

From the Order of Nature to Social Order

by Laurent Folliot

The art of English gardens in the eighteenth century opens up new ground that nurtures the invention of different forms of community life. Jacques Rancière untangles the threads of this complex genealogy.

About: Jacques Rancière, *Le Temps du Paysage. Aux Origines de la Révolution Esthétique* (The Time of the Landscape: The Origins of the Aesthetic Revolution), La Fabrique 144 p., 14 €

Jacques Rancière is without dispute one of the most fundamentally cross-disciplinary French thinkers since Foucault. He is also one of the most concerned with confronting philosophy, its history and authority with various forms of otherness. From working class memory and popular education to the multiple inventions of modern and contemporary art, he has ceaselessly explored discursive practices and fields of study traditionally excluded from the narrow bounds of academic philosophy, particularly in France. It can also be added that he numbers among the relatively rare thinkers in France who address British art and culture, devoting considerable attention in his work to these subjects. For example, there is the importance given to the English Civil War in his book *The Names of History* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994; *Les noms de l'histoire* Le Seuil, 1992). We can also cite the long,

sporadic dialog he has held with the poetry of William Wordsworth—starting with *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (Stanford UP 2003; *Courts voyages au pays du peuple* Le Seuil, 1990)—as one of the forerunners of what the philosopher would soon identify as a new “distribution of the sensible” put to effect in the wake of the French Revolution. The latter concept, elaborated in a work published in 2000 by La Fabrique, essentially designates the way in which, at a given moment, a system of mental representations defines and divides up both the space of the shared experience and the practices current in that space, through a process both inclusive and exclusive. In this, Rancière reflects upon the notion of the classical order of mimesis, that is, the hierarchical system of imitation of “nature” in which the inequalities of themes and registers reproduce and repeat social and political inequalities. In doing so he rethinks aesthetic modernity as an exit from mimesis, replacing it with a more experimental, polymorphous exploration of experience. This in turn is marked by the continual interrogation of the difference between art and non-art, and by the more or less explicit aspiration to reinvent forms of community life. As the philosopher himself emphasizes, *Le Temps du Paysage* pursues a deeper understanding of this “aesthetic revolution,” to which he has devoted a number of his recent works (*Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art*, Galilée, 2011 translated into English as *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* published by Verso, 2013; *Les temps modernes*, La Fabrique, 2018). More specifically, he explores here the recognition of the first signs of this revolution in the discourses and debates surrounding the art of gardens in eighteenth century England. According to Rancière, these discussions contributed to the appearance of a radically new concept of nature upon which the artistic creation of the following centuries was based. The resulting book is brief but dense, with a winding structure. In fact, Rancière defines his reflections in terms of “plot” and “scenes” where various potentialities of experience unfold, sometimes suddenly. Its main lines, however, remain clearly identifiable, in which the words of connoisseurs of painting and gardens intersect with political turbulence and the social question of the revolutionary era.

When Garden and Landscape Become Art

Here again, philosophical tradition is revisited and reconfigured by its confrontation with other forms of discourse, since Rancière's reflection starts with Kant, returning to the German philosopher through the byways of the aesthetic of the English garden. Indeed, in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant places gardens among the fine arts, or liberal arts, insofar as being freed from utilitarian necessities, the garden constitutes, like painting, an art of the "sensible appearance." With this position, he follows Englishman Thomas Whately's influential *Observations on the Art of Gardening*. Rancière's first chapter analyzes the implications of this innovation in the system of the fine arts and shows that it is based on a new understanding of nature, no longer an immutable order of causalities, but the free creative play of sensible forms (nature itself as artist, producing "scenes") leading to a "culture" which prepares the soul for ideas. The Kantian sublime then appears as a particular manifestation of a more general phenomenon, by virtue of which the line between art and nature begins to blur.

