

Arcadia as utopia in contemporary landscape design: the work of Bernard Lassus

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the concept of the utopia from the point of view of garden design. It begins with an evocation of the 'Jardin de Julie', the literary garden described in Rousseau and acutely analysed by Louis Marin. It then passes to a series of actual gardens created by the French contemporary designer Bernard Lassus, in which the use of landscape effects is seen as achieving similar dislocations of space and incitements to the imagination.

Key words arcadia, history, landscape, perspective, vegetation

Arcadia, the mountainous area glimpsed on the other side of the Isthmus from the slopes of Parnassus, is also the mythic region celebrated in the pastoral poetry of the ancient world. It becomes, over centuries of reminiscence, the paradigm of the beautiful, untouched landscape, where shepherds and their consorts live a simple life without, however, being freed from the destiny that awaits them in the material world. Poussin's Arcadians, themselves at the beginning of the translation of the poetic into terms of visual landscape, are transfixed by the presence of death in their idyllic realm. To call a landscape Arcadian is inevitably to bear in mind this other dimension.

In starting, however remotely, from the model of an actual place, Arcadia would appear to represent a very different genealogy from that of utopia. Nor would its subterranean message of mortality seem to accord with the forward projections of an ideal society. Yet I shall be arguing that there is a dynamic internal to the development of landscape and garden design that genuinely combines both traditions. In doing so, I am particularly conscious of the fact that Louis Marin, in one of his last books, classed under the section heading of 'Utopiques' a brief but highly suggestive essay on Rousseau's 'Jardin de Julie', in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (Marin, 1992).¹ In this section of the book, the garden shares its place with the archipelago and the *Rue Traversière*, or 'road which runs across': in other words, with spatial configurations that elude normative expectations as far as function and direction are concerned. Yet my argument will implicitly suggest that the contemporary Arcadia is something more than just a disjointed space, freed from conventional and utilitarian constraints. It is, or can be, an integral part of the spatial and visual economy. So I would conclude from the designed landscapes, both realized and in project form, of the French *paysagiste*, Bernard Lassus, whose work will be the basis for my commentary.²

In fact, Marin himself fully recognizes this point. His argument is not only an exposition of the way in which the 'Jardin de Julie' implicitly follows, according to the interpretation of Wolmar, a logic contrary to the traditional values of the *jardin à la française*. It is also a call to action, addressed precisely to the practice of artists and designers such as Lassus himself.

Marin begins with evoking as a prototype for Julie's fictional garden the mythic prototype of the medieval *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden associated with the Virgin: both her private space and the emblem of her virginity (1992: 66). According to this parallel, the garden of Julie will celebrate 'the virginity of the orchard to the look, to the cyclopean, Medusa-like eye of perspective, justice and God' (ibid.: 67). In Marin's terms, 'Rousseau, through the voice of Wolmar, will conceptualise . . . this "negation" of perspective and its two poles of the eye and the look, viewpoint and vanishing point' (ibid.: 67). There is no need to underline here the basic point that Rousseau is indeed criticizing the formal articulation of the *jardin à la française*, with its extended views dominating the ordered spaces between the *château* and the far-away 'eye-catchers' that mark the extent of the parkland. In place of the spatial system that reproduces the regime of monocular perspective, there is the garden as a 'pure within-ness, away from any spectacular effect of distance, with no representation possible, becoming as a result a body/space, feeling and felt, not so much seen as touched, caressing and caressed, fold or recess of a possible world, as Merleau-Ponty used to say' (ibid.: 67–8). This is indeed a utopian possibility, but it has for its most concrete analogy a parallel from Rousseau's text that needs no philosophical elaboration. 'The direction will have a *je ne sais quoi* of vagueness like the comportment of an idle man who

strays in the process of walking. He will have no concern to penetrate further into the beautiful perspectives' (ibid.: 68).

