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# PERMANENT MARKERS

## The Monumental, the Mobile, and the Sustainable in Enlightened Eras

Kevin L. Cope

Today we live in an upgraded, digital version of eternity: in the commercially if not culturally pervasive hope that, while we wait for longevity research to provide some discounted version of personal immortality, the archival similitude of all that we do, know, and anticipate will endure forever in the suggestively named, heavenly “cloud.” Once upon a time, those who regarded themselves as great wits aspired to enjoy, if not immortality, then at least permanence of influence. Along with the self-styled “immortals” who founded the Academie Française and along with those scattered European intellectuals who vicariously participated in the metropolitan Enlightenment, that strange cast of professionals, virtuosi, eccentrics, and dilettantes who founded Britain’s Royal Society believed that

their recipe for the advancement of science and society—an intellectual cocktail compounded of Baconian induction, nascent capitalism, exploration-enhanced connoisseurship, neoclassical orderliness, Puritan enthusiasm, and diluted, pop empiricism—would facilitate the nonstop increase of knowledge. Their model of a new science, they expected, would continuously change the learned world but would itself remain the unvarying foundation of all future inquiries. These former Commonwealth-men turned impromptu intellectuals relished the prospect of what we would now somewhat pejoratively call an “analog” eternity: a durable legacy that was neither alienated into nor stored away in an electronic vault or subscription database but that exerted its influence here, now, and forever, in real time. Various efforts at restarting the calendar, whether Joseph Glanvill’s proposal to declare his fellow virtuosi’s repudiation of Aristotle as “day one” of the new reckoning or whether the efforts of French Revolutionaries to update time, diversely epitomize a widespread confidence that the Enlightenment marked the beginning of a futurity that would grow in scope but that would never fundamentally change. How did we move from a world in which Francis Bacon’s “Solomon’s House” could grow ever bigger yet remain forever upon the firm foundation of the “law of nature” to a world like our own, in which seekers after permanence rally to the battle-cry not of immortal fame but of “sustainability”? Where are the interesting if not useful markers along the highway leading from the confident realism of the Glanvills, Sprats, and Boyles to twenty-first-century exponents of a vague *process* that *might* help degenerating nature—or, more precisely, the human interface with nature—last a good long while but maybe not forever?

The answers to the kind of open-ended questions that guarantee the sustainability of academe—that ensure, for a wry example, that there will be another book, journal, or conference on sustainability and cultural history—emerge several tiers below those skyscrapers of intellect whose reputations tower above the rolling dunes of time. Only a select few have encountered the works of James Howell, a clever but somewhat feckless cavalier who, having spent most of his life in search of royal preferment, finally demolished his career by going to work for the king in, of all years, 1640. Like so many members of the provincial second echelon, Howell devoted his most productive years to the recreational laying of a very small corner of the foundation of the English Enlightenment. Howell’s breakthrough work, *Dendrologia: Dodona’s Grove, Or, The Vocal Forest*, recounts and recasts British and European history as an elaborate allegory not only of trees but also of shrubs, bushes, and assorted ornamentals. Howell deploys an entire multilevel ecosystem of conversational flora, creating a sylvan narrative that parallels the early history of the

early civil war era and that analogizes that history to related events in Europe. Theorists of allegory such as Maureen Quilligan, Harold Bloom, Hazard Adams, and Northrop Frye who have been influenced by the Romantic literary traditions usually associate allegory with obscurity and obfuscation.<sup>1</sup> For these critics, allegory hides the tenor behind an already enigmatic vehicle, indeed eventually erases the signifying vehicle in a blur of possible referents. A confident if not altogether successful man of his optimistic (if strife-torn) era, Howell, by contrast, practices what might be called "clarity allegory." He takes every possible measure to ensure that tenor, vehicle, man, and metaphor coincide, that only a dunce could miss the point of his arboreal comparisons. So his description of England's laudable elms:

Elmes the Nobilitie, prime Elme principal Nobilities. That comely Elm Georg Villers D[.] Of Buckingham[.] Elme sent to relieve Perrina Robert Earle of Lindsey, Elme of Montico lean stock, William Earle of Pembroke Lord Steward of his Maiesties Houshold.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to an abundance of such vehemently explicative passages, Howell provides an elaborate "Clavis" or key in which the various plant species are indexed and their allegorical counterparts identified, often supplementing these entries with anecdotes concerning the identified parties' political exploits. Howell's is an allegory that becomes more clear and more informative the more that one reads; his metaphors never obscure but, rather, relentlessly amplify meaning.

I open with Howell because he epitomizes, up in his little tree-house overlooking the oncoming Enlightenment, a fundamental characteristic of the fascination with monuments, permanence, and eventually "sustainability" that would characterize the next four centuries. On one hand, Howell takes as the canvas, for his talking picture of contemporary politics, an English forest that seems, to his pre-Darwinian mind, a genuine thing-in-itself: an enduring product of divine artistry as well as the residence of wondrous diversity. On the other hand, Howell goes to incredible lengths to coordinate

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1979); Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Hazard Adams, *Philosophy of the Literary Symbolic* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1983); and Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> James Howell, *Dendrologia: Dodona's Grove, Or, The Vocal Forest* (London, 1640), "Clavis."



and thereby to extend the meaning of the elements of his allegory. He packs multiple layers of information, allusion, and abstraction into plants that seem too fragile and too simple to sustain his breathtaking review of a continent full of controversy. All the while, he tries his best to ensure that his extended, allegorical analyses correspond in some minimal way to the actual functioning of the collective organism that is a forest. Howell's frontispiece, in which he leans against the mighty royal oak that had not yet been cut down, offers a deep perspective that extends to casual strollers and distant cities off at the vanishing point—that implies an infinity of surprisingly accessible extended meanings—yet it shows no tree in its entirety, as if Howell and his engraver recognized the futility of trying to stay within the frame or to limit the discursive depth of Howell's "vocal forest." Howell's *Dendrologia* might qualify as the "big bang" of sustainability: as a moment in which the full spectrum of knowledge quivered in a single point—and trembled on the brink of division, expansion, and even explosion.

