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## **Empires, Gardens, Collections — How Each Explains the Others**

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Adam and Eve, we hear, lived briefly in a paradise before being compelled to go forth and suffer through work and childbirth. *Paradeisos*: the word used in the Greek translations of the Book of Genesis encodes the memory of an older Eastern empire. In Persian a *pairidaeza* was an enclosed garden, most notably the king's garden, a sheltered, well-watered space where the rare plants of the four quarters were collected and tended.<sup>1</sup> What if, rather than a fresh space created together with the beginning world, Adam and Eve lived (as the Greek lexicon of their adventures does) in the ruins of a vanished dynasty? And if, as some readers of the Book of Genesis believe, paradise is the desired destination of humanity, are the old Mesopotamian empires the arrival-point of history as well? Gardens are the self-image of empire, its ideal on display, the place where, uncommanded, unforced, "labor is blossoming or dancing" for the satisfaction of the sovereign's eye.<sup>2</sup> Their history tracks the transformations of the imperial idea, the outlines of their vanished structures still visible in such modern institutions as the

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<sup>1</sup> See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. *paradise*. The Old Persian word was later incorporated into Hebrew in the form *pardes*, and appears in Ecclesiasticus, the Song of Songs and Talmudic literature with the meanings of both "garden" and "paradise."

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive study of this motif, see Robert Batchelor, "The European Aristocratic Imaginary and the Eastern Paradise: Europe, Islam and China, 1100–1780" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1999).

museum and the amusement park.<sup>3</sup> Let us muse in the garden of gardens, the collection of collections, that only a comparative history can assemble.

*Hyperbolic Likenesses*

It seems to be a nearly universal feature of imperial overlords that they should desire a paradise, an enclosed space where the image of their far-flung possessions can be concentrated and embraced in a single glance. The formation of the first Chinese empire in 221 BC brought a boom in garden-building, for reasons of political symbolism.

The empire extended east to the sea and to Korea, west to Lintao and Qiangzhong, and south to Beihu. In the north fortresses were established along the Yellow River and then over the Yin Mountains to Liaodong. Rich and powerful families from all over the empire, 120,000 families in all, were moved to Xianyang.... And every time Qin wiped out one of the feudal states, it would make replicas of its halls and palaces and reconstruct them on the slope north of [the Qin capital of] Xianyang, facing south over the Wei. From Yongmen east to the Jing and Wei rivers, mansions, elevated walks, and fenced pavilions succeeded one another, all filled with the beautiful women, bells and drums that Qin had taken from the feudal rulers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The World (Shijie)*, directed by Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 (2004), is set in a Beijing tourist attraction that offers miniature versions of the famous sights of many countries. The film can be read as a humorous commentary on the new “world empire” of consumer culture, of which China is now more and more a part.

<sup>4</sup> Sima Qian, *Shiji*, 6, “Qin shihuang benji.” Translated by Burton Watson as *Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 1, *Qin Dynasty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 45, translation slightly modified.

Several traditional Chinese ideas about sovereignty enter into this passage. Under the multi-state system of pre-imperial China, when two kingdoms concluded a treaty of friendship, they would exchange hostages of high rank and undertake to treat them as state guests. The First Emperor concentrates all the “diplomatic hostages” of the empire (now powerless underlings) in one place, at the same time ensuring that he can keep an eye on them. The amassing of the signs of legitimate rule—bells, drums, beautiful women—bears the same meaning.<sup>5</sup> But instead of aggregating all those people and symbols in his own palace, the First Emperor preserves geographical difference by making replicas of all the vanquished royal palaces and retaining their prestige-bearing objects in their (reduplicated) original locations. This gesture of distinction within inclusion mirrors the traditional definition of an empire, as opposed to a kingdom: a king is a king over men, whereas an emperor is a king over kings. A magical meaning, too, is implied by this act of reduplication—analogue to the building, in the Emperor’s vast tomb, of a model of the entire known world. A scale model of the conquered territory is a more powerful index of conquest than an undifferentiated treasure-heap. If these “mansions, elevated walks, and fenced pavilions” amount to a garden, it is a garden that makes a blunt statement of ownership. It is a “world in miniature” crafted to make visible actions and relations in the real-sized world.<sup>6</sup>

Several layers of identification need to be pointed out here. The parts of the

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<sup>5</sup> On musical scales and instruments as signs of political allegiance, see Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Suspended Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> On such mappings see Rolf A. Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

emperor's garden correspond to the parts of the realm that are under the emperor's power. Thus the king's garden is the image of the realm. But at the same time, the assembling of all these sub-gardens into a single space is the feat of one man, the emperor himself, so that the garden also serves as a kind of royal portrait. The king's garden is the image of the king. This would have been self-evident to any Chinese writer who ever had to deal with the description of palaces and parks. Palace descriptions, in fact, serve to place the sovereign at a sublime remove from the ordinary observer, as is shown by Ban Gu's evocation of the gardens of the former dynasty of the Later Han:

If one pushes a gallery door and exits above,  
It were as if he wandered his eyes far beyond Heaven,  
And with nothing to cling to, all was an empty vastness.  
In front is Middle Path, behind is Grand Fluid,  
Where one views the flooding flow of the emerald sea.  
It dashes its waves against Jieshi,  
Strikes the divine peaks with a tumultuous roar.  
On it float the Yingzhou and Fang-Hu isles,  
And Penglai rises from its center.  
And then there are:  
Magic herbs blooming in winter,  
Sacred trees growing in groves,  
Precipitous and steep, peaked and sharp,  
Rugged hills of gold and precious stones....

