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Ekaterina Kochetkova

Glooms and Solitudes of Superior Gardens: Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Little Sparta and its 16th-Century Alter Ego

Article

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur deux jardins qui illustrent parfaitement des attitudes peu orthodoxes envers la création de jardins : Little Sparta en Écosse de Ian Hamilton Finlay et Sacro Bosco de Vicino Orsini à Bomarzo en Italie. Les deux jardins contiennent des témoignages artistiques sur des sujets de vie et de mort, d’amour et de séparation, de danger et de violence, parsemés de nombreuses références philosophiques et littéraires, et parfois d’étincelles d’humour. À Bomarzo, une sélection particulière de personnages et d’épisodes de la mythologie classique et de la romance chevaleresque de la Renaissance aboutit à une vision non conventionnelle de l’univers où les mondes des vivants et des morts sont inséparablement liés et entrent en contact. Little Sparta est rempli de nostalgie pour la civilisation classique, qui est paradoxalement liée à l’histoire moderne, en particulier celle de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale. La juxtaposition des deux sites révèle des liens qui traversent les siècles et les géographies, mettant en lumière les fondements mélancoliques des jardins classiques et contemporains.

Abstract

This paper is focused on two gardens that serve as perfect examples of unorthodox attitudes toward garden-making : Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Little Sparta in Scotland and Vicino Orsini’s Sacro Bosco at Bomarzo, Italy. Both gardens contain artistic statements on matters of life and death, love and separation, danger and violence, peppered with numerous philosophical and literary references, and occasional sparks of humor. In Bomarzo, a peculiar selection of characters and episodes from classical mythology and Renaissance chivalric romance results in an unconventional vision of the universe where the worlds of the living and the dead are inseparably linked and come into contact. Little Sparta is filled with nostalgia for classical civilization, which is paradoxically related to modern history, especially that of World War II. The juxtaposition of the two sites reveals connections that span across centuries and geographies, bringing to light the melancholic underpinnings of classical and contemporary gardens.

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Texte intégral
Gardens are mostly perceived as perfect microcosms of delight and poetic meditation. However, darker moods also find their ways into designed landscapes. One of the most intriguing examples of the latter tendency is the garden of **Little Sparta** near Edinburgh, a masterwork by Scottish artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay. This is a space filled with anxiety and provocation, where classical themes are used to ponder philosophical matters of life and death, love and separation, war and violence, with occasional sparks of humor. A counterpart of this distinctive approach to garden-making can be found in 16th-century Italy – the controversial **Sacro Bosco** at Bomarzo, created by Vicino Orsini. This paper aims at juxtaposing the two sites to reveal connections that span across centuries and geographies, thus bringing to light the melancholic underpinnings of classical and contemporary gardens.

The underlying motive for such «contrasted comparison» is the unique position that **Little Sparta** occupies in the broad spectrum of modern and contemporary landscape sites. The majority of them are essentially spaces of garden *design* – that is, spaces beautifully composed from a purely aesthetic viewpoint, but often lacking any serious symbolic framework. **Little Sparta** presents a striking contrast to this tendency, as it follows the line of classical garden-making, in which every decorative element constitutes a part of a complex iconographical program and is intended for *reading* and *interpretation* as well as for *looking* and *enjoyment*. In this respect, Finlay’s most obvious inspiration sources are English and French gardens of the Enlightenment – an epoch that fascinated the 20th-century artist. However, it was through the lens of the 18th century that Finlay looked at deeper historical strata – namely, Antiquity, which is always the starting point whenever the term «classical» is employed. Unfortunately, Finlay couldn’t possibly draw upon the gardens of Antiquity themselves, as most of them disappeared and are known from scattered and incomplete sources. In this light, gardens of the Italian Renaissance present a crucial intermediary step, connecting Modernity to Antiquity, so it would be tempting to inquire in what degree Finlay could borrow from that cultural milieu. Another argument supporting the proposed methodology is the fact that Italian Renaissance gardens set the patterns for later developments in landscape art, whether they belong to «formal» French or «picturesque» English schools. Moreover, the connections between Finlay and the 18th century have been studied extensively – so this paper intentionally overlooks the gardens of Enlightenment and aims at exploring the primary sources from Renaissance times.

