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THE THEATRICAL REPRESENTATION OF LANDSCAPE IN ROUSSEAU'S *LA NOUVELLE HÉLOÏSE*

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Numerous scholars, including John Barrell, D. G. Charlton, Wil Munsters, Christopher Thacker, and Dora Wiebenson, have discussed the affiliation of landscape and painting in eighteenth-century European aesthetics.¹ Landscape painting, they claim, provided the paradigm for a manner of viewing and appreciating the countryside, as represented in prose accounts and poetic descriptions. Briefly put, the countryside came to be seen in terms of the relatively new aesthetic category, the "picturesque"—country scenes were praised to the degree that they were deemed either similar to paintings or, at least, worthy of being painted. Likewise, in a common scholarly account, just as landscape painting provided a model for viewing the countryside, it also furnished a model for the development of the picturesque garden, as it appeared in Britain, and increasingly, from the around the middle of the eighteenth century, in France as well. What remains far too little examined, however, is the affiliation of landscape with theatre, as an alternative medium of visual representation, and as a complementary paradigm for conceptualizing how a viewer perceives the countryside and how a garden designer may achieve artistic effects that imitate those of uncultivated (or minimally cultivated) nature.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, frequently credited as a father of a Romantic attitude towards the relationship between nature and a human spectator, also, I will argue, deploys rhetoric that makes precisely this correlation between landscape and theatre. To test this hypothesis, I propose as case studies two passages from Rousseau's 1761 epistolary novel, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. It is not, of course, that I deny elements of a painterly vision of landscape in these passages—indeed, quite the opposite—but rather I assert the importance of recognizing the theatrical vision that infuses Rousseau's novelistic rhetoric.

To direct this discussion, I would like to open with the following three questions: First, how might we articulate the continuities in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* between, on the one hand, the narrator Saint-Preux's epistolary descriptions of the Alps, wherein nature is figured as presenting a theatrical performance, and, on the other hand, the illusion that he praises in Julie's landscape garden on her estate at Clarens? Secondly, how do both descriptions celebrate natural illusions, in which either nature produces artistic effects, or, inversely, human artifice does not call attention to itself and thereby appears as if a spontaneous outgrowth of untouched nature? Lastly, how do these passages deploy the rhetorical conceit that the spectator enters on stage to participate physically and imaginatively in the theatrical performance?

Before beginning with Rousseau's text, I will clarify what I mean to invoke by the term "theatrical," by posing a contrast between the terms "theatre" and "drama." Drama, particularly in an eighteenth-century European context, principally implies a scripted text, written by a playwright and pronounced by actors, and in that way, it centers around articulate discourse. On the other hand, theatre implies the spatial features of performance—a stage where the action occurs, most often embellished with décor, and

viewed by spectators. Thus theatre, in this sense, is importantly a visual phenomenon and also a phenomenon emphasizing spatial, rather than verbal or linguistic, relationship between the performance and those who witness it.²

Having made this distinction, let us turn now to these two frequently cited passages from Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*: the Valais episode, in Part I of the novel, and the similarly celebrated description, from Part IV, of Julie's orchard at Clarens, named her *Élysée*. One crucial commonality between the two passages from the novel is the emphasis placed on the interplay of "nature sauvage" and "nature cultivée": otherwise put, brute, wild nature, and nature fashioned by human artifice. In the first selection, Saint-Preux describes to his lover Julie part of his journey through the Alps in the Valais region of Switzerland. Saint-Preux writes: "A surprising mixture of wild nature and cultivated nature showed everywhere the hand of human beings where one would have thought that they had never penetrated: next to a cavern I found houses; I found dried vines where I would have looked only for brambles; excellent fruits on the rocks, and fields on the precipices."³ What Saint-Preux insists on is his surprise, and he draws out clearly the contrast between what he would have expected and what he actually finds. If not for the surprise of what he sees, he might never have paid attention to anything around him: "I wanted to daydream," he says, "but I was constantly turned away from it by some unexpected spectacle."⁴

The use of *spectacle* refers, first of all, to an object of vision, but also, of course, can refer to a theatrical performance, as in Rousseau's own *Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, in which he decries the Encyclopedist's suggestion that a theatre should be built in Geneva. Rather than the theatrical performances that Rousseau vehemently argues will only lead to the town's moral degeneration, Rousseau presents here a natural theatre, so to speak. Here in the mountains, Saint-Preux finds that he would be "surprised if the swaths of healthy mountain air were not among the finest remedies of medicine and morality."⁵ The blending of "nature sauvage" and "nature cultivée" is one in which human beings live peacefully and healthfully with their surroundings. The surprise he notes is not a condemnatory shock that cultivated nature has been perversely grafted onto wild nature, but an approving surprise that cultivated nature could slip in so peacefully into wild nature, without disturbing it. On a first glance, it still gives the impression that a human hand has never worked to alter it.