It is truly a lodging place for the immortals,

Not a place where we humans are at ease.<sup>7</sup>

The hyperbole—for it is hyperbole, describing nothing more than a terrace, an artificial hill, and a pair of lakes in the imperial palace—would always have been recognized as referring to the cosmic grandeur of the garden’s owner, not to the scenery itself. Good courtier that he is, Ban Gu does not look the ruler in the eye, nor does he even let his gaze linger for long on the landscape that represents, with its miniature universe and its models of Taoist paradises, the royal condition.

Sixteen centuries on, Sima Qian (~145-~90 BC) or Ban Gu (32-92) would have recognized in the Yuanming yuan 圓明園, the “Garden of Complete Brightness” outside of Peking, better known as the Old Summer Palace, another version of the same cosmological program. Its nine divisions patterned on the “Nine Regions” of classical China, its grandly titled subgardens, its towers, artificial lakes and fabricated mountains announced it to be an imperial dwelling-place. There was, in fact, a particular set of design criteria for a proper imperial garden, and when a space was chosen for elevation to that status, it had to be rebuilt accordingly. The design program of these gardens took on all the more force for the fact that in the middle and later reigns of the Qing, the sovereign spent far more time in residence at the Yuanming yuan and the northern

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<sup>7</sup> Ban Gu 班固, “Liang Du fu 兩都賦” (Two Capitals Rhapsody), in: Xiao Tong 蕭統, comp., *Wen xuan, or Selections of Refined Literature*, vol. 1: *Rhapsodies on Metropolises and Capitals*, tr. David R. Knechtges (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 133-135.

summer palace at Chengde than in the Forbidden City of Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

The building and landscaping programs of these palaces did not just glorify imperial power in the abstract, but often recalled particular feats and characteristics of an individual ruler. The Kangxi emperor's complex at Chengde included a miniature version of the Potala palace, both a reminder that the emperor's sway held as far as distant Tibet and a sign of the Manchu sovereigns' acceptance of Lamaist Buddhism as their official religion. Images and poems celebrating Chengde were published under the title *Bishu shanzhuang sanshiliu jing shi bing tu* 避暑山莊三十六景詩并圖 (Thirty-six views of the summer residence in poems and paintings). [ILLUSTRATION 1] In the wake of Kangxi's southern tours, starting once the Jiangnan region was well and truly pacified in the 1680s, most imperial gardens came to include an imitation of Suzhou, Hangzhou or Yangzhou. Just as with the colossal series of twelve Southern Inspection Tour scroll paintings executed by Wang Hui and his associates, the gesture involved both sincere admiration of the South and an appreciative digestion of it.<sup>9</sup> The European-style fountains, concert halls and labyrinths added to the Yuanming yuan after 1747 must have amused the Qianlong emperor as a three-dimensional recreation of the prints and paintings he periodically received from Europe, as well as formalizing his "possession,"

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<sup>8</sup> According to Evelyn Rawski, the Kangxi emperor never spent more than three months in Beijing in a year. In 1741 Qianlong spent only 18 days in the Forbidden City. See Rawski, *The Last Emperors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> See *Kangxi empereur de Chine 1662-1722* (exhibition catalogue, Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2004), pp. 103-113. The twelve paintings are today divided among the Forbidden City, the Metropolitan Museum, the Musée Guimet, the Bibliothèque Nationale, and the Hong Kong Museum of Art. For reproductions of the first, ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth scrolls, see Gu gong bowuyuan 故宮博物院, *Qingdai gongting huihua* 清代宮庭繪畫 (Palace painting of the Qing dynasty; Beijing: Wenwu, 1992), pp. 54-80.

at least through culture, of this newly familiar civilization.<sup>10</sup> Kangxi and Qianlong extended the program of the garden as a world in miniature to whichever definition of the “world” characterized their times.

*‘An Elevated Point of View’*

With this background, Sima Qian and Ban Gu would have had no trouble understanding the gardens of Versailles as they stood in the time of Kangxi. It might have been best to start their visit in the royal zoo next to the Grand Trianon. Louis XIV stocked it with eagles, ostriches, Libyan demoiselle cranes, various ornamental fowls, elk, deer, gazelles, peacocks, turkeys, boars, pigs, swamp hens, crows, a stable and a pheasant coop, as well as elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses, and other wild animals.<sup>11</sup>

[ILLUSTRATION 2] This assembly of beasts—some beautiful to look at, some good to eat, some simply rare, with fine horses thrown in—would have told Sima Qian, or any other visitor magically transported from dynastic China, that its owner was someone whose status authorized him to aspire to reproduce the world in small compass, up to and including the heraldic lions, eagles, tigers and elephants. (The French kings had kept an animal garden, including at least a lion or two, for hundreds of years.) Continuing the tour, the historians’ experience of Chinese palaces would have prepared them to assess the miniature navy that floated up and down Louis XIV’s Grand Canal: “not just a few barks for outings on the water, but a virtual reduced model of the war fleet. A man-o’-

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<sup>10</sup> See Nathalie Monnet, *Chine: l’empire du trait* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2004), pp. 224-231, and Gu gong bowuyuan, *Qingdai gongting huihua*, pp. 219-225, for iconography of the time, and Maurice Adam, *Yuen ming yuen* (Pei-p’ing, Imprimerie des Lazaristes, 1936), for older photographs of the ruins.

