

## THE SENTIMENTAL TRAVERSE OF CLAUDE-HENRI WATELET'S EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PICTURESQUE GARDEN ISLE, THE MOULIN JOLY

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Sentimental Traverse of Claude-Henri Watelet's Eighteenth-Century Picturesque Garden Isle, the Moulin Joly.* Claude-Henri Watelet's 1774 *Essai sur les jardins* (*Essay on Gardens*) was the first French garden treatise to enter the picturesque garden debate, set into motion in England with the 1748 publication of William Gilpin's *A Dialogue Upon the Gardens [...] at Stow*, a dialogic garden tour which delineated the aesthetic principles of the picturesque, advancing a formalist approach to the visual apprehension of the landscape. Watelet's *Essay on Gardens*, however, exemplified the affective development of the garden treatise in the second half of the eighteenth century, which featured a textual, oftentimes sentimental traverse of the picturesque landscape, evoking a sensation-imbued garden walk, or in this case, ferry crossing. Watelet's *Essay* describes the new domain of landscape architecture as inhabited by artists, poets, and designers, or *décorateurs*, who conceived gardens as pictures, and the garden walk as a series of volatile, shifting tableaux. The picturesque garden ramble, vivified in Watelet's ekphrastic prose, could thereafter be traversed and re-traversed by the reader regardless of their location in space-time. In *Essai sur les jardins*,

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Watelet crosses the Seine by boat, en route to Paris, when he serendipitously discovers his future garden isle, the Moulin Joly. Watelet's gaze errs along the otherworldly pastorale, seizing upon what would become his future *ferme ornée*, or embellished farm, catching sight of its flowing waters and verdant groves, fortuitously up for sale. This fleeting glimpse, or *coup d'œil*, in which the fugitive tableau is instantaneously imprinted onto the retina, enabled the garden visitor an immediate entrée into the terrain of the subconscious, embarking upon an ever-changing traverse of the emotions suggested by the imagery, symbolism, and vocabulary of the landscape garden.

**Keywords:** *the eighteenth century, picturesque aesthetics, sentiment, Claude-Henri Watelet, Moulin Joli.*

**REZUMAT. Traiectoria sentimentală a grădinii pitorești de la Moulin Joly a lui Claude-Henri Watelet.** „Essai sur les jardins” („Eseu despre grădini”), publicat în 1774 și semnat de Claude-Henri Watelet, este primul tratat despre grădini scris în limba franceză care ia parte la dezbateră despre grădinile pitorești de la acea vreme, dezbateră care a început în Anglia odată cu apariția în anul 1748, la Stow, a tratatului „A Dialogue Upon the Gardens” („Dialog despre grădini”) semnat de William Gilpin. Textul lui Gilpin poate fi descris ca un tur prin mai multe grădini și ia forma unui dialog în care sunt enunțate principiile estetice ale pitorescului, propunând astfel o abordare formalistă asupra aprecierii estetice a peisajelor. Acesta marchează momentul în care literatura despre grădini începe să se preocupe mai mult de modul în care grădina este percepută vizual de vizitatorii săi, în defavoarea intenției peisagistice. „Eseul despre grădini” al lui Watelet este reprezentativ pentru tratatele despre grădini din cea de-a doua jumătate a secolului al XVIII-lea, care propun cititorului o călătorie textuală și adesea sentimentală printr-un peisaj pitoresc bogat în diferite senzații, fie că este vorba de o scurtă plimbare prin grădină sau de traversarea unei ape cu vaporul, ca în textul lui Watelet. El descrie domeniul incipient al peisagisticii și îl reprezintă ca fiind populat de artiști, poeți, arhitecți și proiectanți, care concep grădinile ca pe niște picturi și reprezintă plimbarea prin grădină ca și când ar presupune o înlănțuire de tablouri aflate în perpetuă schimbare și mișcare. Rătăcirea prin grădina pitorească, ilustrată în proza efrastică a lui Watelet, poate fi traversată din nou și din nou, indiferent de constrângerile spațiale sau temporale. În „Eseul despre grădini”, Watelet traversează Sena cu vaporul, în drum spre Paris, unde descoperă cu totul întâmplător insula cu grădini pe care se va întinde viitoarea sa proprietate de la Moulin Joly. Privirea lui Watelet rătăcește prin peisajul pastoral care pare desprins din cu totul altă lume și se apleacă asupra viitoarei sale ferme, surprinzând astfel apele sale curgătoare și crângurile verzi, care, spre norocul său, erau scoase la vânzare. Un astfel de *coup d'œil*, prin intermediul căruia tabloul volatil se imprimă instantaneu pe retină, îi oferă celui care vizitează grădina acces la propriul său subconștient, unde se întâlnește cu o gamă largă de emoții sugerate de imaginile, simbolismul și limbajul prin care comunică peisajul unei grădini.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *secolul al XVIII-lea, estetica pitorescului, sentimentalism, Claude-Henri Watelet, Moulin Joli.*