Howell was by no means alone in his hope for an easygoing yet dramatically compressed presentation of a landscape, environment, or setting that embodied polyphonic meanings. A few rungs down on the ladder of philosophical complexity, writers of Georgic poems specialized in making nature articulate by fusing agriculture, ecology, and industry with art. The enthusiasm for topographical poems such as *Upon Appleton House*, *Grongar Hill*, and *Cooper's Hill* as well as for descriptive epics such as *The Seasons* or *The Task* and also, later in the period, for landscape painting suggests a widespread confidence that places and panoramas veritably radiated interpretations. Alexander Pope joined with Joseph Addison and with a bevy of landscape theorists in suggesting that landscape designers consult the *genius loci*, the genius of the place: that special personification of topographical and hydrographical attributes that seemed to speak suggestions about the proper use, ornamentation, and elaboration of the settings in which great estates arose.<sup>3</sup> Local genii induced particular garden designs and maintenance systems. One need not own vast tracts of land to explore informative settings. Those interested in articulate environments should not underrate the philosophical daring with which poor old underappreciated John Bunyan assumes that actions, characters, ideas, and

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent introduction to the *genius loci* and to other fundamental concepts underlying the English landscape garden, see Morris Brownell, *Alexander Pope and the Arts of Georgian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); John Dixon Hunt, *The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting, and Gardening during the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and Heinz-Joachim Müllenbrock, *Der Englische Landschaftsgarten des 18. Jahrhunderts und sein Literarischer Kontext* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986).

landscapes mutually represent one another. Soft-core and soft-tissue Puritan horticulturalists such as Ralph Austen released treatises such as the combined *Treatise of Fruit Trees* and *The Spiritual Use of an Orchard* (1653) in which up-to-the-minute garden technology combined with sustainability-friendly stewardship as well as with an abundance of hermeneutic extrapolation to create a highly systematic as well as highly sacramental terrain, terrain where the proper, efficient management of the environment could yield attractive views, induce emotional stability, and promote philosophical competence. As Austen explains, experience is so heavily enameled with interpretation that anyone can detect it, even a country bumpkin:

Now among all the Creatures below Man, I know none that teaches us so plainly, and convincingly, as *Fruit-trees*: *The Garden of Fruit-trees is a Volume full of good Notions*: some Instructions lye obvious, and plaine to every mans eye, an illiterate man may here read distinctly, and the Learned man, may find matter enough, wherewith to exercise his Wisdom and Judgement.<sup>4</sup>

Austen's polymathic pal, Samuel Hartlib, extracted—or, rather, claimed that he perceived—similar supplemental significance in the lifestyles and operations of silkworms.<sup>5</sup> Like that later German entomologist, Friedrich Christian Lesser, Commonwealth-connected Hartlib affirmed not only the providential design of the insect economy but detected its immediate congeniality vis-à-vis human management. For Hartlib, who always saw the practical as well as scientific value in the divine creator's genius, the human uses of silkworms are part and parcel of the silkworms themselves. For him, form *is* function. These diminutive but highly productive creatures embody a highly optimistic variety of what we now call "sustainability." By their very nature, they induce the economic and agricultural system that allows for long-term survivability as well as utility. Their viability resides at once in themselves and in a system that is somehow or other attached to them, that is an inevitable outgrowth of what they are.

Howell, Austen, and a bevy of topographical, pastoral, and Georgic poets help us to understand the narrative character of sustainability as a mixed cultural and scientific invention. For all of these writers, the ability of system

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Austen, *The Spiritual use of an Orchard, or Garden of Fruit Trees* (Oxford, 1656), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> See Samuel Hartlib, *The Reformed Virginia Silkworm*, appended to his *The Reformed Commonwealth of Bees* (London, 1662).

to function, presumably over a long time, implies and depends on the declaration of a story. For the aforementioned versifiers and virtuosi, that story happened to be congruent with, even embedded in the landscape, yet the apparent need for tellers of such stories—for artists who can amplify the implicit sustainability narrative—suggests that sustainability may not be a self-guiding perpetual motion machine, that it may require input or refinement by outside interpreters. Sustainable systems have a media relations problem; they seem to require elucidation. To put it somewhat cheekily, long-eighteenth-century garden, forest, and landscape prospects declaim their status as durable long-runners, but they need a librarian to organize the information that they emit and to turn them into sustainable as well as permanent monuments.<sup>6</sup>