As has been already stated, Marin himself makes the point that this should be a lesson – a utopian prospect – for the contemporary practitioner of landscape design. What we need, in relation to 'the theories and practices of contemporary urbanism, those involving "green spaces" and "natural" leisure resorts in the great post-industrial city' is, precisely, a 'traverse' – something that cuts across (1992: 64). He concludes with a 'parodic Envoi':

You who construct gardens, no longer make parks, or green spaces; make margins. Do not make leisure and game terrains; make places of *jouissance*, make closures which are openings; do not make imaginary objects, make fictions. Do not make representations, make emptiness, digression; make neutrality. (1992: 87)

It would be falling into the commonest pitfall of utopian thinking if I were to claim that Bernard Lassus, or indeed any present-day practitioner of landscape, precisely fitted the bill in respect of Marin's injunction. Like all successful utopian writings, Marin's text is, in the first place, self-conscious about its own discursive strategies. Marin lets us know that the original text was itself written in a garden in South California. He dates the successive sections between 17 and 24 June, allowing us to catch something of the summery atmosphere that sustained his labour of composition, in a not too demanding schedule. He also intimates that his text follows the trope of the garden as digression – as '*parcours narratif-descriptif hors du sujet*' (1992: 64). He visits and revisits Rousseau's garden text, narrating and describing its literary form while in the process of pursuing his own argument. In myself retracing and reformulating – in an English July – the lecture with slides that I first gave on a dark evening in February, I am all too conscious of the fact that I cannot interweave text and image in the same way. Not being able to animate the space of reading with colourful projections, I have to rely on a few diagrammatic images, or photographs whose re-creation of the shock of the real is diminished to a pallid allusion.³

Yet this change in strategy does not obviate the fact that Lassus's work can be shown, even with modest illustrative means, to respond to Marin's challenge. If Rousseau's 'Jardin de Julie' is, in his terms, the 'traverse' that cuts across 'the theories and practices of contemporary urbanism', it can also be affirmed that Lassus's actual practice takes the same track. This is not simply because it adopts, in various different ways, the 'English' strategy of 'concealing the perspective vanishing point through the curve given to the garden paths', which would have been well known to Rousseau (1992: 68). It is also because Lassus has responded to the specifically contemporary opportunity of placing his Arcadia 'crossways' to the linear dynamic of modern industrial and technological progress.

Doubtless the first sign of the emergence of this strategy in the context of a fully planned garden scheme is his design for 'the Garden of the Anterior', which won the competition for a park for the new town of L'Isle d'Abeau in 1975. Since the mid-1960s, Lassus had formulated his ideas about the planning of the environment in terms of distinctions such as that between the visual and the tactile: that is, 'the zone within which we require precise information about our environment – in order to park our car, negotiate a flight of steps, etc. – and the zone which is manifest to us only through vision and does not entail the risks of direct physical contact' (Lassus, 1999: 110). In the scheme for L'Isle d'Abeau, this distinction is, so to speak, the main structuring element in the articulation of the natural *vis-à-vis* the constructed zone. The town is provided with a boundary wall or rampart, from which the garden is visible, but cannot be accessed directly: the garden therefore becomes landscape. By contrast, the garden as it is experienced on the ground level is planned to be the exact antithesis of the domesticated and clipped vegetation appropriate to the town. To quote from Lassus's description:

Away from the foot of the ramparts, there stretches the garden of the anterior. Although there are no walks and pathways, you will discover – as the ground becomes more and more wild – occasional fields scattered with groups of trees, a few domestic animals, almost abandoned fields that retain parcels of earlier cultivation, fallow land, woods, bushes, thickets or briar surrounding practically inaccessible ponds, fringes of the forest where the dead branches are no longer gathered up. (1999: 114)

Here is Arcadia as the negation of the carefully tended *jardin à la française*, remarkably well attuned to Marin's call for a space of 'digressions' and 'margins'. When the 'micro-landscapes' finally make their appearance beyond this liminal terrain, they do so indeed under the sign of 'fiction', illustrating 'the legends and tales of the region'. A gigantic flying creature, seemingly out of a fairy story, will bestride a pond well stocked with reeds and water-lilies, while the nearby viewing column will offer the visitor a visual track suitable for proceeding to the next legendary feature.

