

New Materialist Eco-poetics in Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta*: The Garden as a Living Text

Ian Hamilton Finlay'in *Little Sparta*'sında Yeni Materyalist Ekopoetik: Yaşayan bir Metin Olarak Bahçe

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta* through the lens of New Materialism, presenting the garden as both an aesthetic space and an active agent that redefines human-nature relations. Central to this study are concepts like *agential realism*, *vibrant matter*, and *intra-action*, which highlight dynamic interactions between the garden's installations and their surroundings. Rather than being solely shaped by human intervention, the garden evolves through natural processes—seasonal shifts, weather changes, and plant growth—making it a co-creative, living text. The study emphasizes *Little Sparta*'s role in challenging anthropocentric views by merging poetry with natural elements, thereby advocating a holistic understanding of ecological and cultural narratives. Through the integration of art and nature, the garden dissolves boundaries, illustrating interconnectedness and fostering environmental empathy. As a space of continuous interaction, *Little Sparta* positions itself as an eco-poetic landscape that prompts visitors to reconsider their role within ecosystems. This approach not only enhances aesthetic and ecological engagement but also demonstrates how New Materialist principles can transform our perceptions of both art and the environment.

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*Poetry, Painting, and Gardening, or the Science of
Landscape, will forever by men of taste be deemed Three
Sisters, or the Three New Graces who dress and adorn
nature.*

Horace Walpole¹

Introduction

Little Sparta, (see Figure 1a & 1b) created by Scottish poet and artist Ian Hamilton Finlay² (1925-2006),³ represents a radical synthesis of art, literature, and landscape. Located in the Pentland

¹ MS annotation to William Mason's *Satirical Poems*, published in an edition of the relevant poems by Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1926), p. 43 (Hunt 1971:294).

² Finlay was born in the Bahamas in 1925 but spent most of his life in Scotland. He published his first book of short stories in 1958 (while working as a shepherd in Rousay in Orkney). Although he's written in various genres such as short story, novel, poetry etc he's well known as a poet and with his concrete poems. He is the pioneer figure in concrete poetry movement in the UK.

³ All photos used in the article belong to the author unless otherwise stated.

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Hills near Edinburgh,⁴ this garden functions as more than a curated collection of plants and sculptures; it is an evolving narrative space that challenges traditional notions of human dominance over nature. Little Sparta houses more than 270 artworks arranged in what Finlay referred to as “specific landscapes,” distinct areas within the garden, each with a unique character and ambiance. Finlay collaborated with stone carvers, letterers, and occasionally other artists and poets to produce numerous sculptures and artworks, all of which are integral to the garden's design. These pieces address a variety of themes, including the sea and its fishing fleets, human connections to nature, classical antiquity, the French Revolution, and the Second World War. The individual poetic and sculptural elements—crafted in wood, stone, and metal—are thoughtfully positioned within meticulously designed landscaping and plantings. Thus, the garden as a whole becomes the artwork (*The Little Sparta Trust n.d.*).



Figure 1a



Figure 1b

Integrating New Materialist theories such as Karen Barad's *agential realism* and Jane Bennett's concept of *vibrant matter*, this study reinterprets the garden as an active participant that continuously engages with its surroundings. Installations, ranging from inscribed stones to sculptural elements, serve as mediators that dissolve traditional boundaries between culture and nature, positioning the garden as a 'living text' where human and non-human actors co-create meaning, reshaping ecological and cultural narratives.

Historically, gardens have symbolized humanity's quest to replicate and master nature's perceived perfection, often envisioned as

⁴ Little Sparta is located in the western foothills of the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh. The garden, a small farmstead at Stonypath that was left to Mrs Finlay by her family, has been created over the course of a 23-year cooperation. Its original name was Stonypath until emended to Little Sparta in 1983. The place took its name because of a long-running conflict with a local authority. The Council desired to categorise it as a gallery and boost its tax rate correspondingly, but Finlay protested that it was a temple for art. Living in a place that was at conflict with Edinburgh, he picked the name Little Sparta in response to Edinburgh's reputation as the 'Athens of the North', the centre of learning during the Enlightenment, and the fact that Sparta was the military city state that was constantly in opposition to Athens. Finlay's Little Sparta is a cultural outpost that challenges Edinburgh's cultural hegemony. In other words, this conflict between Finlay and the Council can be compared to the division between the belief in nature and the belief in monotheistic religion (God), in which Edinburgh, a major cultural hub like Athens and Rome, demanded taxes from the place that the poet considered to be a temple. Thus, instead of a serene garden of solitude, Finlay's Little Sparta was supposed to be an "attack," since Finlay was a figure who challenged authority throughout his life (Linklater, 2015, p. 1). The garden allows entry only at specific times of the year—June to September—aligning with Finlay's intention for visitors to experience the artworks integrated with the lush greenery, as trees and plants reach full bloom during this period.

microcosms of the idealized Garden of Eden. This quest is evident in the meticulous cultivation of land, where art and science converge. As Raymond Williams discusses in *Keywords*, land cultivation reflects societal values and power dynamics, extending beyond physical work to cultural processes. Similarly, Edward Said interprets gardens like the one in *Mansfield Park* as symbols of colonial relationships, where land management mirrors imperial control. While Franco Moretti, in *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900*, critiques Said’s reading as flawed and superficial, the debate underscores how the garden becomes a contested space of cultural and ideological production, linking it to broader historical narratives. In literature and art, gardens are portrayed not only as retreats from the wild but as spaces where human aspirations engage with nature’s autonomy. Finlay extends this tradition by embedding his poetic and artistic visions into the living earth, creating environments where art and nature maintain a continuous dialogue.

