## Catherine Rubinger

# Some Gardens in the French Eighteenth-Century Novel

During the second half of the eighteenth-century, the art of landscape gardening in France underwent a marked evolution. The aristocrats and the well-off bourgeoisie discovered the out-of-doors and adopted Nature as a new setting for their pleasures. It was at this period that the great country houses sprang up along the banks of the Seine and the Marne as it became fashionable to retire to the country for the weekend and holidays.<sup>1</sup> The fête rustique and the fête champêtre were highly popular events. For the scholarly, botany became a serious science, while the more frivolous hastened to follow the example of Mme de Pompadour and her ladies, discovering the dairy as a backdrop for galas and receptions. At this period, new gardens were laid out all across France. Abandoning the aesthetic of man-made symmetry and geometrical shapes, the clipped yews, the box hedges, the "quinconces" and the severely ordered flower beds, the long straight avenues and the formal "bassins d'eau" of the Le Nôtre garden, the French became enthusiasts for a less artificial kind of setting. The Chinese garden and the English garden became a new fashionsubject like all fashions to exaggeration and misunderstanding-but reflecting nevertheless an authentic change of vision.

Beauty and theatricality, formerly seen only in architecture and its extensions indoors and out were now found in the arrangement of trees, grass and water. For many garden owners it was a mere mode but to the garden designers, artists and theoreticians, Nature offered not merely a new style, but also a new sensibility. They sought to lay out a garden which would "*parler à l'âme*." "L'art des jardins," says Mornet, "subit dans la deuxième moitié du dix-huitième siècle, une transformation décisive." And as "l'art des jardins devint l'art préféré des âmes champêtres," a new word was required to describe the sensations afforded by the new experience: "le mot romanesque ne suffit plus...l'Angleterre, en apportant ses jardins apportera aussi le terme nouveau de romantique."<sup>2</sup>

New inspiration also came from the arts of the Orient. Exotism was in fashion. Yet the French had reservations about the Chinese garden and adopted only those characteristics that were also common to the English garden for "En fait, la fantaisie laborieuse et déconcertante de ces jardins (chinois) ne s'accomodait pas aisément de la logique européenne. On en retint seulement la variété des scènes, passages tournants ouverts au milieu des bosquets et qui font arriver aux différents points de vue, union des plus agréables objets de la nature ramassés comme par un peintre, transitions subites, frappantes oppositions de formes, de couleurs et d'ombres, horreur de la ligne droit."3 Like their English contemporaries and models, the French designers sought to set the house harmoniously in the landscape. Within the park, meandering paths were designed to tease the curiosity and please the eye, rocks were carefully shaped to suggest the rugged wilderness. There were grottoes and follies to offer a change of temperature and mood. Water was no longer channeled into severely geometrical pools, but allowed to flow and become part of the natural setting in a variety of streams, falls and pools. Flowers, trees and grass were allowed to suggest Nature's own arrangement, and the whole was modelled to follow the natural contours of the land. Chinese pagodas, statues, shrines, tombs of the famous were placed carefully to inspire changes of mood and feeling while the play of shade and open ground was studied to ensure contrasts of light. Yet Nature was harnessed, ordered, rather than given sway: the picturesquely wild was incorporated into the garden but at a safe and aesthetic distance. Grandeur was still important, but where the Le Nôtre garden had celebrated art as an expression of the nobility of human intellect, the romantic English garden was designed to express and dramatise the nobility and grandeur of the soul.