<sup>11</sup> See Alfred Marie, *Naissance de Versailles: Le Château – Les Jardins*, vol. 1 (Paris: Vincent, Fréal & Cie, 1968), pp. 41-44.

war and a Biscayan galleon were constructed; there were ketches, sloops, brigantines, and a little later, gondolas sent as a gift from Venice. In 1675, two yachts were brought from England.”<sup>12</sup> With some explaining, Ban Gu would have understood the purport of the king’s Cabinet of Curiosities too:

In 1684, the treasure of Childeric, stored in a cupboard, occupied a large part of the hall which contained prints by Marolles and other precious items like a large basin of carved ivory, kept in a red leather case. On the mantelpiece, three busts: Pallas Athena, a Bacchante, a child; elsewhere, a Diana of Ephesus, a piece of petrified moss, a cedar cabinet full of seashells, vases from the Far East and Italy, a Japanese sword in its wooden scabbard, some Chinese paintings on silk, Pascal’s calculating machine, dried lizards, three fish jawbones and two huge snakeskins, three petrified mushrooms, four crabs, a rhinoceros horn, a big buffalo horn and a little one, a bird’s nest, a small woven basket from India and some modern medals. The inventory of this rummage might go on forever: it also included sculptures of every dimension and material, globes, pots, and mineral specimens.<sup>13</sup>

The only thing missing is a catalogue-poet like Ban Gu, to give the “rummage” order and symmetry. The treasure-room’s inherited confusion, the result of a many-sided

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<sup>12</sup> Marie, *Naissance de Versailles*, vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale des origines à 1800* (Genève : Droz, 1988), pp. 82-83. The curiosity cabinet referred to here is that of the royal library, located on the rue Vivienne in Paris, as it stood between 1684 and 1720. Its contents are housed today in the National Library of France.

process of historical accretion, nonetheless takes on thematic order when recentered on the person of its owner, the Frenchman who substitutes for all Frenchmen. The collection is like a perspective drawing with the king at its vanishing point. And the reduction to that vanishing point is inevitable.

Like most medal collectors of the seventeenth century, the king is interested in ancient medals (especially those of the Roman Empire...), but not from the perspective of a historian. They are rather an iconographic complement to the readings from Plutarch's *Lives* that Racine performed for the king, and like those readings, a mine of examples, anecdotes and 'curious' details... The placement of the collections within the château confirms their double character, both private and public.... In actuality, the Cabinet des Médailles, like all other cultural institutions under the Ancien Régime, was expected to contribute to the king's glory, to support the good opinion he had of himself and that the world had of him, as the protector of sciences, letters and arts. Gros de Boze, in his speech celebrating Oudinet, makes an insightful comparison between the royal gardens and the cabinet of antiquities: the work that goes on in the Cabinet is 'like those prodigious displacements of earth that, in the course of time and after infinite pains, ultimately produce beauties that often go unnoticed, as nature almost always receives the credit for them.'<sup>14</sup>

Whatever Gros de Boze meant by the last part of his garden analogy, no one

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<sup>14</sup> Thierry Sarmant, *Le Cabinet des Médailles de la Bibliothèque Nationale, 1661-1848* (Paris: Ecole des Chartes, 1994), pp. 88-89.

ever credited the splendor of the gardens at Versailles to nature. That was not the point of the “prodigious earth-moving” at all. The identification of the garden, like that of the cabinet of rarities, with its owner and presiding spirit was always meant to be complete.<sup>15</sup>

We have an exceptional document on this identification, a guide to the gardens of Versailles written by Louis XIV and periodically updated between 1689 and 1705. It begins:

After exiting the château by the vestibule of the Marble Court, one walks onto the terrace; one must stop at the top of the steps to consider the placement of the parterres, the pools and the fountains of the Cabinets. Then one must go straight to the outlook above the pool of Latona and consider Latona, the Pool of the Lizards, the ramps, the statues, the royal avenue, Apollo, the canal, and then turn around to see the parterre and the château. Then one must turn left to pass between the Sphinxes... One will go straight to the point of view at the bottom of the pool of Latona, and as one passes by one will look at the little fountain of the Satyr set in one of the groves; when one has reached the point of view, one will pause there to consider the ramps, the vases, the statues, the lizards, Latona and the château; on the other side, the royal avenue, Apollo, the canal, the spurting fountains in the groves, Flora, and Saturn, with Ceres on the right and Bacchus on the left.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Louis Marin, *Le portrait du Roi* (Paris: Minuit, 1981); Jean-Marie Apostolides, *Le Roi-machine* (Paris: Minuit, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Louis XIV, *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 2002), pp. 19-22, 30-33. My awkward translation is meant to preserve the grammar of the original, which is cast from start to finish in the imperative and impersonal future modes.

Louis XIV speaks *of* rather than *to* his reader, never saying “you might like to...” or “I suggest...” but predicting and commanding. “On ira sur la terrasse; il faut s’arrêter... il faut après tourner à gauche... On ira droit au point de vue.” As Louis warms to the work, he abandons the imperative “il faut” and seems to join the visitor in a pure future-tense imagination: “on descendra... on ira... on remontera... on verra...” The visit planned by the king is a five-mile walk that stops in front of the major pieces of sculpture and architecture, but more importantly for our purposes, designates the “points of view” or perspectives that he and Le Nôtre had so carefully planned when designing the garden. These lines and crossings are crucial to the garden’s thematics. Avenues cut in the mass of trees, perspectives and “points of view” are so characteristic of the French garden style that we must, as Louis might have said, “pause to consider” the terms. Littré, the authoritative nineteenth-century lexicographer, treats “perspective” and “point de vue” as synonymous. His leading citations for the second expression sketch out a little history of the idea of point of view:

Point of view: the point toward which vision is directed or fixed....