Among Renaissance and Mannerist gardens, the **Sacro Bosco** at Bomarzo also occupies a unique position as it breaks with the conventions of «formal» architectonic landscaping associated with 15th- and 16th-century style. However, the most important distinction is not even the design but rather the iconography: unlike most Renaissance gardens recreating the idea of the «earthly paradise», Bomarzo goes dark, offering instead the disturbing images of hell and the «other» side of classical mythology. Finlay was known for his interest in unconventional literary and visual sources, as well as for his grim humor – so, it seems plausible that, for him, Bomarzo could represent an important example of a «gloomy» garden space, which explains iconographical and emotional similarities between **Little Sparta** and **Sacro Bosco**. As Bomarzo was a standalone artwork of the 16th century, so **Little Sparta** is a standalone piece in its own time, and comparing them may lead to some interesting conclusions about Finlay’s prototypes other than the well-known 18th-century ones.

**Kindred Spirits, or Some Biographical Notes**

Surprisingly enough, initial points of contact emerge in the biographical details of the two men who owned and designed their personal landscapes. Duke Pierfrancesco or Vicino Orsini (1523–1585) was an extraordinary *uomo di lettere*, coming from an ancient and influential Roman family. His areas of interest included history and archaeology, poetry and drama, philosophy and medical science, and even alchemy and magic. After taking part in several military campaigns, he was disillusioned with social activity and withdrew to Bomarzo, halfway between Rome and Florence, with his beloved wife Giulia Farnese. However, she died prematurely in 1557, and from then on Vicino took refuge in his
Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006) had his share of frustration, too. During World War II, he was too young to take up arms, and yet the events of those years had a profound impact on him, leaving him forever disappointed with political authorities and, largely, humankind. In 1966, he retreated to a small country estate inherited by his wife Sue, at Stonypath, in the Pentland Hills south of Edinburgh, and almost never left the place until his death, dedicating all his time to the garden he named *Little Sparta*. Just like Vicino Orsini, Finlay was a self-educated intellectual with a special inclination toward history, philosophy, and the Classics.

There are similarities in the way the two gardens were created, the first of them being the role that the owners played in the process. For Bomarzo, there are several hypotheses ascribing the project to different 16th-century artists and architects, including Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, Pirro Ligorio, and Bartolomeo Ammannati, though neither of these attributions is certain. However, it is clear that Vicino Orsini himself was the man behind the concept of the park and may also have designed some sculptures. Likewise, Ian Hamilton Finlay came up with ideas and sketches, though almost never created physical objects with his own hands; instead, he called in stone-carvers, typographers, printmakers, ceramicists, and other craftsmen. Often, it was all done by correspondence only, but nearly always, it was peer-to-peer collaboration rather than just commissioning. Of course, in the majority of historic gardens, the personality, taste, and ideas of the owners lay the foundations of their iconographical program and formal structure. However, in most cases the artist or gardener acts as a mediator, whereas Bomarzo and *Little Sparta* were born entirely in the minds of their owners-cum-creators, which means a far greater degree of involvement and some quite intimate insights emanating from these landscapes.

The Sacred Grove as Spatial Concept

Though these biographical coincidences may be indicative, the proposed comparison of the two gardens aims at transcending them and pointing out more important similarities of the two works in design and, most of all, iconography. Firstly, both gardens are similar in their spatial organization, as they both belong to the compositional type that originated in Renaissance Italy as *bosco* (grove) and was later developed in the «picturesque» garden style of 18th-century England. This type of landscaping creates an illusion of the environment unaffected by man’s hand, with no obvious geometrical layout, no «prescribed» paths or movement directions, natural-looking ground, water, and planting. In reality, this «naturalness» is a carefully constructed illusion, an artistic trick, as everything is planned and «retouched» to produce the desired look. Both *Little Sparta* and Bomarzo play with this idea of «naturalness», as their sculptures, fountains, inscriptions, architectural fragments and other decorative elements seemingly «spring» out of uneven terrain and «wild» greenery.

In both cases, the landscape evoked is predominantly a wooded one, which involves a number of symbolic connotations. Woods and groves have always been seen as sacred spaces populated by spirits and deities and, at the same time, as dark and dangerous places that conceal secrets and threats. In Bomarzo, these associations are closely related to the literary tradition of Renaissance chivalric romance, where action typically takes place in an enchanted forest. Some sculptures at *Sacro Bosco* closely reproduce or at least interpret images and scenes from Renaissance novels: to name but a few, a group of wrestling giants is associated with the episode from Lodovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* where Orlando goes mad and dismembers a lumberman; a turtle and a sea monster placed next to each other remind of Alidoro’s trials in Bernardo Tasso’s *L’Amadigi*; a guardian dragon appears in numerous literary sources, including *L’Amadigi* and Matteo Maria Boiardo’s *Orlando innamorato*.