Girardin's description of the romantic site ends: "C'est dans de semblables situations que l'on éprouve toute la force de cette analogie entre les charmes physiques et les impressions morales. On se plaît à rêver de cette rêverie si douce, besoin pressant pour celui qui connaît la valeur des choses et les sentiments tendres: on voudrait y rester toujours, parce que le coeur y sent toute la vérité et l'energie de la nature."<sup>4</sup> Amidst his words suggestive of gentle emotional pleasure, however, we note Girardin's inclusion of abstracts: "valeur," "vérité," "impressions morales"—which give the clue to a further dimension of the eighteenthcentury evolution associated with gardens: not merely were they places for a new type of feeling, but also an expression of a new attitude to ethics and values. Mornet, commenting on this passage, says, "Girardin n'a pas voulu seulement y goûter les fortes impressions de la situation romantique, il y a mis des conclusions philosophiques et des élévations métaphysiques."<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual and philosophical dimension of the art of gardening would ultimately be articulated in a novel. It was Rousseau who popularised the change in "la façon de comprendre la Nature"6 and who took it decisively out of the realm of mere fashion and made it an integral part of civilisation. Yet until the publication of La Nouvelle Héloise, the evolution which we have sketched passed almost unnoticed in the novel. The word "nature" it is true, was common enough, but it lacked the resonance and meaning that it was to take on with Rousseau. Because the most famous line from a novel in the French eighteenth century concerns a garden, we might perhaps expect to find numerous descriptions of gardens in literature. In the novel, however, they are rare, both before and after the adoption of the jardin à l'anglaise as a landscape art form. The Le Nôtre garden is almost entirely absent. Gardens in the early novels are, like the familiar landscape of France itself, reduced to abstract decor, wholly subordinated to the deeds of the characters. The typical scenery in much of the eighteenth-century novel consists of a road, down which the hero or heroine travels to seek his or her fortune, with a tree beside it for resting under and being accosted by a stranger-a new character. There is a forest for being seduced in or robbed or terrified. Sometimes in the forest there is a château for encountering danger. It may have a garden for a dramatic rendez-vous important to the plot. In Zadig,<sup>7</sup> there is a garden which features "un rosier." In Juliette8 there is a garden forming the scene of an orgy and crime. It has no architectural or horticultural features. In Marianne9 there is a convent garden with "les plus belles allées du monde," and in the same novel, one of the rooms has a view of "un très beau jardin," otherwise unspecified, Marianne also waits for her suitor in a garden and at another point has an explanation with her lover in a "cabinet vert," a recognisable garden conceit. In Manon<sup>10</sup> there are two references to the great gardens and parks of Paris. Le Jardin du Palais Royal is the setting for an impassioned scene of friendship. It features "un banc." Later the plot takes a new twist in the Bois de Boulogne, which is undescribed. Its significance is that Manon may be betraying her lover there: perfidious, treacherous forests! In Gil Blas11 there are occasional unspecified gardens for waiting and plotting in.

It is thus apparent that gardens as such are of little interest to novelists, their descriptions rare, their characteristics a sort of shorthand for plot development. There are, however, four of significance in tracing the evolution of style, sensibility and morality that we have outlined.

The first in order of publication, dated 1734, is in L'Ecumoire by Crébillon. It purports to be in Japan. L'Ecumoire is an intellectual fire-work in the high spirited vein of the "philosophes." The subject matter is frivolous, though the underlying theme of the search for self-knowledge may be meant to be taken seriously. It is the story of a prince and princess, deeply in love, but unable to consumate their marriage owing to a magic spell that afflicts first one then the other of them. Both must perform a test before they can be happy and united in the maturity and self-awareness necessary for solid happiness. Princess Néardarné has to agree to submit to the "charms" of an "enchanter" in order to be released from her spell. Her seduction and test occur in a garden. It is a back-drop, a stage setting, designed to create an erotic and voluptuous mood so that the heroine will forget reason and her honour and agree to be "disenchanted." The play on words, the brittle elegance of the style, the essentially contrived nature of the plot, all belong to a literary mode more charcteristic of the Le Nôtre garden period-that of the fête galante-than that of the romantic garden. The description indeed starts out that way: "Du palais on entrait dans des jardins charmants; tout ce que l'art a pu imaginer de plus correct, et de plus brillant .... "Yet that sentence ends in the word "nature" and indeed in parts of what follows, there are elements suggesting that this is already physically an English romantic garden: "On voyait d'un côté, des grottes rustiques, et des ruisseaux dont le murmure tranquille invitait au plus doux repos, ou aux plus tendres plaisirs. De l'autre, c'étaient des cascades à perte de vue. Là on s'égarait dans les routes tortueuses et inégales d'un bois, que son irregularité ne rendait que plus agréable. Ici des allées d'une hauteur surprenante et compassées avec soin, offraient une promenade plus aisée mais moins voluptueuse. Les parterres ravissaient par la variété et la beauté des fleurs dont ils étaient ornés." After this passage, however, Crébillon lapses into literary conceits: "Flore y avait à jamais fixé son empire; et Zéphire l'y trouvait si belle que. . . etc.". He mentions the birds which are essentially literary: "la tourterelle," "le serin," "le rossignal" and there are charming nymphs and gallant shepherds piping amorous tunes. "Tout enfin parlait amour dans ces délicieux bocages ... la volupté assise au milieu de ce jardin, ordonnait elle-même les plaisirs et répandait sur eux ce charme si flatteur que, sans elle, ils n'ont jamais."12 We are, in fact, no longer in a romantic garden, but in Arcady, in a fête champêtre. Crébillon does not trust his delicious copses and rustic grottoes to inspire feeling without the support of the classics, their homeric shepherds and metaphors of idyllic love. Crébillon in fact, does not feel the dynamic relationship between nature and human emotion. It is the ordered poetic abstractions that have their effect on Néardarné. This is the garden of the transition generation, where the English romantic garden has entered fiction as a fashion, but where it remains purely decor. It has not yet become a source of emotion nor a literary metaphor or allegory.