An assembly of objects on which vision is directed or fixed, across a distance. ‘Whenever I encounter a fine point of view, I stop and delight in it’ (Diderot).... *Figuratively*.... ‘The point of view where [Leibniz] stood was always an elevated one, and he always gazed on a vast territory no detail of which escaped him’ (Fontenelle).... *As technical term in perspective*. Point of view: the precise spot where one must stand to see an object correctly, or that where

the object must be placed to be seen correctly. Viewpoint, the point chosen by a painter or draughtsman to put objects in perspective, towards which are directed all the rays that are imagined as emanating from the spectator's eyes. You are not in the viewpoint, at the viewpoint... *Figuratively*, the different ways in which a man or a topic can or should be considered...<sup>17</sup>

There is a big difference between *the point of view* and *a point of view*. In the usage of the French seventeenth century, the former, with the definite article, dominates. A garden or painting is designed to be seen from a single point of view, and no other point will give quite the same result, the correct result. Thus Pascal, in his *Pensées*, deplores the fact that although everyone knows that there is a right point of view for a painting, the right point of view in religion and morality is still a matter of controversy.<sup>18</sup> And in the same way Louis tells us to go to “*the point of view*.” Designing a point of view into a landscape supposes and confirms an absolute manner of seeing things.<sup>19</sup> On the day that “point of view” began habitually to take the indefinite article, becoming *a point of view*, *this* or *that point of view*, or *my point of view* in comparison to *yours*, a quiet shift from epistemological absolutism to relativism got underway. In any case, Louis is not interested in your, my or any other random point of view; he wants to lead us to a series of points of view from which the garden can be “considered” as its designer intended. In such gardens, the landscape is transformed in order to reveal or create such perspectives or points of view; territory is reshaped in the service of a pictorial project.

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<sup>17</sup> Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Hachette, 1873), s.v. “Vue.”

<sup>18</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Michel Le Guern (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1977), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> I steal this phrase from Flaubert, who used it to define style.

Garden design and garden viewing frame and center the given as if with a Claude glass, that baroque equivalent of the viewfinder. When a garden designed to look like a painting is painted, a great circle comes to completion.

We are here coming onto the balcony that looks over one of the great stereotypes of garden history, the sharp contrast between the French ideal of gardening exhibited in Versailles and the English garden, the theory of which as we know comes, via a free interpretation, from China.<sup>20</sup> Garden literature is dominated by it. The absolutist garden, looking back to Euclid and the Italian Renaissance, versus the romantic garden full of the unpredictable profusion of nature; rules versus genius; “ordered” Racine versus “wild” Shakespeare; the single point of view versus multiple nooks and crannies; the garden of geometry versus the garden of pleasure. The parallel distinction in painting has been brought out in a charming video by David Hockney, “A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China,” dedicated to smashing the tyranny of single-point perspective.<sup>21</sup> Readers of Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la folie (A History of Madness)* and *Les Mots et les choses (The Order of Things)* can insert the contrast into a historical legend (unfortunately not quite accurate, but powerful as only a legend can be), according to which a busy anarchy of forms, the Book of Nature with its ornamental madmen, somewhat medieval but also Chinese in its way, crumbled under the advance of the disciplined, monotonous rationality of the Classical Age. These blunt and polemical contrasts should not lead us to assume that we can read off social history from the artistic

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<sup>20</sup> This was common knowledge in the eighteenth century: “puisque tout le monde sait que les Jardins Anglais ne sont qu’une imitation de ceux de la Chine” (Georges-Louis le Rouge, *Jardins chinois contenant les XI principales maisons de l’Empereur de Chine* [Paris, 1786], reproduced in Monnet, *Chine: l’empire du trait*, pp. 228-229).

<sup>21</sup> *A Day on the Grand Canal with the Emperor of China, Or, Surface is Illusion But So is Depth*, dir. Philip Haas (1989).

or architectural productions of a culture. The gentle contours of a Chinese garden do not simply “mean” that the Chinese empire was a relaxing place to live in. For the Chinese emperors were absolute enough, in their own way; their absolutism simply took the form of the inclusion of a surprising and various nature (consider the First Emperor’s inclusive garden). This material shape, once transported to Europe, became an image of multiplicity and irreducible subjectivity. It wouldn’t be the first or last time that the two civilizations misconstrued each other with such elegant symmetry.

### *Overgrown Paths*

Attention to history is a good antidote to the oversimplification that would state: “Versailles is to the Summer Palace as European culture is to Chinese.” As readers of the great novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 know, rebuilding gives a garden a historical thickness that no amount of mere design or planting or even inscription can achieve. (In that novel, a new garden is built in the place of an older one, partly in the hope of expunging the memories attached to the former site, but the repressed history comes back to be relived.<sup>22</sup>) It is by being simultaneously the place it is and the trace of the places it formerly was that a garden becomes a multi-layered symbol and demands explanation through a narrative. So for example the fact of the Changchun yuan’s 暢春園 having been the favorite residence of Kangxi explains Qianlong’s desire to expand it, under the name of Yuanming yuan, into the grandest thing of its kind that had been attempted.

The story of Versailles must be told in stages. Like the gardens of the *Honglou*

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<sup>22</sup> See Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Honglou meng de liangge shijie* 紅樓夢的兩個世界 (The two worlds of ‘Honglou meng’), Taipei: Lianjing, 1978.

*meng*, the Versailles of symmetrical hedges and arrow-straight vistas is built around and on top of a garden with a different architecture and a different program. The former garden even survives to be incorporated in the absolutist Versailles, as part of a program more complex and contradictory than we often give that garden credit for being. And when the “other garden” that gave Versailles its complexity around 1700 is removed in the later part of the eighteenth century, it is, strangely, in order to make room for the very Anglo-Chinese garden that is typically held up as the anti-Versailles. The states of construction form a kind of grammar of oppositions and inclusions, programmatically articulating (as all garden constructions do) the relation between the inside and the outside of the garden.