In *Little Sparta*, the connection with Renaissance literature takes a different turn – instead of
iconographical borrowings, Finlay is more interested in dramatic love stories. On the trees of his garden, one can find three ceramic plaques with the names of famous literary couples: Ænone and Paris from Ovid’s *Heroides V*, Angelica and Medoro from *Orlando furioso*, and Rosalind and Orlando from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. These plaques continue the age-long practice of lovers carving their names on tree-trunks to « tie the knot ». For Finlay, the very idea of a forest is also extremely important (even the words « forest », « wood » or « grove » appear frequently in the garden inscriptions): the site is located on marshy grounds, and trees were purposefully planted in and around the garden to protect it from winds and create an intimate space contrasting with the surrounding landscape. Ann Uppington, who used to work as a gardener for Finlay, described Little Sparta as « a cocoon, sheltered by the trees from brutal weather, a sacred grove – not a clearing in the woods but a wood in the clearing ».

**Terza Natura, Its Delights and Dangers**

10 The ambiguity of collaborations between art and nature probably constitutes the core of all gardening and landscaping practices. Thus, 16th-century art theorists denominate it as *terza natura* (« the third nature »). For example, in 1541, Jacopo Bonfadio writes about his villa on Lake Garda and mentions that « […] nature incorporated with art is made an artificer and naturally equal with art, and from them both together is made a third nature, which I would not know how to name ». The interplay between the natural and the artificial is manifested in numerous objects in both gardens studied in this paper. For example, in Bomarzo one can find a knobby, moss-grown tree trunk that appears, upon closer inspection, to be a sculpture made of stone. In Little Sparta, a stone nest is installed in the branches of a tree – and birds readily use it to raise their offspring.

11 The duality and deceptiveness of nature are perceived by creators of both gardens in a philosophical vein, to which numerous inscriptions found *in situ* testify. On the one hand, both places convey the idea of a perfect microcosm that harmonizes the visitor, too – a common ground for most historic gardens. A gate leading to Little Sparta proclaims: « A cottage, a field, a plough – there is happiness », referencing the simple pleasures of country life and agricultural labor, praised by ancient poets. Finlay strongly believes in the classical notion of nature as a transforming force, which is able to bring out the best in every man; he announces in a tree-plaque: « All the noble sentiments of my heart, all its praiseworthy impulses – I could give them free rein, in the midst of this solitary wood ». To experience such « turn for the better », one needs to be sensitive, open-minded, and prepared for awe and admiration upon encountering the miracles of art and nature. Thus, in Bomarzo, two sphynxes greet the visitors at the entrance and warn them: « Those with arched brows and tight lips, don’t come to this place should you not admire the famous Seven Wonders of the World ».

12 On the other hand, what starkly differentiates both gardens studied here from numerous other landscape sites is precisely their emotional setting: instead of the more conventional « high spirits », in Little Sparta and Bomarzo the visitor is engulfed in a pensive state of mind, in anxiety and unrest, and even suspense. These troubling feelings are sometimes concealed innocuously: thus, an inscription on an obelisk in Sacro Bosco seemingly explains that the place serves « just to unburden the heart »; however, a deeper meaning is revealed through the analysis of possible sources of the phrase. It is a combination of two citations from Renaissance sonnets: one was written by Vittoria Colonna when her husband passed away, and another one – by Petrarch to commemorate the death of his fellow poet Cino da Pistoia. Thus, Vicino Orsini intended his park as a healing of pain after having lost his wife. Finlay shared this suggestive mood, claiming that « superior gardens are composed of Gloom and Solitudes and not of plants and trees ».}

**Garden Philosophy and Its Classical Origins**
That being said, Finlay’s and Orsini’s gardens are also composed of numerous classical references, as both makers were very fond of Antiquity and felt rather nostalgic about it. Above all, classical philosophy lays the foundation for the mindsets of both in their search for « the middle way » somewhere in between the austerity of Stoicism and the light-heartedness of Epicureanism. It is no coincidence that, in Little Sparta, the busts of Zeno of Citium and Epicurus flank a straight and narrow pathway through the garden. Vicino Orsini’s views are expressed in inscriptions found in his palace at Bomarzo, for example: « Eat, drink, play – there is no pleasure after death. Spurn all the mundane – true pleasure comes after death. The blessed keep to the middle ». This « middle way » is also expressed in the well-known motto of Emperor Augustus – *Festina lente* (« Hasten slowly »), which often reappears in philosophy and literature, as well as in gardens. In 1499, it is illustrated in the famous novel *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* as a dolphin coiling around an anchor; in Bomarzo, it is embodied in a winged female figure atop a turtle; in Little Sparta, it gains the form of a flail tank intertwined with the testicles of a sea creature.

