

Thalassophobia and Geolatry: Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and the Geography of Virtue

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Opinions are divided on the generic character of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*. From the author himself, who calls it a "pastorale" without explaining why and then compares it to Homeric epics, to Jean Fabre, who sees it as an approximation of pastoral, to Jean-Michel Racault, who finds its Utopian pretensions lacking, to Lieve Spaas, who sees in Bernardin's fictional Mauritius a paradise at odds with its native sexuality, critical views abound and readings multiply but provide very few definite answers.¹ What sort of pastoral is it, after all, where slaves are bought and sold and chaste heroines drown? For my purposes, I should like to draw on past interpretations to read Bernardin as a moralist and *Paul et Virginie* as an exemplary tale, offering a quasi-religious orientation and something like a moral prescription for a better world.² In doing so I am following the example of Malcolm Cook, who has made a persuasive case for a religious reading of *Paul et Virginie*, but here I would like to sug-

1 Jean Fabre, "Paul et Virginie, pastorale," *Lumières et romantisme. Énergie et nostalgie de Rousseau à Mickiewicz*, nouvelle éd. (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980), pp. 225–57; Jean-Michel Racault, "Paul et Virginie et l'utopie: de la 'petite société' au mythe collectif," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 242 (1986), 419–72; Lieve Spaas, "Paul et Virginie: The Shipwreck of an Idyll," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 13 (2001), 315–24.

2 On the many lessons contained in *Paul et Virginie*, see Bernard Bray, "Paul et Virginie, un texte variable à usages didactiques divers," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 89 (1989), 856–78.

gest that the religion in question is more pagan, almost pre-Socratic, than Christian, and idolizes the land rather than Christ.³

While not exactly a *roman à thèse*, *Paul et Virginie* nevertheless displays at least some of the salient features of exemplary narrative described by Susan Suleiman: the presence of a dualistic system of values, the (implied) presence of a rule of action addressed to the reader, and finally the support of a doctrinal intertext.⁴ In *Paul et Virginie*, the dualism is found in the Manichean opposition between land and sea at work in the novel: as I shall demonstrate, the land is good in Bernardin's system and the sea evil. The lesson addressed to the reader is one about the virtues of not leaving one's homeland. The third criterion listed by Suleiman is harder to discern in *Paul et Virginie*, since the doctrines at work in her study tend to be well-established ones such as Christianity, socialism, and capitalism. Nevertheless, the case can be made that *Paul et Virginie* is supported by—indeed illustrates—Bernardin's doctrine of the adoration of nature as laid out in the *Études de la nature*, of which *Paul et Virginie* was originally a part.

Thus, for Bernardin as for many others (especially Rousseau, his mentor), fiction provides a far more useful critical and didactic tool than an overt analysis of actual human society, especially in its corrupt late eighteenth-century French guise. Bernardin's many voyages and copious work suggest the possibility that he is driven by the search for a perfect society, or at least one better than France. Like the pastoral poets whom he frequently quotes, he is concerned with the place in the world of human beings, the possibility of their happiness, and the location of this happiness. In this essay, I examine the answers to these questions mainly through *Paul et Virginie*, the *Voyage à l'Île de France*, and *Études de la nature*, but Bernardin's concern with ideal locations may be found throughout his other writings, such as his description of Arcadia (in *L'Arcadie*) and even the brief *Voyage en Silésie*, where one of the characters reminds the others of the fact that the etymology of Silesia is linked to the Elysian Fields. In any case, a cursory glance at his works reveals Bernardin's taste for idyllic settings. On further inspection, what becomes clear is the diametric

3 Malcolm Cook, "Paul et Virginie. A roman poétique," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 24 (1987), 245–52.

4 Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (1983; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 56.

opposition between land and sea, between terrestrial and maritime geographies. This opposition relates to his search for a perfect location and corresponds to the moral dualism mentioned above. There is, in other words, a geography of good and evil in Bernardin's idiom. In both the *Voyage* and *Paul et Virginie*, the preoccupation with the island of Mauritius as a natural Utopia is counterbalanced by a very real anxiety about the watery element surrounding it and the influence of that element on the island's inhabitants. The sea marks the limits of Paul and Virginie's terrestrial paradise.⁵ It is my contention that virtue in *Paul et Virginie* consists of being rooted, both literally and figuratively: the virtue of the protagonists of Bernardin's pastoral derives from their status as creatures of the earth. The sea marks the end of virtue, and every moment of contact with the sea introduces ambiguity, doubt, and (in Virginie's case) death, where hitherto there had only been certainty and innocent pastoral bliss.⁶ It would seem, then, that Bernardin's ideal society must needs be far from the sea.