What human beings have done here by introducing their work to the landscape, is importantly similar to wild nature's activities themselves: "Nature," writes Saint-Preux, "seemed still to take pleasure in setting herself in opposition with herself, so much does one find her different in the same place under varied aspects."⁶ The natural space becomes a theatre in which nature takes on different roles, bringing together different seasons, climates and terrains onto one stage in an unusually brief period of time. Indeed if human artifice, in the form of houses and agriculture, has become a cultivated nature, natural phenomena have become natural artistry of sorts. The "optical illusions" and "chiaroscuro" of human art are here executed by nature herself.⁷ These terms, most especially the latter, are, of course, borrowed from painting. But the vision is theatrical as well: Nature, presents, as in a stage play, "continual scenes which did not cease to attract my attention, and which seemed to be offered to me in a true theatre."⁸

On a more cursory level, Rousseau remarks simply on the resemblance in shape between an amphitheatre and the dense rows of trees on mountain slopes arranged in a

semi-circle. The comparison goes deeper than that, however. The scenes are theatrical in the sense that they capture the spectator's attention, imagination and emotions; the place, a theatre because "the prospect from the mountains, being vertical, strikes the eyes all at the same time and much more powerfully than that from the plains, which can be seen only obliquely, receding into the distance, and in which one object blocks another from view."⁹ Consequently, this bird's-eye view from the mountains permits a depth of vision, while at the same time, the encircling slopes cordon off the performance space for the viewer. The elements in the range of vision are, moreover, arranged for viewing simultaneously, like theatrical décor and actors, and for viewing with the most striking effect. Thus Saint-Preux characterizes the natural spectacle as having the temporal and spatial concision that, we might say, partially distinguishes the unfolding of real life from theatrical representation—a concision that betokens an artful selection and disposition of elements, and that, in turn, allows the spectator to view everything deemed worthy of seeing within a markedly limited space and length of time.

Saint-Preux implies that his prose, necessarily successive, rather than simultaneous, cannot do justice to the concision of what he views and feels in response: "Suppose," he invites Julie, "them all reunited, these impressions that I have just described to you, and you will have some idea of the delicious situation in which I found myself. Imagine the variety, the grandness, the beauty of a thousand surprising spectacles."¹⁰ The effect is like that of a fantastic play or opera: He observes "another nature" ("une autre nature"), finds himself "in a new world" ("dans un nouveau monde"); "the spectacle has a *je ne sais quoi*, that is magical, supernatural, that ravishes the mind and the senses; one forgets everything, one forgets oneself, one no longer knows where one is."¹¹ One way of understanding these statements is to say that Saint-Preux's situation is eminently theatrical—he is captivated by events presented to his view; he is taken in by the illusion of being transported to some other world; he forgets the cares of his real life, and forgets his identity and his actual spatial position, much as spectators forget themselves when they are wrapped up in a stage play.

So, we might say, that in this excerpt, Saint-Preux describes a natural theatre, where nature executes the performance. Thus we arrive at the paradox of a nature that creates artistic effects. The paradox becomes more acute in the description later in the novel of Julie's Élysée, which also highlights a mixing of nature and artifice, though here the dialectic has been reversed. Rather than nature's presenting an artistic performance, here, in Julie's garden, human beings consciously manipulate nature to give the appearance of an utter lack of artifice.

Describing his visit to a gated patch of land, cloistered away on the estate at Clarens, Saint-Preux writes to his English correspondent Milord Édouard, "I thought that I was seeing the most wild, the most solitary place in nature, and it seemed to me that I was the first mortal who had ever penetrated this wilderness."¹² Here the illusion is that not only had a human being never constructed anything there, but never had a human being even set foot there. And once again Saint-Preux is unprepared for what he sees, "surprised, stricken, transported by a spectacle so little foreseen."¹³ He is quickly disabused of his illusion by Julie, who responds nonchalantly, undoing his impression from the first sentence: "Many people find it as you do. But twenty steps further lead them back to Clarens."¹⁴

By the same token, the illusion of being in a completely natural space, untouched by human artfulness, is perfect. "This place is charming, it is true," Saint-Preux tells Julie, "but rustic and abandoned; I do not see any human handiwork at all. You have closed the door; the water has entered I know not how; nature alone has done all the rest; and you yourself could not have done it as well as she."¹⁵ Julie's reply is as famous as it is cryptic: "It is true that nature has done everything, but under my direction, and there is nothing here that I have not ordered."¹⁶ Julie's rhetoric gives credit to nature for the actual work of constructing the garden, while reserving for herself the role of a meticulous coordinator. The statement ignores, however, the explanation that Julie and her husband M. de Wolmar go on to make, that Julie worked on the garden before her marriage and that a gardener and M. de Wolmar himself do actually work regularly in the orchard, a few days a year. Saint-Preux remarks that he "understands none of this enigma,"¹⁷ and indeed it is a mystification, that such a perfect illusion can be accomplished with such little effort. Still, that, too, contributes to the novelistic illusion, inasmuch as the attempted explanation does not fully explain.

