On the advantages of Nietzsche for garden history

GRAHAM LARKIN

> History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance. This threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history — insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a *monumental*, an *antiquarian* and a *critical* species of history.[1]

Garden history has certainly become a growth industry in recent years, as evident from the surge of studies on the French classic garden. The designer traditionally credited with inventing the style, André Le Nôtre, continues to be the subject of well-documented and well-illustrated monographs focusing on issues of dating, attribution and style, as do his gardens at Vaux-le-Vicomte and Versailles.[2] There is also an increasingly steady outpouring of studies from iconographic, philosophical and sociological perspectives.[3] Reviewers are continuing to give this burgeoning body of scholarship the detailed critical attention it deserves; the purpose in the present essay is to step back and pose some questions of a much more general order. How might the dominant approaches in this rapidly expanding field be characterized? How do these various styles of history relate to each other, and what attitudes do they imply? I will begin to answer these questions by juxtaposing brief passages from three very different studies of the French classic garden published over the past two decades, namely Vincent Scully's 'The French classic garden: the art of *Pourtraiture*', Hamilton Hazlehurst's *Gardens of Illusion: The Genius of André Le Nostre,* and Thierry Mariage's *The World of André Le Nôtre.*[4] Each passage is fairly representative of the author's work as a whole, and each corresponds to one of the methods of history described by Friedrich Nietzsche in his classic 1874 essay 'On the uses and disadvantages ofhistory for life,' namely monumental history (Sculy), antiquarian history (Hazlehurst) and critical history (Mariage).

This brief essay in the historiography of the French classic garden does not pretend to be a thorough synopsis of the three studies in question, much less of the field as a whole. Nor is it simply an effort to pick favorites among three very different styles of history — as Nietzsche himself was well aware, each approach has its peculiar strengths and weaknesses.[5] This tripartite schema allows us to benefit from Nietzsche's trenchant analysis of the motivations for, and the relations among, different historical approaches. The great philosopher's insights can help historians of the built environment to understand the broader ramifications — the importance *für das Leben*, as he puts it with characteristic urgency — of our own enterprise.

Monumental history: Vincent Scully

The first of Nietzsche's types is the monumental historian. He is described as 'the man of deeds and power' who takes as his subject those immortal achievements that have served to 'expand the concept "man." ' The credo of Nietzsche's monumental historian is

> [t]hat the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago moment shall be for me still living, bright and great . . . .[6]

This description aptly characterizes the method of Scully in *Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade*, except that his main subject is not a chain of human mountain peaks but a succession of 'manmade' [*sic.*] monuments stretching from the Pyramids of Gizeh to Maya Lin's Vietnam War

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Memorial. In Scully's account, the 'living, bright and great moment' linking individuals across the millennia is an esthetic moment that can only occur in the mind of a viewer who is learned and receptive enough to discern a monument's major formal correspondences (replete with symbolically charged historical references) and to assemble them into a coherent, authentic experience of the place.

The author has one such experience in the gardens of Versailles, where he envisages himself as the distinguished guest of Louis XIV, being guided along the itinerary laid out in the king's *Way to Present the Gardens of Versailles* (ca. 1700). At one point a view takes Scully completely by surprise, an experience that he recounts in strikingly vigorous and unchaste prose:

> Then it all bursts out before us: the Fountain of Latona just below us, the *tapis vert* that slants gently down through the trees that are brought tightly in to focus the view, the Bassin d'Apollon, the Grand Canal, and, most of all, the overriding sky. Louis tells us to admire it all. He was quite aware that it was a moment of vast release. The oval of Latona opens up and surprises us, releasing us to the burst of velocity that explodes up the middle of the garden. Our gaze moves rapidly down the *tapis vert*, but when it hits the water it literally takes off. It no longer adheres but slides — slides across the water to the sky reflected in it.
>
> We are released to infinity, or at least to indefinitely expanding space. One recalls the experience at the crossing of Nôtre Dame in Paris. At Versailles, however, it seems, as it did to [Marguerite] Charageat, a directly Cartesian experience.[7]

Of course, all the king actually wrote was '[n]ext go straight to the top of Latona and pause to look down on Latona, the lizards, the slopes, the statues, the Royal Avenue, Apollo, the canal . . . .'[8] Yet the monumental historian can sense the empowerment that Louis must surely have felt: Scully's experience confirms that the Sun King's Versailles is a naked garden of optical delights, stripped down to its Cartesian essentials to make way for the free-ranging and all-seeing royal gaze. It is significant that Scully's account of the Versailles garden follows the itinerary of a Great King, and culminates in the invocation of a Great Thinker (Descartes) and another Great Monument (the cathedral of Nôtre-Dame). For him the past worth preserving is a conversation among great minds and great monuments, and the historian's task is to participate by tapping into what he calls 'the meaning of the French Classic garden.' Clearly this fundamental meaning is not simply spelled out in the complex iconographic programs at Versailles: it is inherent in the way that the eye takes possession of the space as a whole.

