

Jeffrey N. Peters, *The Written World. Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018. vii + 272 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$34.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8101-3697-7; \$99.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-8101-3698-4; \$34.95 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0-8101-3699-1.

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In the wake of the devastating fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, the conversation assessing the cultural importance of the cathedral to France has touched on its serving as the geographical center of the nation: the point on the map from which all other points have been measured, a universal center of French civilization that is quite apart from the structure's religious meaning or history. The discussion around Notre Dame invites contemplation of geography, space, and spatial and cultural universals in France, the issues that Jeffrey Peters engages in *The Written World: Space, Literature, and the Chorological Imagination in Early Modern France*. Peters analyzes the "classical" works by Boileau, La Fontaine, Corneille, Racine, d'Urfé, and Madeleine de Scudéry, but guided by his central interest in the chorological, he asks: "what pertinence can the notion of physical space possibly have to literature when literary works, unlike such identifiably visual media as painting or architecture, are understood to be fundamentally temporal and linear in concept?" (187).

Peters considers seventeenth-century poetics in relation to early modern transformations in cosmographical understanding of the world, in connection to Cartesian notions of mathematical space and Neo-Platonic notions of forms and ideals. In presenting "the chorological imagination as an aesthetic position that understands the poetic as an event of cosmological making," (27) Peters argues for the seventeenth-century chorological "poetic event" as central to the making and defining of the "classical" in French literature (209-215). He sees the "absence" of geographical and spatial descriptive language as central to the creation of classicism.

If Peters argues that the absence of descriptive spatial specificity in seventeenth-century French poetry is a defining event in the making of French poetry and the French classical aesthetic, it is worthwhile using Peters to think with in the examination of the relationship between poetry and landscape in the seventeenth century—the (long) moment out of which the "classical" French garden emerged and culminated in Versailles. While the transformation of the gardens of Versailles did not begin until the 1660s, the poetic politicization of the French landscape began decades earlier. As Peters demonstrates, the publication of Honore d'Urfé's *L'Astrée* (1607-1627) deployed and developed a revival of the pastoral in the celebration of Henri IV. The allegorical descriptions of "Forests," the setting of *L'Astrée*, were poetic landscape evidence of Henri IV's ushering in a Golden Age: a Golden Age for the nation, more specifically. Peters writes, "If a central concern of *L'Astrée* is to tell the origin story of an emerging and unified France, the concept of nation it expresses is closely tied to the landscape it depicts." (176) When Louis XIV took André le Nôtre from Vaux-le-Vicomte to Versailles, Le Nôtre, transformed the elements of the garden he had perfected for Fouquet, into something quite different. The optical play of the symmetrical *allées* and canals at Vaux-le-Vicomte gave Baroque visual coherence and definition to Fouquet's (recently purchased) land-based claim to title. At Versailles, Le Nôtre achieved something different: instead of brilliantly delimiting the estate and framing the baroque jewel of

a palace at the center as at Vaux, the *allées* and Grand Canal at Versailles lead the eye outward to the horizon, outward to France. With Louis XIV's royal body waking each day at the center of the palace at the center of the garden, the manufactured landscape visually and allegorically became the geographical and cultural center of France.

But if Le Nôtre's design drew the eye outward to France, it was words that made the power and meaning possible. Peters sees a specific role for the pastoral in this process. The pastoral landscape, he argues, "therefore embodies the very foundations of the poetic enterprise: the sequential unfolding of language that seeks culmination in the paradigmatic gathering of vivid depiction, and the forward thrust of the desire both to express and to close the gap between word and meaning in all poetry." (152). If the pastoral makes meaning, the pastoral landscape realized in the garden itself acquired meaning from the pastoral literature.