What does become clear, however, is that, if "no human footsteps" can be seen, it is because, as M. de Wolmar says, "great care has been taken to erase them."¹⁸ All the vegetation is arranged "without order and without symmetry"; garlands are "negligently thrown from tree to tree...as in forests"; grass is carefully sown to hide all appearance of the work of gardening; moss covers the alleys; thick shrubs cover the walls that enclose the garden.¹⁹ As Saint-Preux puts it, "nothing undoes the impression of a deserted island," of a paradise far away from "the least trace of cultivation."²⁰ Like the nature Saint-Preux views in the Alps, Julie's *Élysée* acts as a theatrical space of illusion, where one place appears to the viewer as an elsewhere by enchanting the senses. "The more I explored this pleasant retreat," relates Saint-Preux, "the more I felt grow the delicious sensation that I had felt on entering. I was more moved to see the objects than to examine their impressions, and I wanted to give myself over to this charming contemplation without taking the trouble to think."²¹ We may take this as a further development of the self-forgetting invoked in the mountain description, a forgetting where one is content to be lost in illusion. "Are you still at the end of the world?" asks Julie. "No," Saint-Preux replies, "here I am, completely outside it; you have indeed transported me to Elysium."²²

The discussion of different attitudes towards nature in the main text and footnotes of this passage appears in the context of lively debates in this period of the best way of constructing gardens. As has been often remarked, the praise lavished on Julie's *Élysée* most obviously combats the classical French style, exemplified by Le Nôtre's gardens at Versailles, with their geometrical arrangement, straight alleys, symmetrical *parterres*, and sculpted trees. This is the opposition succinctly articulated by Elizabeth MacArthur when she writes: "The landscape gardeners woo nature; the formal gardener exerts despotic control."²³ In this way, the *Élysée* shares elements with the *style anglais*, given, as it is, to a decentralized, asymmetrical structure and to various techniques, such as the ha-ha, for hiding the work of human construction. All the same, the English landscape garden also typically includes evidently artificial features, such as monuments and inscriptions for meditation. Importantly, then, Julie's garden stands in partial opposition to this style as well, since these usual marks of human intervention are conspicuously absent from the *Élysée*. To the sight, the illusion of naturalness is perfect, and the underlying artistry is exposed only because of Julie and M. de Wolmar's

explanations to Saint-Preux. Like a well-orchestrated theatrical performance, in which no signs internal to the representation betray its fictionality to the audience, the *Élysée* strikes the spectator's senses as if it were the spontaneous outgrowth of unhindered natural processes.

Theatre is not foreign to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century gardens, whether the regular, geometrical gardens of the classical French style, or the English garden of the eighteenth century. We may think of the gardens of Versailles, which served as a sumptuous stage for the posturing of Louis XIV's court, as well as a setting for dramatic performances at the King's elaborate fêtes.²⁴ Or we may consider Vaux-Hall and Ranelagh in London, pleasure gardens whose curving pavilions housed dramatic performances.²⁵ Rousseau's insistence on rustic simplicity might at first seem far apart from the ostentation of these more evident instances of theatre in a garden environment. Nevertheless, Rousseau's discussion does not call for the abandoning of theatrical effects, but rather a restriction of them to "natural" ones—in other words, an artifice that does not attract attention to itself. The *Élysée* passage, then, advocates the natural as an effect, regardless of whether, in point of fact, the forces of uncultivated nature independently cause the desired result. Julie's orchard at Clarens is the sort of garden that nature would create, if nature created gardens, just as what Saint-Preux sees in the Alps is the sort of performance that nature would create if nature created plays. It is this staging of the natural that permits an *âme pur et sensible* such as Saint-Preux to become so engrossed in the spectacles presented to his view, whether by Julie or by Nature herself. And in this context, the aptest comparison is with the sister art of theatre—but where the illusion is so well executed that the spectators can walk on stage and become themselves actors.

Notes

¹ See John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972), chapter I; D. G. Charlton, *New Images of the Natural in France: A Study in European Cultural History, 1750–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), chapters II and III; Wil Munsters, *La Poétique du pittoresque en France de 1700 à 1830* (Geneva: Droz, 1991); Christopher Thacker, *The Wildness Pleases: The Origins of Romanticism* (London and Canberra: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), chapter II; and, Dora Wiebenson, *The Picturesque Garden in France* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).

