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HASTEN SLOWLY:
ON THE PERCEPTION
OF TIME AND SPACE
IN IAN HAMILTON
FINLAY'S
LITTLE SPARTA

EKATERINA KOCHETKOVA

Since ancient times, gardens have been viewed as perfect microcosms governed by their inherent laws and rhythms. In most cases, they are spaces designed for slow motion where the visitor has plenty of opportunities to contemplate the marvels of nature and art. To slow down the pace, classical gardens—like those created in sixteenth-century Italy, for example—use complex geometries that involve elevation changes, sudden turns, and dynamic systems of views. Time being spent in a classical garden follows the legendary motto of Roman Emperor Augustus: *Festina lente*, or “Hasten slowly,” which is often illustrated as a combination of something fast and energetic with something slow and steady. In sixteenth-century garden sculpture, for instance, it can obtain the form of a turtle carrying on its back either a swift-flying Victory (as in *Sacro Bosco* in Bomarzo) or a vivacious Bacchus (as in the Boboli Gardens in Florence).

A contemporary take on the ancient motto is found in the garden of *Little Sparta* near Edinburgh, created by Scottish artist and poet

Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006). Here, one can find yet another version of the phrase—in a form of a stone planter engraved with the words in Latin and English, and a rather bizarre image of an armored tank enveloped in the tentacles of a sea monster.¹

Finlay's career began in the 1960s in the literary field, when he took interest in concrete poetry, a movement in which typography and text design are no less important than verbal significance. Later, when Finlay took up visual arts, he eagerly followed the classical tradition of incorporating poetry into the garden.

As with any classically oriented garden, *Little Sparta* is a miniature vision of the universe, a perfectly constructed microcosm within the imperfect macrocosm. The garden consists of several corresponding parts, and each of them abounds in objects, or, as Finlay used to term them, “garden poems.”² These objects include sculptures, architectural forms and ready-mades accompanied by literary inscriptions, either composed by Finlay himself or borrowed from other authors. Finlay observed that “one could (conceivably) have a one-word poem in a garden, if the surroundings were conceived as *part* of the poem.”³ Thus, for Finlay “the work is not the artefact, the work is the whole composition—the artefact in its context . . . the work . . . is not an isolated object but an object with flowers, plants, trees, water and so on.”⁴

These “garden poems” are often difficult not only to understand but even to find in the



Figure 1.

Ian Hamilton Finlay, Charles Gurrey, and George Burns, Little Fields, Long Horizons (1998).

Drystone walls, Caithness stone plaques. Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland. ©Photo by John Clarke.

Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/jpc_faia/11040010565.

lush greenery; this is why a visit to this rather small estate usually takes several hours. Even the approach to the garden puts the prospective visitor into a somewhat meditative mood: public transportation is virtually nonexistent in this area, so getting there is not easy at all, but even if you drive your own vehicle, the last stretch of road is always reserved for walking. From a distance, you can see a cluster of trees that contrasts with the surrounding hills, sheltering the garden and building up the anticipation of what you are going to experience.

The perception of time and the notion of slowness in Finlay's garden are manifested in several dimensions. First, the movement of the visitor is actually slowed down physically. To do this, Finlay fills the space with

“liminal” elements such as thresholds, transitions, and borders. They appear in various forms—as bridges, stepping-stones, or other means of crossing waterways that pierce the territory here and there. In addition, parts of the garden are marked by numerous gates or gateposts—even in cases when there are no walls that would require such openings. There are also fences, sheepfolds, stiles, and other traditional features of the British countryside—though, again, these farming constructions do not actually enclose or separate anything. All these elements that divide and organize the space in the garden create a certain rhythm of movement—not a continuous but rather an intermittent one. This can be compared to the quasi-linguistic approach of Lancelot “Capability” Brown, the renowned

eighteenth-century British landscape designer whom Finlay valued highly; about his process, he wrote: “Now there . . . I make a comma, and there . . . (where an interruption is desirable to break the view) a parenthesis—now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.”⁵