The story starts with a party, the ten-day celebration, including tournaments, opera, ballet, masques, mythological constructions and a tent city, that Louis XIV held for six hundred *grande*s of the realm in 1664 under the name “The Pleasures of the Enchanted Isle.” An announcement of Louis’ consolidation of the government in his own hands after the nineteen-year regency of his mother, Anne of Austria, and Cardinal Mazarin, the celebration also marked the shift of the royal residence away from the Louvre in Paris, associated for him with the troubles of the Fronde, and toward the former hunting lodge of Versailles which Louis had just begun to expand. With a libretto that borrowed its plot from an episode from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, framing the beginning of the festivities with the fairy Alcina’s bewitching of Roger and his valiant knights and its end with the breaking of the spell by her rival Melissa, the Fêtes designated the garden as a place of enchantment, a place of transformation where the

king can take on the role of a god or of an ordinary mortal, at will.<sup>23</sup> The garden is the realm of fantasy, of utopia, of wish-fulfillment let loose. It is a make-believe in which both *making* and *believing* carry weight. When looking at a garden, we should always ask: what wish does it fulfill? Whose wish?

The ten-day party initiated, in a way, the decades-long house party that began in 1682 as Louis lodged more and more of the nobility in Versailles, distracting them with consummate strategy from political engagement. Theaters and isolated clearings would remain a part of the garden planning of Versailles for the next fifty years. The history of the gardens we see today begins almost immediately after the 1664 Festival, when André Le Nôtre took in hand the massive reorganization of the grounds. Starting from the parterres that occupy the château's immediate back yard, Le Nôtre drew a broad axial path heading due west to the visible horizon and paved its center with the waters of the Grand Canal. That gave the gardens their main visual orientation and a constant reference back to the château. Around the canal were planted groves of tall, durable trees (oaks, chestnuts and beeches) and through these groves sliced long, straight avenues perpendicular or diagonal to the main east-west and north-south axes of the Grand Canal. This visual organization, an enlargement of the geometrical parterres inherited from the Italian Renaissance which had provided the design of the gardens of Versailles before Louis XIV, is the Versailles everyone remembers, the elaborate yet desolate landscape of *Last Year at Marienbad*, the style royal houses all over Europe, from Madrid to Herrenhausen to Vienna, adopted soon after in wishful emulation. Louis "tyrannized over nature, tamed it with technology and treasure," to quote the duke of Saint-Simon.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marie, *Naissance*, pp. 44-50.

<sup>24</sup> Cited, Michel Baridon, *Les jardins de Versailles* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2003), p. 69.

Thematically as well, he tyrannized over the place with the omnipresent legend of the sun-god on which his sculptors and designers had to work hundreds of variations, from the chariot of Apollo rising from the basin just east of the Grand Canal to the marble statues representing Apollo's rest in the grottoes of Tethys. Even the straight lines and long perspectives of the garden could be interpreted as a spatial translation of the light rays that are the sun god's attribute. And whatever fits Apollo, applies to the Sun King: interpretation quickly becomes monotonous in a realm that has only one master.

But Le Nôtre's garden is not just the unrelieved joint application of absolutism and geometry. Between the perspectives lay patches of woods, groves that were organized into little clearings that served as outdoor rooms or theaters: the "Ballroom," the "Council Hall," and so forth. [ILLUSTRATION 3] The approach to these "rooms" was usually indirect, causing surprise, mystery and pleasure. They were ever so slightly sheltered from the sun god's gaze. A labyrinth provided an especially safe area for secrets.

Among all the groves of the park of Versailles, the one named the Labyrinth is especially noteworthy for the novelty of its design and the number and variety of its fountains. It is called the Labyrinth because of its infinity of little paths, so tightly interwoven that it is almost impossible not to get lost; but also, in order that those who lose themselves there can do so pleasurably, not a single detour but presents several fountains to the view, so that at every step one

is surprised by some new object.<sup>25</sup>

Set right behind the Orangery and thus only a few steps from the château, the Labyrinth gave a direct answer to the visual triumphalism of the canal and the avenues. In its meandering paths led from one fountain to another, each one a sculptural illustration of one of Aesop's fables. Charles Perrault invents a legend for this space of secrets, allegories and exceptions: one day Cupid met Apollo walking in the garden of Versailles, and said to him, "I will gladly let you have all the glory and the command of everything, if only you let me design this labyrinth which I love passionately and which suits my character so well. For you know that I too am a labyrinth, where it is easy to lose one's way. My idea would be to make a great many fountains there and adorn them with statues of the best fables of Aesop, under which I would hide lessons and proverbs for the guidance of lovers..."<sup>26</sup> A garden made for pleasure and surprise, rather than the "glory and command" of immense straight views; for curiosity rather than uniformity; for getting agreeably lost rather than being in permanent visual contact with the château and its grandiose proprietor: Perrault tells us that Le Nôtre's garden is really two garden programs in dialogue. The imagery of enclosure, disguise, astonishment and seduction in groves and garden "rooms" preserves the spirit of the festival of the Enchanted Isle in the leafy spaces between the lines of the absolutist observatory or shooting-gallery. At the very least, the garden design executed between 1670 and 1715 is more complex than we

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Perrault, cited, Simone Hoog, "Commentaires," in Louis XIV, *Manière de montrer les jardins*, p. 79. On the Labyrinth, see also Marie, *Naissance de Versailles*, 1, pp. 121-143, and Baridon, *Les jardins*, pp. 238-241.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Perrault, "Le labyrinthe de Versailles," in: Louis XIV, *Manière de montrer les jardins* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1999), pp. 38-39.

usually recognize, containing a proposal and a counter-proposal.

