ANDREW MARVELL AND
SIR HENRY WOTTON: ARCHITECTURAL
AESTHETICS POETICIZED

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Architects and the historians of taste, more often than literary
people, have recognized the value and significance of Sir Henry
Wotton's *Elements of Architecture* (1624). A country gentleman by
birth, a diplomat by profession, and ultimately Provost of Eton
College, Wotton assumed that a knowledge of architecture was a
proper cultural attainment, and a necessary practical one, for men
of his own class, men of position, property, and education. Thus,
at the last moment before architecture became a profession in its
own right, he wrote a short, graceful primer of building and design
principles, aesthetics, and taste. Wotton’s contemporaries
respected his authority as a connoisseur, and over the next two cen-
turies architects drew often on the *Elements* for their own treatises,
acknowledging its clarity and originality as a definition of Vitru-
vian and Palladian principles adapted to English circumstances.¹

Literary scholars have often cited the *Elements* in connection
with Andrew Marvell’s poetry. M. R. Pitman found it a source for
the “standing pool of air” in “The Mower against Gardens”; and
though Kitty Datta found a closer parallel in James Howell’s *In-
structions for Forreine Travel*, she in turn related the “Corinthian
porticoes” of the woods in *Upon Appleton House* to Wotton’s
treatment of the architectural orders.² Peter Schwenger has noted
the parallel between Wotton’s remarks on the foreshortening of
standing sculptures and both the “false angle” of “Eyes and
Tears” and the foreshortened tree of “A Poem upon the Death of
O. C.”³ Rosalie Colie looked to the *Elements* for a norm defining
the proper self-sufficiency of Nunappleton, and, most recently,
John Dixon Hunt has related its descriptions of Italian gardens and
estates to the experiential variety offered by Nunappleton’s

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gardens, ruins, and prospects. Marvell himself never mentions Wotton in his works, and it may be that the Elements represents merely a convenient compendium of general architectural knowledge as well as a definition of period tastes. However, Datta suggests a closer connection when she states that "Wotton's aesthetic categories, though admittedly not unusual, have an interesting correspondence with Marvell's"; and it is instructive to see how Marvell addresses Wottonian concerns in the context of his own art. The appropriate poems for such an examination are those that interpret real landscapes and a real house: "Upon the Hill and Grove at Bill-borow" and Upon Appleton House.

Both poems praise the great Parliamentarian general Thomas Fairfax, who had retired to his Yorkshire estate Nunappleton in 1650. Marvell was engaged as tutor to Fairfax's daughter, Mary, and his tenure there, when he most probably wrote these poems, bridges the publication of Walton's Reliquiae Wottonianae (1651), with its reprint of the Elements. Though not necessarily the earlier poem, "Bill-borow" is arguably the simpler. Here Marvell accepts without question the generic assumption governing topographical panegyric: "the ideal combination of virtues in a great man corresponds to the perfect visual experience."

In Upon Appleton House, by contrast, Marvell is constantly aware of the difference between the reality of the estate, however perfect, however perfected by art, and the poetic models adduced to discern meaning in that reality. Thus, while he does not really undermine the governing assumption, he examines the limitations of the genre in order to understand the broader prospects lying before him: history, determined by God but consigned to man; England, once a garden, now despoiled by civil wars; and the landscape of the mind, all the more uncertain for the refuge it offers. In both these poems, as in "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure" and "The Coronet," Marvell particularly commends the virtue of humility. But Upon Appleton House is more like "The Coronet" in its consideration of the way the poet exercises humility as he creates his art.

In the first stanza of "Bill-borow" Marvell establishes the moral validity of his landscape by assuming the role of presenter and defining the perfection of the hill that supposedly lies in his and the reader's immediate view: