, cutting rides in his woods, and translating for his wife Latin landscapes of erotic melancholy': specifically the quest of Orpheus for Eurydice in the underworld, exploring the dark ways of the irrational and the unknown (Murray 1978).

Further information about the author and this topic is available at:
http://www.sharawadgi.net

Sharawadgi - Oxford English Dictionary online #

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1. First used by Sir William Temple (1628–99) in his *Upon the Gardens of Epicurus* (1685) to describe the Chinese way of planting in an apparently haphazard manner 'without any Order of Disposition of Parts', the term was popularized in mid-C18 England to describe irregularity, asymmetry, and the picturesque qualities of being surprising through graceful disorder, and so was applied to irregular gardens, known as Chinese, or as *les jardins anglo-chinois*, embellished with Chinese bridges with fret work railings and vermilion-painted pagodas shaded by weeping willows.

However, sharawadgi does not seem to be derived from the Chinese at all, but from a C17 notion of 'Chineses', which includes vague notions of 'The Indies' or 'The Orient'. The key to the problem seems to be the Dutch East India Company, which had a factory at Deshima, Nagasaki. When Dutchmen, accompanied by the German Engelbert Kaempfer (1651–1716), visited the gardens at Kyoto in the late C17, they noted the 'irregular but agreeable' features 'artfully made in imitation of nature', and the Japanese words *sorowaji* or *shorowaji* suggesting asymmetry. It would appear that sharawadji is a corruption of the Japanese, filtered through Dutch, probably misheard by the C17 visitors to the Japanese gardens at Kyoto. Temple probably picked the word up from Dutchmen who had visited Japanese gardens.

2. Sharawadgi was also used (somewhat pretentiously) to describe irregular, asymmetrical, informal designs in town-planning circles in the 1940s.

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