It is crucial to realize that, in Lassus's environmental planning, the element of disjunction is a necessary component. The largely untended zone which is the 'Garden of the Anterior' makes sense only in its opposition to, and physical juxtaposition with, the new town entrusted to contemporary architects. That relationship can be seen as a critical, or ironic one; or indeed it can simply be represented as a utopian 'other side' of the disciplinary structures of modern urbanism.

It will come as no surprise that the design for the 'Garden of the Anterior', though it won the prize for the garden at L'Isle d'Abeau, was not in fact carried out. It remained a fiction of Arcadia on every level. But Lassus was

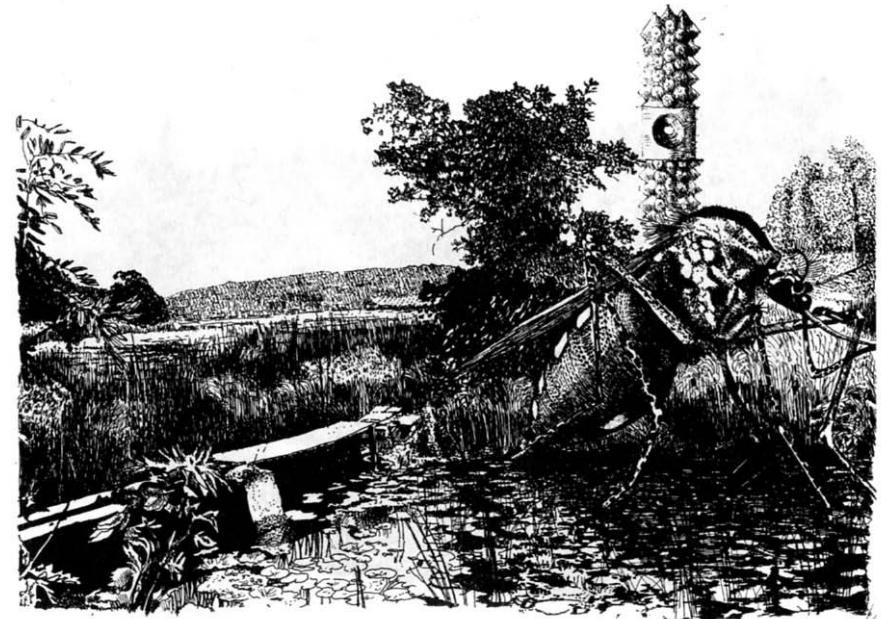


Plate 1 Bernard Lassus: 'Microlandscape' from *The Garden of the Anterior* (1975).



Plate 2 Bernard Lassus: 'Critical Landscape' at Uckange (1982).