This dialogue is particularly evident in the ecopoetics of *Little Sparta*. Ecopoetics, a concept merging ecology with poetic expression, positions poetry as a transformative force capable of enhancing ecological consciousness and fostering environmental empathy. William Rueckert characterizes poetry as “stored energy,” describing it as a form of “formal turbulence,” a renewable, dynamic source derived from language and imagination (1996, p. 108). Poetry, therefore, not only represents nature but actively contributes to it, embodying humanity’s efforts to weave the natural world into the fabric of poetic expression.

Moreover, *Little Sparta* exemplifies New Materialist perspectives that challenge hierarchical distinctions between subjects and objects, culture and nature. Emerging from feminist thought, science studies, and environmental humanities, New Materialism views the world as an interconnected network of forces and materials. Within this framework, *Little Sparta* serves as a vivid example, as it redefines agency as an inherent capacity of all matter, suggesting that stones, water, plants, and poems actively shape their surroundings (Bennett, 2010, p. 21). The garden’s landscape, language, and inscriptions create a co-creative space where human and non-human elements merge, reinforcing the idea that materiality is not passive but actively participates in shaping reality.

Finlay’s “poetry garden” not only repositions poetry within physical space but also aligns with the New Materialist ambition to blur the boundaries between the human and the non-human, relocating the poetic locus from the self to the environment (Rodger, 2020, p. 2). As Carlson notes, the garden “ambushes the visitor” with language that is inscribed on various surfaces, making *Little Sparta* both a “sustained, sensuous poem” and a radical metaphorical space (Carlson, n.d.). This dynamic interaction highlights the interconnected network of forces, emphasizing Finlay’s vision to blend poetry and landscape, reshaping both cultural and ecological narratives.

Little Sparta is not merely an art garden; it is a “poetry garden,” representing a significant shift in modernist poetics, where the poem extends beyond the page to inhabit physical space (Rodger, 2020, p. 2). This shift relocates the poetic locus from the self to the broader environment, aligning with Finlay’s ambition to blend poetry with physical space and reshape both cultural and ecological narratives.

This article argues that *Little Sparta* embodies New Materialist principles by redefining the garden as a space where ecological and poetic elements merge. It proposes that the garden’s design and inscriptions invite visitors to engage with an environment where human and non-human agencies interact. By analysing Finlay’s integration of language, landscape, and sculpture, this study reveals how *Little Sparta* prompts a re-evaluation of human-nature relationships, illustrating that art and nature are mutually influential. The article examines six installations—*CURFEW/Curlew*, *The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future*, *Apollon Terroriste*, *MARE NOSTRUM*, *Evening Will Come*, *They Will Sew The Blue Sail*, and *Man: A Passerby*—for their unique representations of human-

nature interactions, demonstrating the material and symbolic complexities within the garden.⁵

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta* predominantly emphasizes its integration of art, poetry, and landscape, framing it as a dialogic space that redefines traditional garden aesthetics. Rodger (2020) describes *Little Sparta* as an example of *topographical poetics*, shifting the focus from individual subjectivity to broader environmental interactions. This approach aligns with New Materialist principles, which stress the collaborative creation of meaning between human and non-human elements, positioning the garden as an evolving co-creator rather than a static art form.

Eyres (2009) interprets *Little Sparta* as a "People's Arcadia," underscoring Finlay's blend of classical ideals with contemporary site-specific art. He emphasizes how the garden fosters a sustained dialogue between historical Arcadian themes and modern landscapes, demonstrating Finlay's commitment to spaces that are both aesthetic and ecologically resonant. This interaction between culture and nature aligns with New Materialist concepts of entangled agency, where cultural elements co-create meaning alongside natural processes. Drawing on Raymond Williams's discussion in *The Country and the City* (1973), *Little Sparta* not only contests the traditional culture versus nature dualism but also embodies an immanent reconstruction of this relationship. This ecopoetic perspective suggests that meaning emerges through the material interactions within the landscape itself.

Hunt (2012) elaborates on the interpretive depth of *Little Sparta*, presenting it as a "readable garden" characterized by inscribed texts and sculptural elements that provoke reflection. Hunt's analysis highlights how Finlay's use of small-scale *follies*—designed to engage thought and interaction—suits the garden's modest scale and aligns with New Materialist themes, where each component plays a role in dynamic meaning-making processes. This notion resonates with Donna Haraway's ideas in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991), which discuss the co-creation of meaning through complex networks of human and non-human interactions. Similarly, Oppermann and Iovino's work on material ecocriticism emphasizes the active participation of both organic and inorganic agents in shaping ecological narratives, further supporting the interpretation of *Little Sparta* as a living text that continuously evolves through such interactions.