## A Fleeting Glimpse

Bounded by surging waters, sheathed in brume, redolent with vapors, flickering in and out of view, the apparition of a small group of islands in the Seine seemed so incorporeal as to enchant Watelet when crossing the river en route to Paris in 1749. Watelet's reverie was interrupted by this unexpected sighting, writing, "I was [...] calmly preoccupied with thoughts of my friends and of the arts, two subjects so dear to me that, as you know, I have allowed them to dominate all others. I let my gaze wander. The grove I have just described for you attracted my eye", thus setting the tone for an ekphrastic narrative of affect, gentility, and taste on the art of landscape, and the landscape in art (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60). Watelet's emotional response to this "uncommon site" of "potential beauty" underscored the heady, sensation-inducing intent of the discerned or devised picturesque landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Watelet outlines the allure of this triune of islands in an almost textbook description of the picturesque principles of variety, irregularity, asymmetry, sinuosity, and diversity; from his ferryboat he espies "the variety of perspectives, the irregularity of the terrain, the windings [*sinuosités*] 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" (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60). This process of perceiving the landscape according to aesthetic convention is an example of Alain Roger's *artialisation in visu*, wherein land is transformed to landscape within the eye, according to the aesthetic framing of the time (Roger, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

The picturesque, a mid-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century aesthetic ideal that blurred the lines between landscape and picture, drew upon the awe-inspiring sublime in nature tempered by the domesticated pleasantness of the beautiful. These wilderness islands in the Seine, replete with dilapidated sixteenth-century watermill, dairy, outbuildings, and living quarters, embodied the picturesque intersection of nature and art. Drawing upon both observation and

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<sup>2</sup> Certain key words have been translated literally, or on occasion have been left in the original French. These terms may occasionally differ from Samuel Danon's masterfully translated 2003 edition of Watelet's *Essay on Gardens*.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Roger resurrects Montaigne's term "artialisation" [*in visu*] to depict the visual transposition of land into landscape according to the aesthetic conventions of a given period (Roger, 1997). The picturesque fragmentation of the landscape into tableaux, whether due to its picture-like terminology or the expectations surrounding the pictorial representation of the landscape in art, are forms of *artialisation*. Eighteenth-century picturesque theorist Uvedale Price writes that "the English word ['picturesque'] naturally draws the reader's mind toward pictures, and from that partial and confined view of the subject, what in truth is only an illustration of picturesqueness, becomes the foundation of it" (Price, [1794] 1796, 55).

imagination, the island's sighting was an epiphany to Watelet as he arrives at his Arcadia, a forgotten island in the Seine, discovering a *secrete sympathie* [sic] with it that he is powerless to resist (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 141).

This trio of connected islets, eleven kilometers northwest of Paris, accessible by suspended bridge from Colombes, was "far from the bustle of crowds, away from the childish and gloomy anxiety of people who search in vain for happiness while running away from it" (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60). This landscape of Rousseauian ideals, far from the corruption of society, was a place where Watelet "could taste in tranquillity both the delights of study and beauties of nature" (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60). Watelet describes the discovery of the island in the final chapter of his 1774 garden treatise *Essai sur les jardins*, "The French Garden—Letter to a Friend":

This unusual site had been long neglected. Its potential beauty was only waiting to be revealed when, one day in spring some twenty years ago, I discovered its charming location. I was crossing the river in a ferryboat on my way to the city, calmly preoccupied with thoughts of my friends and of the arts, two subjects so dear to me that, as you know, I have allowed them to dominate all others. I let my gaze wander. The grove I have just described for you attracted my eye. An eighth of a league in the distance, it presented such a lovely view that I wished I could enjoy it more fully. A meadow, flowing waters, shade! 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.