Bernardin's anti-maritime invective is worth quoting at length. As is well known, Bernardin had occasion to observe the association between maritime life and what he considers vicious behaviour at first hand during his trip to Mauritius. The letters from this voyage stress the association between the sea and cupidity, or more generally between maritime activity and capitalist exploitation, as opposed to agricultural self-sufficiency. Indeed, the mere sight of the sea depresses Bernardin; for him it is everywhere and nowhere: "Il n'y a guère de vue plus triste que celle de la pleine mer. On s'impatiente d'être toujours au centre d'un cercle dont on n'atteint jamais la cir-

5 See Malcolm Cook, "Harmony and Discord in *Paul et Virginie*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 3 (1991), 205–16.

6 There are other examples of such opposition in Bernardin's other works. Consider *Empsaël et Zoraïde*, a play intended as a vehicle for Bernardin's abolitionist views. The play opens with two European slaves, Januario, a Neapolitan horseman, and Williams, a Dutch pilot, arguing about who has suffered more. Inevitably, this suffering is associated less with their captivity than with their professions: Januario claims that "il n'y a point d'état plus malheureux que celui d'un écuyer dans l'esclavage"; and Williams retorts: "Le vôtre [état] est moins à plaindre que le mien. ... Il n'y rien de plus malheureux que le sort d'un pilote." *Empsaël et Zoraïde, ou, les blancs esclaves des noirs à Maroc*, ed. Roger Little (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), pp. 15–16. This comparison between the relative merits of horse training and seafaring is hardly what one would expect to be uppermost in the minds of recently enslaved men.

conférence.”⁷ The trouble with the sea is that, to borrow Gertrude Stein’s phrase, there is no there there, no intuitive point of reference that would allow the voyager to orient himself. Hence the inevitable sense of alienation on board: Bernardin feels like a stranger at sea; he is “un homme sur un élément étranger dont aucun des habitants n’a de relation avec lui” (*Voyage*, 31). The sea exercises a nefarious influence on those who are routinely exposed to it, namely sailors. Bernardin describes them as lazy, lying brutes with no respect for the law of any land. For him, they are basically savages, largely as a result of the social alienation and detachment from the land that the sea induces. Sailors are always out of place: “Un homme de mer se regarde comme un étranger à terre et surtout dans sa propre maison” (*Voyage*, 23). They are rude: “La promptitude qu’exige la manœuvre les rend grossiers dans leurs expressions. Comme ils vivent loin de la terre, ils se regardent comme indépendants: ils parlent des princes, des lois et de la religion, avec une liberté égale à leur ignorance” (*Voyage*, 22). They are unreliable and emotionally unstable: “L’habitude de faire sans cesse de nouvelles connaissances les rend inconstants dans leurs sociétés et dans leurs goûts: sur mer ils désirent la terre, à terre ils regrettent la mer. ... La mer aigrit naturellement l’humeur. La plus légère contestation y dégénère en querelle” (*Voyage*, 23). Bernardin concludes his diatribe with a curious comparison:

Vous conclurez de tout ceci qu’un vaisseau est un lieu de dissension; qu’un couvent et une île, qui sont des espèces de vaisseaux, doivent être remplis de discorde; et que l’intention de la nature, qui d’ailleurs s’explique si ouvertement, est que la terre soit peuplée de familles, et non de sociétés et de confréries. (*Voyage*, 23)

In other words, all that is social (familial) is natural and good, while all that is merely fraternal is not. The sort of social grouping that obtains on ships and islands—these vessels in the middle of the sea—is not natural, and much of this unnatural character has to do with the sea. The sea dissolves terrestrial attachments of the sort that makes Paul and Virginie so virtuous. When trouble comes to their terrestrial paradise, it comes from overseas.