Antiquarian history: Hamilton Hazlehurst

It is perhaps due to the influence of monumental history that a second and very different Nietzschean type, the antiquarian historian, will often concentrate on great men and great monuments. One such scholar is Hazlehurst, whose *Gardens of Illusion: The Genius of André Le Nostre* could scarcely be further from Scully's treatment of the same subject. For unlike the impassioned monumental historian, the antiquarian Hazlehurst adopts the cool and detached manner of the scientist, concerned with describing the appearance of monuments in minute detail and charting their evolution. Here is a typical paragraph describing the same central portion of the Versailles garden examined by Scully:

> The Allée Royale with its impressive *tapis vert* came into being in 1667 when, on the completion of the Jardin Bas, it was decided that the central *allée* beyond had to be widened. The newly proportioned avenue appears on a drawing of about 1668. A comparison with the older plans shows that the new *allée* was on the same scale as the Jardin Bas and north parterre. This 1668 plan provides few additional innovations in the garden's layout, but its chief interest is that it indicates the position of the temporary pavilions set up at the intersections of the avenues in the garden to celebrate the second of the great fêtes held that year, the spectacle called *Le Grand Divertissement Royal de Versailles*. It shows the ground plan of the Salle du Bal, Salle de Souper and Salle de la Comédie. In addition, at the upper left corner of the plan appears the tower of the newly constructed Pompe from whose heights fireworks exploded to bring the 1668 fête to a close. This display is illustrated in a contemporary engraving by Le Pautre depicting the Tour de la Pompe ablaze. Also pictured is the newly reworked Jardin Bas with its already lavish waterworks and the lantern placed there for this special occasion.[9]

In this painstaking, enumerative account that mentions a date or a document in every sentence, the classic garden is anything but a springboard facilitating mental leaps to infinity, to Descartes, or to Nôtre-Dame. Given Hazlehurst's distance from Scully, it is not surprising that the latter takes issue with the dogged factuality of *Gardens of Illusion*; indeed, he brings up 'the meaning of

the French Classic garden' when accusing Hazlehurst of ignoring it. Scully cannot abide a book that 'ascribes the whole vast series of programs to a simple love of "display," apologizes for its grandeur, and says nothing whatever about iconography.'[10]

Scully's condemnation of Hazlehurst neatly instantiates Nietzsche's formulation of the monumental historian's attitude toward the antiquarian: 'He who has learned to recognize the meaning (*Sinn*) of history is vexed at the sight of inquisitive tourists or pedantic micrologists clambering about on the pyramids of the great eras of the past.'[11] Like Scully, Nietzsche clearly has little time for positivistic fact-finders. He complains at length that the antiquarian sense of the object of study

> always possesses an extremely restricted field of vision; most of what exists it does not perceive at all, and the little it does see it sees much too close up and isolated; it cannot relate what it sees to anything else and it therefore accords everything it sees equal importance and therefore to each individual thing too great importance. There is a lack of that discrimination of value and that sense of proportion which would distinguish between the things of the past in a way that would do true justice to them ... .[12]

By so leveling the historical record the antiquarian historian drains the vital energy out of the past, sometimes reaching a point 'when the historical sense no longer conserves life but mummifies it.'[13] The antiquarian's scrupulous, deadpan procedure is thus likened to the task of an embalmer arranging each feature of a lifeless body and fixing it, permanently, into its proper place. And even when it does not reach this morbid state of affairs, Nietzsche contends, antiquarian history reveals an unhealthy preoccupation with the past at the expense of the present and the future; at best it 'knows only how to *preserve* life, not how to engender it; it always undervalues that which is becoming because it has no instinct for divining it — as monumental history, for example, has.'[14] It seems fair to observe, in this regard, that Scully's presentist, value-laden, declamatory style — wildly unfashionable as it is in many circles — at least possesses the interpretative daring and generative power that Nietzsche views as essential to good history. Although he might come down too hard on the antiquarian, the philosopher does help us to understand why Hazlehurst's cautiously objective account of the Versailles *tapis vert* falls flat beside Scully's richly textured divination.

Critical history: Thierry Mariage

After taking Hazlehurst to task for ignoring the meaning of the classic French garden, Scully cites a single example of a recent book that attends to this meaning: Mariage's *World of André Le Nôtre*, which appeared in the original French edition when his own long-formulated account of Le Nôtre was about to go to press.[15] Scully's brief endorsement of Mariage is a reminder of the shared concerns of these two authors, concerns that will be evident to any careful reader.[16] Yet there are also important differences, which emerge when one considers Mariage as an example of the third and final type discussed by Nietzsche, the critical historian.