I did not resist this first impression. Hardly had I disembarked when I proceeded toward a place that lured me by some kind of secret affinity. (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60-66)

### **Serendipitous Discovery**

In succumbing to the "first impression" of the island that would become his future *ferme ornée*, Watelet participated in the experience of serendipitous discovery that epitomized the picturesque traverse (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60). The "place that lured [him] by some kind of secret affinity" was espied from the deck of a ferryboat, removed from *terra firma*, its Elysian islets giving rise to the evocative, otherworldly sensation that connected the eighteenth-century landscape to the art, poetry, theory, and philosophy of its time (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60-66). The unforeseen apparition of the island prompted a "sagacious discovery", as defined by Francis Bacon in the late seventeenth century (Bacon, [1609] 1884,

333-41). This joining of perspicacity to accident, now known as “serendipity”, was a term conceived just around the time of Watelet’s discovery by fellow art critic, garden theorist, and gentleman gardener Horace Walpole. In 1754, Walpole coined the term “serendipity” from the title of the sixteenth-century picaresque *The Three Princes of the Serendip* (Walpole, 1851, 34). Walpole explained its inspiration in a letter to longtime friend Horace Mann, writing of *The Three Princes* that “as their Highnesses travelled, they were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of” (Walpole, 1851, 26, 34; Silver, 2015, 238).<sup>4</sup>

Horace Walpole, Watelet’s contemporary on the other side of the Channel, visited the Moulin Joly in 1775, one year after the publication of Watelet’s *Essai sur les jardins*, no doubt after having read Watelet’s account, which had given some celebrity to the Moulin Joly all over Europe.<sup>5</sup> Walpole, who had created his own picturesque garden at Strawberry Hill around the same time as Watelet, was the author of his own garden treatise, *Essay on Modern Gardening*, published privately in 1770, and more widely in 1780. It is of particular interest that Walpole, responsible for coining the word “serendipity”, introducing it into the English language in 1754 (although its widespread adoption took place more than a century later), visited the site that embodied the serendipitous experience. Perhaps Walpole had been intrigued by Watelet’s narrative, where Watelet unexpectedly “discovered this charming location” while having an entirely different objective in mind, that of going to Paris. While one may never know if Walpole and Watelet discussed serendipity, it is certain that they both shared a *secrete sympathie* [sic] for the serendipitous garden experience as well as its rendering in text, while championing their respective nations’ claims to the modern picturesque garden. Walpole writes of his visit to the Moulin Joly to picturesque garden theorist William Mason on September 6, 1775. Despite Walpole’s derisive tone and hyperbolic description of the overgrown state of Watelet’s isle, it is evident that Walpole is taken in by the immense charm of its Edenic setting and the picturesque, outward-looking views that it framed. Walpole writes:

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<sup>4</sup> The recipient of Walpole’s “serendipity” letter was Horace Mann, the British Minister of Florence. Watelet explains a sudden illumination, an unexpected link between families via heraldic devices. He writes, “This discovery, indeed, is almost of that kind which I call *Serendipity*” (Walpole, 1937-1983, vol. 26, 307).

<sup>5</sup> When referring to Watelet’s island abode, the Moulin Joly (Pretty Mill), I have used Watelet’s original orthography, except when quoting others who have used “Moulin Joli”, which was an alternative spelling at the time, and is the correct spelling in today’s orthography.

I have begun by visiting M. Watelet's Isle, called *le Moulin Joli* [...] M. Watelet has jumped back into Nature, when she was not above five hundred years old: in one word, his *Island* differs in nothing from a French garden into which no mortal has set his foot for the last century. It is an *ate* (I don't know whether I spell well) joined to his terra firma by two bridges, one of which he calls Dutch and the other Chinese, and which are as unlike either as two peas, and which is pierced and divided into straight narrow walks *en berceau* [bowered] and surrounded by a rude path quite round. To give this *étoile*, an air *champêtre* [country air], a plenary indulgence has been granted to every nettle, thistle and bramble *that grew in the garden, and they seem good in his sight*. The receipt [recipe] is as follows, — take an *ate* [ruin, folly] full of willows, cram it full of small elms and poplar pines, strip them into cradles [bowers], and cut them into paths, and leave all the rest as rough as you found it, and you will have a *Moulin Joli*. You must know this effort of genius is the more provoking, as the situation is charming, besides that the isle is in the middle of the Seine, every peephole (though so small that you seem to look through the diminishing end of a spying glass) besides terminating on one real windmill, is bounded by a chateau, a clocher [belltower], a village, a couvent [convent], a villa where Henrietta Maria was educated, or hermitage to which Bossuet retired, not to mortify himself but Fenelon. (Walpole, [1775] 1851, 202-03; emphasis in the original)

Serendipity, inspired by the spirit of the times, was integral to the picturesque experience; the picturesque landscape, designed according to the principles of variety, irregularity, and contrast, was criss-crossed by meandering byways, opening out onto unexpected vistas, which elicited surprise and astonishment. The serendipitous experience, ripe for definition and distinction by the eighteenth century, had, according to Sean Silver, “accompanied empiricism as the name for an essential gap in its epistemology.” According to Silver, “serendipity bears directly on the ‘induction problem’, or what has more recently been called the ‘conceptual leap’”, identifying serendipity as a concept belonging to the epistemological innovations of late seventeenth-century empiricism (Silver, 2015, 235). These empirical notions led to eighteenth-century sensationism, which exalted the human as oculus onto sensation, experience and therefore knowledge.

