

---

H-France Review Vol. 6 (September 2006), No. 117

**Claude-Henri Watelet**, *Essay on Gardens: A Chapter in the French Picturesque*. Edited and translated by Samuel Damon. Introduction by Joseph Disponzio. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. x + 104 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). Notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-8122-3722-6.

Review by Chandra Mukerji, University of California, San Diego.

---

Claude-Henri Watelet (1718-86) was a poet, painter, and writer on the art of painting who was made a member of the Academy in 1760, the year his acclaimed work, *L'Art de peindre*, was put into print. A voice of the Enlightenment and friend of Rousseau, he wrote on painting and design for the *Encyclopédie* and was working on a dictionary of the visual arts when he died. He was from a wealthy family of financiers, inheriting his father's position as *receveur general des finances* for Orleans. He used much of his fortune on a country estate called Moulin Joli that became a fashionable destination. There he created not only a peaceful retreat from Paris but also an experiment in the emerging aesthetic of picturesque parks. Watelet wrote on the subject and described Moulin Joli in his *Essai des jardins*.

Watelet's gardening essay was lost to Anglophone readers for centuries. But Samuel Damon has recently provided us with a translation that is graceful and precise, conveying Watelet as a writer along with his ideas. There is an introduction to the text by Joseph Disponzio with useful detail about Moulin Joli, Watelet's personal life, and the picturesque garden. Since the book was published in a garden history series, the *Essay's* significance to other readers is not indicated in the volume but remains within Watelet's text itself.

The *Essay* provides an aesthetic reading of French intellectual culture in the mid-eighteenth century and argues for the value of motion, change, and new approaches of the rich to their land. The author promotes the picturesque garden not because he wants to ape a fashionable English style, but to advocate a new form of life. Watelet despises French formal gardens as models of arrogant and destructive domination. The picturesque garden that he wants for France is, in contrast, a model of stewardship, capturing admirers with wisdom and natural charm. The "new parks" draw people into them with "hospitality, which is a simple feeling emanating from nature" (p. 24). They beckon people to them rather than striking viewers with awe. These gardens are unadorned with statues and fountains, but are nonetheless designed with enough diversity and surprises to pique curiosity and stimulate the senses. They draw out thoughts and feelings from visitors who consequently want to go further into them and see more. The beauty of these gardens is derived less from their grand design than the modest elements of the natural world that invite attention--the sound of water, the curve of a hillside, or the sight of a distant village.

Watelet prescribes this type of park as a rural retreat for men and women of rank whose pursuit of urban pleasures has left them exhausted and in need of fresh air, simple activities, and time for reflection. His friends and readers who join him at Moulin Joli are learned people. They are used to reading, writing, thinking, and debating, but still need to learn how to contemplate and learn about the natural world. He is their guide. Like Fontenelle teaching ladies astronomy from his imaginary garden, Watelet presents a sensory approach to natural beauty on his estate. The task is at once literary, spiritual, and liberal. "Let us imagine the dwellings of the patriarchs. Let us consider, in our own countryside, the isolated establishments of people who are still simple in their ways and limited in their wealth" (p. 24). The countryside, Watelet suggests, gains its beauty not from artifice but from natural motion, such as the play of light on trees. These effects are equally available to the high and low born.

---

But men of wealth lack the habit of appreciating them, preferring gardens that demonstrate their powers over the earth. This is their weakness, and what Watelet wants to teach the French to abandon. They should become students of the land, seeking the utility of nature and the beauty of its natural processes.

Watelet's version of a picturesque garden is not so different from others. He calls for using aesthetics from painting to highlight forms already in the landscape. He also argues that, "the person viewing picturesque scenes in a park...changes their organization by changing his location" (p. 36). Having a static view of an open park (or formal garden) is a poor way to appreciate the complexity of nature and the problems of perception and knowledge that limit our ability to use it well.

Movement is also an aesthetic necessity in the garden. "Works of art that are not animated by movement and action, or do not appreciably evoke these ideas, are of limited interest" (p.36). So, the new French park should contain streams, rivers, and other water courses to give life to what would otherwise be a static scene. Garden paths should also open and close vistas and views to make the landscape visually mobile. These devices are the invitations sent out by a well-designed park. Land in this cultural configuration is not something to control as much as a site of regeneration and natural generative power.

Watelet demonstrates the sensual but egalitarian pleasures of his beloved park: "To the west, an hour's distance from the city, the river irrigates lovely meadowlands as it divides into many branches and forms a number of islands shaded by thick willows and tall poplars. The banks of the winding canals offer continuous shade and greenery that is kept fresh by the coolness of the water. The eye delights in the picturesque views on all sides, and in the distant expanses adorned with villages and castles. Finally, in this relatively limited space, the variety of perspectives, the irregularity of the terrain, the windings of the riverbanks, the asymmetrical disposition of the trees, slopes, islands and of the dikes connecting them, all produce such a charming diversity that you have no desire to leave" (p. 60).