Whereas Vicino Orsini seems more serious and more inclined towards Stoic philosophy, Finlay prefers the ease and tranquility of Epicureanism. He references the Greek thinker in three « Epicurean Plaques »: the first of them marks an allotment and defines it as « a garden of Epicurus », thus transporting the visitor from today’s Scotland to ancient Athens. The second one presents a quote ascribed to Epicurus by Diogenes Laërtius: « Blest youth, set sail in your bark and flee from every form of culture ». The third one reads as « Live unknown. E*****s » and presents the philosopher’s motto and name in a fittingly, yet ironically inconspicuous way. Finlay’s mild humor and his take on philosophy are also manifested in « Hegelian Stile », a construction typical of British countryside but interpreted along the lines of Hegel’s dialectics, where a fence is seen as « thesis », a gate – as « antithesis », and a stile – as « synthesis ». And indeed, a stile rests somewhere in the middle between a fence that divides spaces and a gate that unites them, which adds a practical dimension to « garden philosophy ».

**Genius Loci as a Principle of Historical Continuity**

Sweet nostalgia for classical civilization is expressed in both gardens not only through philosophy and literature, but also through the theme of *genius loci*. Among its many incarnations, the most eloquent one is discovered in images of water and sea, which is rather paradoxical, as neither Bomarzo nor Stonypath are located anywhere near actual seashores. Bomarzo abounds in marine symbols, including dolphins, leviathans, and Proteus, the shape-changing sea god. There is also a traditional garden element – a nymphaeum, where the inscription references a spring with beneficial water: « The cave, the spring and the gleeful sky liberate the soul of every dark thought ». In classical culture, a spring is associated with creativity and poetic inspiration, which are most likely to flourish in nature’s lap – this is why water sources and fountains of all kinds are at the heart of every garden. They abound in Little Sparta; thus, in the farthest corner of the garden, a tiny stream of water leaks out of a stone with a bilingual quote borrowed from Virgil, Finlay’s favorite ancient author:

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HIC

GELIDI FONTES

Here are cool springs

HIC
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17Nearby, where the stream grows stronger, a small bridge is built over it, marked as « CLAVDI », which refers to *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: « Here lies a tiny excerpt from a longer water»

« Longer water » mentioned here points not only to the irrigation system concealed underground but, more importantly, to large lengths of sea – and the commonplace pond is poetically transformed into the realm of Neptune.

18There is an even more direct geographical indication in another part of the garden – a plaque reading « MARE NOSTRUM », clearly pointing at a very specific sea, the Mediterranean, the cradle of classical civilization.

Ian Hamilton Finlay & Nicholas Sloan, *Mare Nostrum*, 1978

Portland stone *Little Sparta*, Stonypath, Scotland

Elena Cheban & Natalia Tkachenko for Gardener.ru

19Until 2010, this plaque was mounted on the trunk of a giant ash-tree – the oldest tree on the premises, which for Finlay embodied the spirit of the place, just like the spirit of the Mediterranean was present in the universe of ancient Greeks and Romans. A storm took the tree down, and the plaque was relocated to the low drystone wall nearby. At the foot of the tree, the inscription on the bench continues the theme of the sea: « THE SEA’S WAVES · THE WAVES’ SHEAVES · THE SEA’S NAVES », with a wordplay involving connotations of country life and sacred space. In this context, the new placement of the plaque draws the viewer’s gaze toward the green « sea » of
surrounding fields with cows as « ships » sailing in the waves. And the modest stone fence, labeled as « MARE NOSTRUM », instantly turns almost into « Hadrian’s Wall », marking the borders of Antiquity on the British soil, just south of Scotland. As for the trunk of the ash-tree, it is left intact as a sad and powerful reminder of the lost classical culture that Finlay misses so much. He expresses his longing in the words put in the mouth of Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, one of the leaders of the French Revolution: « The world has been empty since the Romans »31.