\* I \*

The transition from Austen's orchards to library stacks may seem less than obvious, yet the library and its cohort institution, the museum, rise to prominence during the Enlightenment owing to the double concern for the order within information and for the sustainability of progress in all branches of the arts and sciences. With their cultivation of installment publishing, whether of subdivided large works or scientific reports or periodicals, Enlightenment publishers and other information managers were confronting the twin problems of information storage and of information rationing—of creating universal archives while delivering knowledge in parcels sized for the modest human mind. The earliest librarians—or, more accurately those projectors, proposers, and enthusiasts who supported libraries—were recognizing the necessity of intervention in the natural history of information: of guiding the process of the creation, access, and distribution of information in such a way as to maintain its utility while generating some sort of narrative regarding its future conservation. Early libraries featured the analog approach

<sup>6</sup> The notion that a monument was less sustainable than sustained—that immortality involved its own maintenance schedule—underlines the association, in the Enlightenment mind, between monumentalism and ruin and between immortality and decay (per Jonathan Swift's satiric rendering of the immortal but deteriorating "Struldbruggs" in his *Gulliver's Travels*). For a study of the relation between the monumental and the eroded, see Michel Huyseune, "Re-Assessing the classical Tradition: Volney's Changing Use of Artistic Images in Scientific Representations," *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era* 3 (2000): 191–201.

that characterized Howell's interpretation of the vegetative world. Books and manuscripts congregated together not by bar code or accession number but by obvious topic or by author or by donor or sometimes by association with an ancient authority whose bust happened to stand nearby. The zealous librarians of the Enlightenment took far more grandiose but far less intuitive approaches. Despite their daring and confidence, these proposal-writers doubted that (library) object and (catalog) order co-inherited quite as conveniently as did tenor and vehicle in the allegories of Austen and Howell. In his 1697 *A Proposal for Building a Royal Library and Establishing it by Act of Parliament*, Richard Bentley addresses three epiphenomenal concerns that hover around every book and every library visit: the provision of an operating budget; the positioning of the structure in a favorable microclimate, "on elevated Soil, and a dry sandy Ground; the Air clear, and the Light free, and the Buildings, not contiguous to any Houses";<sup>7</sup> and the ornamenting of the walls with assorted reliefs plucked from sites in the ancient world, preferably at the low prices charged for pirated art ("cheaply to be had from the *African Coast*, and *Greece*, and *Asia* the less"). Bentley is among the first to think in systematic and institutional terms about conservation by noting that the ecology of book hordes depends on a long-term support; he at least genuflects toward curatorship by seeking a context where mold may not besmirch Catullus; and he recognizes the popular character of a library by positioning explanatory reliefs around the reading room, thereby assisting the books to remain relevant both in modern times and despite the limits of modern education.<sup>8</sup> All of this is to say that, however inadvertently, early library scientists such as Bentley begin the process of separating sustainability from the sustained items, entities, or institutions. Bentley would provide a variety of support devices so that the presumed immortality of knowledge can achieve a more humdrum sort of real-world permanence. Like many writers of our time, he is eager to highlight the narrative about sustainability—the wrap-around marble relief

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bentley, *A Proposal for Building a Royal Library and Establishing it by Act of Parliament* (London, 1697).

<sup>8</sup> An often overlooked feature of "sustainability" is its implicit need for an archive or history or record. Sustainability is an attribute that is evidenced over extended intervals of time; it can only be discovered, verified, and celebrated through the assembly of records and the writing of history. The academic community that has grown up around sustainability remains remarkably unaware of the historically extended, narratively complex nature of its topics and of the methodology appertaining to it. The most recent international effort, the Second Singapore Sustainability Symposium or "S<sup>3</sup>," completely omits any reference to history, cultural or otherwise, and likewise overlooks humanities and the arts (see [http://www.sustainapore.sg/events/2nd\\_S3.html](http://www.sustainapore.sg/events/2nd_S3.html) [accessed 17 April 2015]).

rendering of universality and thereby long-term, worldwide applicability that surrounds his readers—even if this means saying very little about the books being sustained.

The long eighteenth century made a deep commitment to the construction of both libraries as well as to those comparable repositories of large, nontextual objects, museums. The appearance of large-scale, often professionalized, sometimes government-chartered libraries at Corvey, Göttingen, London, Paris, Berlin, and Philadelphia was complemented by the opening of durable display spaces such as the Ashmolean Museum, the British Museum, the Hermitage, and even the new-world Charleston Museum. It was not only in bricks, stone, and mortar that we find what might be described as the new “museum mentality” of this era: the nagging thought that texts need help in the form of institutional narratives to sustain themselves into futurity. One of the favorite projects of the era was the conceptual museum, the compilation of artifacts or their makers into the imagined habitat of a book, pamphlet, or proposal. Such conceptual museums dispensed with the museum itself and went straight to the sustaining narrative. John Elsum, for example, attempts to pitch up both art and artists by creating a virtual display space comprised of abundant epigrams, of his own composition, on the works of multitudinous daubers and chisellers. Zeuxis’s legendary painting of wrestlers, for example, draws Elsum’s somewhat catachretical praise.