It was Voltaire who would firmly fix the garden as an image. His garden in Candide, "une petite métairie," supposedly in Transylvania, is not a "jardin à l'anglaise" in layout or style, and its description is short, but it is the first in the novel to be endowed with philosophical significance. Candide's garden is that of maturity, of the man who has gone beyond philosophical theory and discovered the peasant's wisdom, determining to make the best of things in the best of all possible worlds, who believes that "travailler sans raisonner . . . c'est le seul moyen de rendre la vie supportable." Unlike other fictional gardens, this one has soil. It has to be cultivated. It is worked by an old man and his three sons and is their prime resource. The peasant who owns it aspires to protect his family from the three great evils: "l'ennui, le vice et le besoin." This garden is not a theatrical decor for a leisured class, but a work place. It grows practical fruits, however exotic, its exoticism being a function of climate. It provides perfumes, not as a luxury or to create an erotic atmosphere, but as an economic staple.<sup>13</sup> Candide offers a practical statement, debunking all "conclusions philosophiques et élévations métaphysiques." It is diametrically opposed to the tendancy to make a metaphor of the romantic garden: it is the antithesis of Rousseau's Elvsée.

The latter, the garden of La Nouvelle Héloise published in 1761, is the most influential in the novels of the eighteenth century. Physically it is clearly a "jardin à l'anglaise" in the French idiom. It is agreeably cool, shaded by its trees, it is vividly green, with flowers and running water and bird song. It is both wild and tamed. It contains rare and exotic plants from the Indies, moss from England, herbs and "mille fleurs des champs parmi lesquelles l'oeil en démêlait avec surprise quelques-unes de jardin." The paths through it wind irregularly amidst trees and shrubs, some pruned, some parasitic, all apparently natural, offering a change of mood and pleasant surprises. The kitchen garden is apart from it: "dans ce lieu seul, on a sacrifié l'utile à l'agréable." The garden is full of water: streams, brooks, springs, canals and pools, all fed by the stream which also feeds an ornamental "jet d'eau," left over from an earlier garden and kept out of respect for the ancestors who installed it, a reminder of what is due to rank and order. Julie and her family do not notice it however, preferring the running brook: "le jet d'eau joue pour les étrangers, le ruisseau coule ici pour nous."14

The physical description of this garden affords Rousseau a chance to criticise the gardens of the past and the exaggerations of those of his