Into the Darkness: Bold Iconographical Choices

20 The above mentioned inscription is set upon a stone block modeled as the fragment of an ancient ruin, which opens up the themes of decay, destruction and violence – quite an unusual repertoire for pleasure gardens. This disturbing spirit is felt in the very first object that the visitor encounters along the road approaching the garden – the so-called « Monument to the First Battle of Little Sparta ». This fragment of a brick wall is decorated with two bronze plaques: the lower one carries the date « February 4, 1983 » while the upper one depicts a machine-gun and a citation from Virgil’s Eclogue VIII: « Flute, begin with me », referred to as « Arcadian Notes ». This peculiar combination of word and image is a reminder of the episode when Finlay took a stand against local authorities, unwilling to pay taxes for an old barn in his property. Finlay’s friends and neighbors volunteered to protect his estate from the sheriff who confronted them at the very spot where the « Monument » stands. The sheriff was forced to withdraw, and Finlay’s « vigilantes » celebrated victory. In fact, this event gave Little Sparta its name: before 1983, the place was known under the geographical title of Stonypath, but after « the Little Spartan War » the garden was renamed to emphasize the conflict between Finlay’s small and independent « Sparta » and the officials from Edinburgh, known as « Athens of the North32 ». Having chosen such a name for his garden, Finlay intentionally raised his banal skirmish with the sheriff to the level of age-old rivalry between two city-states of Ancient Greece, and declared his estate an heir to the lineage of classical culture.

21 Antiquity and warfare are weirdly intertwined in Little Sparta33. The very same barn that triggered the conflict with the sheriff was converted into a « Temple of Apollo » by means of paint, stencil and some gilding. The dedication on the façade reads: « To Apollo, his music, his missiles, his muses », missiles boldly advertised above the front door. Around the corner, there is an ædicule with a miniature statue of Apollo copied from Bernini’s famous group; however, instead of Daphne, the god seizes a machine-gun – in Finlay’s interpretation, weaponry from the times of World War II replacing the traditional bow and arrows. Another image of Apollo is found in the wooded part of the garden – here, his golden head is stigmatized as « Apollon Terroriste ». Thus, Finlay bypasses the popular connotations of Apollo and turns to the earliest, darker, chthonian meanings.

Ian Hamilton Finlay & Alexander Stoddart, Apollon Terroriste, 1987
A similar approach can be seen in Bomarzo, where a very specific selection from the classical pantheon is represented. Here, gods of the underworld reign supreme, signaling the most important aspects of the garden’s iconography, such as life and death, the oscillation of the universe between chaos and cosmos, the flow of time and eternity. In part, this symbolic orientation of Sacro Bosco is due to the fact that Bomarzo is situated in the middle of former Etruscan lands, and associations with this most ancient period of Italian history were very important for many 16th-century intellectuals. There are several Etruscan necropoli around Bomarzo34, and Sacro Bosco, with its shady, overgrown trees and coarse, weather-beaten sculptures hewn of grey local stone, somewhat resembles those archaic cities of the dead. Hence, there are numerous elements in the park that create direct points of contact between «this world» and «another one», such as a rather scary open grave, a rotunda reminiscent of Etruscan tumuli, a giant vase in the form of a funerary urn, or a small temple decorated with wreaths, skulls and other symbols of mourning. Probably the best-known image of Bomarzo – the grotto concealed beneath the mask of Orcus – is designed, literally, as a portal to the underworld, its gaping mouth inscribed with «…every thought flies…35», which certainly rhymes with Dante’s famous verse36.

Orcus, c. 1552–1585
In classical culture, death and dreams are often compared; for example, the so-called « Etruscan Bench » in Bomarzo reproduces the traditional form of sarcophagi or deathbeds in sepulchral chambers, where the deceased were often depicted in the state of slumber. In Little Sparta, this juxtaposition is presented in two matching stones dedicated to the twin gods Hypnos and Thanatos37.

*Etruscan Bench*, c. 1552–1585
Limestone *Sacro Bosco*, Bomarzo, Italy

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24 The most important image of this kind in *Sacro Bosco* is the figure of the sleeping nymph— an embodiment of « *Et in Arcadia ego* », the motif introduced in Virgil’s *Eclogues* (V: 40–44) and frequently resurfacing in the history of art.38

*SLEEPING NYMPH*, c. 1552–1585
Limestone *Sacro Bosco*, Bomarzo, Italy

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Finlay creates his own variations on this theme, placing numerous gravestone-like objects in his garden: a classical obelisk marked as « The Resting Place of Claudius », modest stones with a philosophical « MAN A PASSERBY » or an even more laconic « FRAGILE », a stele prompting to « BRING BACK THE BIRCH », or an actual grave of the artist’s cat with a classical epitaph : « HERE I REST / HERE I STAY / OUR CAT / 1977·1993 ». A more elaborate composition is presented as a table-like « cenotaph » on a tiny island in the middle of a pond.