Like Brown, Finlay organizes the garden space rhythmically, or almost melodically, accentuating certain points, making us stop and contemplate the surrounding landscape. For instance, in the object titled *Little Fields, Long Horizons*, three pairs of low drystone walls are installed at the edge of the property and invite the visitor to walk between them reading the following inscriptions:

LITTLE FIELDS • LONG HORIZONS

LITTLE FIELDS LONG • FOR HORIZONS

HORIZONS LONG • FOR LITTLE FIELDS

This elegant wordplay, together with the orientation of the stone blocks, draws the spectator’s gaze to the horizon and introduces an oscillation between what is inside the garden and outside of it, what is near and far, what can be easily reached and what is inaccessible. In another example, an arbitrary fragment of the countryside is turned into a piece of art, for which a surviving fragment of a commonplace wooden fence acts as a frame, or a pointing arrow, thanks to an addition of a single word: “PICTURESQUE.”



Figure 2.

Ian Hamilton Finlay and Peter Coates, *Picturesque* (1996). Wood. Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland.

©Photo by Flora Laura Hammond. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/64184680@N04/5901408418>.

A very specific means of focusing our attention is the invocation of famous landscape painters of the past: Finlay introduces objects and landscape elements that, in one way or another, rhyme with motifs from those masters' oeuvre. A slender birch tree is planted beside the memorial stele of Camille Corot, reminding the viewer of the painter's silvery color palette; a sober pyramid shadowed by gloomy fir trees commemorates Caspar David Friedrich; and a "rusticated," ivy-cloaked planter dedicated to Giovanni Battista Piranesi brings to mind the latter's ruins and architectural fantasies. A small stone plaque inscribed with "See POUSSIN, Hear LORRAIN" compares not only diverse types of landscapes in the art of two French masters, but also two different modes of perceiving the scenery—a more rational one for

Nicolas Poussin, and a more emotional one for Claude Lorrain. Accordingly, the plaque marks the border between two plots of land planted differently—one with a manicured lawn, and the other one with wild mosses and ferns. The famous monogram of Albrecht Dürer appears twice in *Little Sparta*: the first on a ceramic plaque hanging on a tree branch—just like in his *Adam and Eve* engraving (1504)—and the second on a stone block placed on a tiny island with billowing grasses, instantly reminiscent of his *The Great Piece of Turf* watercolor (1503).

Cross-cultural references and intellectual games like these represent the second dimension of slowness—that of unhurried and undistracted pastime in a garden. Here, Finlay follows the



Figure 3.

Ian Hamilton Finlay and John Andrew, *AD (The Great Piece of Turf)* (1975). Stone. *Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland*. ©Photo by Mike Forsyth. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mikeforsyth/756433414>.

steps of his notable predecessors and draws inspiration from the example of William Shenstone, an eighteenth-century poet and amateur landscape architect. When Shenstone was creating his park at The Leasowes, Worcestershire, he had severe financial constraints (as Finlay, in his own time), so he chose simple benches with inscriptions as the main decorative elements. In *Little Sparta*, benches are intended not only for taking breaks and relaxing, but for provoking thought and conversation. An example of an inscription that begs contemplation:

NOTHINGNESS NIHILATING AS
TIME IN SPACE

IS WHAT MAKES MAN A PASSERBY

IN THE SPATIAL WORLD. KOJEVE

Often corresponding text fragments are inscribed on identical objects placed next to each other—for example, on two slate benches. The first cites a line from Virgil's first *Eclogue* in its original Latin, "MAIORESQUE CADUNT ALTIS DE MONTIBUS UMBRAE"; and the second provides the English translation, "AND LONGER FALL THE SHADOWS FROM THE MOUNTAINS HIGH." Finlay often gives particular importance to the use of Latin in the garden, as the former lingua franca of the universe of Antiquity. Sometimes Finlay leaves Latin to speak for itself, as on a stone urn inscribed with "COGITATIO SUB UMBRA LATINAE CELATA," which can be translated as "thought hidden beneath the

shade of Latin." As this inscription suggests, Finlay intentionally "hides" the meaning from the readers, wanting them to grasp the message bit by bit, pausing for translation and searching for the right words—slowly.⁶