Naked and brawny both, both very bold  
 Long did they struggle, yet maintain’d their hold.  
 Both did stand out against the Kick and Trip,  
 But one of them is got upon the Hip.  
 And after all his pains of seat and toil,  
 Is like to get a Fall, at least a Foil.  
 He’s lifted up on high; but ’tis well known,  
 Only with greater force to be cast down.  
 This Wrestler, *Zeuxis*, you do so devise,  
 And in him show such skill in *Nudities*,  
 Fall he or fall he not, thy Fame will rise.<sup>9</sup>

Elsum here takes a frozen moment, a single pose in the long history of art, and creates a narrative for it that flows not only in time but in the rhythmic clock of verse. One of several hundred, his epigrammatic poem places

<sup>9</sup> John Elsum, *Epigrams upon the Paintings of the most Eminent Masters* (London, 1700), 4.

Zeuxis in an imagined history of conservation-worthy artists and converts his subject matter into the presumably durable fabric of eighteenth-century popular neoclassical verse. A similar effort in the biographical genre appeared under the hand of Frenchman Roger De Piles, whose multivolume set of artists' biographies proved so compelling as well as disappointing to under-represented British creative personnel that an anonymous *English School* supplementing De Piles's Eurocentric compilation soon appeared.<sup>10</sup> Much later in the period, another anonymous author put forward a proposal for a "Temple of Fame" that would be no building at all but rather a thirteen-volume set containing both written accounts of the deeds of worthies from Richard III to present times as well as portraits of these leaders. Today, the discourse of sustainability is somewhat unstably compounded of extreme optimism and extreme pessimism—of the fear that the world is running short of resources and of the hope that ingenuity produced by a few post-Enlightenment geniuses will solve the problems of shortage and pollution by successfully managing complex systems that, sadly, we have yet even to describe. In the early curatorial caste we see a forerunner to this mixed, happily menaced mind: the thought that not only *must* something be done, but also that human art *can* complete this assignment. We see, in sum, the prying apart of sustainability from sustained; we see the narrative and the artistic, usually architectural projection of that division in a building, such as a library, that is more sustaining than itself sustainable; and we see the first notes of a prophetic riff suggesting benign control of the uncertain future.

Closely allied with libraries, museums, and other collecting institutions is that inventively process-oriented eighteenth-century genre, the compilation. Compilations had existed not only since the beginning of the print trade, but since the medieval tradition of the digest, the anthology abounding in excerpts from venerated authorities. Early compilations such as digests were largely matters of economy, convenience, and the physical demands of manuscript preparation. They commemorate an era that prized the delivery of as much canonical material in as little space as possible. Eighteenth-century compilations inverted this tradition by creating large, multivolume, serial, or follow-on publications that soaked up increasing quantities of discretionary income and that exploited the fashion for what looked like brevity and economy to create market appeal for what was, in fact, a greater volume

<sup>10</sup> Roger de Piles [and Bainbrigg Buggeridge]. *The Art of Painting: With the Lives and Characters of above 300 of the most Eminent Painters: Containing a Complete Treatise of Painting, Designing, and the Use of Prints. . . . Translated from the French of Monsieur de Piles. To which is Added, an Essay towards an English School* (London, 1744).

of printed paper than the world had ever seen. Among the most familiar compilations from the period are the numerous dictionaries and encyclopedias that, during the long-winded eighteenth century, emanated from nearly every nation, national academy, print shop, and hack writer. A short visit to libraries, such as Louisiana's Noel Collection or Indiana's Schick Library, that specialize in compilations will reveal the astounding multitudinousness of these projects, whether the universally recognized efforts of Dr. Johnson, William Chambers, or Diderot or obscure projects such as John Seally's encyclopedia of ladies' cultural concerns.<sup>11</sup> The differing level of resolution among long-eighteenth-century encyclopedias—the extreme variation between those that tackle all that is known to humanity and those that fondle a fold or two of the accordion of knowledge—shows that, like museum and library curators, compilers try to find a level and range of knowledge that is manageable, to identify the extent of engagement with a world that, given all factors, whether available trained staff or market demand or the relentless tide of revised editions, is sustainable over the proverbial long haul. Compilations emulate museums in their open-endedness: in the tacit assumption that, unlike other, finished artifacts or institutions, they achieve permanence through flux, through continual enlargement, revision, and rearrangement. Like museums and libraries, compilations explore the uncertain space between experience and explanation; between event and extended, explanatory narrative; between authenticity and creative curatorship; and between the sustained and the idea of sustainability.

Given the extraordinarily high demands underlying the apparently simple if ever-growing idea of a compilation, it is not surprising that specialization emerged early in the history of this genre and that the narrowing of encyclopedic ambitions engendered at least light satire. John Evelyn, admittedly, took the whole of London as the topic for his renowned *Diary*, but he also devoted his spare time to micro-compilations such as *Sylva* (a semi-green compendium on trees, their natural history, and their management); *Numismata* (a compilation of lore and imagery pertaining to coins and medals); and even *Fumifugium* (an organized harangue on everything to do with air pollution). At the other side of the social spectrum from the ambitious if not fully genteel Evelyn, avaricious trade publishers such as Nathaniel Crouch released volume after specialist volume of wonder stories, drawing together everything from marvels of the Anglo-Saxon era to reports of prodigious

<sup>11</sup> See John Seally, *Belles Lettres for the Ladies: Or, a New and Easy Introduction to Polite Literature* (London, 1785).

