

MIRRORS OF AFFECTIVITY AND AESTHETICS:  
GARDENS, PARKS, AND LANDSCAPES AS SEEN BY  
THEOPHILE DE VIAU AND LA FONTAINE

Thanks to the pioneering scholarly work done in the past decades, the baroque flowering in French literature and arts has been recognized as a major event and an important contribution to the aesthetic landscape of early modern culture. In the recently published issue of *Littératures classiques*, “Le Baroque en question(s),” the editor Didier Souiller states with good reason that the relationship between the baroque and classicism has changed . . . baroque aesthetics were still in full bloom during the reign of the Sun King. He adds that today we can better appreciate the works of Molière and La Fontaine, “le plus grand poète du siècle, qui n’est plus enfermé dans l’image réductrice d’auteur des seules *Fables*.”<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to explore this continuity seen in selected works of two great poets, one productive in the early seventeenth century, the other in the second half of that century, and to show what they had in common in their basic tastes and values, beyond the obvious differences in their personalities. It appears that a shared taste for freedom of expression, refusing total submission to rules and strict generic distinction, finding ways to allow their inner self and emotions to come through, as well as their aesthetic views, were common goals for these poets belonging to different generations, in spite of the conventional labels of baroque applied to the former and classical to the latter.

These important traits: the passionate interest for natural beauty perceived in settings such as country landscapes, parks and gardens, and the power of emotions and passions felt in such privileged locations, will become apparent in the works considered.

Two of Théophile de Viau’s early works illustrate his taste and stated preference for the beauty of natural settings and freedom of expression, asserted in no uncertain terms:

Malherbe a très bien fait, mais il a fait pour lui  
. . . . .  
La règle me déplaît; j’écris confusément:  
Jamais un bon esprit ne fait rien qu’aisément.<sup>2</sup>

The early ode *Le Matin*, in spite of some conventional traits such as allusions to mythological deities, to a lion leaving his den, an incongruous sight in a

French landscape,<sup>3</sup> is a sumptuous hymn to the awakening of life at dawn. It is a painterly rendition of a country landscape at sunrise, artfully composed, starting with the brilliant colors of the sky and progressing downwards:

L'Aurore sur le front du jour  
 Sème l'azur, l'or et l'ivoire  
 Et le Soleil, lassé de boire  
 Commence son oblique tour.

(*Le Matin*, O. C. I, XI, 158, 1–4)

The poet then evokes the hills, alive with the activities of bees gathering nectar from aromatic plants that will be transformed into honey, and of lambs frisking about on the green hills; this is obviously a spring landscape, animated by the sounds of birdsongs, a hymn of praise to the morning light. Then the poet turns to human activities: the farmer driving his oxen in his field, the young woman working at her spinning wheel. The whole scene vibrates with manifestations and tensions of life:

Une confuse violence  
 Trouble le calme de la nuit;  
 Et la lumière avec le bruit,  
 Dissipe l'ombre et le silence.

(O. C. I, 159, 41–44)

Life triumphs over repose, light over darkness, sounds over silence: the world is awake, the cycle of daily activities resumes in full. A pantheistic view of the world is present.

The sudden change taking place in the last stanza has puzzled commentators.<sup>4</sup> From the macrocosm of life, the poet turns to the microcosm of his personal life:<sup>5</sup> he addresses his lady-love and invites her to enjoy with him the beauty and the freshness of the morning in the intimate setting of their garden, ending with a conventional homage to her beauty. Her complexion he compares to the color of the garden flowers, lilies and roses:

Il est jour, levons-nous, Phyllis!  
 Allons à notre jardinage,  
 Voir s'il est, comme ton visage,  
 Semé de roses et de lis.

(O. C. I, 160, 59–64)

One may wonder whether the poet's shift indicates a preference for the quiet moment of a morning stroll in the microcosm of a garden, shared with the

woman he loves, instead of the world view he has so powerfully evoked in the major portion of the poem. The personal is obliterating the cosmic, the ending stressing the togetherness, with happiness found in the intimacy of a quiet moment opposed to the bustle of activities in an open and populated landscape. The morning stroll in the flower garden will prolong the delights of the night and seal the harmonious complicity of the lovers in their enjoyment of the morning beauty.

It is again as an ode celebrating his lady-love, addressed under the conventional poetic name of “Corinne,” that *La Solitude* can be read. The framework is again a natural setting, the traditional *locus amoenus* inherited from Greek and Latin bucolic, pastoral tradition, rediscovered by Medieval and Renaissance poets and writers, authors of romances and pastoral plays.<sup>6</sup> Again the presence of traditional mythological creatures, divinities of the forests and waters – nymphs, dryads, naiades – is commonplace. Visual and aural sensations are presented as pleasurable and contributing to the enjoyment of the lovers, secluded from the rest of the world, in a state of perfect intimacy:

Dans ce val solitaire et sombre,  
Le cerf, qui brame au bruit de l'eau  
Penchant ses yeux dans un ruisseau,  
S'amuse à regarder son ombre.