In the second chapter, Rancière goes over the principal categories of the aesthetic understanding of landscape in the eighteenth century, in order to show how it managed to render possible the redefinition of nature referred to above: the "vastness" and "intricacy" as theorized by Hogarth which "leads the eye a wanton kind of chase" (p. 34), and finally the beauty of soft curves. This last is first asserted, again by Hogarth, with his "serpentine line," then more systematically theorized by Burke. It finds one of its most spectacular achievements in the great parks then being landscaped by Launcelot « Capability » Brown (who did not hesitate, in the name of the "natural," to radically overhaul the terrain he was working on, including in some cases moving entire villages). If these two latter categories seem at first glance to be closely related, with the third being a mere elaboration of the second, Rancière shows how they in fact maintained a tense relationship. The quarrel in the 1790s between Brown's disciples on one hand and theorists of the picturesque, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, on the other bears witness to this. The first held with a fondness for carefully waving copses, and the second with the "picturesque," in which the "art" of nature resides principally in the supreme "intricacy" of irregularities and diverse accidents that it blends into a unique whole. This is an aesthetic discord, since it hinges on the relationship between art and nature as well as the concept of nature. It is also political. This is, after all, the period of the enclosures, in which the dominant classes appropriated by parliamentary decree of the old "commons" where the rural poor partially made their living. Brown's approach to the aristocratic, exclusive park is

contrary to the spontaneous and “connected” landscape that makes room for different classes of the community and their occupations.

Painting: Source of the Landscape

The third chapter returns to the often paradoxical relationship between the arts of landscape and painting. If the theoreticians of the picturesque proclaim to all the superiority of nature over art, Uvedale Price, in particular, holds that the landscape developer must train his gaze by studying the great painters. The contradiction is resolved if one admits that this is where we can situate the liberality particular to the aesthetic of the landscape. We might even speak of liberalism, since the adjective “liberal” was beginning just then to change meaning. This liberality, according to Price or William Gilpin, stems certainly from the taste of the connoisseur, but also depends more fundamentally on a ceaseless aesthetic education. Insofar as it teaches its student to recognize, beyond the formal “effects” of nature, its inexhaustible and unequalled creative potential, such an education contributes to dismantling the traditional hierarchies of representation. From this, it might be added, we derive the “perfection of the imperfect”, which, as Rancière notes, will from this point on serve as an artistic principle. This is the period in which sketches begin to be preferred to overly finished paintings. In any case, the education in question also allows for turning such elements as a wheelbarrow full of manure, or a dirt path bordered by tangled branches, into legitimate aesthetic objects.

In the fourth chapter the meaning of such a course of study is explored more deeply, analyzing how it leads the imagination “beyond the visible,” by way of the unity where the idiosyncratic merges. Here Rancière takes up two other notions closely linked to the discourse on gardens: the “great” and the “picturesque.” This allows the author to bring some complexity to the most frequent binary in eighteenth century aesthetic discourse, that between the beautiful and the sublime. Edmund Burke, in particular, had rigidly opposed these two categories in his 1757 *Philosophical Enquiry*. The thinker associates beauty with softness, with the pleasant and the feminine, whereas the sublime is associated with the excessive, the terrible, and with

masculine power. It was these categories of the great and the picturesque, as Rancière insists, that allowed us to make the landscape the locus of a true aesthetic and moral education, with a gradual transition of the subject towards a sphere of the spirit or ideas. One must therefore link Kant and Burke more closely than we usually do. Beyond their philosophical differences (critical idealism versus sensualist psychology), in fact both conceive of the sublime as an experience of displeasure and even humiliation. In the case of Kant (and thus contrary to the gradual transitions that other authors of the late eighteenth century allowed for) this leads to a radical dissociation between sensible nature, that is the landscape, and the supra-sensible reign of which the moral subject partakes, and to which the experience of the sublime ultimately returns him. As Rancière writes, “In sum, Kant tells us that there is no landscape where the spirit can read its destination (p. 91).”