The garden is about royal domination, but also about the areas of private life that are, as if by tacit agreement, sheltered from the royal gaze. If you are going to stand in the public space, you will always be in the sight-line of the Sun (-King). Private life is the alternative to the only form of public life now left, the role of courtier or administrator in the service of the centralizing king. Louis' plan was precisely to lure his nobles into the alternative to political activity, to detach them from a second public space, the regional networks of power that he, like the First Emperor, dismantled and brought under control. The landscape of Versailles offers the visitor two possible places to stand, excluding any position that would be both personal and political.

That structure—a dialogue of choices proposed by the sovereign—lost its potency with the passage of time. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the baroque enigmas and allegories of the Labyrinth, the Ballroom, and the Grotto no longer seemed a valid answer to the perspectives and geometrical parterres. The taste they evoked appeared old-fashioned, didactic, unnatural—perhaps, as proof of Louis XIV's success, they no longer corresponded to an increasing “privatization” of private life. When Louis XVI rebuilt parts of the garden, the major geometrical patterns were left intact, but the groves were redesigned; and the Labyrinth, to take the most forthright example, was replaced with a garden in the wilder, more spontaneous English style, known as the Queen's Garden. The Menagerie, with its baroque cosmographic connotations, was likewise torn down and replaced by a botanical garden that merged with the “English garden,” fake ruins, and farmstead surrounding the new Petit Trianon.

Roughly, then, if the history of the gardens of Versailles were to be told in the

structuralist style, we would have a first period in which the garden's meaning is simply ENCHANTMENT. This meaning gives way to a restructuring, under Le Nôtre starting in 1666, marked by the dialogue

AUTHORITY – CURIOSITY.

(CURIOSITY encompasses the themes of “secrecy,” “variety” and “desire” evoked by Perrault's description of the Labyrinth.) Then follows a third period in which the category of CURIOSITY vanishes, so that the category of AUTHORITY, though unchanged in itself, has a new dialogue-partner:

AUTHORITY – ~~CURIOSITY~~ – NATURE

It is precisely at the third stage that the opposition between the French and the Anglo-Chinese garden crystallizes and becomes the permanent, inevitable stereotype of garden theory that it is to this day. But because NATURE occupies the place of the missing CURIOSITY (literally occupies its place, as in the former Labyrinth), the relation of those two terms will be a blind, unacknowledged and underdetermined one, quite different from the relation of NATURE to AUTHORITY, which is endlessly visible, obvious and obligatory. In the terms made familiar by Dr. Freud of Vienna, CURIOSITY is the repressed content to which the NATURE of the Chinese garden, as adopted in eighteenth-century Europe, corresponds. And the term CURIOSITY corresponds, in happenstance but explicable ways, to the Chinese ideal of the garden that assembles all the variety and components of the universe. An archaeology of the Anglo-Chinese garden, whether physical or intellectual, would have to start by recovering that lost layer. One result of doing so would be to undo the terms of the contrast between

rational and spontaneous garden design: although we are used to thinking of the geometrical garden as artificial and the English garden as natural, the allegorical garden is so artificial that it makes the geometrical garden look “natural.”

A game of differentiated spaces is to be seen here. Recall that Versailles was always known as the château, never as the palace: it was supposed to be the retreat from the capital even as it took on the functions of a second capital. The gardens, in turn, were a place of refuge from the formality of the château, and within the gardens, the groves were an alternative to the avenues. In the groves occurs the substitution of nature for teasing allegories. The French case suggests that although the identification of the garden with the king’s action in the world is constant, the terms of the identification vary, for reasons having to do with changes in taste which are ultimately changes in the fantasy that society weaves about itself. Louis XIV with obvious and monotonous success turned the whole garden to the purpose of AUTHORITY, of glorifying his reign; you might say that the landscape alterations of Louis XVI put the garden on the path of ignoring the very existence of AUTHORITY, a dangerous invitation.

A detailed study of the Chinese emperors’ activities in their different residences would presumably show how their sense of themselves and their function varied with place and time. The residences were private spaces in the rather special sense that we have to give to “private” in that context: largely reserved for the women and eunuchs of the imperial household and some important members of the imperial family, to which add a population of daytime visitors, chiefly male and carrying papers to be commented and signed. Precisely what parts of which gardens were reserved for what uses, from what year to what, is the sort of question that would shed a raking sideways light on the

functions of palace administration that other documents might be unable to provide. A psychology of garden spaces, drawn from observed behavior, would thus be desirable, even for political historians.

*Dispossession: Vandals and Scholars*

It is not surprising that Kangxi and Louis XIV created gardens that represented their own historical position, their place in the world. If this common feature were missing, *that* would be surprising. But the underpinnings of the royal use of garden space vary over time, as we have seen, and the fact that Versailles was decidedly for public show while outsiders were more or less barred from the Chinese imperial residences is adequate warning against outright assimilation. We can take the identification of the sovereign with his garden as a given, whether this identification is performed by garden design alone, by public or state display of garden spaces, or through the circulation of images representing the royal domain, like the painted views of the Summer Palace that drew attention throughout China and all the way to Sweden.<sup>27</sup> [ILLUSTRATION 4]

What happens to a garden when its thematic center or owner disappears?