### **Locke's Empiricism and Condillac's Sensationism**

The elicitation of sensation in the individual through the myriad landscape effects of the picturesque accompanied the burgeoning interest across the arts and sciences in sensory perception, affirming the fundamental role of the senses in

understanding the world around us, placing the human at the center of knowledge creation. This was largely due to John Locke's empiricism, which contended that knowledge is gained through the senses, understood through reflection on that experience (Locke, 1690). Locke's late seventeenth-century epistemology broke with previous notions of knowledge impartation through divine revelation as well as the innate ideas propounded by Descartes, instead, describing the human mind as a blank slate at birth, marked by experience in the form of observable, quantifiable sensory input (Locke, 1690). In the mid-eighteenth century, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac departed from Locke's empiricism, radically excluding all but sensory input in his sensationist epistemology, stating that all knowledge is transformed sensation (Condillac, 1746, 1754).

The picturesque landscape traverse participated in Condillac's sensation-to-knowledge cycle which engaged all of the senses, its contrasting imagery evoking the *frisson* of the unexpected, creating a spontaneous ramble in response to the sensation-educing features of the picturesque garden. In the foreword to *Essai sur les jardins*, Watelet outlines the epistemological process forged by the arts wherein pleasure is delivered to the senses, thereby stimulating the mind, leading to the expansion of the soul. Watelet states:

In other words, we wish not only that both the materials of artistic creations and their uses bring pleasure to the senses, but also that the mind and the soul in turn be touched and stirred by their appeal. That is the natural progress followed by an alert mind when its desires are stimulated, and also by the soul which, if active, strives to grow and flourish. (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 19)

Watelet elevates garden design to the ranks of the liberal arts, its visual stimuli overlapping onto the other senses, extending visual touch over the roughness of the landscape, immersing the garden wanderer in the redolent scents and sounds of nature. This created synaesthetic "modes" or moods which, according to Condillac's sensationism, were amalgamations of sensation in early human development wherein one could hear color, or see sound, all of these sensations perceived together as a mood which was an inseparable part of self (Condillac, 1754). Thus, touch became feeling, and sensation became sentiment, united through synaesthetic modes which would eventually be differentiated through pleasure or pain (Condillac, 1746). These newly-discerned strands of sensation could be re-entwined, if only momentarily, through the experience of the picturesque.

## Sensation and Sentiment in the Picturesque

Sensation is considered a precursor to sentiment in the work of eighteenth-century philosophers Condillac, Burke, and Rousseau. However, William Gilpin, artist, picturesque theorist, and author of what is considered the first picturesque garden treatise, the 1748 *A Dialogue Upon the Gardens [...] at Stow*, excluded affect in his formalist approach to picturesque perception. While Gilpin's 1748 *Dialogue* introduced the rudiments of picturesque aesthetics into art and landscape theory, it is his *Three Essays* (1792) which elucidate the visual apprehension of the picturesque; Gilpin asserts that "the artist, who deals in lines, surfaces, and colours, which are an immediate address to the *eye*, conceives the *very truth itself* concerned in his *mode* of representing it" (Gilpin, 1792, 18; emphasis in the original). This "immediate address to the eye" circumvented sentiment and morality, prescribing a purely visual response to the picturesque principles of variety, irregularity, contrast, light and shade, roughness, and ruggedness, affirming that "the province of the picturesque eye is to *survey nature*, not to *anatomize matter*" (Gilpin, 1792, 18, 26; emphasis in the original).