(*La Solitude*, O. C. I, xiii, 160, 1–4)

The stag's voice and the pleasant sound of running water are suggested by the alliterations that Théophile uses. The stag is personified; like Narcissus, he enjoys looking at his reflexion. Recent commentators have stressed, in the first part of the poem, allusions to tragic love stories: Philomèle, Hyacinthe, victims of violent acts of passion.<sup>7</sup> However the poet also presents the forest as a place of safety, an asylum, a haven where Cupid and Venus are present:

Ici l'Amour fait ses études;  
Vénus y dresse des autels,  
Et les visites des mortels  
Ne troublent point ces solitudes.

(O. C. I, 161, 29–32)

The first fifteen stanzas are dedicated to the description of the forest, the *locus amoenus*, shady, cool and quiet, where victims of violent passion have found a refuge, but also a desirable retreat for a couple to consummate their love. The poet, in the second part, addresses his beloved, Corinne, inviting

her to lie down with him on a patch of moss, or better, to enter an even more remote rocky hollow:

Corinne, je te prie, approche;  
Couchons-nous sur ce tapis vert,  
Et pour être mieux à couvert,  
Entrons au creux de cette roche.

(*O. C. I.*, 162, 61–64)

The lover is obviously attempting to convince the young woman of his admiration for her charms and of his love, and to entice her to respond to it. She appears to be in the preliminary stage before yielding to the entreaties of her lover for a tender embrace in this intimate setting, a natural expression of love in a natural beautiful spot. Corinne's initial shyness is quite attractive and allows her wooer to reassure her:

Ah! je vois que tu m'aimes bien:  
Tu rougis quand je te regarde.  
Dieux! que cette façon timide  
Est puissante sur mes esprits!  
  
Ma Corinne, que je t'embrasse!  
Personne ne nous voit qu'Amour.

(*O. C. I.*, 165, 151–158)

The expected outcome of such an amorous encounter in a discreet and safe setting is alluded to, without expressing any doubt on the role taken by the lady:

Les vents qui ne se peuvent taire,  
Ne peuvent écouter aussi,  
Et ce que nous ferons ici  
Leur est un inconnu mystère.

(*O. C. I.*, 165, 161–164)

The couple will celebrate love's mysteries in a communion together. Théophile had presented in *Le Matin* the postlude of a night of love, communion in a garden. Here we have the prelude to an afternoon of love in a protected natural setting. The poem can be seen as an epithalamion<sup>8</sup> expressing in fervent terms the expectation of a lover ready to share with an attractive partner the joys of natural pleasures. As Guido Saba has pointed out in his recent book, two poles of inspiration are central in Théophile's poetic work: sensual love and nature. The aesthetic form of the poem is consonant with this vision. The subtle fusion of painting and music, a series of refined impressionist touches, coexists in the perfection of each stanza.<sup>9</sup>

Although *La Maison de Sylvie* belongs to a later period in his career and represents the more mature person and artist who has known many trials and tribulations, the same basic tenets and qualities of expression and style can be observed. In this extraordinary suite of ten odes, Théophile celebrates his patrons, the Duc and Duchesse de Montmorency and their splendid country estate, Chantilly,<sup>10</sup> which was a haven and a temporary asylum for the persecuted poet, hounded by the forces of Justice. Thus Chantilly, the château and especially the park are for him

Les lieux les plus révéés  
Où la vertu se réfugie,  
Et dont le port me fut ouvert  
Pour mettre ma tête à couvert  
Quand on brûla mon effigie.

(*La Maison de Sylvie*, Ode I, O. C. II, 201, 6–10)

The poet's admiration and devotion are especially directed to the Duchesse, Marie-Félice des Ursins, from the famous Italian Orsini family, celebrated under the poetic name of Sylvie, well chosen since the lady is represented as thoroughly attuned to the natural beauty of the park and fully deserving the homage of the poet. Her kindness and virtue are an image of God:

Après lui je m'en vais louer  
Une image de Dieu si belle  
Que le Ciel me doit avouer  
Du travail que je fais pour elle.

(Ode I, O. C. II, 202, 51–54)

If Théophile's poems do not carry her name to immortality,

Ces eaux, ces rochers et ces bois  
Prendront des âmes et des voix  
Pour en conserver la mémoire. . . .

(Ode I, O. C. II, 203, 68–70)

Sylvie has supernatural powers, she can bestow life and speech on inanimate objects. She is therefore given the rank of a divinity, able to tame the waters:

Je sais que ces miroirs flottants  
Où l'objet change tant de place,  
Pour elle devenus constants  
Auront une fidèle glace. . . .

(Ode I, O. C. II, 204, 101–104)