² On the role of visual, non-verbal elements of eighteenth-century French theatre, see Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998) and Angelica Goodden, *Actio and Persuasion: Dramatic Performance in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1986). For the purposes of this essay, I leave aside the negatively valorized senses of "theatrical" and "theatricality," invoked, most importantly, in discussions of Denis Diderot's aesthetics, in which the "theatrical" denotes excessively mannered representation. On this question, in addition to Frantz and Goodden, see also Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1988).

³ "Un mélange étonnant de la nature sauvage et de la nature cultivée, montrait par tout la main des hommes, où l'on eut cru qu'ils n'avoient jamais pénétré : à côté d'une caverne on trouvoit des maisons; on voyoit des pampres secs où l'on n'eut cherché que des ronces, des vignes dans des terres éboulées, d'excellens fruits sur des rochers, et des champs dans des précipices" (*Œuvres*

complètes, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade [Paris: Gallimard, 1964] I.xxiii: 2:77 [original orthography preserved; translations are mine].

⁴ “Je voulois rêver, et j’en étois toujours détourné par quelque spectacle inattendu [*sic*]” (*ibid.*).

⁵ “je suis surpris que des bains de l’air salubre et bienfaisant des montagnes ne soient pas un des grands remèdes [*sic*] de la médecine et de la morale” (78–9).

⁶ “la nature sembloit encore prendre plaisir à s’y mettre en opposition avec elle-même, tant on la trouvoit différente en un même lieu sous divers aspects” (77).

⁷ “Ajoutez à tout cela les illusions de l’optique..., le clair obscur du soleil et des ombres” (*ibid.*).

⁸ “des scènes continuelles qui ne cessent d’attirer mon admiration, et qui sembloient m’être offertes en un vrai théâtre [*sic*]” (*ibid.*).

⁹ “la perspective des monts étant verticale frappe [*sic*] les yeux tout à la fois et plus puissamment que celle des plaines, qui ne se voit qu’obliquement, en fuyant, et dont chaque objet vous en cache un autre” (*ibid.*).

¹⁰ “Supposez les impressions réunies de ce que je viens de vous décrire, et vous aurez quelque idée de la situation délicieuse où je me trouvois. Imaginez la variété, la grandeur, la beauté de mille étonnans spectacles” (79).

¹¹ “le spectacle a je ne sais quoi de magique, de surnaturel qui ravit l’esprit et les sens; on oublie tout, on s’oublie soi-même, on ne sait plus où l’on est” (*ibid.*).

¹² “je crus voir le lieu le plus sauvage, le plus solitaire de la nature, et il me sembloit d’être le premier mortel qui jamais eut pénétré dans ce désert [*sic*]” (IV.xi: 2:471).

¹³ “Surpris, saisi, transporté d’un spectacle si peu prévu” (*ibid.*).

¹⁴ “Beaucoup de gens le trouvent ici comme vous...; mais vingt pas de plus les ramènent bien vite à Clarens” (*ibid.*).

¹⁵ “Ce lieu est charmant, il est vrai, mais agreste et abandonné; je n’y vois point de travail humain. Vous avez fermé la porte; l’eau est venue je ne sais comment; la nature seule a fait tout le reste et vous-même n’eussiez jamais su faire aussi bien qu’elle” (472).

¹⁶ “Il est vrai...que la nature a tout fait, mais sous ma direction, et il n’y a rien là que je n’aye ordonné” (*ibid.*).

¹⁷ “Je ne comprenois rien à cette énigme” (*ibid.*).

¹⁸ “je n’apperçois aucuns pas d’hommes. Ah! dit M. de Wolmar, c’est qu’on a pris grand soin de les effacer” (479).

¹⁹ “je voyais çà et là sans ordre et sans symétrie des broussailles de roses, de framboisiers, [etc.]... Ces guirlandes sembloient jettées négligemment d’un arbre à l’autre, comme...dans les forêts” (473).

²⁰ “je ne vois nulle part la moindre trace de culture.... [R]ien ne dément l’idée d’une Isle déserte” (478–9).

²¹ “Plus je parcourois cet agréable azile, plus je sentois augmenter la sensation délicieuse que j’avois éprouvée en y entrant.... J’étois plus empressé de voir les objets que d’examiner leurs impressions, et j’aimois à me livrer à cette charmante contemplation sans prendre la peine de penser” (475).

²² “Etes-vous encore au bout du monde? Non, dis-je, m’en voici tout-à-fait dehors, et vous m’avez en effet transporté dans l’Elisée” (478).

²³ Elizabeth MacArthur, “Textual Gardens: Elysée and Girardin’s Ermenonville,” *Romance Quarterly* 38.3 (1991): 331.

²⁴ See Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), chapter V.

²⁵ See John Dixon Hunt, *Gardens and the Picturesque: Studies in the History of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London; MIT P, 1992), chapter II.

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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher
si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles
paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*.

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