While eighteenth-century aesthetic theorists Archibald Alison affirms that "the Painter addresses himself to the Eye", Alison effectively upends Gilpin's contention that the aesthetic response of the eye excludes emotion in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790, 91). To the contrary, Alison insists that visual phenomena cannot be adequately perceived without emotion, as "the language he [the painter] employs is found not only to speak to the eye, but to affect the imagination and the heart" (Alison, 1790, 90). Alison explains:

The Painter can give to the objects of his scenery, only the visible and material qualities which are discerned by the eye, and must leave the interpretation of their expression to the imagination to the spectator [...]. All the sublimity and beauty of the moral and intellectual world are at his disposal; and by bestowing on the inanimate objects of his scenery the characters and affectations of mind, he can produce at once an expression which every capacity may understand, and every heart may feel. (Alison, 1790, 92)

Watelet's 1774 *Essay* also depicted the eye as conveying immediate sensation, while its movement across the landscape engaged sense memory, bringing emotion, and in this case, joy to its possessor. Watelet describes the eye's apprehension of the island tableau:



As the eye embraces the whole establishment and lingers over it, one remembers the sensations already received. That is when it is only natural to say, like the sage: Oh, how happy they would be, those who inhabit the countryside, if they truly knew the value of the benefits they enjoy, or could enjoy! (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 31)

Watelet's roving view of the landscape, as both a catalyst of sensation and traverse of memory, elicits an associative train of thought. These associations, according to Alison, are precipitated by visual phenomena of sublimity or beauty which pique the imagination:

When any object, either of sublimity or beauty, is presented to the mind, I believe every man is conscious of a train of thought being immediately awakened in his imagination, analogous to the character of expression of the original object.

This simple perception of the object, we frequently find, is insufficient to excite these emotions, unless it is accompanied by this operation of the mind, unless, according to common expression, our imagination is seized, and our fancy busied in the pursuit of all those trains of thought, which are allied to this character or expression. (Alison, 1790, 2)

Alison traced the affective and associative responses to visual phenomena against the backdrop of the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful, joining associationism to eighteenth-century aesthetics, mingling visual stimuli with psychological response, thereby connecting sensation to mood, as did Condillac's sensationism (1746, 1754).

### **Between the Sublime and the Beautiful**

Oscillating between the poles of the awe-striking sublime and her more agreeable, domesticated cousin, the beautiful, was the picturesque aesthetic according to philosopher Edmund Burke, along with garden theorists William Chambers and Uvedale Price. These landscape extremes were meant to arouse instinctual passion through the sublime, contrasted by the more civilized sentiment of the beautiful. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, shows sublime nature as the stimulus that innervates both sensation and passion:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object,

that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect on the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect. (Burke, 1757, 73-74; emphasis in the original)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his 1755 *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*), describes the passions as anticipating reason, contending that

whatever moralists may hold, the human understanding is greatly indebted to the passions, which, it is universally allowed, are also much indebted to the understanding. It is by the activity of the passions that our reason is improved; for we desire knowledge only because we wish to enjoy; and it is impossible to conceive any reason why a person who has neither fears nor desires should give himself the trouble of reasoning. The passions, again, originate in our wants, and their progress depends on that of our knowledge; for we cannot desire or fear anything, except from the idea we have of it, or from the simple impulse of nature. (Rousseau, [1755] 1920, 185-86)

### ***Amour de Soi and Amour Propre***

The contrasting emotional states of passion and sentiment were believed to either passively or actively involve the person; with passion, the individual was considered a passive bystander caught in a maelstrom of raw emotion, while sentiment required active reflection. Burke explains:

Most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind, whether simply of pain or pleasure, or the modifications of those, may be reduced very nearly to these two heads, *self-preservation* and *society*; to the ends of one or the other of which, all our passions are calculated to answer. The passions which concern self-preservation turn mostly on *pain* or *danger*. The ideas of *pain*, *sickness*, and *death*, fill the mind with strong emotions of horror [...]. (Burke, [1757] 1823, 44; emphasis in the original)

In this passage, Burke refers to the dichotomy revealed in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1755) as *amour de soi*, which signifies a passionate, instinctual feeling of self-love – a primeval impulse of self-preservation, while *amour propre*

was a sentiment tempered by concern for the opinions of others. *Amour propre*, while potentially promoting societal benefit, in excess, led to venality and corruption. Watelet also owes the philosophical foundation of his *Essai* to Rousseau's state of nature, which exalted the uncorrupted passion of *amour de soi*, contrasted by *amour propre*, which Watelet calls the "artificial sentiment, a construct of society." Watelet laments the garden's nascence as not being the result of a "simple feeling emanating from nature," but from the "ostentatious" sentiment of *amour propre*. Watelet traces the advent of the garden according to Rousseau's principles:

Emblematic of personality, the enclosure is a small empire built by a human being who cannot increase his power without also increasing the concerns that threaten it.

We can easily see that in its early development the art of gardens cannot advance rapidly. In order to hasten its course it is important that the idea of shared enjoyment be added to the desire for private pleasure.