While landscape historians today refer to picturesque gardens as English, Watelet refuses to do this. He calls Moulin Joli a French garden, not an imitation of British parks. He admits that great parks are often created by "servile imitators of foreign fashions and peculiarities" (p. 25), and that this new kind of park might be "designated in the name of a nation [England] that we imitate in certain uninteresting practices with an eagerness that is often ridiculous" (p. 34). But Watelet presents the new park as a descendant of the embellished farm (*la ferme ornée*) described by French *mesnagement* writers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, such as Charles Estienne and Olivier de Serres. This tradition of French estate management predated the formal gardening that Watelet wants to overthrow, and provides the French with an alternative precedent for garden design.

Authors of *mesnagement* texts explained how to design farms to improve their utility and aesthetic orderliness. The purpose of these efforts was restoration of the landscape to make it more Edenic. Wild nature lacked the order that God intended on earth, because men had corrupted nature by sin. Rational land management was designed to restore the natural abundance of Eden. *Mesnagement* books provided practical prescriptions to facilitate dominion over the creatures. A house would be built partly up a hill, where the earth was not too wet or too dry. Different parts of the farm would be located according to their requirements. Each hillside and valley had its own amount of sunlight, water, and soil properties. Some areas were good as pasture land for animals; other places were appropriate for henhouses and chicken yards. The farm needed apiaries for bees, fields for grain, orchards for fruit trees, and gardens for vegetables, flowers and medicinal herbs. All had different requirements and suitable sites that could be found through careful study. Using land wisely was an act of intelligence and a form of organizing nature to improve its productivity. Gardening in this tradition was associated with Huguenots, and

---

appealed to the English in part because of it. French books on the subject were quickly translated and widely read in England, but that was not the point for Watelet.

Neither was the explicitly spiritual dimension of *mesnage* writings. Stewardship rhetoric had disappeared from French gardening literature a century before Watelet wrote his essay. Still, the *ferme ornée*, as Watelet describes it, is Edenic—a model of simplicity and virtue. This is why a country estate should have such a farm, and landowners should experiment in agriculture. Such tasks can focus the minds of jaded urbanites, and serve the well-being of others, too.

The English picturesque garden is also a model of stewardship, but explicitly so. The point is to realize God's plan, not follow the fashion for French formal gardens. With the *mesnage* roots of French gardening mostly forgotten even in France, and French style so firmly associated with the gardens of Le Nôtre, parks based on stewardship principles and painterly aesthetics seem in England a radical break with French garden aesthetics. The picturesque is a modest style that appears appropriate to the gardens of sober, Protestant land owners, not flamboyant, Catholic Frenchmen. But Watelet wants his peers to understand the form as fundamentally French.

Importantly, Watelet's tone is not agonistic toward the English. His is an essay on motion and change crafted with a keen sense of aesthetics and French political critique. He takes the reader on a visit to Moulin Joli with its old mill, streams, and farm buildings. He rails against parks that have been stripped of their natural features by rich landowners, who only want to draw attention to themselves and to kill animals when they are not at war. Watelet prefers a peaceful countryside shaped by farmers, not soldiers, and used to sustain rather than terminate life. At places like Moulin Joli, the terrain carries its history lightly, and its improvement seems possible and worthwhile. "Its potential beauty was only waiting to be revealed when, one day in spring some twenty years ago, I discovered this charming location. I was crossing the river in a ferryboat on my way to the city, calmly preoccupied with thought of my friends and of the arts.... I let my gaze wander. [A grove of trees] attracted my eye.... Here, I told myself, far from the tiresome and sterile bustle of crowds, away from the childish and gloomy anxiety of people who search in vain for happiness while running away from it--this is where I could taste in tranquility both the delights of study and the beauties of nature" (p. 60).

In this secluded spot, Watelet reasoned, nature had not been debased because farmers had tended it with care. When the farm had been abandoned, the land only got more natural. Both the aesthetic possibilities of the site itself and the intellectual rewards of improving it made this piece of property attractive to Watelet. What he built there (or left available in the garden) was a treat for the senses, relief for the mind, and site to cultivate a new thoughtfulness. "When, amidst the books of my study, I tire of composing and writing, I jump into a boat and then row myself and go seeking the pleasures of my garden. Sometimes I come to the island reserved for fishing, where, protected from the burning sun by a large straw hat, I amuse myself by luring the fish that frolic in the water, and study our human passions by observing their readiness to be deceived" (p. 58).

To learn from nature requires attention, and a well-designed garden draws it out. A picturesque garden can take a dissipated Parisian and make a new man of him. Nature has this power, but needs improvement to manifest it. So, the garden must also be a laboratory to serve the intellect as well as the senses.

Moulin Joli no longer exists except on paper. It is a great benefit to historians of early modern France, aesthetics, and gardening that Samuel Damon has now made the *Essay* available to Anglophone readers. New guests can be conducted to Watelet's beloved garden and follow the author on his walks into a

---

countryside where he tried to teach the powerful to see the wisdom in nature, and to loosen their destructive hold on the land.

---

Chandra Mukerji  
University of California, San Diego  
cmukerji@weber.ucsd.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172