Another time-consuming activity in Finlay's garden is solving intellectual puzzles, like the one presented in *Camouflaged Flowers*. On five brick stelae, one can see copper plates with silhouettes of World War II battleships and anagrammatic inscriptions: VERLEAND, INCOMAP, YUPSHONALT, TIMENAT-OBR, TEGARBMO. Stele number six is the key to reading this composition—the anagrams can be deciphered as names of flowers: LAVENDER, CAMPION, POLYANTHUS, MONTBRETIA, BERG-AMOT. This recalls the British navy tradition of the so-called "Flower-class corvettes"—their "botanical" names were supposed to "camouflage" the ships in radio transmissions. To complete the picture, some of the above-mentioned flowers are planted near the stelae, where they both stand in stark contrast to the military theme and also suggest the fragility of battleships sunken during the war.

Quite often, the slowing down of the visitor's pace is done in surprising ways. For instance, reading the alert "ACHTUNG! MINEN" ("DANGER! MINES") and seeing a skull-and-crossbones carved on a stone hidden in the greenery, we literally stop short in our tracks, struck by this deadly warning, as war and violence are not the things that we expect to encounter in a pleasure garden. Ironically,



Figure 4.

Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Brazenell, and John Andrew, Camouflaged Flowers (2001). Brick, bronze plaques. Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland. ©Photo by Rebecca DeWald for the Glasgow Review of Books. Source: <https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2013/05/30/little-sparta>.

however, this object was originally placed on the spot where a high voltage cable is concealed underground.⁷

This playful approach contrasts with the third dimension of slowness in Finlay's garden, this time pensive and philosophical, often with a critical perspective. "The contemplation of death" seems to be especially omnipresent in *Little Sparta*.⁸ The garden may even remind us of a cemetery, as objects taking the forms of gravestones are scattered all over the place. They vary from solemn obelisks to modest stones and stelae, always accompanied by laconic yet deeply meaningful inscriptions pondering the temporality and frailty of human existence (like stones incised with "MAN—A PASSERBY," or with a single yet eloquent

word: "FRAGILE"), or the passing of all things in nature, including trees (like the stele pleading to "BRING BACK THE BIRCH" placed underneath a young birch tree) or even cats (this is a unique case of a real tombstone, as Finlay's cat is buried here).⁹ Although sometimes ironic, Finlay is mostly very serious about his garden "composed of Glooms and Solitudes and not of plants and trees."¹⁰

Meditating upon death in the garden, Finlay addresses another historic space: the French estate of Ermenonville, famous as the last residence and resting place of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was buried there on a circular island planted with poplars, in a monumental sarcophagus designed by landscape painter Hubert Robert. Separate elements

of Ermenonville's poplar island are reproduced in *Little Sparta*—in different spots and different scales, forming a sort of spatial assemblage. These elements include the indicative tree-plaque *L'Île des Peupliers* (“The Isle of Poplars”), an island with a tablelike cenotaph, and a miniature sarcophagus. All these parts are rearranged, “cut” and “pasted” into the garden space; they require a certain effort in recombining and deciphering yet point unmistakably to Rousseau as *Little Sparta's* genius loci.