But how can this idea be implemented?

Through hospitality, which is a simple feeling emanating from nature [*amour de soi*]; or else through vanity [*amour propre*], which I shall call "ostentatious," for it is an artificial sentiment, a construct of society. To humanity's shame, the first of these feelings is not the one that propels the art of gardens to its most brilliant successes. (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 24)

The true state of nature, or *amour de soi*, according to Rousseau, has been lost to human progress and development; it is now the interaction of these two *amours* that comprise our nature today. Rousseau describes the mitigating action *amour propre* on *amour de soi* as contributing to the preservation of humanity:

It is then certain that compassion is a natural feeling, which, by moderating the violence of love of self [*amour de soi*] in each individual, contributes to the preservation of the whole species. It is this compassion that hurries us without reflection to the relief of those who are in distress: it is this which in a state of nature supplies the place of laws, morals and virtues. (Rousseau, [1755] 1920, 199-200)

All of the laws, morals, and societal benefit arising from *amour de soi*, moderated by *amour propre*, however, can be uprooted by the tempest of romantic love. Romantic love, a threat to both self-preservation and societal welfare, has the capacity to inflame the heart while possessing the potential to devastate humanity. Rousseau concludes, "it is therefore incontestable that love, as well as all other passions, must have acquired in society that glowing impetuosity, which makes

it so often fatal to mankind” (Rousseau, [1755]1920, 202). The passions, in their ability to overwhelm reason, are a danger to the very society which they were “destined to preserve.” Rousseau states:

Of the passions that stir the heart of man, there is one which makes the sexes necessary to each other, and is extremely ardent and impetuous; a terrible passion that braves danger, surmounts all obstacles, and in its transports seems calculated to bring destruction on the human race which it is really destined to preserve. (Rousseau, [1755]1920, 200-01)

It is this love – a sublime, passionate current running headlong toward destruction – that is churned by the Moulin Joly, despite the island’s outward cultivation of refined sentiment and placid picturesqueness.

### **Romantic Love**

Watelet, who has succeeded in charming the reader with the genteel, affectionate tone of his *Essay on Gardens*, invites the reader further into his confidence in the final chapter of his *Essay* entitled “The French Garden—Letter to a Friend”, where he appeals to the reader as a trusted confidant, infusing his account of the island’s founding with romantic love, joining the sentimental provenance and visual narrative of his island to Héloïse’s former abbey across the water at Argenteuil, just within view of his island.<sup>6</sup> The reader, whom Watelet addresses as “we”, accompanies him on his traverse:

But let us retrace our steps and walk to the tip of the largest island, which we have largely visited in part. By crossing a stand of willows, we come, along tortuous and shaded roads, to the spot where the river forms two canals that surround this section before rejoining the riverbed.

At this farthest point we face an untamed landscape. A barren island rises in the near distance and arrests the eye. Water churns behind a broken dike that resists the current’s efforts to destroy it, and, when the river level rises, a cascade forms that well suits this solitary place. The adjacent island is clear of trees that would obstruct the view; thus, the gaze extends beyond it and comes to rest on a few buildings that are part of a small town not too far away. Among these structures, there is one taller than the others and therefore more imposing. In itself it is not very

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<sup>6</sup> The objective of Watelet’s final chapter entitled “The French Garden—Letter to a Friend”, in addition to consecrating his sentimental garden traverse to posterity, was to establish the Moulin Joly as *le jardin français* [sic], a model of French taste, gentility, culture and progress (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 60-72).

remarkable, but who would not stop to contemplate it, upon learning that Héloïse once lived there! Who, upon hearing this name, would not take a moment to talk about that frail and all-too-unhappy lover! After her tragic adventure, she withdrew to a convent where Abélard—wise, troubled, demanding, and jealous—was abbot. What you see here is that very convent. (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 69-70)

In Watelet's text, the twin souls of Héloïse and Abélard are conjured and carried along two channels divided by Watelet's island, only to be reunited in the river's confluence beyond. Héloïse's spirit is uplifted in the turbulence caused by the broken lock, which "resists the current's effort to destroy it". As her spirit rises, it spills over its obstacle, erupting into "a cascade [...] that well suits this solitary place." Her courageous love has not been destroyed, but elevated as a testament to eternal love in the form of a waterfall.