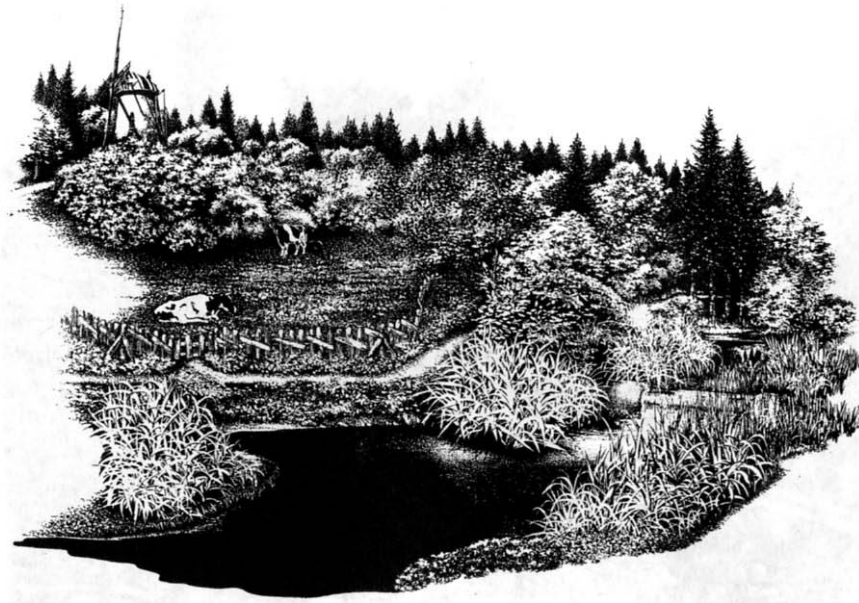


Plate 3 Bernard Lassus: 'The Day before Yesterday' from *The Park of Duisburg-Nord* (1991).

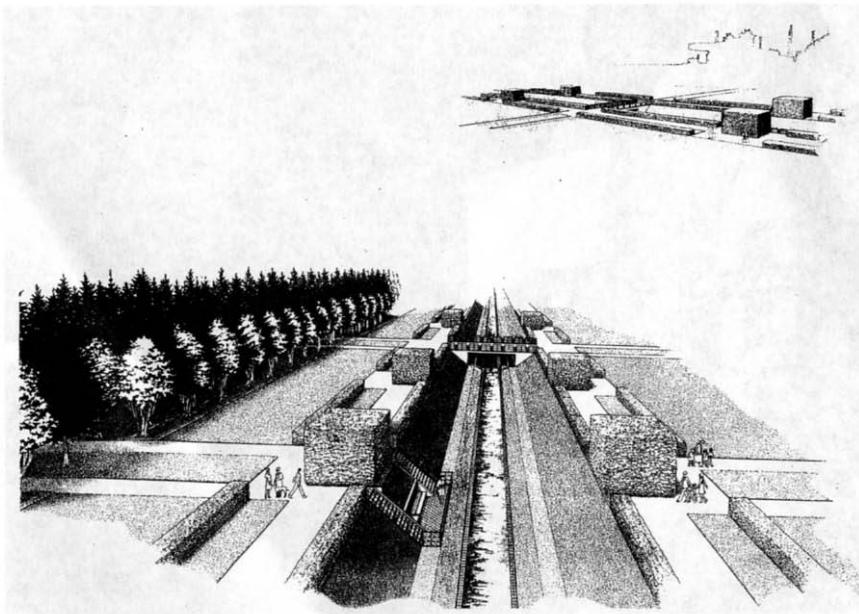


Plate 4 Bernard Lassus: 'Yesterday' from *The Park of Duisburg-Nord* (1991).

given the opportunity to test his concepts in a concrete way in the early 1980s, when he was commissioned to take part in a massive scheme of rehabilitating the apartment blocks in the decayed industrial region between Metz and Thionville in Lorraine. At Uckange, where his scheme was carried out in 1982, no less than 1,186 apartments were involved: 576 were demolished, and the remaining 610 improved in an ambience that had obviously benefited from the creation of extra space. In parallel with a programme of refitting the apartments internally, Lassus undertook the repainting of the concrete façades, which had previously been uniformly monochrome. His reinscription of local architectural motifs and garden features immediately transformed the environment, creating (in this case) a fiction of a visual complexity that exists over and beyond the functional space of the apartment blocks.⁴

Lassus refers to his work in the Lorraine coalfields as a '*paysage critique*'. Although it can be shown that the painting of the façades has, indeed, contributed to changing local attitudes to the built environment, the strategy has to be classed as being as much recuperative as creative. In a very much more ambitious scheme for the 'Park of Duisburg-Nord' in the Ruhr region of Germany, submitted in 1991, he showed himself anxious to vindicate the disjunctive strategy which he had used before, by creating sharp differences within the environment. These corresponded precisely to the various different visions of the past that could be reinvented to enrich the experience of the place. What, after all, could a landscape designer summon up in redesigning an area which had been rapidly industrialized, and then equally rapidly forced into deindustrialization? Should it be a matter of trying to revive a pre-lapsarian state of innocence, when the River Emscher was not a polluted channel but a rural brook? Should it be a matter of preserving and giving new value to the decayed industrial buildings? But, in that case, should they be presented as grandiose ruins, like the wrecked abbeys in the code of the 18th-century picturesque?