Gardens change hands. But in the case of a royal property, ownership is not a casual thing. First, because the landscape, on coming into royal hands, is typically organized to reflect the image of the king; second, because when a dynasty ends, the real property of the former dynasty is typically taken over without bargaining by the new

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<sup>27</sup> Le Rouge's 1786 suite of engravings (see above, note 20) directly reproduced an album, *Tang Dai Shen Yuan hehua Yuanmingyuan sishi jing* (唐岱沈源和畫圓明園四十景), now in the possession of the Bibliothèque Nationale after being taken as war booty in 1860 (Monnet, pp. 225-228).

dynasty, an especially tricky transition when the new owners are “the people” or “the nation.” It is easy enough to learn to shout, “Long live the nation!” instead of “Long live the king!” But what is to be done with the halls and gardens that amount to the leftover imaginary body of a departed king?<sup>28</sup>

The change of purport that ensues when dynastic property becomes national property is a legal and thematic dispossession. It may happen suddenly, but nonetheless involves several stages. In the immediate post-revolutionary mood, a public showing of royal or imperial treasures could only have been construed as a denunciation—Exhibit A in the case against the dynasty, meant to accuse the former rulers of “extorting these riches from the blood and sweat of the people.” At one time, most museum labels in China were couched in this style. The accusatory way of conceiving museums indeed “went up to the mountains and down to the villages”: the exposition of ransacked household “treasures” with similar labeling was a recurrent feature of anti-landlord violence, the anti-rightist movement, and the Cultural Revolution. Those improvised village museums put before the viewer with the immediacy of a crime scene the signs of corruption and luxury: a pair of American nylon stockings, a watch, a radio, some gold coins.<sup>29</sup>

Such accusatory displays proclaim, no less than the triumphal parades of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), has been a constant reference for scholars of the absolutist royal image such as Marin and Apostolidès.

<sup>29</sup> See Li Zhensheng, *Red-Color News Soldier* (London: Phaidon, 2003), p. 53, for an example. Another instance that shows the unpredictability of changes in the meaning of collections is the displays of profaned church property and relics laid out by radical factions in Republican Spain: these displays were then in turn displayed by the Phalangists as evidence of the evil of the leftist government. See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 103-127, for discussion.

Ancien Régime, the identification between collection or garden and the owner. But the survival of collections in a post-monarchical age depended on their being detached from their prior owners and made “national treasure,” a complex operation. And a risky one, for the transition from royal palaces, where everything is owned by a particular somebody, to public museums, where everything is owned by the nation as a whole, is full of ambiguities and difficulties having to do with the relation of ownership and meaning.<sup>30</sup> Some eunuchs of the Forbidden City are known to have made off with treasures entrusted to their care after the fall of the dynasty. Supposing that some of them stood their ground and guarded the imperial collections during the power vacuum of the first years of the Republic in the North, for what purpose could they conceivably have done so if not a future restoration of the dynasty? Not until 1925 was the status of the Forbidden City and its contents settled without ambiguity as national property destined for museum display.

Soon after the beheading of Louis XVI in 1793, the Convention ordered the destruction of all symbols of royalty and feudalism. Considering the number of coronets, fleurs-de-lis, and L’s worked into the fabric of public places, from gateways to picture frames to wallpaper, there was a lot of uprooting to do, and the National Library began to train a corps of specialists in the art of removing the hated symbols from books and prints without damaging their content.<sup>31</sup> The room of the library with the most powerful royal

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<sup>30</sup> See Dominique Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine, 1789-1815* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), on the emergence of the idea of national heritage during the decade of revolutionary iconoclasm. In describing the shift from royal to public institution via vandalism, Poulot cites Victor Turner’s account of rites of passage as incorporating “structure and anti-structure” (p. 16).

<sup>31</sup> Balayé, *La Bibliothèque nationale*, pp. 372-375, and see also the catalogue *1789, Le Patrimoine libéré: 200 trésors entrés à la Bibliothèque nationale de 1789 à 1799* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 1989).

associations was the Cabinet of Medals and Antiquities, formerly installed at Versailles and closely tied up, as we saw above, with the programs of royal self-promotion. For a time the Cabinet was in very real danger of being dissolved and its collections sold off. For once the process of removing symbols begins, nothing stops the category of offensive images from expanding indefinitely: how many objects in the France of 1793 were completely free of royal associations?

The effort to turn collections away from identification with their former owners came quickly, in a climate of emergency. Repeated decrees in 1792 and 1793 ordered the melting down of royal medals and the sale of the resulting quantities of gold, silver and bronze. The director of the Cabinet des Médailles, Barthélémy, secured an exception for works of art. Libraries were ordered to go through their collections and destroy books that glorified monarchy. A speech by the representative Marie-Joseph Chénier in 1793 argued against this intellectual cleansing and launched a new term: “Books are the very origin of the French Revolution.... So now we are to burn them? ... I see you are silent. Perhaps the Vandals or Visigoths would have the courage to speak up for you.”<sup>32</sup> The following year, the Abbé Grégoire submitted a report to the Convention, inventorying works of artistic, architectural or historical value that had been obliterated by this revolutionary “vandalism.” “I created the word,” he said, “in order to destroy the thing.”<sup>33</sup> The creation of the concept of vandalism, as an offense against the nation, history, or art, rather than against the individuals whose memory was to be effaced, marks a shift in the definition of cultural property. From now on, there is a category of

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<sup>32</sup> Cited, Balayé, *La Bibliothèque Nationale*, p. 372.

<sup>33</sup> Littré, *Dictionnaire*, s.v. *vandalisme*. Grégoire’s paper was entitled *Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le vandalisme*.

objects that deserve to be defended *despite* their meaning. The state takes on the role of trustee for future historians, art-lovers and schoolchildren.