Héloïse's enduring love, which Watelet visualizes in the swirling waters of the Seine, echoes his own illicit love affair with longtime lover Marguerite Le Comte. She, too, resided with Watelet on this island paradise. However, the two were not alone; they were accompanied by Monsieur Le Comte, Marguerite's husband. One can assume that Watelet's generosity abated any qualms that Marguerite's husband might have had with this arrangement; Watelet purchased the island domain and paid for its upkeep, while giving legal ownership to Marguerite and her husband. Watelet's friend and fellow artist, Madame Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun, remarked on their unusual relationship:

[Watelet] gracefully received a small but very well-chosen company. A friend (Marguerite Le Comte), to whom he had been attached over thirty years, was established in his house, time having, so to speak, sanctified their relationship, so that they were received in the best society, together with the lady's husband who, strange to say, never left her. (Vigée-Le Brun, [1835] 1927, 108)

Watelet's unconventional love affair, seen through Héloïse and Abélard's tale of forbidden love, lent wistful sentiment to the traverse of Watelet's garden isle, incising imagined inscriptions into his text which "would no doubt be carved into the bark of a myrtle" (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 70). Watelet celebrates the immortality of Héloïse's love in one such inscription:

These roofs that rise high in the air  
Protect Héloïse's unhappy place.  
Sigh, tender hearts, and remember my praise.  
She honored love; Love grants her life forever.  
(Watelet, [1774] 2003, 70)

Watelet's homage to romantic love, inscribed into the body of his *Essai*, transmitted the sentimental meanderings of his intensely personal garden experience.<sup>7</sup> Watelet undoubtedly intended his *Essay on Gardens* to be an enduring legacy – a personalized walking tour of his endangered island habitat, as fantastical as it was fragile. In the manner of the modern garden treatises of the latter half of the eighteenth century, Watelet textually evoked the sensations and sentiment suggested by the landscape features along the promenade. Now the reader could partake in the picturesque garden experience regardless of their location in space-time. The garden's byways could be traversed and re-traversed, experienced emotionally, framed aesthetically, yet envisioned anew, despite the impermanence of nature and vagaries of human emotion.

Watelet's final passage seems almost a premonition of the devastation of his island idyll. He entreats the reader, an invited guest and vital presence in this shared narrative, to “come join us in our Laurentine and with your presence restore what it is lacking and what nothing can replace” (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 72). Therefore, it is up to the reader to summon the *genius loci*, to restore, if only in memory, the spirit of the place, re-conjuring Watelet's Laurentine, tracing the *sinuosités* of his sentimental roadmap, locating it in a space-time wherein discovery, ruin, and regeneration can coexist.

### Ephemerality

The temporality of the garden, exemplified by Watelet's Moulin Joly, was captured in epistolary form by Benjamin Franklin, then seventy-two, on his 1778 visit to Watelet's embellished farm, writing to the object of his admiration, thirty-seven-year-old Madame Brillon (Franklin, [1778] 1988, 430-35).<sup>8</sup> During their garden stroll, Franklin examined the *éphémère*, or mayfly, joining its short-lived earthly transit to the fleetingness of nature and his own life, which he felt could not but last “7 or 8 Minutes longer”, while the Moulin Joly, Franklin wrote, “could not itself subsist more than 18 Hours”. He writes: “But what will fame be

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<sup>7</sup> While these inscriptions were intended for the reader of Watelet's *Essay*, actual physical inscriptions also graced the lanes of the Moulin Joly according to F.M. Grimm, a reviewer of Watelet's just-published 1774 work. Grimm wrote of his garden visit that “we only noticed that the poetic inscriptions—which one comes upon with pleasure in the garden for which they were made—had lost much for being put into print, and are like fruit that is only pleasing if it is picked on the tree that produced it” (F.M. Grimm, 1877-1882, vol. 10, December 1774, 522), cited by Joseph Dispozio in (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 83).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Franklin's visit to the Moulin Joly is thought to have transpired on August 13, 1778.

to an *Éphémère* who no longer exists? And what will become of all History in the 18th Hour, when the World itself, even the whole *Moulin Joly*, shall come to its End and be buried in universal Ruin?" (Franklin, [1778] 1988, 430-35).