This brings us to the fourth and final dimension of slowness in Finlay's art, which expresses the idea of continuity of human history and culture. It acts like a “slow-moving time machine” that can transfer us to other eras and spaces, and is powered by the classical tradition in art, of which Finlay was an ardent proponent; he was adamant about the unfortunate condition of contemporary culture that “feels separated from the past.”¹¹ In an attempt to overcome this “unconsciousness” of the past, Finlay interconnects modern events of World War II with classical mythology: for instance, he converts an old barn on his property into a “temple of Apollo” by means of paint, stencil, and some gilding. The dedication on the façade reads: “TO APOLLO, HIS MVSIC, HIS MISSILES, HIS MVSES,” missiles boldly advertised above the front door. Around the corner, there is an aedicule with a miniature statue of Apollo copied from Bernini's famous group *Apollo and Daphne*; instead of a nymph, however, the deity seizes a machine-gun. In Finlay's interpretation, weaponry from World War II replaces the traditional bow

and arrows. The artist explores this topic in numerous works, including those unrelated to *Little Sparta*. For example, a stone sculpture entitled *Et in Arcadia Ego* and bearing the subtitle *After Nicolas Poussin* refers to the famous painting by the French seventeenth-century master, but it replaces the solemn tomb with a modern tank made of bricks, a no less powerful memento mori.¹²

Finlay used to say that he didn't “feel a distance between [himself] and the classical,” and wished to literally shorten the distance between his garden on the British Isles and the space of the Mediterranean.¹³ For example, the brook that feeds the garden with water is crossed by a small bridge marked as “CLAVDI,” which refers to the Aqua Claudia aqueduct, one of the most important waterways of Imperial Rome. Further downstream, on the bank of a pond, there is a stele with another Latin inscription meaning “here lies a tiny excerpt from a longer water.”¹⁴ The latter points not only to the irrigation system concealed underground but, more importantly, to large lengths of sea (which is nowhere near *Little Sparta*), and the commonplace garden pond is poetically transformed into the realm of Neptune. Again, the shape of a gravestone and Latin majuscule letters chosen for this stele reflect Finlay's nostalgia for the classical past.

Another historic period that fascinated Finlay was the French Revolution. The artist believed that “our time can be understood through the French revolution,” just like “the French revolution . . . understood itself through antiquity,”

as “[i]t is quite a natural process to use other times to understand your own time.”¹⁵ These intertemporal connections can be demonstrated in an eloquent manner by juxtaposing different systems of time measurement. For example, in the *Fructidor* series of objects, the baskets filled with fruit represent the months of the French Republican calendar (in which titles for days, weeks, and months were inspired by natural phenomena and agricultural processes), while the real time in the garden is governed by the familiar change of seasons.¹⁶

When it came to actual time measurement, Finlay preferred to use a rather old-fashioned, less-than-precise, and “slow” device: a sundial,

of which he created dozens of versions throughout his oeuvre. Sundials serve as physical reminders of the passing of time and, as always with Finlay, ponder it in a poetic and metaphorical manner. One of them states, “DIVIDING THE LIGHT I DISCLOSE THE HOUR,” pointing to the paradoxical ability of a shadow to conceal and reveal things simultaneously. In Finlay’s interpretation, time is immediately expressed in nature—this is why the whole landscape acts as an immense face-clock for a monumental stone gnomon inscribed as “SHADOW *n.* THE HOUR-HAND”—and is related to the time of human existence.

The interconnectedness of the local and global, personal and universal, real and dreamlike is



Figure 5.

Ian Hamilton Finlay and Michael Harvey, *Silver Cloud* (1972). Marble. Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland. ©Photo by Elena Cheban and Natalia Tkachenko for Gardener.ru. Source: http://www.gardener.ru/gap/garden_guide/page3812.php?cat=11.

the essence of Ian Hamilton Finlay's art. He carefully constructs the time that visitors spend in his garden, slowing down their pace with the help of various methods and media. He reconstructs times and spaces different from the ones we are in, both building and breaking the historical and geographical continuum. At certain points, time can run incredibly fast in *Little Sparta*, as we are instantly transported into other realities; and yet, paradoxically, this haste remains essentially slow, as physical time almost ceases to exist or dramatically changes its current, substituted by fictional, imaginary contexts. However, Finlay is extremely sensitive to how these contexts are chained to the here and now, because, as Louis Antoine de Saint-Just once put it, "the present order is the disorder of the future."¹⁷

/ Notes /

¹ See Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta: A Guide to the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2003). Hereinafter, all inscriptions in *Little Sparta* are reproduced as quoted in Sheeler's book, following the original paragraphs, italics, capitalization, and other typeface patterns as closely as possible. All catalogue entries are also borrowed from this book (see pages 181–92).