Ian Hamilton Finlay & Michael Harvey, *Silver Cloud*, 1972
This spot is designated as «Poplar Island» in a corresponding tree-plaque, which clearly refers to, perhaps the most famous grave in a garden, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s resting place in Ermenonville, the estate of Marquis René-Louis de Girardin. In 1778, Rousseau was buried here in a classical sarcophagus placed on a circular island planted with poplars – the whole composition designed by Hubert Robert. In Little Sparta, the form of Rousseau’s sarcophagus is reproduced in miniature, yet in another corner of the garden; as for the «table tomb» on the island, it bears an inscription that has no connection with the French philosopher:

SILVER CLOUD
‘standing out to sea’
SILVER CLOUD
‘becalmed’
SILVER CLOUD
‘towing’
SILVER CLOUD
‘tacking in a light wind’
27Parts of this inscription are borrowed from a popular sailing manual, where they serve as captions for illustrations depicting various weather conditions and instructions on appropriate ship handling. However, in the context of Finlay’s garden, these descriptions are perceived as ages of human existence, physical and mental states of man, much like in Caspar David Friedrich’s The Stages of Life (1835, Museum of Fine Arts, Leipzig, Germany), where the ships floating near the shore or sailing away to the horizon “rhyme” with the characters in the foreground.

28In Bomarzo, the philosophical perception of death resonates with some episodes from Vicino Orsini’s biography. Notably, the armed elephant carrying the body of a legionary, and the dragon fighting with wolf-like beasts are reminders of battles that the duke had to withstand during the Italian Wars. Events from the real world are mixed with mythological ones, and the next ordeals to pass are figures of Echidna, one of the Furies, and Cerberus that guard the final portion of the garden.

Fury, c. 1552–1585
Curiously, in *Sacro Bosco*, the traditional model of the world is inverted: inhabitants of the underworld are placed in the upper terraces of the site, whereas beneficent Olympic gods occupy the lower parts of it. And the movement of the visitor is organized in such a way that one ascends the physical hill, yet at the same time symbolically descends in limbo. And there, amid alarming images of hell, one reaches the temple, which crowns the top of the hill and serves as the culmination point in the garden’s iconography. It is considered to be the mortuary temple of Vicino’s wife Giulia Farnese, though no actual signs of a burial were found there. This structure indicates “the point of no return” where Vicino himself and the visitor to his garden have to cross the threshold of the netherworld, blurring the boundaries of life and death.

That transition between the real, the imaginary and the unimaginable is brilliantly and quite unconventionally manifested in *Little Sparta*. Yet again, Finlay links the classical cosmology with recent events of World War II, stressing the continuity of history from Antiquity to the present. For example, a truncated column serves as a memorial to the so-called «Dido class cruisers» that were torpedoed and perished during the war. The quotation from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “and reached out longing hands to the far shore”, refers to the moment when the lost souls beg Charon to ferry them over to the kingdom of the dead, and evokes the tragic outcomes of modern warfare.

Finlay was well-versed in military history, but what fascinated him most of all were the naval battles of World War II. For him, ships were not just sophisticated machinery, but rather living creatures, each with her own character, soul, and fate. This romantic attitude was partly rooted in the distant memories of the artist’s childhood in Bermuda, where his father was a smuggler and bootlegger. Ships are everywhere in *Little Sparta* – to fit them in the intimate space of the garden, Finlay plays with scale, material, and context. For example, miniature models of aircraft carriers are turned into bird-feeding tables that «float» in the «sea» of greenery – thus, deadly weapons are «domesticated», and their gravity mitigated.

Ian Hamilton Finlay & John Andrew, *Aircraft Carrier Bird Table (Iwo Jima)*, 1975
At the same time, a paper boat is made of marble and put onto a high pedestal, becoming a touching monument to its own fragility. In another object, «The Last Cruise of the Emden» is dubbed «Kleiner Kreuzer Sonata», evoking the emotional intensity of Beethoven’s music and the drama of Leo Tolstoy’s eponymous novella, and linking them to the story of Emden cruiser blown up by the Germans on 3 May 1945 to prevent the Allies from capturing her.47

Yet another romantic interpretation of naval history is presented in the composition entitled «Camouflaged Flowers».

Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Brazenell & John Andrew, Camouflaged Flowers, 2001
Brick, bronze plaques Little Sparta, Stonypath, Scotland

Rebecca DeWald for the Glasgow Review of Books

34It consists of six brick stelae, five of which carry copper silhouettes of warships and plaques with anagrammatic words: VERLEAND, INCOMAP, YUPSHONALT, TIMENATOBR and TEGARBMO. The sixth stele provides the solutions to the anagrams, which appear to be names of flowers: LAVENDER, CAMPION, POLYANTHUS, MONTBRETIA, BERGAMOT. They refer to the « Flower-class corvettes » of the Royal Navy that were called with plant names to « camouflage » them in radio transmissions. Some of the flowers mentioned above are planted near the stelae to underline the sharp contrast between their gentle nature and the violent way those ships met their end at war.

35Thus, the analysis of iconographical sources and imagery of Little Sparta and Sacro Bosco demonstrates that their creators had analogous views on the mood that should prevail in their gardens and the impact they should have on visitors. By an odd coincidence, both owners of the two gardens were kindred spirits – being men of great learning, they eventually developed philosophical and rather pessimistic mindsets, which brought them to nostalgia for the idealized version of Antiquity. Both sites are similar in spatial organization, prioritizing the illusion of natural-looking landscape over formal planning schemes, and making the idea of a « sacred grove » central to their design and symbolism. Both spaces abound in inscriptions that expand the meanings of sculptures and other elements, and require attentive and well-educated viewers, as the chosen words and lines may often be enigmatic. The iconography of both gardens heavily relies on classical mythology, the theme of genius loci serving as a key for expressing the awareness of historical continuity spanning across centuries and civilizations. The specific choice of subjects, stories and characters is highly unconventional in both Little Sparta and Bomarzo: instead of delightful images common for pleasure gardens, themes of danger, violence, war and death prevail, filling both landscapes with an unmistakably gloomy atmosphere.

36These two artistic statements are very personal, deeply rooted in biographies and opinions of
Vicino Orsini and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Both were outstanding personalities with a peculiar sense of humor who perceived their gardens as spaces of sweet nostalgia and light melancholy, as well as those of doubt, questioning, and controversy. For both, the gardens served as private sanctuaries and even hiding-places, and yet they were intended for thoughtful and sharp-witted audiences able to comprehend that « certain gardens are described as retreats when they are really attacks ».

Notes

1 An example of Finlay’s interest in 18th-century gardens can be seen in a Christmas card that he produced in 1966. The front side of the card represents an engraved view of Stourhead, one of the best-known English estates. Inside the folded card, the following statement can be found « (Classical) landscape, n. a stand of concepts ». Thus, Finlay perceives the 18th-century landscape as a repository of ideas, images, and motifs that can be used in modern works. Stourhead is a prime example of the recreation of Antiquity in gardens of the Enlightenment; the temple on Finlay’s card is a version of the Roman Pantheon, and quotes from Virgil are placed in numerous spots of the estate. In his turn, Finlay aspires to revive Antiquity in the 20th century. See John Dixon Hunt, Nature Over Again. The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay, London, Reaktion Books, 2008, p. 100-101.


5 This results in numerous and sometimes controversial interpretations of Bomarzo’s iconography, and the garden is most commonly referred to as « mysterious ». See Julie Authoff, Il sacro bosco d’amore. Communication through Desire [A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Architecture (History and Theory)], Montréal, McGill University, 1999; Anne Belanger, Bomarzo ou les Incertitudes de la lecture. Figure de la meraviglia dans un jardin maniériste du XVIe siècle, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007; Leonardo Benevelo, « Saggio d’interpretazione storica del Sacro Bosco »,


13 Matteo Maria BOIARDO, *Orlando innamorato*, II : IV : 5-6.


18 *Chì con ciglia inarcate / et labbra strette / non va per questo loco / manco ammira / le fameose del mondo / moli sette*. Hereinafter, unless stated otherwise, all inscriptions in *Sacro Bosco* are quoted.
from: Giuseppe ZANDER, art. cit.

19 Sol per sfragare il core.

20 « Scrivo sol per sfogar l’interna doglia / ch’al cor mandar le lucci al mondo sole, / e non per giunger lume al mio bel Sole, / al chiaro spirto e a l’onorata spoglia ». See Vittoria COLONNA, Rime amorose, I.

21 « Io per me prego il mio acerbo dolore, / non sian da lui le lagrime contese, / et mi sia di sospir’ tanto cortese, / quanto bisogna a disfogare il core ». See Francesco PETRARCA, Canzoniere, XCII.