Universal ruin came a mere eight years after Franklin's visit, when Watelet died in 1786, and his beloved Moulin Joly was sold off by his mistress, Marguerite Le Comte, abandoning the dream-like vision that drew queens, kings, princes, and personages to its gentle shores. Marie Antoinette, who had visited the island on multiple occasions, brought along King Louis XVI in 1774, presumably to draw inspiration for her Hamlet, or *Hameau* at Versailles, constructed nine years later, in 1783.<sup>9</sup> Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne, one of Marie Antoinette's confidants, wrote an account of his own visit to the Moulin Joly, along with walk-throughs of his own and other picturesque gardens:<sup>10</sup>

One day, abandoning the vain whirl of the capital and following my own whimsy, I lost sight of Paris at Moulin Joli and found myself (possible only in Nature). Whoever you may be, unless your heart is hardened, sit down in a fork of a willow by the riverside at Moulin Joli. Read, look around, and weep—not from sadness but from a delicious feeling of sensibility. The panorama of your soul will appear before you. Past happiness (should you have known it), happiness to come, and the desire to be happy—a thousand thoughts revolving around this one thought, regrets, joys, desires, all will rush upon you at once. Struggles [...] your indignation [...] the heart [...] memories [...] the present [...] Go away, unbelievers! Reflect upon the inscriptions that Taste has placed there. Meditate with the wise man, sigh with the lover, and bless M. Watelet. (de Ligne, [1786] 1991, 188-89)

Other visitors to the Moulin Joly were Jean le Rond d'Alembert, François Boucher, Abbé Jacques Delille, Denis Diderot, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Hubert Robert, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Abbé de Saint-Non, Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun, George Sand, and Horace Walpole, which testified not only to Watelet's artistic and social standing, but to the rustic hospitality and charm of his *ferme ornée*, considered the first French picturesque garden exemplar.

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<sup>9</sup> In 1777, Marie Antoinette began the construction of her English garden, followed by her 1783 *Hameau de la Reine* (The Queen's Hamlet), replete with watermill, dairy and assorted farm buildings by architect Richard Mique and artist Hubert Robert. While not even a trace of Watelet's garden island remains today, Marie Antoinette's *Hameau* at Versailles may be considered the Moulin Joly's living legacy, inspired by her visits to Watelet's *jardin français* [sic], immortalized in his *Essai*.

<sup>10</sup> I have borrowed Jennifer Carter's term "walk-through" to describe the virtual garden tours found in the mid-eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century garden literature (Carter, 2007, 205, 293).

Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun, like friend and fellow artist Watelet, invites the reader of her memoirs to roam the no-longer-extant Arcadian paradise, the Moulin Joly, remembering it with both joy and longing:

Ah! how I would have loved to go for walks with you in the wood at Moulin Joli! It was one of those places one never forgets, so beautiful, so varied, picturesque, Elysian, wild, ravishing! Imagine a large island covered with woods, gardens and orchards, cut through the middle by the Seine. The shores were connected by a bridge of boats, decorated along the sides with boxes of flowers, while seats placed at intervals allowed one to enjoy the balmy air and wonderful views a long while. The bridge, seen from afar with enormous poplars and weeping-willows, whose tender green branches reached down to the water like bowers. One of these willows formed a large vault beneath which one could rest or dream delightfully. Words fail to express the happiness I felt in that delightful spot, with which I have never seen anything to be compared. (Vigée-Le Brun, [1835] 1927, 107)

Within a few decades of Watelet's death, the Moulin Joly's twining rivulets were filled in, its stately trees downed, its eponymous mill demolished, and its whimsical bridges dismantled (Quénéhen, [1937] 2004; Conservatoire, 2007).<sup>11</sup> The view of Héloïse's former abbey across the water at Argenteuil, whose history Watelet joined to the romantic provenance and visual narrative of his island, was no longer reflected in the island's sentimental glow. The garden's arteries had been severed and its stolid mass anchored to the mainland. Nowadays a sports complex and gas station sprawl where its lanes once meandered. Not a stone of it remains; however, the picturesque garden ramble continues its traverse of history through text, image, and the evocation of sentiment.

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<sup>11</sup> The Moulin Joly was put up for sale by Watelet's mistress Marguerite Le Comte only months after Watelet's death; however, due to its inflated asking price, it was purchased two years later, in 1788, by a Monsieur Gaudran, "a rich business man [...] who understood nothing of the picturesque", according to painter Élisabeth Vigée-Le Brun, who had wished to buy the Moulin Joly herself (Vigée-Le Brun, 1835, Lettre IX, 150; my translation). Madame de Sabran had also offered to buy the Moulin Joly, but was deterred by Marguerite Le Comte's exorbitant asking price. Sabran writes: "Madame Le Comte, who spent there many a happy day in the arms of love, considers it priceless, and would have me pay for all her pleasures!" (Watelet, [1774] 2003, 84). The demise of Watelet's Laurentine began soon after it was sold; its rivers were filled in in 1800, its trees felled in 1806, its mill dismantled in 1811, and the property divided and sold off in 1830 (Quénéhen [1937] 2004).



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