Linklater (2015) further enhances the understanding of *Little Sparta* by exploring its juxtaposition of beauty and provocation. He notes how the garden serves as a space that not only inspires aesthetic appreciation but also confronts complex themes such as warfare, classical philosophy, and revolution. Finlay's installations blur the lines between art and nature, embodying New Materialist ideas that emphasize material agency and the dissolution of traditional boundaries. In this context, matter itself is seen as possessing agency, actively participating in meaning-making and shaping reality rather than merely serving as a passive object influenced by human action. For instance, the *Monument to the First Battle of Little Sparta* symbolizes Finlay's resistance against local authorities, reflecting the garden's rebellious spirit and critique of institutional norms.

Thomas (2005) examines the ideological implications of Finlay's installations, observing how the aesthetic choices in *Little Sparta* critique authority and institutional control. This perspective aligns with New Materialist critiques of anthropocentrism, emphasizing material agency—the capacity of non-human entities, such as objects, landscapes, and elements, to shape socio-political narratives. Thomas illustrates how the garden's material elements actively contribute to its

⁵ I have chosen to focus on seven specific examples from *Little Sparta*'s 270 artworks due to the impracticality of analysing each piece in depth within a single article. These selected works represent Finlay's thematic and aesthetic vision, allowing for a balanced exploration of his artistry without overwhelming the reader.

evolving political and philosophical messages, highlighting the role of non-human actors in constructing meaning within the landscape.

Guziur (2021) extends this analysis by interpreting the classical column bases in *Little Sparta* as “neopresocratic” symbols of philosophical ideas about order and chaos, aligning with Finlay’s engagement with material symbolism and New Materialist theories. This perspective underscores the active role of all matter—whether human-made or natural—in shaping the garden’s narrative. Meanwhile, Kochetkova (2021) introduces a temporal dimension, suggesting that *Little Sparta* functions as a microcosm embodying both classical traditions and contemporary ecological awareness. Her analysis emphasizes the continuous interaction between historical narratives and material reality, proposing that the garden encourages a rethinking of human-nature relationships over time.

Additionally, Mitchell (2024) highlights *Little Sparta*’s potential as a site of philosophical inquiry, focusing on its integration of classical references, historical narratives, and natural elements. He argues that the garden fosters a contemplative yet visually engaging space, where human and non-human elements co-create meaning. This aligns with Timothy Morton’s “ecological thought,” which insists on acknowledging the complex interrelation of all things and urges a shift away from anthropocentric doctrines toward a deeper understanding of shared agency and interconnectedness.

In summary, the literature on *Little Sparta* highlights its function as a dynamic text that integrates poetic, artistic, and ecological elements, creating an interactive space that challenges conventional distinctions between culture and nature. However, while existing studies emphasize the garden’s aesthetic, ideological, and symbolic features, they often overlook a comprehensive New Materialist interpretation that accounts for the entangled agency among human and non-human actors. This article aims to address this gap by examining *Little Sparta* through a New Materialist lens, emphasizing its role as an active participant in cultural and ecological narratives, where matter and meaning co-constitute one another.

Principles of New Materialism

New Materialism disrupts conventional ecological and artistic discourses, by asserting that all matter—whether animate or inanimate—possesses agency. This approach aligns with deep ecology’s call for a “radical conceptualisation of humanity’s place on the planet,” promoting a “nature-centred system of values” (Clark, p. 23; Garrard, p. 24). Both frameworks emphasize the “fundamental interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features” (Nayar, p. 336), advocating for a broader “circle of identification with other living things” (Clark, p. 23) that transcends anthropocentric hierarchies.

Aligned with Arne Naess’s “biospherical egalitarianism,” which prioritizes the interests of the biosphere over individual species (Marland, p. 850), New Materialism proposes an immanent approach that redefines human-nature relations, extending respect not just for all life forms but also for natural landscapes like rivers and mountains (Nayar, p. 336).

Donna Haraway’s *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* (1985) critiques Western dualisms—such as self/other, culture/nature, and active/passive—that underpin systemic forms of domination across gender, race, and environmental lines (Haraway, 1985, p. 35). New Materialism embraces this critique, advocating a framework that acknowledges the entangled agency of all entities. By dissolving these dualisms, New Materialism proposes a more complex network of relations where matter and meaning co-constitute one another.

Barad’s concept of “agential realism” is crucial in this discourse, redefining agency as emerging from “intra-actions” rather than from pre-existing entities acting independently (2007, p. 26).

Barad argues that entities do not exist prior to their interactions; instead, they emerge through these “intra-actions,” which fundamentally shape their identities and capacities (2007, p. 33). In *Little Sparta*, Barad’s concept manifest in the interactions between human-created inscriptions and natural elements, where meanings evolve continuously through non-human influences, illustrating Barad’s assertion that “matter and meaning are not separate elements; they are inextricably fused together” (Barad, 2007, p. 3).

Barad’s framework encourages a reconsideration of conventional ethical and scientific paradigms, promoting a holistic approach that acknowledges the entangled nature of being, knowing, and acting (2007, p. 5). This perspective not only redefines agency but also fosters a more ethical engagement with the world. In *Little Sparta*, for example, inscribed stones do not convey fixed messages; instead, their interactions with weather, water, and plant growth transform the garden into a co-creator of meaning. This aligns with Barad’s assertion that both human and non-human elements actively contribute to the garden’s evolving narrative.