The Democratic Aspirations of the Landscape

The subject of the book’s last chapter demonstrates, this Kantian verdict contradicts a particularly frequent experience at the end of the eighteenth century. We might cite that of the young Wordsworth discovering a better and brighter life in the French countryside in the days following the Feast of the Federation. We might also speak of the experience of British polemicists for whom the landscape echoed the social order, as far as that social order could be rendered into metaphor under the appearances of landscape. During the revolutionary decade, political discourse and garden theory borrowed language from each other, while the appearance of the landscape itself became a highly politicized issue. In the final analysis it reflected the distribution and the exercise of property, with all the conflicts that property is at that point more and more visibly tied to. For someone like Uvedale Price, hardly a revolutionary himself, the rural landscape should not reflect a tyrannical domination by the oligarchy, but instead meld into the aesthetic unity of a “beautiful evening” in which, as in certain pictures by Gainsborough, the different social classes live together peacefully. This is the aspiration that philosophy will have drained of its essence. First of all this happens with Kant, as we will have gathered. As Rancière tells us in his epilogue, it happens more definitively still with Hegel whose system reduces the art of gardens to a simple addendum to architecture. For the German philosopher, art

dispenses with nature in order to be concentrated into the face-to-face with the Spirit itself. Philosophy would seem then to have thus closed the brief chapter opened by the landscape garden, stopping up the breaches that it opened into the edifice of representation. This sealing off is but illusory however, since only a few years after Hegel, thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Ruskin began to ponder anew the vocation of art as a means of invention of forms of communal life. This is what Rancière has long identified as the very question of aesthetic modernity. Emerson called for the celebration of the still-latent poetry in the prosaic practices of a young America. Ruskin brought painting back to its original dialog with the crafts of furniture and ornamentation. "Nature" in the eighteenth century, in its egalitarian and elegant aspect, covers a fundamental break between the immutable order of things and the era of democratic aspirations.

With Rancière's sober yet refined writing, and quite beautifully illustrated on top of it, the little book has the great virtue of offering the reader, beyond a new addition to the philosopher's long term reflection, an original and often brilliant synthesis of a cultural moment generally not well-known in France. The punctilious expert will find little to dispute, except for a few minor points. One might gather, for instance, that the author downplays the creative and dynamic character given to nature as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century, with a philosopher like Lord Shaftesbury, tutelary figure of the aesthetic reflection, who was also influenced by a certain pantheism (p. 33; we will add that the concept of nature that emerges then in Great Britain owes much to the liberal wing of the Anglican Church). One might also point out that he is wrong when he writes that Burke, and the adversaries of the Levellers in general, revealed themselves oblivious to the revolutionary precedent in England (p. 97; it was quite on purpose that the Anti-Jacobins called their reformist or radical enemies Levellers, in reference to the politically egalitarian extremist fringe of the parliamentary camp of the 1640s).

More largely, perhaps, one might regret that Rancière has not brought his thought into dialog with the critical tradition that has developed in Great Britain for a good half century, around the same issues (though from a literary or art historical rather than philosophical perspective). One might refer to of the seminal works of Raymond Williams, one of the forerunners of Cultural Studies (*The Country and the City*, 1973) and, to a lesser degree, John Barrell (*The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of*

Place 1730-1840, 1972; *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 1980), which have long been points of reference to scholars attempting to reflect upon what Rancière rightly calls the “politics of landscape” in Neoclassical and Romantic England. For Williams and Barrell, the poetic or painterly discourse that exalts nature and rural life partakes almost invariably of ideology. Historically, it has only smothered conflicting voices that bear witness to the economic and social infrastructures making such discourse possible. The gap is wide, as we gather, between a British approach—extremely classist and imbued with a systematic suspicion of the dominant traditional culture—and that of Rancière. The French thinker’s approach is more generously dialectical, more apt to discover in the past the conditions of possibility for the present and the future. In any case one can hope that the highly probable translation of this book might be the occasion of a lively debate with English-language researchers and which the French public might in turn benefit from.

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