

Commentary on Poem:

In the summer of 2014, traveling in Britain, I found myself lodged for a week on the vast Stowe estate, now a school but once the UK's largest private residence. The Landmark Trust makes staying there possible: <http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk/search-and-book/properties/gothic-temple-8075/>. I had some vague idea that writing *in situ* in a setting devised by the 18th-century landscape artist Capability Brown (the famous Stowe Gardens) might be productive. I must also admit to some even vaguer fascination with the idea of living in such a fantastic piece of architecture, perhaps fueled by too much fantasy reading in childhood; and, indeed, T.H. White wrote much of *The Once and Future King* on the Stowe estate. (His odd, lesser-known, cranky, deeply flawed children's novel-cum-political tract *Mistress Masham's Repose* is in fact set there.) Stowe has been celebrated, or at least mentioned, in many poems, most notably by Alexander Pope. How could I resist the Fane of Pastoral Poetry?

(Which is real, by the way, one of many period follies that dot the Stowe landscape: <http://faculty.bsc.edu/jtatter/fane.html>. The plinths missing their statues, which were sold off the estate in 1922 and never recovered, are in the Grecian Valley southwest of the Fane.)

But the truth is that the Stowe estate, whatever its aesthetic merits, is a deeply problematic landscape for a Christian. However beautiful, however tantalizingly numinous, Stowe is essentially, and indeed explicitly, in its conception, design, and execution, a pagan landscape: what Lord Cobham and the Temple-Grenvilles believed in were politics and various Enlightenment idea(s) of freedom and the rational man, curiously seasoned with the period's racist conception of a peculiar *Englishness* combining Greek, Roman, and Celtic elements. Pagan gods and abstract virtues were what Lord Cobham celebrated here. While he did not quite close or demolish the medieval parish church in his landscaping—perhaps because of the family monuments it contained—he did use his gardening and earthmoving corps to disguise and conceal it almost completely, even though it lies close to the center of the property.

The reality of Stowe's construction—its vast arrogance, its pure allegiances—crept up on me as the week passed, as I wrestled with two ancient, very different (and in their own ways equally demanding) traditions of natural relation. In the end, I'd never felt quite as shut down, spiritually or creatively. The poem in *NDR* is a compilation of false starts, feints, and queries. "Every shepherd tells his tale" is Milton, but it was the quotation from the 4th-century hymnodist Ephrem the Syrian that gave me the centripetal focus I needed to organize the poem.

Weblinks:

<http://www.nereview.com/chipping-campden/>

<http://www.nereview.com/2016/05/05/g-c-waldrep/>

<http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/30-1/Waldrep.htm>

<http://conjunctions.com/webcon/waldrep15.htm>

<http://www.omnidawn.com/products-page/chapbooks/susquehanna-g-c-waldrep/>

<https://www.boaeditions.org/collections/poetry/products/testament>

Recent interview:

http://poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_waldrep.php