Building on this foundation, Rosi Braidotti extends the non-anthropocentric vision of New Materialism by advocating for a posthuman perspective that intertwines ethical considerations with environmental sustainability (2013, pp. 3-4). Braidotti critiques traditional human-centred notions of agency and environmental action, suggesting a subjectivity that recognizes human embeddedness within the material world (2013, pp. 11-12). This approach aligns with Cary Wolfe’s assertion that “the ‘human,’ we now know, is not now and never was itself” (Wolfe, 2003, p. xiii), emphasizing the critique of speciesism and deconstructing the human/animal boundary, as illustrated by Derrida’s concept of *animot* (Derrida, 2002, p. 399). Additionally, Braidotti’s perspective resonates with Serenella Iovino’s “ecological horizontalism,” which stresses shared materiality and the dissolution of the human/nature binary (Iovino, 2012, p. 52).

Recognizing non-human agency in ecological art fosters a more inclusive approach to environmental engagement, encouraging individuals to reconsider their roles within ecosystems (Braidotti, 2013, p. 6). This approach is particularly evident in *Little Sparta*, where the garden’s design embodies intricate connections between human creations and non-human elements. The interplay of sculptures, inscriptions, plants, water flows, and weather changes illustrates Braidotti’s emphasis on non-human participation in shaping ecological narratives. By presenting art as inherently interwoven with nature, *Little Sparta* invites visitors to reconsider their role within ecosystems, advocating for a more sustainable and inclusive form of engagement (Braidotti, 2013, p. 7).

Braidotti’s integration of New Materialism with a posthuman approach also calls for ethical reorientation towards non-human actors, shifting from exploitative to reciprocal relationships with nature (2013, p. 12). This ethical stance is vital in addressing current environmental crises, as it promotes a holistic view of sustainability that includes all ecosystem participants, not just humans. In *Little Sparta*, this principle is evident in the coexistence of artistic and natural elements, where each component contributes to the garden’s narrative, fostering deeper ecological awareness.

Braidotti’s approach not only critiques traditional humanism but also offers transformative potential for environmental philosophy, art, and policy. It promotes an integrated approach that honours the myriad forms of life, inviting new strategies to tackle ecological challenges. As a dynamic embodiment of this posthumanist vision, *Little Sparta* encourages ethical engagement with the more-than-human world, exemplifying Braidotti’s call for responsible and inclusive ecological practices.

Jane Bennett’s concept of *vibrant matter* enriches the theoretical framework of New Materialism by suggesting that all matter, including seemingly inert objects like stones or rivers, possesses

agency (2010, p. 2). Bennett argues that these entities actively participate in ecological and political spheres, challenging the perception of the non-human world as passive (2010, p. 24). This perspective broadens ethical and political responsibilities toward non-human entities.

In artistic contexts, Bennett's idea reimagines art as a collaborative interaction between human and non-human forces, where the creative process emerges from the engagement of all forms of matter (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). This perspective expands our understanding of creativity, acknowledging the role of non-human elements in shaping artistic and cultural landscapes.

In *Little Sparta*, these ideas are actualized as the garden becomes an active entity where art and nature coalesce through *vibrant matter*. For instance, inscribed stones interact continuously with sunlight, rain, and plant growth, transforming the garden into a living exchange that embodies diverse material agencies (Bennett, 2010, p. 24). This perspective fosters a holistic appreciation of the interconnectedness of all matter, bridging the gap between humans and the more-than-human world.

New Materialism offers a comprehensive framework for understanding interactions within *Little Sparta*. It emphasizes that to fully grasp the garden's potential, one must consider its dynamic relationships, resonating with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "heterogenesis," where components form an ever-evolving whole (Deleuze & Guattari, [1980] 1987). This perspective rejects fixed essences in favor of multiplicity, suggesting that concepts are not static but constantly evolving assemblages.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *puissance*, or "the ability to affect and be affected" (Smith & Protevi, n.d.), applies to *Little Sparta*, where elements (plants, sculptures, inscriptions) continually reshape the garden's meaning. As they propose, the understanding of *Little Sparta* emerges from its interactions with the environment, emphasizing a process-oriented, relational approach to ecological engagement.

The garden transcends aesthetic boundaries, functioning as a "network of living texts" that engages continuously with visitors, flora, and natural elements. Each component—from stone sculptures and inscriptions to plants and water features—contributes to an ongoing dialogue. This perspective aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's *natureculture*, where *Little Sparta* is seen not as a static entity but as an active participant in ecological and cultural processes (Herzogenrath, 2008, p. 2).

This interpretation deepens our understanding of Ian Hamilton Finlay's artistic vision, demonstrating how each element within *Little Sparta* embodies potential energy and agency, contributing to an evolving narrative shaped by both human and non-human interactions. This interplay exemplifies New Materialism's challenge to traditional views by illustrating how the garden's materiality—its stones, plants, and texts—engages in a continuous dialogue, dissolving boundaries between nature and culture, art and environment.

The Garden as Text: A New Materialist Approach

Within New Materialist discourse, gardens are not merely collections of flora and objects but rather "texts" that communicate with visitors and engage dynamically with their surroundings. This approach broadens the concept of textuality to include a range of material expressions and interactions, as observed in *Little Sparta*. Here, the garden's narrative unfolds not only through visual engagement but also via sensory interactions and continuous dialogues with the surrounding ecosystem (Bennett, 2010, p. 29).