Bernardin’s comparison between islands and ships is not uninteresting, for his description of the mores of the French colonists on

7 Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Voyage à l’Île de France*, in *Île de France: Voyage et controverses*, Collection Mater (La Pelouse, Trou d’Eau Douce, Mauritius: Alma, 1996), p. 26. References are to this edition.

Mauritius follows the same principles: these are the people that the sea brought to the island. Like the sailors, they are not especially virtuous: Mauritius is, for all intents and purposes, a trash heap of French society, held together by discord and hatred:

La discorde règne dans toutes les classes, et a banni de cette île l'amour de la société, qui semble devoir régner parmi des Français exilés au milieu des mers, aux extrémités du monde. Tous sont mécontents, tous voudraient faire fortune et s'en aller bien vite. À les entendre, chacun s'en va l'année prochaine. Il y en a qui depuis trente ans tiennent ce langage. (*Voyage*, 80)

Of all the people who come to the island, though, the sailors seem to be the most destructive, morally speaking:

Les marins sont fort considérés des habitants, parce qu'ils en ont besoin. Leurs murmures, leurs allées et venues perpétuelles, donnent à cette île quelque chose des mœurs d'une auberge.

De tant d'hommes de différents états résulte un peuple de différentes nations qui se haïssent très-cordialement. On n'y estime que la fausseté. (*Voyage*, 81)

Family life on the islands is morally loose. There are few marriages, largely owing to the widespread practices of concubinage and slave rape: "Il y a très peu de gens mariés à la ville. Ceux qui ne sont pas riches s'excusent sur la médiocrité de leur fortune: les autres veulent, disent-ils, s'établir en France; mais la facilité de trouver des concubines parmi les négresses en est la véritable raison" (*Voyage*, 82). Bernardin also applauds the virtues of the (white) women of Port-Louis who have to deal with an atmosphere hardly conducive to family life; they are "plus vertueuses que les hommes qui ne les négligent que trop souvent pour des esclaves noires. ... Elles ont à combattre la chaleur du climat, quelquefois l'indifférence de leurs maris et souvent l'ardeur et la prodigalité des jeunes marins" (*Voyage*, 82–83). Once again, these patterns are blamed on those who came to the island from the sea: "La faute en est à nous, qui avons porté des mœurs françaises sous le ciel de l'Afrique" (*Voyage*, 83).

The account of the mores of the colonists is followed by a description of the black population, and the utterly savage nature of the French colonists—sailors and non-sailors alike—is further elaborated. The mere act of detailing the horrors of slavery depresses Bernardin, who envies the ability of his (French) readers to seek solace in the countryside from the horrors of the city, while he is hemmed

in, trapped by the dismal expanse of the sea: “le bruit sourd des flots qui se brisent sur les récifs, cette vaste mer qui s’étend au loin vers des régions inconnues aux hommes, tout me jette dans la tristesse, et ne porte dans mon âme que des idées d’exil et d’abandon” (*Voyage*, 88). Once again, the land relieves what the sea cannot.

The stated aim of all this is to indict the slave trade, as well as the mad European drive to “faire fortune” on the islands. But the *Voyage* ends on a very domestic note. In his last letter, Bernardin says that his voyage has taught him that there is no place like home, the place where he is rooted:

Je préférerais, de toutes les campagnes, celle de mon pays; non pas parce qu’elle est belle, mais parce que j’y ai été élevé. Il est dans le lieu natal un attrait caché, je ne sais quoi d’attendrissant, qu’aucune fortune ne saurait donner et qu’aucun pays ne peut rendre. Où sont ces jeux du premier âge, ces jours si pleins, sans prévoyance et sans amertume? La prise d’un oiseau me comblait de joie. Que j’avais de plaisir à caresser une perdrix, à recevoir ses coups de bec, à sentir dans mes mains palpiter son cœur et frissonner ses plumes! Heureux qui revoit les lieux où tout fut aimé, où tout parut aimable, et la prairie où il courut, et le verger qu’il ravagea! Plus heureux qui ne vous a jamais quitté, toit paternel, asile saint!⁸

The patriotic tone also appears at the start of the *Voyage*, where Bernardin explains his aims as follows: “Je croirai avoir rendu service à ma patrie, si j’empêche un seul honnête homme d’en sortir, et si je peux le déterminer à y cultiver un arpent de plus dans quelque lande abandonnée” (*Voyage*, 12). In a moment reminiscent of *Candide* but in a far less cynical voice, the lesson of this peripatetic moralist is that people should stay put and cultivate the land around their home.