The critical historian rejects both the ecstatic, celebratory tone of the monumental historian and the scientistic detachment of the antiquarian. Although he shares the former's concern that history be placed in the service of life, he chooses to judge and condemn that history. Mariage's critical stance results in a revisionist account of the French classic garden that posits a tragic demise at the point where many would see a triumphant flowering. He describes how Le Nôtre discovered new esthetic potential in an indigenous, collective tradition of gardening practices based on adaptation to the existing site. The tragedy lies in the fact that, towards the end of his life, Le Nôtre's style of gardening was distorted by brutal and self-interested princes and technocrats. As a result of this change, the environmental contextualism of Le Nôtre's most successful designs was overlooked by future generations of planners, who came to characterize his method with the ominous and inappropriate phrase *forcer la nature*. Modern planning techniques are thus presented as an inheritance of the absolutist state's willful misconstrual of Le Nôtre's techniques of spatial management:

> There is nothing, down to the products of Le Corbusier's Charter of Athens and the now much-derided mega-schemes themselves, that cannot be considered the final avatars of an axial and monumental composition that has been totally perverted by abstract considerations and academicians.[17]

As we shall see, Mariage is no less critical of the reverse side of the modern will-to-abstraction, namely the 'vegetal conservatism' stemming from a romantic ideal of an essential and unchanging nature.[18]

Mariage's suspiciousness about the past, and his belief that one can learn from its mistakes, are typical of the critical historian's vigilant attitude

toward his culture's foundational myths — in this case the myth that Le Nôtre's work embodies the spirit of the age of Louis XIV. The antiquarian pays scant attention to such myths; the monumental historian revives and perpetuates them; the critical historian unmasks and overthrows them. Nietzsche discusses the motivation for the latter enterprise:

> If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worthy to be condemned — for that is the nature of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them.[19]

In a related passage that further anticipates Walter Benjamin's famous observation that every civilization is founded on acts of barbarism, Nietzsche describes critical history as a brutal process of introspection and purgation:

> It requires a great deal of strength to be able to live and to forget the extent to which to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing. ... Sometimes, however, this same life that requires forgetting demands a temporary suspension of this forgetfulness; it wants to be clear as to how unjust the existence of anything — a privilege, a caste, a dynasty, for example — is, and how greatly this thing deserves to perish. Then its past is regarded critically, then one takes the knife to its roots, then one cruelly tramples over every kind of piety.[20]

Here one should make an important distinction between Nietzsche's critical historian and Mariage. Although he seems to fit the critical paradigm insofar as he is bent on revealing and condemning past injustices, Mariage is not so thoroughly suspicious of the past that he views it as completely irredeemable. Rather than wishing to take the knife to the roots of the French gardening tradition, he advocates a return to its real roots as the best way to reform modern practices of territorial management. *The World of André Le Nôtre* ends on a warily constructive note:

> The great lesson of seventeenth-century landscapists, and hence of Le Nôtre, is that we need to relearn how to take advantage of the surroundings while realizing that they cannot be frozen in time. The picturesque trees (lopsided, fallen, covered in mistletoe and ground ivy) that have been the marvel of generations from Rousseau to the Romantics to the ecologists, are nothing but an image of obsolescence that some would like to preserve at all costs. The protection of sites involves their management first and foremost; landscape only makes sense when considered in terms of movement, the renewal of societies, agrarian forms, and the ways in which we occupy the land. Traditional pictorial conceptions and vegetal conservatism present no long-term solutions. A tamed nature, but one whose fundamental laws are nonetheless respected, is ultimately more attractive and profitable in every respect than the Amazonian nostalgias haunting our culture. The classical heritage does not reside in grand simplifying schemas; rather, it should guide us in a method of management based on a subtle and coherent analysis.[21]

This passage bears no trace of antiquarian detachment, nor of the preoccupation with timeless ideals characterizing monumentalists and romantic naturalists. Instead, Mariage suggests that a perspicacious understanding of long-forgotten land management techniques could help planners to devise sustainable approaches to the inevitable mutations of an environment that is both natural and social. Praising Le Nôtre's ability to adapt intelligently to the exigencies of societal change, Mariage urges planners to emulate this flexible attitude instead of simply attending to the traditional formal vocabulary.[22] The hope for salvation through the revitalization of adaptive methods certainly qualifies the gloomy view that every past is worthy to be condemned.