Specific elements within *Little Sparta*, such as inscribed stones, actively participate in a dialogue with the environment. These inscriptions may contrast with the wildness of nearby foliage or harmonize with the rhythmic sounds of water, enriching the garden's narrative through layered

meanings. This nuanced interplay between human writing and natural forms aligns with eco-poetic principles, emphasizing the fusion of text and nature (Skinner, 2018, p. 66). Finlay argues that while a single word on a page lacks the relational context necessary to form a complete poem, the same word within a garden can transform into a full poem when considered part of the poetic landscape (Hunt, 2005, p. 302). This perspective suggests that art is not solely about objects but also about their interactions with surroundings and their reception by audiences.

Elements within *Little Sparta*—stones, plants, and water—are not merely decorative; they possess agency in the New Materialist sense. These elements engage in dialogues with visitors, altering perceptions and inviting new interpretations with each encounter. Recognized as texts, these components hold meaning: a stone's placement, a plant's growth, or the sound of water contributes to the evolving narrative of the garden. Their communication is evident in interactions with human and non-human actors, demonstrating Barad's notion of "intra-action," where entities emerge through interactions, shaping their identities and meanings (Barad, 2007, pp. 11-12). As Finlay elaborates:

[U]sually each area gets a small artefact, which reigns like a small deity or spirit of place. My understanding is that the work is the whole composition – the artefact in its context. The work is not an isolated object, but an object with flowers, plants, trees, water and so on [It is a] giant work of art, a poem which exists within and with nature. (in Harling-Lee, 2021)

Agency in *Little Sparta* permeates the entire ecosystem, impacting both animate and inanimate elements. Reflecting Jane Bennett's concept of "vibrant matter," the garden illustrates how all components, regardless of form, have the capacity to influence and be influenced by their surroundings (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). Sculptures and plants, therefore, are not mere ornaments; they actively contribute to the garden's evolving experience, responding to visitors, weather, and one another.

Recognizing the agency of these elements, *Little Sparta* emerges as a living text, continually shaped and reshaped by its engagements. This perspective invites a re-evaluation of how to read a garden, perceiving its components not as static objects but as active participants in a network of ecological and cultural significance. It becomes a space where artistry meets natural processes, with visitors serving as integral parts of the text's creation (Hunt, 2008, p. 23; Braidotti, 2013, p. 12). In *Little Sparta*, poems materialize not only through tangible elements like intricately carved stones but also through more transient manifestations like blossoming flowers, shifting shadows, subtle changes in light, and ambient sounds. This rich sensory environment embodies a New Materialist perspective, affirming that non-human entities possess agency and actively shape the garden's evolving narrative. By engaging visitors on multiple sensory levels, the garden emphasizes that human and non-human actors co-create a shared story, challenging anthropocentric narratives that prioritize human



Figure 2

perspectives over the intrinsic value and agency of the natural world.

To illustrate the active role of symbolic elements within *Little Sparta*, this section deepens the analysis of specific installations like *CURFEW/Curlew* (see Figure 2). The poem, inscribed on a stone, physically anchors itself in the landscape while metaphorically bridging the gap between the ephemeral and the enduring. The onomatopoeic repetition of “cur-lee, cur-lee” mirrors the curlew’s call at dusk, reinforcing the continuity between human language and natural rhythms. This repetition embodies Bennett’s notion of “vibrant matter,” asserting that all matter possesses life and agency (Bennett, 2010, p. 24). The poem’s placement, often traversed at twilight, accentuates the theme of diurnal transition: as natural light fades, the inscription becomes less visible, paralleling the fading of the curlew’s call into the night. This sensory overlap transforms the poem into a living experience, inviting viewers to actively engage with the changing environment.

The term *curfew*, derived from the Old French *couvre-feu* (literally “cover fire”), historically referred to extinguishing fires at a designated time, symbolizing an enforced closure. In contrast, the curlew’s call at dusk represents continuity, echoing through the dimming light as a natural transition. This juxtaposition—between human-imposed order and the organic rhythm of the curlew—aligns with Karen Barad’s New Materialist concept of “intra-action,” where entities emerge through interaction rather than existing independently. Here, human language and natural processes reshape one another in real-time, blurring the boundaries between culture and nature.

The poem’s placement within *Little Sparta* is equally significant. Located along a path often traversed during twilight, it reinforces the theme of diurnal transition. As natural light fades, the inscription becomes less visible, paralleling the gradual disappearance of the curlew’s call into the night. This sensory overlap—fading words and diminishing sound—transforms the poem into a living experience, prompting viewers to engage actively with the changing environment. The shift from light to darkness not only represents a physical transition but also invites deeper contemplation of the interconnected rhythms of humans and nature.



Figure 3

In the curated environment of *Little Sparta*, the phrase by French revolutionary Louis Antoine Léon de Saint-Just, “*The Present Order Is the Disorder of the Future*” (see Figure 3), is prominently engraved on large stone blocks. This inscription questions the stability of human-made systems and emphasizes their inevitable transformation over time. The deliberate arrangement of the stones—puzzle-like with intentional gaps—visually suggests disorder within perceived order. As each stone weathers over time, the erosion of words vividly demonstrates Bennett’s concept of *vibrant matter*, showing how

even stone—typically seen as a stable material—exhibits life-like qualities through its active interaction with the environment.