day. By 1781, France had many "jardins à l'anglaise," so Rousseau is putting his mark on current taste rather than propounding original ideas. Rousseau "ne créa pas les jardins irréguliers, mais il apporta à la transformation des moeurs la collaboration de son génie. Il parle au moment même où les résistances semblent vaincues, au moment où les dessinateurs de jardins, peintres et hommes de lettres, grands seigneurs ou bourgeois vont entasser les beaux désordres plus courageusement qu'on n'avait poursuivi les effets de l'art."15 His opinions, however, are not any less vigorous for being shared with his contemporaries. In his Elysée, explains Julie, "vous ne voyez rien d'aligné, rien de nivelé; jamais le cordeau n'entra dans ce lieu; la nature ne plante rien en cordeau; les sinuosités dans leur feinte irrégularité sont ménagées avec art pour prolonger la promenade, cacher les bords de l'île et agrandir l'étendue apparente sans faire des détours incommodes et trop fréquents." There has to be "un peu l'illusion" but not too much, for "la symétrie . . . est l'ennemi de la nature." Rousseau derides the "beaux alignements" of the past, the "belles allées ... les belles pattes d'oie, les beaux arbres en parasol, en éventail," the squares, the "quinconces" the fine English lawns, the pagodas and vases and statues, which adorn, he says "un très beau lieu dans lequel on n'ira guère" and which merely reflect "la vanité du propriétaire et de l'artiste."32 Such conceits, he declares roundly are "l'erreur des prétendus gens du goût" reflecting "un faux goût de grandeur."16

Aesthetics, however, are not his main concern. The physical characteristics of the Elysée have corresponding moral qualities. This is the garden of the wise man who is "bien où il est et qui ne se soucie point d'être ailleurs." It is to be respected, for it was "planté par les mains de la vertu." It was, in fact planted by a woman, by Julie, at a critical stage of her life and of Rousseau's thesis. Separated from a lover who is not her social equal, Julie is married to an "honnête homme," Monsieur de Wolmar, an old friend of her father's, and the owner of a country estate. Together in their rural retreat, Julie and her husband live a sort of idyll where Julie subordinates her childhood passion for Des Preux to her other great passion-that for virtue. The garden, however, is not described in the novel until the lover reappears on the scene. It is, despite its moral dimensions, to be, as in Crébillon, the setting for a trial of virtue. But unlike Crébillon's, this garden plays an active role, ambiguous in its effect on the characters, but part of Rousseau's attempt to reconcile his paradoxes. It becomes a metaphor for his assertion that "le bon n'est que le beau mis en action."17

The Elysée is an enclosed garden, a private paradise. This is in itself not untypical of the French "*jardin à l'anglaise*." Blaikie, the Scottish gardener who worked on many gardens in France, was irritated by the French rejection of the open, unwalled plan. He explains that the French prefer to keep a wall between the house and the garden for protection against thieves.<sup>18</sup> Rousseau, however, gives another explanation: his Elysée is walled in, separate, secretive, always locked, because it represents virtue and "la jouissance de la vertu est tout intérieure." Rousseau's garden is, in fact, an image for his philosophical and social thesis. It represents the "goût de la retraite, du travail, de la modération, et conserve à celui qui s'y livre une âme saine, un coeur libre du tremble des passions."<sup>19</sup>

Moderation, in Rousseau's mind, is a matter of aesthetics and morality as we have seen, and of freedom from passion, but it is also economic. Chinese gardens, he asserts, are too expensive. Julie's cost nothing, except—he explains airily—a few days of labourers' work. And those labourers are kept severely out of sight. Work itself must not show. Nature must seem to be the prime worker. Julie has tamed a wilderness, but she says that "la nature a tout fait, mais sous ma direction."<sup>20</sup> Patience and time have completed the miracle, creating a serene sanctuary, a triumph of nature over art.

The purpose of this garden is to inspire—and not merely to frame agreeable and uplifting sentiments. The garden has an active role in creating and changing states of mind and feeling. The lover, being invited to walk there, first feels "un sentiment coupable" and then "des pensées honnêtes et une sorte de bien-être que les méchants n'ont jamais connus . . . c'est celui de se plaire avec soi-même."<sup>21</sup>

This desire to give a moral and ultimately a spiritual value to his garden in particular and Nature in general, was one of Rousseau's most significant contributions to literature and to contemporary manners. He put into words the growing Romanticism in popular taste; he made of nature an "état d'âme."

Bernardin de Saint Pierre continued this trend and developed the allegorical dimension of the garden in literature. In *Paul et Virginie*, there are in fact three gardens, the original one planted by a child—the garden of innocence, and which is destroyed in a storm—the garden of the wise man who instructs Paul in philosophy, and the new garden which Paul will plant in his maturity. The only one described in great detail however is the first. Like Rousseau's, it has qualities peculiar to its author-creator, but it is also visibly a romantic "*jardin à l'anglaise*," influenced by the Elysée: it too is the site of an idyll, it too is a product of carefully tamed Nature. Paul in planting it, "en assujettissant" les "végétaux à son plan . . . ne s'était pas écarte de celui de la nature." Trees, plants, fountains, the greenery, are all arranged in harmony with each other and the land contours. A path leads from "un bosquet d'arbres sauvages, au centre du quel croissait, à l'abri des vents, au arbre domestique chargé de fruits." There are winding paths from which at times the house can be seen, at other the "sommets inaccessibles de la montagne." All lead to a rock dominating the sea which brings news of Europe and the outside world to the little community living amidst the ordered confusion of a tropical jungle, tamed by a twelve-year-old boy. At the rock, "Les familles se rassemblaient le soir et jouissaient en silence de la fraîcheur de l'air, du parfum des fleurs, du murmure des fontaines et des dernières harmonies de la lumière et des ombres."22 This garden, however, unlike Rousseau's is also useful. The riotous profusion of growth is designed to feed the family as well as please their senses and emotions. Oranges and lemons are grown as well as lilies: nuts and fruit trees offer sustenance as well as shade: Bernardin de Saint Pierre understands Voltaire as well as Rousseau, and his hero truly cultivates his garden and allows the effort to show. The effort is indeed part of the thesis. Paul works his garden inspired by a pure and innocent love, and it flourishes so long as his heart is uncorrupted and his mind without disillusionment. The garden is vulnerable, however, as is Paul's happiness, menaced by the values of worldly society which will reach out and destroy them. As in Rousseau, elvseum can only be maintained in seclusion, cut off from mainstream values.

Bernardin illustrates his moral thesis by borrowing from the "jardin à l'anglaise" a fashionable conceit: he gives names to the various features of his garden. Its little pavillon has love verses from Horace inscribed upon it. Virginie would prefer the motto "Toujours agitée mais constante" qui "conviendrait encore mieux à la vertu." All the other spots in the garden have names, "les noms les plus tendres." A circle of oranges, bananas and jamroses around a lawn where the children dance is called La Concorde. An old tree where the two widows had shared their sorrows is named "les Pleurs Essuvés." To comfort their home-sickness, the patch where peas, strawberries and corn grow, is named "Bretagne" and "Normandie." The most romantic site consists of two intertwined coconut trees, planted when the children were born, with a fountain at their base in a field of herbs, overlooking their cabin. This is called "le Repos de Virginie." Here Nature is particularly colourful and fertile. Here Virginie rests and washes clothes and puts her goats to pasture, and here Paul brings birds' nests and their conversation is "aussi innocente que leurs festins." In this setting where the classical allusions of the fête champêtre are fused with the sentimentality to be so characteristic of the Romantics, Paul and Virginie often talk in the evening of the work done that day and the tasks of the morrow. Here too, we learn that Paul "méditait toujours quelquechose d'utile pour la société," as Bernardin de

Saint Pierre develops his thesis beyond that of Voltaire and Rousseau. Nature has become the educator not merely of happy and virtuous children whose lack of possessions and whose ignorance "ajoutaient encore à leur félicité", but of citizens concerned with the good of society.<sup>23</sup>

Then disaster strikes. Virginie is invited to go to France and her mother, faithful to conventional standards, sends her away to become a lady of rank. The idyllic garden is destroyed by a tempest. Virginie chooses love over social standing, but is drowned on the way home. Paul then turns for consolation to an old hermit-wisdom once more being found in seclusion-who has a garden full of aromatic plants and flowers and birds, half wild, half cultivated for their usefulness, recalling the garden of Voltaire's Candide. In this setting, Paul's philosophy matures, as he learns from the old man to think of the State as a garden. In this, Bernardin de Saint Pierre transcends the work ethnic of Voltaire's garden and the moral implications of Rousseau's and gives to the garden its final-and overtly political-dimension. "L'état est semblable à un jardin," explains the old hermit, "où les petits arbres ne peuvent venir s'il y en a de trop grands qui les ombragent, mais il y a cette différence que la beauté d'un jardin peut résulter d'un petit nombre de grands arbres, et que la prospérité d'un Etat dépend toujours de la multitude et de l'égalite des sujets, et non pas d'un petit nombre de riches."24

Thus are the strands of the novelists' social, emotional, moral and politico-economic ideas fused in the single image of the garden. Literature and life are similarly fused when Paul and Virginie are buried in the ruins of their garden, in a splendid example of early Romantic sentimental pathos—as was Rousseau at Ermenonville.