² On "garden poems," see Peter Davidson, "Ian Hamilton Finlay: (De)signing the Landscape," in *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-war British and Irish Poetry*, ed. C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 172.

³ Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 5; original emphasis.

⁴ Udo Weilacher, *Between Landscape Architecture and Land Art* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 93–94, 98.

⁵ Elizabeth Manwaring, *Italian Landscape in 18th-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), 141.

⁶ See John Dixon Hunt, *Nature Over Again: The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Reaktion, 2008), 65.

⁷ Sheeler, *Little Sparta*, 36.

⁸ This is a fragment from the three-part citation from Henry Vaughan's *The Mount of Olives, or Solitary Devotions*, inscribed on three stone plinths with inset lead tablets: "The Contemplation of death is an obscure melancholy walk • an Expatiation in shadows & solitude • but it leads unto life." Sheeler, *Little Sparta*, 43–44.

⁹ This fact is confirmed by the epitaph: "HERE I REST • HERE I STAY • OUR CAT • 1977–1993."

¹⁰ Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Unconnected Sentences on Gardening*, in Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, 40.

¹¹ Nagy Rashwan, "The Death of Piety: Ian Hamilton Finlay in Conversation with Nagy Rashwan," *Jacket* 15 (December 2001), <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/rash-iv-finlay.html>.

¹² Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1976, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh, UK). This theme is further explored by Finlay in his "Footnotes to an Essay," a set of visual and verbal commentaries on Erwin Panofsky's famous essay, *Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition* (first published in Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955], 295–320). In this work, Finlay took five seventeenth-century paintings on the motif of *Et in Arcadia Ego* (three of them studied in Panofsky's essay) and redrew them, adding images and verbal hints of modern warfare to the classical scenes. *Footnotes to an Essay* is reproduced in Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay*, 245–47. See also Hunt, *Nature Over Again*, 94–99.

¹³ Finlay, “Footnotes to an Essay,” 295–320.

¹⁴ “HIC IACET PARVULUM QUODDAM
EX AQUA LONGIORE EXCERPTUM.”

¹⁵ Rashwan, “Death of Piety.”

¹⁶ The calendar was structured in decades rather than weeks, and eight of the days were named after plants—in the case of Finlay’s object: eglantine, hazelnut, hops, sorghum, orange, goldenrod, maize, and chestnut. Every fifth day of a decade was named after an animal (crayfish here), and every tenth day after an agricultural implement (the basket itself).

¹⁷ These words are inscribed on several massive stone blocks reminiscent of the brick puzzle, where one can play with meanings, with “order” and “disorder,” by moving the parts.

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MARIA FUSCO

This is an extract from my unpublished novella, *Sailor*. Set during the Blitz in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1941, it is narrated by the eponymous Sailor—a two-year-old ver-vet monkey, smuggled from Freetown by a merchant seaman as a Christmas present for his wife, Sailor’s adopted human parents “Mammy” and “Daddy”—written in first person Belfast dialect as an internal monologue. I am principal investigator of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded academic project entitled “De-localising Dialect,” which seeks to untether (and to test) dialect from geographical location; one of my key concerns with this ongoing project is to see if it’s possible, ethical, or even desirable to “score” dialect. As I was writing the text, I had a persistent idea that the monkey would already have a thick Belfast dialect in the Sierra Leonean jungle before he is trapped