Since *Paul et Virginie* was originally appended to the *Études de la nature* and described as an application of the laws of nature as Bernardin saw them, it would perhaps be appropriate to gauge Bernardin’s view of the sea as presented in the *Études* before interpreting *Paul et Virginie*. Bernardin’s study of nature unfolds in the spaces between natural theology and natural history, biblical cosmogony and modern geology, enlightened reason and mystical reaction, scientific discourse and the vindication of divine Providence. His oceanography in particular seems to rely more on biblical

8 Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Cœuvres complètes*, ed. Louis Aimé Martin, 12 vols (Paris: Méquignon-Marvis, 1818), 2:102–3. References to this edition appear as *OC*. This citation is taken from the *Cœuvres complètes* rather than the 1996 edition of the *Voyage*, as the latter contains only the letters written on Mauritius (letters 1–18).

exegesis and a firm knowledge of the classics than on empirical research. The latter is present to a certain extent in his *Études de la nature*, but nearly every observation in that text is subordinated to and used to confirm some aspect of the Bible. In this respect, he resembles those early (pre-seventeenth-century) cosmogonists described by Roy Porter, whose weapons were

philological and exegetical depending on the canons of interpreting Biblical, Patristic and Classical texts. ... Problems and solutions sprang from scholarly inquiry into the written word rather than an examination of the Earth itself: "Mineralists look exactly into the twenty eighth of Job."⁹

Bernardin lives up to this stereotype by quoting at great length from the book of Job in his fourth *Étude*, where he describes the theory of maritime currents of which he was especially proud.¹⁰ Alain Corbin's seminal history of maritime exploration describes how, in this world view, the ocean is less a neutral physical phenomenon than a frightening creature with its own dangerous moods and habits, a constant reminder of humanity's fallen state and a chronic threat to society and civilization.¹¹

So it is with Bernardin, whose oceanography and fiction are both informed by this orientation. Several aspects of Bernardin's oceanography demand our attention. First, his vehemently anti-Newtonian bent, as evinced by his refusal to believe that any aspect of physical geography could possibly be the accidental result of attrition, erosion, or gravity. This is all the more curious as the *Études* were written during the age when Newtonian mechanics were systematically applied to problems of geodesy and celestial mechanics.¹² In

9 T. Browne, *Works*, ed. G. Keynes (London, 1928–31), 5:4. Quoted in Roy Porter, *The Making of Geology: Earth Science in Britain, 1660–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 11.

10 *OC*, 3:196–98. Bernardin recaps this theory, along with his other favourite, the theory of extraterrestrial life, in the preamble to the 1806 edition of *Paul et Virginie*. He informs us that his theories are especially popular in England: "Ma Théorie des mers y a un grand nombre de partisans" (pp. 68–71, 81–88, 32).

11 Alain Corbin, *Le Territoire du vide. L'occident et le désir du rivage (1750–1840)* (Paris: Aubier, 1988), pp. 11–140. This study is excellent, but it is difficult to agree with Corbin's assessment that Bernardin "a théorisé la supériorité de la plage sur la montagne" (p. 45).

12 The details of this routinization of Newtonian mechanics and the earliest systematic applications of the calculus to astronomy are beyond the scope of this essay. A thorough account is found in Charles Coulston Gillispie, Robert Fox, and Ivor Grattan-Guinness, *Pierre-Simon Laplace, 1749–1827: A Life in Exact Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

fact, his opposition to Newton is evident nearly everywhere *chez* Bernardin, who sees in classical mechanics a real moral threat to society, as he writes in the preamble to the 1806 edition of *Paul et Virginie*: “Je ne sais si l’attraction passera un jour sur la terre, comme dans les cieux, pour la loi unique qui en a formé tous les êtres. Mais que deviendront alors les lois morales qui doivent régir les hommes?”¹³ Bernardin’s theory describes how the melting of the polar ice cap forms the oceans, almost as if the sea were a vast, extended river arising from the snow melting on a mountain top. Mountains, in turn, become terrestrial breasts in Bernardin’s idiom:

Il y beaucoup de montagnes dont les sommets sont arrondis en forme de mamelles, et qui en portent les noms dans toutes les langues. Ce sont en effet de véritables mamelles; car ce sont d’elles que découlent beaucoup de rivières et de ruisseaux qui répandent l’abondance sur la terre. Elles sont les sources des principaux fleuves qui l’arrosent, et elles fournissent constamment à leurs eaux en attirant sans cesse les nuages autour du piton de rocher qui les surmonte à leur centre comme un mamelon. (*PV*, 106)

In other words, Bernardin’s oceanography treats the entire planet as part of a pastoral setting—a mountain in the background, say—and then proceeds to construct his theory within this terrestrial, land-bound paradigm. Once formed, the ocean constantly threatens to flood and becomes something from which the land must be protected at all costs, as the following description of coastal reefs and mountain ranges suggests: “C’est pour le maintien de ces convenances [bays, river deltas] que le nature a fortifié tous les rivages de longs bancs de sables, de rescifs, d’énormes rochers et d’îles, qui en sont placés à des distances convenables pour protéger contre les fureurs de l’Océan” (*OC*, 3:151). Indeed, Bernardin is immensely grateful to Providence for what he describes as an invisible screen between the land and the sea: “C’est principalement sur le rivage de l’Océan qu’est placée cette borne invisible que l’auteur de la nature a prescrite à ses flots” (*OC*, 3:154–55).

Similar barriers between the land and the sea are found in *Paul et Virginie*. Indeed, in this novel, the barriers seem to be both physical and metaphysical, all following a fairly straightforward division between a peaceful earth and a tumultuous ocean. In the *Préambule*,

13 Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, ed. Jean Delabroy (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1991), pp. 87–88. References to this edition appear as *PV*.

he describes an epic geological battle that the ocean seems destined to lose: “Chaque siècle diminue l’empire de l’Océan tempétueux, et accroît celui de la terre paisible” (*PV*, 70). So much so, in fact, that the English Channel will disappear one day: “Après de nombreuses tempêtes le détroit qui sépare l’Angleterre de la France se changera en guérets. Après d’interminables guerres, les Anglais et les Français verront leurs intérêts réunis comme leur territoire” (*PV*, 71). In this beatific vision we detect part of what Bernardin hates about the ocean, namely the fact that it separates people. Only that which brings people and populations together can be called good.¹⁴ Similarly, the description of Virginie’s death features an inversion of the binary opposition between maternal mountains and vicious seas: “une montagne d’eau d’une effroyable grandeur s’engouffra entre l’île d’Ambre et la côte, et s’avança en rugissant vers le vaisseau, qu’elle menaçait de ses flancs noirs et de ses sommets écumants” (*PV*, 182). The mountain of water becomes a monstrous living creature that mimics the “Trois-Mamelles” on the island, bringing death and destruction instead of nursing life like its terrestrial counterparts.

Consider the three mottoes that the old man inscribes near Paul and Virginie’s haunts, quoted here together with Bernardin’s somewhat inaccurate translations:

1. “Fratres Helenae, lucida sidera, / ventorumque regat pater, / obstrictis aliis praeter Iapyga;” [“Que les frères d’Hélène, astres charmants comme vous, et que le père des vents vous dirigent, et ne fassent souffler que le zéphyr.”]
2. “Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes [sic.];” [“Heureux, mon fils, de ne connaître que les divinités champêtres!”]
3. “At segura quies, et nescia fallere vita.” [“Ici est une bonne conscience, et une vie qui ne sait pas tromper.”] (*PV*, 115–16)

I would like to show that neither the choice nor the rendition of these selections is entirely accidental, and that the ensemble is intimately linked to Bernardin’s terrestrial ethics.

The second and third mottoes are taken from a lengthy section in Virgil’s *Georgics* that sings the praises of the farmer’s life.¹⁵ Bernardin’s translation of the last quotation comes closest to the original,