The installation serves as a philosophical and ecological reflection, suggesting that seemingly stable structures often precede future disruptions. This aligns with New Materialist thought, proposing that all matter—whether stone, plant, or living being—is interconnected and actively participates in cycles of creation, dissolution, and reformation. The engraved phrase, situated within the context of a constantly changing landscape, embodies the transient nature of social, political, and ecological systems, emphasizing that they are subject to natural forces that drive transformation.

By integrating these reflections into *Little Sparta*, Ian Hamilton Finlay creates a site that transcends mere aesthetic appreciation, inviting a deeper meditation on the forces shaping human understanding of nature and culture. The stones, with their physical permanence contrasted by the temporary nature of their inscriptions, become active participants in a dialogue that blurs the boundaries between human creation and natural processes. This interplay of permanence and impermanence positions the garden as a 'living text,' where human and non-human elements continually shape evolving narratives of interaction and transformation. This dynamic can be conceptualized as 'nature as narration / narration as nature,' highlighting how ecological and cultural narratives are intertwined in a continuous dialogue. Such an approach not only rejects dualistic thinking but aligns with Agamben's notions of *bios* (qualified life, defined by political frameworks) and *zoe*⁶ (bare life, shared by all living beings), suggesting a broader, boundary-transcending perspective on ecological and cultural processes.

Moreover, the placement of inscribed stones among natural growth and decay amplifies their message. As plants grow, weather the stones, or partially obscure inscriptions, they highlight the relentless natural processes that erode human imprints on the landscape, reinforcing an inevitable return to organic forms. The garden thereby embodies principles of ecological succession and entropy, serving as a microcosm of broader environmental cycles and forces. This evolving visual scene, influenced by changing seasons and natural weathering, underscores the fluid nature of cultural symbols when juxtaposed with the enduring cycles of nature. This dynamic interaction can be conceptualized as 'nature as narration / narration as nature,' emphasizing how ecological and cultural narratives are mutually constitutive, where each shape and is shaped by the other in a continuous process of transformation.

In this way, the installation not only highlights the inevitability of change but also positions *Little Sparta* as a mediator between human cultural expressions and nature's unyielding forces. It invites visitors to reconsider the fragility of human constructs in contrast to nature's persistent presence, prompting a re-evaluation of the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world. Finlay's garden transcends aesthetics, emerging as a symbol of philosophical inquiry and ecological awareness—a space where human aspirations and natural realities continuously interact, revealing deeper insights into humanity's place within the evolving natural order. The statue of Apollo, titled "*Apollon Terroriste*" (see Figures 4a and 4b), further exemplifies this complex interplay of classical symbolism and subversive potential. The sculpture juxtaposes the



Figure 4a

⁶ *Bios* and *zoe* are key concepts in Giorgio Agamben's philosophical work, where *bios* refers to life defined by social and political structures, while *zoe* denotes the biological life shared by all organisms. The distinction emphasizes the need to recognize both dimensions in discussions of life and nature, which *Little Sparta* embodies by fostering a holistic engagement with both human and non-human elements.

idealized form of Apollo—a symbol of harmony and rationality—with a reinterpretation that disrupts these associations. The figure appears to be simultaneously emerging from the earth and shaped by human hands, representing a synthesis between cultural artifacts and natural forces. This design challenges conventional distinctions between human achievements and natural elements, presenting a visual and conceptual synthesis central to New Materialist thought.

Reimagining Apollo as a “terrorist” unsettles traditional iconography, which typically associates the god with order and control. In *Apollon Terroriste*, these associations are placed within the context of modern political conflicts and environmental activism, reflecting the tensions between authority and resistance. The figure’s partially unfinished form and stance suggest potential chaos and conflict, aligning with Bennett’s idea of *vibrant matter*, which emphasizes that all matter—whether human-made or natural—possesses agency. By foregrounding Apollo’s destabilized image, Finlay emphasizes the active role of matter in shaping cultural narratives and environmental contexts, demonstrating that boundaries between human creations and natural forces are fluid.

The hybrid aesthetic of *Apollon Terroriste*, merging classical and contemporary elements, epitomizes the New Materialist perspective that all matter is vibrant and co-creative. The statue’s rough texture and fragmented form evoke natural erosion, further blurring distinctions between human and non-human elements. This material interplay encourages viewers to rethink how art and nature coalesce into a hybrid space, where traditional binaries are not just blurred but actively intertwined. The sculpture’s presence becomes a symbolic reminder of the interconnected relationship between creativity and natural energy, illustrating how each reshapes the other.

Through *Apollon Terroriste*, Finlay provocatively suggests that art should not be seen merely as an aesthetic refuge but as a force capable of challenging and transforming societal norms and natural orders. The piece acts as a catalyst within the garden, prompting visitors to reflect on the potential of art to question and redefine boundaries—whether between beauty and terror, culture and nature, or order and chaos. This perspective aligns with Rosi Braidotti’s posthuman framework, which emphasizes the entanglement of human and non-human elements in a shared space of creation and interaction.

The sculpture not only enriches the visual and thematic landscape of *Little Sparta* but also reinforces the garden’s role as a space of philosophical inquiry and ecological interaction. Here, every element, from stone to plant to sculpture, participates in a larger, evolving narrative that continuously redefines human and non-human relationships. As such, *Apollon Terroriste* serves as a powerful representation of the New Materialist view that art and nature are co-creators in shaping the material world, challenging visitors to engage with both the potential and the limitations of human cultural endeavours when placed in direct conversation with the forces of nature.