Lassus's response is that all the three times should be expressed in relation to each other: it is a question of 'Placing the Park's Yesterday Between Today and the Day Before Yesterday' (Lassus, 1999: 153). This means that a part of the river should indeed be restored to the condition of a rural idyll. But it also means that the great blast furnaces should be framed in their turn: 'The dignity of the spot – the mystery and sense of fear inspired by it – must be retained (in particular, through appropriate night-lighting)' (1999: 151–2). In order that the different prospects corresponding to the different historical stages should have their full effect, isolation of one from the other is necessary. Lassus thus sees the need to create 'temporal pens', which will discriminate between one historical site and another by means of appropriate foliage, in the same way as a pen on a canal effects a transition between different physical levels of water.



Plate 5 Bernard Lassus: a curving gravel path by the River Charente, *The Garden of Returns* (1982–87), Rochefort-sur-mer.



Plate 6 Bernard Lassus: tontines on the deck of the 'Rigging Area', *The Garden of Returns* (1982–7), Rochefort-sur-mer.

It seems to me beyond question that Lassus's highly inventive descriptions of garden projects function as utopian texts: Arcadia is conjured up, as it were, in the interstices of the design, and the charming line drawings that he provides are the exact graphic correlate to this state of potentiality. But it is particularly impressive to glimpse the emergence of these possibilities within the growth and development of an actual garden. The 'Jardin des Retours' at Rochefort-sur-mer, on the River Charente, is the most evolved example to date, having been begun in the mid-1980s, after Lassus had won an open competition to rehabilitate the neglected area around the 'Corderie royale' of the old port (see Lassus, 1999: 131–40 for the full project).

The site is, in effect, a marginal one. The access of the town to the river had been blocked on this side, and the long range of fine classical buildings used for the fabrication of cordage for the French fleet had been upstaged by a concrete blockhouse installed by the German troops in the Second World War. Lassus could have decided to treat the long façade of the Corderie as a kind of extended château, opening up the sight lines and creating axial walkways. In effect, he did exactly the opposite. A stone retaining-wall and ramp were created on the town side, achieving the same dissociation of visual and tactile scales that he had stipulated in the plan for the 'Garden of the Anterior'. Instead of opening up the prospect of the Corderie on the river side, he developed a scheme of two parallel pathways, one formally paved and rectilinear, the other (close to the river bank) curving and made of trodden gravel. From these paths, the façade was visible only intermittently, as if through 'rides' of foliage.

However, the most original feature of the 'Garden of returns' is its recourse to history, as a temporal dimension to be actualized in the present. At each end of the pathways, there is a garden feature that both creates a discontinuity of scale and evokes an aspect of the naval warfare and commerce of the past. To the west, a 'Labyrinth of Naval Battles' conceals within the heaving waves of its evergreen hedge a series of encounters recalling the naval engagements, mainly between the French and British fleets. To the east, the 'Rigging Area', constructed on the remains of the concrete blockhouse, sports the full rig of a sailing ship, with its deck accessible to the visitor. At one side of the deck are stocked modern replicas of the 'tontines', large baskets used to repatriate exotic plants from the tropics. Michel Bégon, intendant of the port of Rochefort, gave his name to the plant species known as the Begonia, while his grandson, the Admiral de la Galissonnière, returned to France from America in 1711 with the first seeds of the large-flowered magnolia, named *galissoniensis* in his honour.