Conclusion: the significance of style

In the absence of an adequately full and subtle historiography of the French classic garden, I have been emboldened to depict a motley trio of contemporary historians in guises fabricated by a philosopher. To the extent that each author has been permitted to speak for himself, these character sketches are also unwitting self-portraits. The result is perhaps more a caricature than a characterization of each historian; nor would one wish for actual writers to behave exactly like Nietzsche's hyperbolic exemplars. I hope it is nonetheless evident that his analysis can help us distinguish among the various methods, temperaments and ideologies of living historians. For Nietzsche such distinctions are ultimately a matter of style, since every style of writing manifests a particular way of seeing, thinking and feeling (unless it signals an incapacity to see, think or feel). His insistence on close attention to style, in

the double sense of rhetorical and exegetical prowess, is of continuing relevance to the study of an art that assembles living forms into artificial realms of sensation; even when critical, writers of garden history should always strive to communicate the vitality and artfulness of the places or procedures they describe. Readers, for their part, should be on the lookout for signs of life, ever eager to distinguish engaged and engaging interpretation from arid fact-mongering, niggling disputation, wayward contextualism and gratuitous novelty.

Harvard University

NOTES

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1. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life' [1874], in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 67.
2. For Le Nôtre, see HAMILTON HAZLEHURST, *Gardens of Illusion: The Genius of André Le Nostre* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1980). Recent site monographs include those by JEAN-MARIE PEROUSE DE MONTCLOS, *Versailles* (Paris: Menges, 1991) and *Vaux-le-Vicomte* (London: Scala, 1997); as well as THOMAS F. HEIDIN, 'Le Nostre to Mansart: transition in the gardens of Versailles', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, CXXX/1547 (1997), pp. 191–344.
3. For examples of each of these approaches respectively, see ROBERT W. BERGER, *In the Garden of the Sun King: Studies on the park of Versailles under Louis XIV* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985); ALAN S. WEISS, *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17th-century Metaphysics* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995); and CHANDRA MUKERJI, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For appreciative summary of some recent developments in the field, see SUSAN TAYLOR-LEDUC, 'Introduction: the French seventeenth-century garden revisited', *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, XVIII/1 (1998), pp. 2–4.
4. VINCENT SCULLY, 'The French classic garden: the art of *Pourtraiture*', in *Architecture: The Natural and the Manmade* (London: Harper Collins, 1991); THIERRY MARIAGE, *The World of André Le Nôtre* trans. Graham Larkin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999; orig. *L'univers de Le Nostre*, Brussels: Mardaga, 1990).
5. For an examination of Nietzsche's stylistic pluralism, see ALEXANDER NEHAMAS, *Nietzsche, Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 1.
6. NIETZSCHE, 'On the uses', p. 68.
7. SCULLY, Architecture, pp. 227–8.
8. LOUIS XIV, *The Way to Present the Gardens of Versailles* [ca. 1700], trans. John F. Stewart (Paris: Réunion des Museés Nationaux, 1992), p. 20.
9. HAZLEHURST, *Gardens of Illusion*, p. 73.
10. SCULLY, *Architecture*, pp. 222–3.
11. NIETZSCHE, 'On the uses', p. 68.
12. Ibid., p. 74.
13. Ibid., p. 75.
14. Ibid.
15. SCULLY, *Architecture*, p. 223. Scully cites two earlier examples of the investigation of this meaning: MARGUERITE CHARAGEAT, *L'art des jardins* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962); and the chauvinistic, rather oppressively monumentalizing work by LUCIEN CORPECHOT, *Les jardins de l'intelligence* (Paris: Émile-Paul, 1912). It is significant that Hazlehurst ignores the work of Mariage in his authoritative Le Nôtre biography for JANE TURNER (ed.), *Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan; New York: Grove, 1996).
16. For instance, both authors examine the links between classic garden forms and fortifications: SCULLY, *Architecture*, ch. 10; MARIAGE, *World of André Le Nôtre*, pp. 37–40.
17. MARIAGE, *The World of André Le Nôtre*, p. 113.
18. Ibid.
19. NIETZSCHE, 'On the uses', pp. 75–6.
20. Ibid., p. 75. For the Benjamin passage, see his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, with an Introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 256.
21. MARIAGE, *The World of André Le Nôtre*, p. 113.
22. Mariage's promotion of a flexible attitude, rather than the adoption of particular forms, can be viewed as a critique of the methods of the Duchêne family, whose turn-of-the-century restorations of major classic gardens employed the kinds of 'grand simplifying schemas' that he warns against. HENRI DUCHÊNE and ACHILLE DUCHÊNE, *Le style Duchêne* (Paris: du Labyrinthe/Fonds Henri et Achille Duchêne, 1998).