Figure 4b



Figure 5

In *Little Sparta*, the “*MARE NOSTRUM*” plaque (see Figure 5) on an ash tree merges historical resonance with natural qualities. The phrase, meaning “Our Sea,” symbolizes Roman identity and cultural exchange. Positioned within the garden, it represents broader narratives of coexistence and conflict. The rustling of the tree’s leaves mimics the sound of waves, creating a sense of an “island kingdom,” despite being inland (Mitchell, 2024, n.p.). The choice of the ash tree is significant, as its expansive canopy enhances the sea-like ambiance. Alec Finlay explains: “the ash fills the garden with its sea-sound ... That is our sea” (Finlay, 2011). This installation suggests a fluid dialogue between human culture and nature, embodying the fluidity of cultural boundaries and interconnected histories.

The placement of *MARE NOSTRUM* promotes contemplation, encouraging visitors to consider the broader implications of human interaction with nature. The plaque transcends its decorative role, becoming part of a living narrative that merges human and natural histories into a cohesive ecopoetic expression. The ash tree embodies both communication and memory, using its rustling leaves as a language through which the garden speaks.

Transitioning from auditory to visual and thematic richness, the poem “*Evening Will Come, They Will Sew The Blue Sail*” (see Figure 6), inscribed on a gravestone-shaped stele beside the pond, explores themes of death, renewal, and cyclical continuity. The phrase, *Evening Will Come*, evokes the closure associated with the day’s end, while *sewing the sail* suggests preparation for an impending journey. This aligns with mythological transitions, such as the crossing of the river Styx in Greek mythology or Odysseus’ voyage into the unknown. The juxtaposition of these elements highlights the interconnected concepts of endings and new beginnings, situating the poem within a broader ecological and mythic framework.



Figure 6

The gravestone-shaped stele reinforces themes of mortality, serving as a material reminder of life’s transience. However, its proximity to the pond—a symbol of water, life, and rebirth—adds a layer of cyclical symbolism, emphasizing renewal. This placement creates a thematic dialogue that moves beyond linear interpretations of time, embracing the cyclical nature of existence found in both human and natural realms. Water, traditionally a symbol of death and regeneration, underscores the notion that closure in life is also the precursor to renewal, echoing the principles

of ecological succession.

The blue colour of the sail enriches the poem's symbolism, representing both sea and sky—elements traditionally associated with vastness, the unconscious depths of the human psyche, and transcendence beyond the material world. This choice of colour suggests a connection between human mortality and broader cosmic cycles, emphasizing the New Materialist perspective that human experiences are part of a larger, interconnected material network. The blue sail, as a metaphorical vessel, not only symbolizes the journey of human life navigating existential uncertainties but also represents the influence of natural and cosmic forces that shape human understanding and identity.

The poem's inscription on the stele is not merely a static text; it actively participates in *Little Sparta's* ecopoetic landscape. Drawing on Karen Barad's concept of "intra-action," where entities emerge and influence each other through their interactions rather than existing as isolated components, the poem and its surroundings shape one another's meanings. The pond's reflection of the gravestone changes throughout the day, as the words shift in visibility depending on light, weather, and water conditions. This interplay embodies the New Materialist idea that matter possesses agency, contributing to the evolving narrative of the space.

In addition to its philosophical implications, the poem invites an emotional response. Its melancholic tone and mythic references encourage introspection, prompting visitors to contemplate their mortality within the context of the garden's living ecosystem. By placing the poem beside the pond, Finlay creates a space where human emotions, poetic expression, and natural elements merge, allowing for multi-layered engagement with the text on sensory and intellectual levels.

Through this installation, *Evening Will Come, They Will Sew The Blue Sail* becomes a site of layered meaning, blurring the distinctions between human creation and natural processes. It serves not only as a poetic representation of life's transience but also as a material manifestation of New Materialist principles, where human and non-human elements collaboratively shape a narrative of life, death, and renewal. This engagement aligns with *Little Sparta's* broader ecopoetic vision, urging a rethinking of human mortality in relation to the enduring cycles of nature.

The legend of *Lokman Hekim*, (*Luqman the Wise*) famed for discovering a plant that could grant immortality, metaphorically enriches the narrative explored in *Little Sparta*. In this legend, Lokman Hekim's knowledge of eternal life is ultimately lost, symbolizing the inherent limitations of human understanding and the transient nature of existence. This myth resonates deeply with the themes present in *Little Sparta*, where the motif of impermanence permeates the garden's design. Installations like *Evening Will Come, They Will Sew The Blue Sail* echo a similar acknowledgment of mortality, underscoring the futility of human endeavours to transcend the natural limits imposed by life's cyclical processes.

Although the legend of Lokman Hekim is not physically represented within the garden, its essence aligns with Finlay's conceptual approach, challenging human aspirations to dominate nature. In contrast to Gilgamesh's legendary quest to conquer nature and achieve immortality, Lokman Hekim's philosophy emphasizes harmony with nature's cycles, highlighting interconnectedness rather than domination. Both the legend and the garden underscore the reciprocal relationship between human endeavours and nature's enduring rhythms. In this way, *Little Sparta* becomes more than a collection of sculptures and inscriptions; it transforms into a contemplative space that continuously explores the themes of life, death, and renewal. Visitors are invited to reflect on broader philosophical questions related to New Materialism, where matter's agency extends beyond symbolism, actively shaping the evolving narrative of the garden.