14 The *Préambule* bears this out by proceeding to describe all of humanity rallying around its mothers (*PV*, 73–76).

15 Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid 1–6*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough and G.P. Goold, revised edition, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 63 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2.458–542. References are to this edition. Abbreviations of classical sources are from the third

where Virgil argues that if farmers do not have conventional material treasures, they do at least enjoy sleep without anxiety and a life free of deceit, among other things (*G* 2.467). Still, Bernardin translates “at *secura quies*” as “*ici est une bonne conscience*,” rather than “but a quiet resting place.” The slippage from physical environment (“*secura quies*”) to metaphysical quality (“*une bonne conscience*”) implies that somehow the spirit of the place will inspire its inhabitants (in this case Mme de la Tour), inciting them to greater good. The identification of the good life with the earth returns in the second quotation (this verse comes after the third quotation in the *Georgics*): “*Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestis*” (*G* 2.493). The implication is that Paul’s intimate knowledge of these rural settings is what makes him happy and fortunate. It bears pointing out, however, that the verse says, “happy, too, is he who knows the gods of the field,” rather than, as Bernardin has it, happy is he who *only* knows the gods of the field (“*Heureux, mon fils, de ne connaître que les divinités champêtres*”). This variation, though minor, is especially significant in so far as it suggests another category of deities in opposition to the rural or terrestrial, namely, the aquatic or maritime.

Nevertheless, both verses—indeed, the last one hundred or so verses of the second *Georgic*—are intuitively obvious choices for the situation described in *Paul et Virginie*. In both cases, native piety, pastoral bliss, and agricultural self-sufficiency abound. The first motto, however, seems not to belong to this category. Taken from Horace’s send-off ode (*propempticon*) on the occasion of Virgil’s departure for Greece, the verses invoke the Dioscuri and the aerial gods to beg them for safe passage for the voyager.¹⁶ This is a rather odd choice for an inscription on Paul and Virginie’s tent mast, a choice made stranger still by the fact that it has nothing to do with farming or the pleasures of the terrestrial life. Horace’s poem does, however, have much to do with the sea, and proceeds after the invocation to dwell on the dangers of maritime travel. Horace describes the sea in terms that Bernardin would appreciate: he calls the sea fierce (“*trux*”), stormy (“*turbidum*”), full of swimming monsters (“*monstra natantia*”) and “separating” (“*dissociabilis*”). The last epithet

edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, and, unless otherwise noted, the translations are mine.

16 Horace, *The Odes and Epodes*, trans. C.E. Bennett, revised edition, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 181 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), *Carm.*, 1.3.2–4. References are to this edition.

underlines the utter incompatibility of marine life and human society (*Carm.*, 1.3.11, 19, 18, 22). Roads and lands bring people together, while oceans and seas keep them apart. For Horace, people were simply not meant to travel by sea; sailing was a violation of the laws of nature. These are all topoi associated with the *propempticon* genre.¹⁷ The last four strophes of the ode deal with the hubris of mankind, always rushing into forbidden endeavours, driven on by ambition and greed. Interestingly enough, these are the same passions that propel the seafarers in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's world, driven by their greed to travel in an insane medium, as may be seen in the scene where Virginie sings "le bonheur de la vie champêtre, et les malheurs des gens de mer que l'avarice pousse à naviguer sur un élément furieux, plutôt que de cultiver la terre, qui donne paisiblement tant de biens" (*PV*, 122). Together with the two extracts from Virgil, therefore, the quotation from Horace acts as a reminder of the natural superiority of the terrestrial over the maritime.¹⁸

Strangely enough, Bernardin does not explicitly mention the one locus that comes to mind as we read *Paul et Virginie*, all the more so since it comes from a source to which Virgil's *Georgics* are heavily indebted, and since it is a source to which Bernardin returns in the tenth *Étude de la nature*. The second book of *De rerum natura* opens with a scene that is actually staged in the novel: "Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis, / E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem." [It is sweet to calmly watch as someone else labours against a stormy sea].¹⁹ Lucretius explains that the pleasure procured by this troubling spectacle is due to its cathartic effect: like a tragedy, the view of a drowning man or woman leaves the spectator happy that he has not suffered such a dreadful fate. On a more figurative level, the tempest stands for the passions that trouble the individual. Lucre-

17 R.G.M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace, Odes Book I*, 1968 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 40–58.

18 There is also a certain irony associated with the fact that Virginie's death in the shipwreck represents the exact opposite of the wish expressed in Horace's *Ode*. Janine Baudry hints at this role of the inscriptions in "Un aspect mauricien de l'œuvre de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre: La flore locale," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 89 (1989), 782–90.

19 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse and Martin Ferguson Smith, revised edition, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 181 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2.1–2. References are to this edition.