In the gardens of Versailles, there is no narrative. Only moments in a larger schema, the logic of which exists only in the collected stanzas or vignettes or chapters that are the *bosquets*, parterres, fountains, and flowers that make up the whole. Historians have struggled with this absence of a cohesive narrative structure. Unlike the narrative of the emerging seventeenth-century French classical novel and, as explored by Peters, the absence of spatial description given to the gardens of Versailles in fact realizes and embodies what is little described but richly meaningful. I have written about the importance of flowers in the early modern French garden, but it is worthwhile revisiting them here, as they speak to Peters' chorological notions in interesting ways. If the pastoral provided the meta narrative of the unification of France, the gardens were the chapters of the story come to life. Most immediately, the gardens provided an opportunity to physically realize the Golden Age in the landscape. And the parterres demonstrated it horticulturally. One of the more interesting facets of the political deployment of the garden is that the narrative of growth and transformation was never spelled out in the parterres. Though engineering, building, designing, re-designing, and planting was perpetual and ongoing, and meant to be marveled at, that growth was not observed or described. Rather, the gardens were imagined to be static (though fruitful and productive) in a Golden Age created by Louis XIV. More specifically, the gardens were meant to be fixed in a state of "perpetual springtime," with all the promise of fertility and prosperity on display. Perpetual springtime was realized horticulturally in multiple ways. The "bedding out" method of planting hundreds of potted flowers brought to bloom in the greenhouses and nurseries into the flowerbeds overnight was the most frequently deployed. A surviving planting plan also testifies to the deliberate planting of a mix of bulbs, annuals, and perennials in the same bed to ensure that something was growing and blooming from early spring until December. The unseen process (or narrative?) of growing, maturing, and blossoming was evidence of the king's magical powers.

Those powers on display in dedicated spaces in the landscape were reinforced poetically, however. In his analysis of the *Princesse de Clèves*, Peters asks (as I quoted above) "what pertinence can the notion of physical space possibly have to literature when literary works, unlike such identifiably visual media as painting or architecture, are understood to be fundamentally temporal and linear in concept?" (187) He answers first, that "geography—broadly constructed—seems to appear whenever the nature of the literary, as well as the origin of the work of art itself, is at issue," (187) and second, "narrative forms . . . offer an opportunity to think about the distances implied by material space and their relation to the ostensibly linear features of written language, and therefore to space as a problem of literary becoming." (187) The spaces at Versailles provided stages upon which such literary becoming was acted out. For these forms coalesced in the staging

of ballets and operas within the gardens at Versailles that played with the larger narratives. In one of the most striking examples, in 1689, the flower-filled Trianon gardens themselves served as the setting for the performance of the ballet *Du Palais de Flore*. According to the text, the ballet was set in “The Palace of Flora & eternal Springtime which until now have [existed] only in the imagination of Poets, [but which] are [now] veritably found here” (no pagination). [1] The text continued, “. . . these Parterres are always filled with all sorts of flowers. One cannot remember that it is the middle of Winter, or one believes that he has been transported all of a sudden to another Climate, when one sees the delicious objects which denote so agreeably the abode of Flora.” (my translation; no pagination) The “eternal Springtime which had existed only in the imagination of the Poets” was of course a deliberate reference to the perpetual springtime of the Golden Age described by Ovid and Virgil. Unlike the Ancients, however, who dwelt in the world of myth, Louis XIV commanded the horticultural means to create a literal “eternal springtime” in his gardens. In the gardens of Versailles, then, spaces of becoming were created through horticultural fictions intent on making an ideal—using the language of the past and the horticultural possibilities of the present to create the French universal, the French classical age (and garden).

In the conclusion to *The Written World*, Jeffrey Peters plays with Patrick Dandrey’s assertion that the seventeenth century, situated between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, “does not exist.” (212) But he concludes, “The chorological imagination is in this way bound to the situation of Neoplatonism in the seventeenth century, as we have seen. In its more conventional form, it governs the causal relation of form and copy, of the particular and the universal, that founds the exemplary transcendence of what we call classical art.” (215) I would suggest that the seventeenth century can be found to exist in the garden—in the spaces and landscapes realized in conversation with the poetry Peters explores. Those gardens, which represent an attempt through landscape to make Versailles and the king at its center the measure of all things in France, might be the “written world” realized.

NOTES

[1] Author unknown, *Le Palais de Flore: Ballet Dansé à Trianon le janvier 1689*. Classic Reprint Series. (London: Forgotten Books, 2018).

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