By metaphorically connecting *Little Sparta* to the legend of Lokman Hekim, the interpretation positions the garden as a living text that embodies the complex interplay of existence—an ecosystem where human and non-human elements engage dynamically, revealing both the potential and limitations of human understanding. This perspective encourages a reconsideration of the garden's role, not merely as an artistic creation but as a symbolic dialogue between humanity and nature's continuous cycles. The installations, through their interaction with natural forces like weathering, water flow, and plant growth, reflect New Materialism's emphasis on vibrant matter, co-creating meanings with human interpretations.

The phrase *Man: A Passerby* (see Figure 7) inscribed on a stone in *Little Sparta* serves as a poignant reminder of human transience in contrast to the relative permanence of natural processes. This concept resonates with New Materialist themes, especially agential realism and vibrant matter, which question the centrality and permanence of humanity in nature. Here, "Man" is portrayed not as a dominating or lasting entity but as a transient participant in the ongoing natural narrative.

This inscription conveys the humility of the human condition, presenting humanity as merely passing through, akin to other transient phenomena in nature. The term "passerby" underscores the temporary nature of human presence, ultimately rendering it less consequential than the enduring ecological cycles. This aligns with *Little Sparta's* eco-poetic philosophy, wherein human art and inscriptions are integrated within a dynamic natural environment, subject to the forces of weathering and growth that gradually obscure or alter them. This interplay embodies the concept of intra-action, wherein human and non-human elements constantly shape and redefine one another.



Figure 7

In the framework of New Materialism, this inscription invites reflection on the temporality of human life within a world where non-human entities persist, evolve, and interact independently. By depicting "man" as a passerby, Finlay subtly challenges anthropocentric narratives, promoting a view of humans as integrated into, rather than separate from, the ecological cycles shaping *Little Sparta*. Thus, this inscription serves not only as a memento mori but also as a New Materialist statement, encouraging contemplation of humanity's place within an interconnected, self-sustaining environment that extends beyond human influence. It reinforces the idea of *Little Sparta* as a "living text," where human artifacts are enmeshed with natural processes, illustrating the dissolution of boundaries between human culture and the natural world.

In sum, *Little Sparta* functions as an eco-poetic landscape, enriched by metaphorical elements that deepen its philosophical resonance. The garden's layered narratives imply that while human knowledge seeks permanence, it remains bound by the temporal rhythms of the natural world. In this way, *Little Sparta* embodies New Materialist principles, offering a holistic engagement that bridges tangible and conceptual elements, challenging traditional distinctions between culture and nature, life and death, and knowledge and mystery.

Conclusion

Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Little Sparta* exemplifies New Materialist principles, evolving from a traditional aesthetic space into a dynamic, textual, and ecological entity. By integrating art, literature, and landscape, the garden establishes itself as an active participant in cultural and environmental dialogues. It transcends conventional aesthetics, becoming a continuous site of

interaction where human and non-human elements collaboratively create meaning.

The integration of art and nature in *Little Sparta* reflects the New Materialist notion that all matter possesses agency. Elements like inscribed stones and sculptures actively engage in dialogues that dissolve the boundaries between human and non-human actors. This interaction fosters a comprehensive understanding of the environment, highlighting each element's active role—whether living or non-living—in shaping the garden's narrative. Consequently, *Little Sparta* emerges as more than just an eco-poetic manifestation; it becomes a space where poetry and nature converge, generating new ecological and cultural meanings that encourage visitors to reassess their relationship with the environment.

The garden's physical and textual elements prompt a re-evaluation of conventional notions of agency and textuality. In alignment with Jane Bennett's concept of *vibrant matter*, Finlay's work emphasizes the dynamic capabilities of all matter, transforming *Little Sparta* from a scenic garden into a collaborative ecological and cultural discourse. For example, the interplay among water features, sculptural elements, and pathways creates a nuanced interaction among stones, plants, and water, reinforcing the idea that each component actively contributes to the garden's evolving narrative.

As a critical embodiment of New Materialist principles, *Little Sparta* challenges anthropocentric narratives, advocating for a model of human and non-human co-creation essential to environmental understanding. This approach not only enriches aesthetic and ecological experiences but also offers a vital framework for addressing urgent environmental challenges. By presenting the garden as a 'text' where poetic inscriptions and material interactions merge, Finlay's work strengthens the notion of eco-poetics as a means to foster deeper environmental empathy and engagement. The dynamic interplay of elements within the garden emphasizes the inseparability of human actions and natural processes, underscoring the need for integrated approaches to sustainability.

In conclusion, *Little Sparta* is not only a reflection of Finlay's artistic vision but also a critical landscape that deepens our understanding of material interactions and cultural dynamics. By merging artistic and natural forces, the garden illustrates how New Materialist perspectives can inspire further studies of other artistic landscapes, inviting exploration of the entangled relationships among art, nature, and culture. The garden's transformative potential enhances our understanding of ecological and artistic interconnections and calls for more holistic and inclusive approaches to addressing contemporary environmental challenges.

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