Vandalism responds to a felt threat. To destroy the object is to claim a direct, urgent relation to it, such that “either it goes, or I do.” To preserve it not because of but despite its content says that my relation to the symbol is mediated by the nation and by history, which both consist of events that allow me to possess the symbol rather than being possessed by it. In the Louvre, where the concentration of beautiful, rare and costly objects, augmented by the booty of Napoleon’s European wars, and the emphasis on sensory appreciation allowed for a smooth transition to the status of national treasure-house, the process worked out somewhat differently than it did in the National Library, where the value of the object collections was indistinguishable from their history and deep royal associations, and at Versailles, which did not complete the transition to the status of museum until 1837. And when Versailles did become nationalized, the marks of effort and strain are plain to see: on the pediments of the courtyard, Louis-Philippe put the dedication “A toutes les gloires de la France” (To all the glories of France) and many of the rooms were dominated by huge, newly-commissioned paintings of great men and events from French history.<sup>34</sup> It is as if the shadow of identification with the Bourbons, inescapable in that place, had to be chased away with ostentatious displays of patriotism and the national history held to be the shared heritage of all Frenchmen.

And as Ernest Renan so memorably said, being a nation requires a selective memory. The subsequent history of Versailles as a museum is intertwined with the permissibility and implications of displaying the history of the last three monarchs to

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<sup>34</sup> Baridon, *Les jardins*, p. 295.

reign there. Choices in the restoration of the building and gardens shape the experience of visitors and the messages that are taken away. The decision, for example, to remove the incrustations of Louis XV and XVI and restore certain rooms to their condition under Louis XIV implies a prior determination of what matters, and of how French history is to be made visible. Whose utopia is this? Had the restorers chosen simply to maintain the condition of the place just before the Revolution, the plot and tone of the visitor's experience would have been quite different. The gardens, on the other hand, have remained a composite of their Louis XVI state and the inroads made by a not always cooperative nature, for reasons of taste and perhaps for reasons of cost too, since it is easier to maintain a half-wild garden than one that needs to be trimmed and realigned all the time.

A critique of the museum of the Forbidden City as it stood in the late 1990s points to the emphasis on spectacle, to the staging of a version of the common past without shame, pain or conflict, and to the loss of historical specificity. Tamara Hamlsh charges that “the complexity of Chinese history—the context within which these objects were both made and used—is collapsed into an ahistoric, generic past that is re-membered in the seemingly random collection of material objects displayed in these halls.”<sup>35</sup> Once again, whose wish does this arrangement satisfy, and what conditions surround it? Certainly the fact that most of the palace's treasures are in the parallel museum on Taiwan accounts for some of the forced choices, and one can imagine the emptiness of a Forbidden City that existed to commemorate a specifically Manchu China, or worse yet,

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<sup>35</sup> Tamara Hamlsh, “Global Culture, Modern Heritage: Re-Membering the Chinese Imperial Collections,” in *Museums and Memory*, ed. Susan A. Crane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 137-158, here p. 148.

the traces of the last child-emperor Pu Yi. Maybe a *vaguely national* treasure is the most useful impression to give, useful though not particularly truthful. Until a consensus is reached on the meaning of national history, which is hardly to be imagined, museums and gardens will always reflect strategic waffling: consider the recent emergence of the slave cabins of Monticello from the mists of time, and the historical recovery of individual slave gardeners who worked with Jefferson.

Few gardens are as plainly riveted to a strategic version of national memory as is the Yuanming yuan, ransacked and burned by French and English troops in 1860. Ruins of its Jesuit-baroque walls and foundations spread among several acres of trees and grass recall not so much the garden's past as the fact of its destruction, and a fifteen-minute video shown in an information booth revives the blame and calls on patriotic Chinese to remember the sack of the Summer Palace when dealing with outsiders. The conversion of the Summer Palace into symbol rules out an interpretation of the event that might define the sack as an insult to an incompetent Manchu administration that many Chinese in both 1860 and 1900 would no doubt have been happy to see end.<sup>36</sup> The Manchus become, retrospectively, "Chinese"; their loss becomes everyone's loss; a national treasure consisting mainly of an absence is created. But as every Chinese visitor to the Summer Palace *also* knows, the Manchu dynasty in its waning decades cared so much for the well-being of the nation that the navy's budget

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<sup>36</sup> Lord Elgin, the commander of the British forces in 1860, thought the sack and burning of the palace would serve as a memorable punishment to the emperor and his court for refusing to open diplomatic relations and allowing a group of foreign hostages to be killed. The least one can say is that the message intended was not the message received. See Young-tsu Wong, *A Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), pp. 143-149, and James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 43-48.

was drained to repair, not the fleet, but the New Summer Palace (Yihe yuan 頤和園), and with particularly dismal irony, to build a marble tea-house there in the shape of a paddle-wheeled boat.<sup>37</sup> A walk through the Summer Palaces accommodates both moments, celebration and critique, of the contradictory view on the gardens' former owners. Both identification and dispossession occur at different moments, for the edifying purpose of crafting a national narrative. A story univocal in its purport accommodates impressive contradictions in its detail, and all passes through the choices made in the preservation of the site. Whose utopia is this? Whose will it become, and how will it change, in fifty or a hundred years? The Yuanming yuan in its ruined state has become a political version of a lost paradise, a reevaluation made possible only on condition that one forget the site's imperial (not national) meanings. "We would be living in this garden if it were not for European imperialism," it seems to say. Like Adam's and Eve's paradise (or at least its name), this *paradeisos* stands on the footprint of a previous empire, the Manchu polity, that cannot be entirely expunged.

Museums and gardens are not merely specialized institutions. Their influence extends beyond their gates; they are models for dealing with the world. The perspectives—the implied points of view—built into collections and gardens are the primary fact about them, though often elusive when it comes to defining them. It appears that the more historical and specific the presentation of a garden or museum, the less it harmonizes with the consensus-driven wishes of its national owners. A challenge to both

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<sup>37</sup> See John King Fairbank and Kwang-ching Liu, eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 11: *Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 256.

the directors of such sites and to the public which experiences its history through them is to revive what in the past most vividly clashes with the present, to take on the many defunct identifications that annoy and embarrass, and through them to ally beauty with knowledge.