births in the provinces to anecdotes about superstitious public responses to beached whales. This drive to particularity within the generalizing world of the compilation should be familiar to sustainability-minded ecologists, who, to their pleasure and chagrin, uncover runaway complications when perusing even tiny segments of ecosystems and who, too, tend to drift down in their expectations, from saving the environment in toto to saving discrete if populous species such as harp seals and finally to preserving local swaths of habitat such as a parcel of marshland alongside the Everglades. The tension (or perhaps reverberation) between the particular and the general that characterizes both the eighteenth-century compilation and the modern "green" movement finds an unexpected expression in the productions of enthusiasts such as John Dunton, who half-seriously boasted that he would, in his irregularly released yet conceptually synoptical periodicals, address no less than six hundred topics, and such as Alexander Cruden, the self-styled "Corrector" of England, who began his career with the compilation of biblical concordances, proceeded to proposals for a kind of inverse encyclopedia "correcting" all the errors of Britain, and then finally ratified his taste for serial activities by landing, one after another, in several prominent madhouses. Half-mad compilation zealots such as Dunton, Cruden, and the hyperproductive Sir John Hill gravitated toward periodical publication, as if in recognition of a "management mania" that both advances and afflicts all efforts at sustainability, whether economic or intellectual or ecological: as if to affirm that even the most unmanageable of tasks, whether reviewing the totality of human knowledge or supervising the full expanse of the would-be sustainable environment, might yield to implementation by installments. The quickly-discovered necessity for an infinity of such installments when trying to cover the immensity of the whole world results in the mounting of a permanent project, or at least a project that lasts until the sponsor runs mad or until subscriptions run out (which may well be never, as witnessed by the persistence of *The London Magazine* to this day).

The range of compiled, often serialized projects in the Enlightenment would leave even the most ardent librarian gasping for breath. There are virtuoso-projector John Ray's volumes gathering dialect words from the outer provinces of Britain; there are volumes such as *Early Blossoms of Genius and Virtue*<sup>12</sup> that offer highly focused collections of such topics as witty statements by young prodigies; there are enormous volumes that center on the wisdom

<sup>12</sup> *Early Blossoms of Genius and Virtue; including Maxims of Early Wisdom, Juvenile Memoirs, a Great Variety of Examples of the Moral Virtues, and a Selection of Moral Poesy* (London, 1797).



of a nation, one example being *Scots Proverbs*;<sup>13</sup> there are volumes, slightly impudent in tone, that, following the lead of Thomas Browne's *Vulgar Errors*, gather together the blunders and superstitious beliefs of gullible persons; there are joke encyclopedias for every taste, venue or occasion, whether William Hickee's ribald *Coffee-House Jest*s<sup>14</sup> or the more elegant yet no less comical *A Collection of Epigrams*;<sup>15</sup> there are assemblages of key terms and concepts in Swedenborgian religion; in sum, there are encyclopedias or dictionaries on almost every topic, now matter how small. Which points up another interesting feature about the precursors and analogues of the modern idea of sustainability in long-eighteenth-century culture: the centrality of smallness to the grasping of the whole, an idea that originated in the Enlightenment and that now manifests itself in our confidence that close-up studies of individual species or of specific chemical processes will contribute to the vast goal of sustainability—that, say, building an educational demonstration garden within an urban park or developing a better enzyme for the cleaning and aeration of ponds will help “the environment” as a whole.

This confidence in the power of the particular is especially pervasive in one highly popular form of eighteenth-century compilation, the aphorism anthology. If the hundreds of aphorism collections that powered the eighteenth-century print industry make any one point, it is that a particular datum—a cogently delivered and wittily judgmental concise statement—can resolve not only a difficult particular situation but can serve as a model for the solution of any and all management issues. The business of both the aphorism anthology and indeed of most specialty compilations might be colloquially described as “staying ahead of the game,” having at hand that one sentence or solution that will not only save the day in a unique situation but that will reset a much larger system. Between the “adage” genre that Erasmus popularized and the startling, effective aphorism used across the Enlightenment—from hard-head Francis Bacon to buoyant Shaftesbury and on to quipping Dr. Johnson—lies a whole world of difference, a world in which sustainability supplants authority.

<sup>13</sup> Allan Ramsay, *A Collection of Scots Proverbs* (Edinburgh, 1737).

<sup>14</sup> William Hickee, *Coffee-House Jest*s (1671; rpt. London, 1686).

<sup>15</sup> *A Collection of Epigrams* (London, 1727).