Lassus's strategy in the 'Garden of returns' is thus entirely opposed to the conventional practices stigmatized in Marin's 'Envoi'. The empty rhetoric of 'green spaces' is here replaced by a subtle interweaving of diverse tracks, adjusted to the pace of the walker, and calibrated to comprise both the

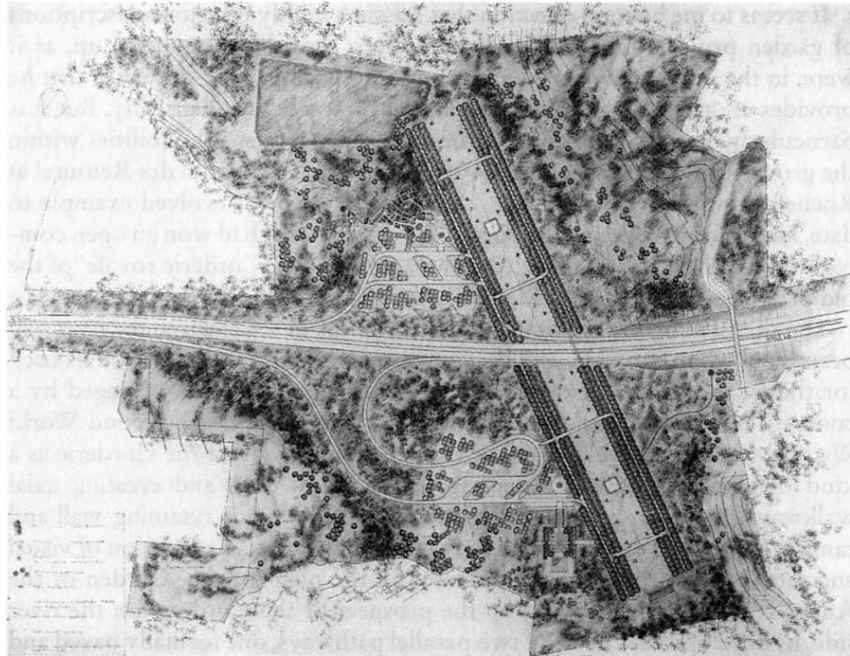


Plate 7 Bernard Lassus: plan of motorway rest area at Nîmes-Caissargues (1992).



Plate 8 Bernard Lassus: general view of the motorway rest area at Nîmes-Caissargues, with the transplanted theatre façade at the top right, and the alley of conifers cutting across the carriageway.

digressive and the comparatively direct. The 'game' areas are not just collections of swings and roundabouts, but zones constructed to evoke the past of the port of Rochefort. Marin once wrote, in a celebrated article, about 'Disneyland, a Degenerate Utopia' (Marin, 1976). But Lassus does not risk this type of condemnation, precisely because his overall concern is with the planning of a garden, and the features that it contains make their effect, poetic and historical though it may be, from within the matrix of a living zone of vegetation, responsive to the changes of the seasons. The idea of Arcadia precedes the many myths that it proves capable of supporting.

Yet perhaps the most striking examples of Lassus's ability to express the landscape as a utopian statement come from a type of practice that has emerged only recently, and remains for the present unique to France. The French system of entrusting the construction of new motorways to distinct, regional '*sociétés d'autoroutes*' has resulted in an ever-increasing prestige accruing to the rest areas, or '*aires d'autoroutes*', that allow a measure of interaction between the traveller and the locality. It has become customary to 'thematize' such areas, in a more or less elaborate way, and entrust the planning of individual sites to architects and landscape designers. To date, Lassus has completed two of these, at Nîmes-Caissargues (1992) and Crazannes in the Charente (1995). Each is remarkable, both in their utilization of the specific possibilities of the natural site and in their density of poetic and historical reference.

The distinctive feature of the motorway rest area is, of course, that it must form a counterpoint to the functional, dynamic and linear movement of the two carriageways. By definition, the motorway cuts across the static zone, which is usually a mere appendage, annexed to the speeding tracks. The creation of a garden, or a distinctive landscape, is a wager in which the stakes are very high in these conditions. Yet the challenge is one that is worth taking up. Even for purely touristic reasons, the creation of a sense of place that may tempt the traveller to digress into the nearby region is a worthwhile objective.