22 For more on connections between chivalric literature and Bomarzo, see Maurizio CALVEZI, « Bomarzo e i poemi cavallereschi. Le fonti delle iscrizioni », in Arte Documento, 1989, n° 3, p. 142-153.

23 Finlay followed the tradition of 18th-century garden theorists (notably William Shenstone and his Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening, 1764) and expressed his views in the aphoristic « Unconnected Sentences on Gardening » (in some sources also referred to as « Detached Sentences on Gardening »). He composed several sets of « sentences », but neither of versions can be considered a full compendium. Hereinafter, they are quoted from: Ian Hamilton FINLAY, « Unconnected Sentences on Gardening », in Yves ABRIOUX, op. cit., 1992, p. 40. William Shenstone was an important figure for Finlay – for example, in his Proposal for the Leasowes (1992), the Scottish artist intended to commemorate his 18th-century predecessor with an inscribed bench, stating that « a bench, in our modern gardens, is a thing to be sat upon; in Shenstone’s Leasowes it was a thing to be read ». The Proposal is cited in John DIXON HUNT, op. cit., 2008, p. 59.


25 For this planter, Finlay chooses the exact version of the motto that appears in Hypnerotomachia Poliphili – « SEMPER FESTINA LENTE » (« Always hasten slowly »). See Jessie SHEELER, op. cit., 2015, p. 76.

26 Ibid., p. 87-89.

27 According to Diogenes’s account, Epicurus gives this piece of advice to Pythocles; however, in the surviving text of Epicurus’s letter to Pythocles, there is no such phrase. Translated by Robert Drew Hicks, this phrase reads as follows: « Hoist all sail, my dear boy, and steer clear of all culture ». See DIogenes LAëRTIUS, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, X : 6, Loeb Classical Library, n° 184, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1925, available at: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives_of_the_Eminent_Philosophers/Book_X (accessed June 16, 2019).


29 Capitalization, italics, paragraphs and other text patterns are reproduced as close to Finlay’s designs as possible. See Jessie SHEELER, op. cit., 2015, p. 113.

30 « HIC IACET PARVULUM QUODDAM EX AQUA LONGIORE EXCERPTUM ». Ibid., p. 62.

31 Ibid., p. 133.

33 In fact, Little Sparta is filled with images of war, treated in different contexts, yet invariably with a touch of irony : for example, one of the gates in the garden is crowned by hand grenades instead of classical vases, and a stele inscribed with « ACHTUNG! MINEN » (« DANGER! MINES ») is aptly placed on the spot where a high voltage cable is concealed underground – so, it literally warns against unauthorized digging.


35 The fragment « …OGNI PENSIERO VO… » should most likely be reconstructed as « LASCIATE OGNI PENSIERO VOI CHE ENTRATE ». The same inscription on a similar mask can be found in a drawing from the Vatican Library (Codice Vaticano Latino n. 11258). See Giuseppe ZANDER, art. cit., p. 29.

36 « Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate » (Dante ALIGHIERI, La Divina Commedia, Inferno, III : 9). See also a similar verse by Boiardo : « Or lascia adunque ogni tristo pensiero » (Matteo Maria BOIARDO, Orlando innamorato, I : XXV : 8).

37 One of the stones is inscribed with « HYPNOS – HIS WINES TROUBLE HIS EYES », and another one with « THANATOS – OUR STONES SUMMON YOUR MOSS ». See Jessie SHEELEER, op. cit., 2015, p. 55-56.


39 « IL RIPOSO DI CLAUDIO ».

40 « L’Ile des Peupliers ».

41 In 1795, Rousseau’s ashes were transferred to the Pantheon in Paris, but the Poplar Island at Ermenonville remains intact as a cenotaph.

42 This stone is inscribed with « Of Flutes & Wild Roses », a fragment that Finlay borrows from one of his earlier landscape projects, The Monteviot Proposal (1979), where Rousseau acts as protagonist and narrator. See John DIXON HUNT, op. cit., 2008, p. 106.


44 The first mention of the mortuary function of the temple can be found in Francesco Sansovino’s preface to the 1578 edition of Jacopo Sannazaro’s Arcadia. Sansovino dedicated the new edition to his


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Quelques mots à propos de : [Ekaterina Kochetkova](#)

Associate Professor in Art History Department, Lomonosov Moscow


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Associate Professor in Art History Department, Lomonosov Moscow

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