\* II \*

The abundance of collections, whether physical museums or textual anthologies, evidences a new Enlightenment approach to monuments. Collecting projects present large arrays of fragments from the work of others, usually others from the past. Rather than presenting a new building or unveiling a new painting or transcribing a new fiction, collections create monumentality out of systematicity. Such monuments arise from the assembling and organizing of materials rather than from original genius. It is not uncommon for such undertakings to adopt a monumental veneer, whether the kind of untempered, colossal classicism of the Ashmolean Museum or the column-surrounded, antiquity-emulating frontispiece designs for wisdom collections. His immersion in such an unabashedly, heroically epigonous culture helps to explain the strange if successful career of an utterly canonical writer such as Alexander Pope, who began his career imitating ancient pastorals, who preached neoclassicism while devising unprecedented, innovative if often incoherent works such as *Windsor Forest*, and who ended his career as the most original as well as most furious practitioner of a mock-heroic genre that was already fifty years old if some fewer years out-of-date. Pope is routinely taken for granted by those who are happy to have an excerpt from the hilarious hunchback in the anthologies for their survey courses so that they can pay their dues to neoclassicism and then happily move on to a less prickly author. Yet it is no small wonder that the three Popean works that seem the least relevant to our time—*The Essay on Criticism*, *An Essay on Man*, and *The Rape of the Lock*—are precisely those that, at least in the colloquial sense, have proved the most sustainable, with even left-leaning anthologies such as those published by Broadview or Blackwell unable to delete them completely. It is impossible to argue that anyone recovers any learnable “content” from these works. No one fancies that “whatever is, is right,” and those who entertain a more refined version of this thesis look for guidance to the disciplined Leibniz rather than to the wildly buzzing Wasp of Twickenham. It is unlikely that many, in our troubled time, regard “Nature and Homer” as “the same.” Anyone who thinks it cute to purloin locks of hair will probably face arrest. However facetious these examples, they demonstrate that what sustains Pope’s reputation and place in literary curricula is his witty, concise, and always snappy epitomizing of the culture of amalgamation and management—his attempt to pool the resources, dare we say clichés, gleaned from thousands of years of scribbling into what appear to be a cooperative wholes, much in the same way that, nowadays, we cleverly find ways to assert

that one piece of the ecological puzzle, say, a microorganism abiding in an Amazonian river bend, stands in a crucial relationship to bacteria deep in the Antarctic ice cap. Sustainability, after all, is not about originality, but about conservation, minimization, and perhaps occasional surplus production. This is exactly what Pope does so well as he cobbles together vast if fragmented and reprocessed arrays of other people's ideas into works that seem to celebrate their lack of content while running on their own energy.

A fundamental feature of neoclassicism like Pope's is its strangely energetic, seemingly self-sustaining incongruity. From Sir Philip Sidney onward, the core challenge to those embracing the classical tradition has been the slight absurdity of living anachronistically in a half-complete simulacrum of antiquity. Anyone who has walked through a British or American college or university campus has had the strange experience of seeing a neoclassical classroom building standing side-by-side with a fiercely utilitarian chilled water plant and an ultramodern recital hall. Very seldom does the presence of a neoclassical artifact leave one feeling as if one were living in Athens or Rome or even in some modern remake of those ancient cities. Neoclassicism, whether in architecture or literature, demands that we see day-to-day experience through the lens of history and with an eye toward the cultural system as a whole. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to make sense of the displacements and mismatches that the idiom generates. The claim that neoclassicism prizes the unity of nature and art is not, however, altogether jejune. Seen from the longest perspective, it is precisely this sort of cheek-by-jowl incongruity that characterizes every ecosystem. The fish, after all, knows nothing of and bears no empirical similarity to the plants that oxygenate its water. Green ideologies also require that we see through and beyond the obvious, in much the same way that crazy old William Blake fancied that he saw god in the apple tree in his backyard in Lambeth. Anyone who has attended a putatively antiquity-inspired opera by Georg Friedrich Händel knows very well that attention to details (or probabilities) will ruin a performance that is based on seeing through and around more than a few inconsistencies.

Seeing around details in order to discover a more durable system enjoyed a high level of prominence throughout the eighteenth century. One thinks, for example, of John Gay's *Trivia*, where a seeming abundance of details slips into the background of the larger project, the construction of a cultural map of and survival guide for London; one thinks of the long stretches of time that are simply skipped in that most durable of classics, *Robinson Crusoe*; and one thinks of Robert Barker's later eighteenth-century panoramas, in which wraparound paintings of famous landscapes present detail in order to eclipse

it into an overall prospect. Disappearance, especially of detail, thus became a favorite topos of eighteenth-century writers. One of the great sensations of the later seventeenth century, for example, was a freak low tide that exposed an entire formerly submerged petrified forest. This unique event attracted multitudinous commentators, all of whom looked straight past both the forest and the trees in the hope of perceiving the place of this long-invisible woodland in sacred history. The arctic waters around volcanic Iceland were a favorite haunt for those in pursuit of isolated, odd, and above all ephemeral phenomena. Over the geologically active years of the eighteenth century, several islands came and went from these intermittent shores. French explorer Christophe Paulinde La Poix conducts a veritable symphony of vanishing aerial, geological, and oceanic events.

It was here [Iceland] that a very singular submarine phenomenon occurred, in 1783; the sea appeared covered with a light-bluish flame, through an extent of more than a mile; it lasted several hours, and occasioned a very great consternation among the inhabitants of the neighbouring coast. When the flame ceased, a small island appeared on the scite [sic], the surface of which was covered with pumice-stones and volcanic ashes. The islet since disappeared, probably by another convulsion of the same kind.<sup>16</sup>

La Poix succeeds in suggesting the operation of a complex system involving vulcanism, wave action, electricity, and more, all by seeing through and around what is no longer there. He is able to suggest the operation of numerous natural systems by invoking and then dismissing a very few, very ephemeral phenomena. He even suggests a kind of permanence, if not sustainability, inherent in the processes themselves, which seem to produce and dismiss islands routinely and regularly. So it is that another set of routinely appearing and vanishing natural monument, the great geysers of Iceland, also emerged, at the end of the Enlightenment, as favorite tourist destinations for affluent virtuosi. The cyclic predictability of geysers made their absent moments as well as speculation about the natural systems that drove them equally worth the long and icy walk as the eruptive spectacles themselves. So with the wide-ranging yet stationery tourism of that late-Enlightenment

<sup>16</sup> Christophe Paulinde La Poix, Chevalier de Ferminville, *Voyage To The North Pole, In the Frigate The Syrene; Including A Physical and Geographical Notice Relative To The Island of Iceland* (London, 1819), 86.

astronomer duet, William and Caroline Herschel, whose astral cartographic activity centered on the spaces between stars and on celestial venues that this most nocturnal of pairs would never visit. So with the eccentric Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, who, in an early effort at exobiology, inferred the existence of a full complement of both known and unknown plants and animals on an infinity of worlds that both he and, later, Fontenelle expected to discover amidst the ebony invisibilities of outer space.