These four gardens in the novel illustrate the evolution of taste, style, sensibility and thought through to the eve of the Revolution. *Paul et Virginie* was published in 1787. All four gardens are situated outside the mainstream of contemporary life, purportedly outside France—or on the frontier—permitting the authors to criticise implicitly, and increasingly explicitly, the manners and morality of their day and incidentally to elude the censor while doing so. Three out of the four are situated in seclusion, suggesting a despairing recognition that society cannot be changed from within, but that new models of morality and social concern require distance and separation from the prevailing behaviour of the city, the court, the capital. All but Crébillon's are the gardens of the petite noblesse or the bourgeoisie, representing the novelists' assertion that nobility is not only a matter of birth, but more importantly of the mind and soul, that "les talents sont encore plus rares que les naissances et que les richesses.'<sup>25</sup> They stress the middle-class virtues of work, moderation and responsible management of an ample but not lavish, income. All four implicitly attack the corrupting influence of display, riches, rank. All four suggest, increasingly clearly, that contact with nature leads to self-knowledge, that there is something intrinsically wise and good about nature, that nature and human nature, when working in harmony, lead to the good of both, and of society.

If we turn momentarily from the novelists and consider the real owners of the great gardens of 18th century France, we see few signs of a parallel evolution in attitudes and ideas among the aristocracy. Some of the minor nobility were, by the late eighteenth century, living in the country and not wholly without the prestige formerly reserved for the courtier. The responsible gentle-farmer ceased at this period to be a joke.<sup>26</sup> Others-clients or patrons of the Scottish court gardener, Blaikie—were driven to taking refuge on their country estates, living year-round in their secondary residences, for financial reasons. Yet to them, according to Blaikie, the Revolution came as a complete surprise, and the riots of the peasantry were incomprehensible. The aristocrats he describes were still frozen in an elitist aesthetic and cult of pleasure, cut off from other realities. Their gardens were not necessities, not a source of food, Nature was to them merely an accessory, a tool of art and artifice, still essentially a show-case decor. They failed, it seems, to understand the model for their gardens. Where their English contemporaries considered the stately home and the village, the park and the fields, the land-owner and the land-worker as interdependant parts of an ordered whole, rooted in the soil, the French nobility had no such buttress against rapid change.

Some members of the upper classes were beginning to modify their values by the late eighteenth century, but too late, for the gifted, dynamic middle-class—artists, garden designers, novelists, philosophers, scientists, thinkers—had by then effected and popularised radical changes in the attitudes and expectations of their time. Among their other means of expressing their ideas, the image of the garden illustrates how what began as a fashion evolved into a fully-blown allegory of state-craft, a metaphor with moral, social, economic, political and psychological dimensions. They had elaborated a new vision, a new identity, which though often still theoretical and obscured by unresolved contradictions, were to give rise to a new relationship between the individual and nature, the individual and society, the individual and the State. It lacked only political power for the impetus of change to become irrestible. That was to come.

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- 4. Marquis R.L. de Girardin, De la composition des paysages sur le terrain ou des moyens d'embellir la Nature (4 édition, Paris, 1805).
- 5. Mornet, p. 248.
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- 16. Rousseau, Julie, pp. 462-466.
- 17. Ibid., pp. 466-468, 32.
- 18. Blaikie, Diary of a Scotch gardener at the French court at the end of the eighteenth century (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1931).
- 19. Rousseau, Julie, pp. 471, 453.
- 20. Ibid., pp. 467, 454.
- 21. Ibid., p. 470.
- 22. Bernardin de Saint Pierre, Paul et Virginie (Paris: Nelson Editeurs), pp. 44-46.
- 23. Ibid., pp. 48, 53, 66.
- 24. Ibid., p. 142.
- 25. Ibid., p. 133.
- 26. Mornet, p. 36.

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