François Aimé Louis Demoulin (1753–1836), *Collection de cent-cinquante gravures représentant et formant une suite non interrompue des "Voyages et aventures surprenantes de Robinson Crusoe"* (Vevey: Loertscher et fils [1818]), plate 15. Reproduced by permission of McMaster University Library.

tius thus teaches the lesson that a staid, calm existence is far better than an excited, passionate one.²⁰

Paul et Virginie offers the reader several *mises en scène* of Lucretius. We are told that Paul would sometimes sit under the tree that bore the old man's second inscription, "pour regarder au loin la mer agitée" (*PV*, 115). This scene is not innocent: not only does it illustrate the hopes expressed by the old man's inscription ("Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes"), but it also represents the oppositions of land and sea, calm and trouble, virtue and vice. As he watches the sea, Paul does more than enjoy his stoic tranquillity: he sees the character of the dangerous passions against which the old man warns him. The scene also prefigures the scene of Virginie's death at the end of the novel, where the agitated sea claims her life. Another allusion to Lucretius comes in the description of family picnics by the sea, which they undertake in order to feel good about their ethically superior (read: landbound, rooted) position and to pity those who are on (or in) the water. These are modelled on another passage in *De rerum natura* that follows shortly after the one quoted above, where Lucretius describes the highest pleasure as going for a picnic with good friends on the bank of the river (2.24–33). The tastes of Bernardin's characters are decidedly melodramatic: the old man says that "Les sites les plus terribles nous procuraient souvent les plaisirs les plus tranquilles" (*PV*, 122).²¹ All of this is prefigured by the following passage from the tenth *Étude de la nature*:

Lucrèce a eu raison de dire que notre plaisir et notre sécurité augmentent sur le rivage à la vue d'une tempête. Ainsi, un peintre qui voudrait renforcer dans

20 A good literary history of the shipwreck topos, as well as an explicit link between Lucretius and *Paul et Virginie*, is found in Michel Delon, "Naufrages vus de loin: les développements narratifs d'un thème lucrétien," *Rivista di Letterature moderne e comparate* 41 (1988), 91–120. It bears pointing out that the rest of *De rerum natura* is not without its relevance to *Paul et Virginie*. One might mention two passages where Lucretius expounds at great length the theory of the earth as the source of all life in the universe, from the first plants to his own day. Cf. 2.589–660 and, in much greater detail, 5.772–1457.

21 Michel Delon has analysed the melancholy character of these pleasures: "Le bonheur négatif selon Bernardin de Saint-Pierre," *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 89 (1989), 791–801. It should also be noted that the opening of the second book of *De rerum natura* exercised extensive influence on eighteenth-century aesthetics via the *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719) of Du Bos. See David Marshall's extensive analysis of this work: *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 9–44. It is not clear to what extent Bernardin was influenced by Du Bos's ideas, but the importance of the spectacle of suffering for the writers and painters of the eighteenth century suggests a possible affinity.

un tableau, l'agrément d'un paysage et le bonheur de ses habitants, n'aurait qu'à représenter au loin un vaisseau battu par les vents et par une mer irritée; le bonheur des bergers y doublerait par le malheur des matelots. (*OC* 4:210)

The protagonists of *Paul et Virginie* have a strong relationship to the land and to the fruits of the earth. These terrestrial attachments of the protagonists are inscribed onomastically, spatially, and thematically in the novel.²² Unlike the sea, which offers no points of reference, the island provides references both spatial and temporal, as Paul and Virginie find out when they get lost after returning the hapless runaway slave to her master. The local house of worship is the Church of the Grapefruit (Pamplemousses). Paul is named after St Paul the Hermit, who sought refuge in the desert from his persecutors. His name and character are thus emblematic of a place at the farthest and driest possible remove from the sea and its vicious horrors. When a site is chosen for the huts, Mme de la Tour instinctively seeks out a place in the mountains "pour s'y retirer comme dans un nid" (*PV*, 92)—so as to be better tucked away, as it were, not only from society, but from the coast of Mauritius, since that is where most of the inhabitants live. Indeed, the chosen site operates like an island within the island; the closest equivalent to Bernardin's rural escapes that Mauritius can offer. Paul's activities with Dominique are strictly agricultural, not marine in any way. Virginie measures her age—indeed, her life—and Paul's in terms of the trees that surround them: "les périodes de leurs vies se réglèrent sur celles de la nature" (*PV*, 127). In times of trouble, the solidarity of the protagonists sees them compared to "les plantes faibles qui s'entrelacent ensemble pour résister aux ouragans" (*PV*, 120).²³ When Virginie goes to Paris, she writes to Paul and recommends that he plant certain flowers that would, in effect, represent their relationship to one another. What makes Paul and Virginie what they are is their almost plant-like nature. They are utterly indifferent to anything that goes beyond their immediate surroundings. As the narrator points out, "ils croyaient que le monde finissait où finissait leur île" (*PV*, 99), and where the island ends, the sea begins.