At the very least, the Enlightenment has proved sustainable as a cultural memory and as an academic enterprise. Traces of the eighteenth-century discussion of this slightly elusive, invisibility-adapted idea appear in modern considerations of our environment as well as in the role that literary and intellectual-historical study play in our habitat. As understood by Herschel, More, Newton, Flamsteed, and countless others, space—the seemingly empty vessel into which the creator presumably dispensed the infinity or worlds—is the ultimate sustainable monument, the eternal environment into which any accomplishment or memorial, not matter how grand, may be set. Those eighteenth-century works that set themselves up as monuments—Thompson's *The Seasons*, William Byrd's *History of the Line*, Georg Forster's logbooks—relish the use of space, whether in sweeping settings or in accounts of vast travels or in the long-term act of occupying extensive areas on library shelves. In Europe, America, and the former British colonies, the national park movement is at least superficially associated with space, whether the vast open prairie of the former American west or the soaring vistas of the Rocky Mountains or the open meadows protected by British authorities. Indeed, the British National Park web site sports a title-level logo reading "Britain's Breathing Spaces."<sup>17</sup> The conception underlying the national park, however, has always been more contained, whether in attempts to close prospects within the photographic frame, as so splendidly imposed by sophisticated shutterbug Ansel Adams, or whether in the division between genuinely outdoorsy venues such as Yellowstone or Loch Lomond or Mount Cook from "historic" or other commemorative sites such as urban Boston's Freedom Trail or any of the hundreds of National Trust sites throughout the United Kingdom. On the United States National Park web site, four out of five rotating pictures are of historical rather than natural venues. Only one shows a truly "natural" setting.<sup>18</sup> Its British counterpart inserts moralizing suggestions within the picture frames, urging visitors to both natural and historic sites to engage

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/> (accessed 28 May 2014).

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.nps.gov/index.htm> (accessed 28 May 2014).

in self-improvement processes, exhorting vacationers to "aim higher," "look deeper," "breathe easier," and even "smile wider" while doing enriching tasks such as staring close-up at the trunk of an English oak. In all these images and admonitions we find the suggestion that some greater body of knowledge or insight, some very extensive system, is pushing out of and beyond the neatly arranged picture frames. We also find the countervailing insinuation that the best way to elicit this sense of systematicity is to stare deeply and intently at particular details that are taken on faith to epitomize and invoke the whole. Monuments as points of reference and objects of contemplation are especially prized by the various park services; indeed, historical objects are equated with natural monuments such as the Grand Canyon or Big Bend, at least to the extent that those vast reserves can be "seen deeply" by inspection of details.

The Enlightenment legacy of controlled expansiveness thus creates a division in the environmentalist mind. This split presents itself in the simultaneous affirmation of the value of the great outdoors, per the stereotype of a national park as a vast, undamaged, "natural" space, and the contrasting affirmation of the urgency of the historical, the urban, and the socially helpful, per the unexpected imaging of park services' efforts as centered on human-infested urban habitats. Once a natural venue is converted into or otherwise reconceived as a monument, the countervailing metropolitan mindset inevitably emerges. Part of this twinned mentality is a commitment to sustainability, which is also about the projection of moderating human management schemes onto landscapes or ecosystems that are anything but moderate, that, indeed, insofar as they count as "monumental," are rather more colossal and sublime than manageable.

Especially in America, with its disappointed former confidence in the endlessness of the frontier, the dialogue between the colossal and the historic, the genuinely natural and the culturally sustainable, produces hybrid phenomena in which manifestations of nature take the form of colossal expressions of restrictive human management. Only a few blocks from my residence, for example, a gigantic inflatable gorilla rears up over a building supply dealership, hoisting its arms into the air in a gesture of enthusiasm for sturdy forestry products that have traveled to the adjacent shop over great distances and thereby incorporating the wild, the jungle, and an assortment of stereotypes into the image of a "nature" that is productive, durable, monumental yet mobile, and, above all, sustainable. The old movie *King Kong* plays out a similar set of ideas, culminating, as it does, with the entanglement of a colossal gorilla in the monumental Empire State Building. Certainly the American interstate highway system, along with the assortment of European superhighway networks

that it inspired, imports the natural idea of an unblocked circulatory system into the provision of a well-organized view of the totality of the vast landscape. Remarkably, the American interstate highway system has engendered a secondary ecosystem, the hedgerows comprising the highway verges and medians being one of the largest continuous habitats in the world.