At Nîmes-Caissargues, the immediate impression created by the plan, as well as by the visual evidence of photographs of the site, is of a majestic alley crossing the motorway at an oblique angle, and thus reorientating the lines of sight to a new axis. At the bottom end of this alley, on the plan, the eye is captured by the monumental classical façade of the 19th-century theatre of Nîmes, removed to this new location after the erection of Norman Foster's 'Carré pour l'art' in the centre of the town. The speeding cars and trucks, clearly visible in the slightly recessed carriageways as they pass, are effectively counterbalanced by the monumental scale of the alley, with its formal ponds and rows of cypresses in the process of growing. In this case, Lassus indeed uses the 'Medusa-like eye of perspective', but he does so precisely to form a counter-attraction to the linearity of the motorway. From a specially

constructed Belvedere, at the opposite end of the alley to the classical columns, it is possible to look out over the city of Nîmes. The Belvedere itself brings the city into poetic propinquity, being constructed in the form of its most salient Roman monument, the Tour Magne.

If the rest area at Nîmes-Caissargues dislocates the linear axis in order to provide new (and more satisfying) prospects, its successor at Crazannes effects a different, even more radical dislocation. Here Lassus was to exploit the fact that the motorway took its course over a vast zone of former quarries, whose distinctive yellowish stone had served throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period to build cathedrals and palaces in France and other European countries. The site had become a deserted one, with a profusion of outcrops of rock, subterranean caves and winding paths in which rare varieties of fern had taken root and flourished. By contrast to Nîmes-Caissargues, this exotic rocky landscape was developed and extended along the axis of the motorway itself. The motorist thus enters a zone where, for several kilometres, the prospect is framed by a spectacular sequence of rock formations, many of them enhanced or indeed created by Lassus's ingenuity: this 'land art installation' (as he terms it) heralds the slip road to the rest area.

In the rest area itself, the main building is a small museum devoted to the history of the quarry workings, which offers glimpses on to the steep gullies and pathways, glowing in the shaded light filtered by the ferns. If the traveller wishes to experience an environment completely different from the speed-track of the motorway, it is possible to penetrate further into this labyrinth of secret paths, where the mystery of dark hollows and unknown depths supplants the dynamic linear motion just a few yards away. 'Annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade': Marvell's Arcadian evocation is not out of place here.

NOTES

- 1 See Marin (1992: 63–87). For my earlier article comparing the 'reserved spaces' of the shrine, the garden and the utopia, see Bann (1994). This was originally delivered at a conference commemorating the life and work of Louis Marin organized at Johns Hopkins University by Michael Fried in November 1993. I would like to mention here that this article is based on a talk delivered to one of the last of Irving Velody's seminars on utopias, in February 2000.
- 2 Bernard Lassus (b. 1926) is one of the foremost landscape garden designers in Europe at the present time. He has been professor of architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and La Villette, and completed numerous gardens and parks in France, including those mentioned here. A comprehensive illustrated edition of his writings, in an English translation, can be found in Lassus (1999). For a parallel argument bearing on a very different style of contemporary garden design, see my article on Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'Luton Arcadia', in Bann (1992).

- 3 For a more balanced version of Lassus's theory and practice, see the exhaustive collection of his texts and garden projects, copiously illustrated in colour and black and white, in Lassus (1999). This will be the main source for quotations throughout the remainder of the article.
- 4 See Lassus (1989: 131–99). It is important to note that Lassus had earlier carried out an extensive survey of what he termed *habitants-paysagistes* (literally 'dweller-landscapers') throughout France. He had documented innumerable examples of people who had transformed the literal, often modest, dimensions of their surrounding space through using both plastic and fictional devices. In the case of the inhabitants of apartment blocks, he had noted that many such dwellers sought to convert their small balconies and window-boxes in a style that the architects would have found quite unacceptable. See Lassus (1977: 16–17).

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