22 On the spaces and toponymy of *Paul et Virginie*, see Jean-Michel Racault, "Système de la toponymie et organisation de l'espace romanesque dans *Paul et Virginie*," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 242 (1986), 377–418.

23 On the botanical symbolism in *Paul et Virginie*, see Baudry, 782–90.

Inevitably, the sea represents trouble, and lots of it. When Paul is offered the prospect of overseas trading out of Mauritius, he rejects the idea out of hand, in part because of his natural attachment to his home but also, we may assume, because of his discomfort with what the sea represents: contact with corrupt European society and the sort of commercial success that undermines people's virtue. When Virginie's wealthy aunt invites her to complete her education in France, Paul sees the voyage as something that will pervert Virginie beyond recognition. Her death in the shipwreck off the île d'Ambre is ascribed to the fact that she prefers drowning to the vicious prospect of taking her clothes off and swimming to safety with the sailor who offers to save her life. The sea is thus associated with those things that have no place on the earthly paradise of Mauritius: greed, corruption, and sexuality. The moral note sounded by Virginie's death should also be underlined here: whereas the sea is, in Bernardin's idiom, the monstrous entity that strove to strip Virginie of her clothing and modesty, her drowning constitutes a physical but not a metaphysical death. She yields her body to the undertow, but not her morals. Hers may be, as Thomas Carlyle derisively put it, a "death by etiquette," but it is not a death *of* etiquette.²⁴ Her death marks a tragic moment, but the way in which she dies preserves her exemplary character: she is so virtuous that, once she is sea borne, she *has* to die.

From this perspective, *Paul et Virginie* reads less like a hymn of praise to unspoiled exotic lands and more like a text written to communicate a didactic message about the virtues of staying put and not leaving one's native soil.²⁵ Although Bernardin cannot be called an unequivocal opponent of colonialism, the oppositions at work in *Paul et Virginie* between land and sea, agriculture and trade, staying put and going away, contain and inflect all the very real problems of eighteenth-century colonial expansion. The characters of Paul and Virginie systematically reverse the vices of colonial life that Bernardin details in the *Voyage: qua* creatures of the earth and autochthonous natives of the island, they are naturally virtuous (unlike the naturally vicious creatures of the sea, who inhabit the cities and

24 Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, ed. K.J. Fielding and David Sorensen, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1:63.

25 This message is not univocal, however; as it runs parallel to the critique of French social life implicit in *Paul et Virginie*. Cf. Malcolm Cook, *Fictional France: Social Reality in the French Novel, 1775–1800* (Providence, RI and Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 67–75.

coastal towns of Mauritius), and their biggest mistake seems to have been acquiescing to Virginie's departure across the water and over the sea. Moreover, the use of maritime imagery to connote material desire and the drive to "faire fortune" implies a very real critique of capitalist practice in its eighteenth-century avatar as an activity based on hypocrisy, pretence, and slave labour. It is perhaps no accident that this text that set in motion all of the rhetorical claims about attachment to the land of France proved so popular during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, events that depended on such emotional attachments for their success.

And so, to answer the moralist's questions about where people should live and where a perfect society is to be found, the answer, of course, is "nowhere" (U-topia), but this nowhere is to be constructed through a systematic negation and reversal of the attributes of a place that really exists, as Bernardin does with Mauritius. Moreover, such a place should be on land, on the earth, and not on or near the sea. Indeed, the best of all possible worlds would seem to be one where the troubles of dealing with the ocean are inconceivable because it is a landlocked world, a world full of virtue, a world without (salt) water.

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INTERNAL COLONIALISM