Of special interest in the long cultural history of Enlightenment-inspired sustainability ideals is the history of that ultimate travel experience, the space program, whether in America, Europe, or now Asia. Originating in a desire to probe the far reaches of what was once called “outer space,” the world’s various space programs quickly took pictures of earth and discovered that we are already floating in the “outer” reaches of the spacious abysm. With the disappearance of the “outer” in “outer space” and with the recognition that from elevated viewpoints the foreign—in this case, the cosmic—was the same as the domestic, the emphasis on space travel shifted from exploration of the weird unknown to the maintenance of habitats—to sustainability. Hence the replacement of the forward-moving Saturn V rocket with the condominium-style Space Shuttle and hence the preoccupation with the duration—again, the sustainability—of visits to the high habitat of the International Space Station. Even daring private undertakings such as the “Mars One” proposal to send brave, altruistic, and possibly sociopathic sky sailors on a one-way mission to Mars focus less on the sheer immensity of the undertaking than on the creation of a compact, manageable, sustainable habitat on alien planets.<sup>19</sup>

The popular projection of such ultimate journeys has also reiterated the long story of sustainability. Two staples of cinema science fiction are spaceships and alien life forms. With regard to the first of these, it is easy enough to see that early science fiction fixated on propulsion: on naive images of designer-drawn, streamlined, missile-like objects that accomplished the task of space travel at any cost, through fuel-burning flames streaming from rocket tails. Contemporary science fiction, by contrast, focuses on interiors. Images of linear rockets hurtling through space now count as retro; cinematic fashion calls for dark spacecraft interiors that combine postindustrial chic with suggestions of refugee camps as well as of undefined mechanical menaces. The citizens of space have simultaneously metamorphosed from monstrous aliens who wreak havoc or who impose dictatorial, crypto-communist regimes into, first, benign neonate creatures such as those seen in Stephen Spielberg’s *ET*

<sup>19</sup> For a rendering of this simultaneously immense and compact extra-planetary dwelling concept, see the Mars One web site, <http://www.mars-one.com/mission/roadmap> (accessed 20 April 2015).

and now, in recent times, into enigmatic, morphologically diverse beings who either want to hybridize with the human species or to help with ecological crises or, in sum, to promote sustainability, albeit in an invisible way, from ships that are nowadays rendered as semitransparent or that are presumed to be hidden deep within secret bunkers.<sup>20</sup>

To make a bit of an aviation pun, the suspicion-corrupted hope that enigmatic aliens may remotely promote ecological awareness from control panels aboard their spacecraft marks a new high point in the long story that began with James Howell. Confidence in an unseen ensemble of technologically elevated savvy beings brings to its highest pitch Howell's battle to relate the expanding story, the intricate meaning, and the complex management of nature to nature itself. Indeed, many practitioners of both science fiction and exobiology enjoy speculating that alleged alien visitors have traveled not only through space but through time, that they have returned from our future and from the endpoint of our efforts at unnatural, human-guided "natural" selection so as to help their predecessors and to stabilize the forerunner of their own environment. Howell would delight in this effort to force the entire content, meaning, and management of the future into our little patch of forest. Lest we think that such speculations are the province only of the deranged or underemployed, let us remember that much of mainstream literary study involves the heavy critique of the behavior of those who went before us: those who wrought the mayhem as well as the magic of the ever-lengthening eighteenth century. The academic habit of congregating in departments, of trying to carry out interdisciplinary and other far-ranging enterprises within academic boroughs or in professing inability to evaluate the work of promotion-worthy colleagues who slip beyond the local sector of the forest of knowledge, is also a tale about trying to find the complex meaning of academic life in but one tray in the garden center. So is the habit, in progressive universities, of seeming to integrate newly discovered material that crosses the territorial borders of departments, disciplines, canons, or curricula by establishing separate programs or "silos" in which interdisciplinarity must

<sup>20</sup> An argument could be made that the uptick in interest in alien life coincides with an intensifying alienation from nature that began with the rise of modern science during the Enlightenment and that has taken an unfortunately intimidating turn in the form of global warming scares and other anticipations of global catastrophes. Popular media abound in programming that forges a link between alien life and the response of environmental threats. Currently available programming that stresses this theme includes *Hangar One* (History Channel); *Ancient Aliens* (History Channel); *NASA's Unexplained Files* (Discovery Science Channel); *Alien Encounters* (Discovery Science Channel); and *UFO Files* (History Channel).



express itself within the confines of a “center.” Liberal arts departments have attempted to demonstrate their relevance to the contemporary obsession with the creation of trained workforces by boasting that study of the humanities confers a saleable capacity for “critical thinking”; unfortunately, that retreat into a diluted abstraction lessens rather than increases the measurable content of lettered curricula and thereby discourages a far more necessary attempt to reaffirm the status of the liberal arts as a body of valuable knowledge and as the source of the narrative that has made “sustainability” a worldwide topic of educated conversation as well as of technological advances. Whatever our fate might be as citizens of what James Howell might call the “vocal forest” of chatty academe, whether or not unknown life forms hover over some secret project in the New Mexico desert, it is nonetheless cheering to recognize that the Enlightenment-sponsored story of sustainability is still being told and that, in opening the conference at Gardens by the Bay and in closing it at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Samara Cahill, the organizer of the 2014 “Sustainable Networks” conference, allowed conferees to experience, in but three days, a condensed version of the three-hundred year history of this tale, from the creations of well-managed gardens to the advent of, if not quite bio-mechanical life forms, hybrid life-sustaining and beauty-creating habitats.