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An Ecocritical Re-reading of Rousseau's
Julie or the New Heloise

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Abstract

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie or the New Heloise* extends far beyond picturesque scenery. It anticipates central questions of contemporary ecocriticism. Through a close reading of gardens, mountain landscapes, and lake shores, this study shows that Rousseau treats nature as an active agent that shapes human identity and moral development. The novel's first half features scenes of intimate reverie that demonstrate what Zev Trachtenberg calls the "environmentalism of the man," as nature elicits affect, stimulates self-understanding, and contributes to lovers' psychological development through influence. The second half, focusing on the Clarens estate and the Elysium Garden, illustrates the "environmentalism of the citizen" (Trachtenberg "Rousseau and Environmentalism"). Rousseau presents an ecological micro-republic where sustainable agriculture, closed-loop exchanges, vegetarian consumption, and cooperative labor cultivate civic virtue and social justice. Rousseau dramatizes a reciprocally beneficial human-nature relationship that echoes debates about environmental justice in the Anthropocene. By situating *Julie* in early modern ecological thought, the study positions Rousseau as a pioneering voice in the environmental humanities and a precursor to ecocriticism's emphasis on non-human agency.

Keywords: Rousseau; *Julie or the New Heloise*; ecocriticism; Rousseau's environmentalism; Anthropocene; environmental humanities; *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*

Introduction

Few writers of the eighteenth century have shown the same affinity for nature as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In all of Rousseau's works, especially in his novel *Julie or the New Heloise*, the relationship between man and nature has many complex dimensions beyond a romantic vision. The relationship deepens into an active two-way relationship in which nature, like man, assumes an agency. Using ecocriticism, we argue Rousseau was a pioneering thinker in environmental ethics and justice by emphasizing this active relationship. Through presenting a progressive model for living in harmony with nature, Rousseau speaks to environmental justice, showing how natural resources can be used responsibly.

Zev Trachtenberg divides Rousseau's environmental thought into two strands: "environmentalism of the man" and "environmentalism of the citizen" (Trachtenberg "Rousseau and Environmentalism" 485-87, 489-93). Building on this framework, I argue that the first part of *Julie, or the New Heloise* exemplifies the former, treating nature as an agent, a view central to ecocritical efforts to redefine the human-nature relationship. The second part of the study examines nature from the perspective of "environmentalism of the citizen," a concept that considers nature as the engine of economic systems that affect society's culture, ethics, and politics.

Nature as a Subject?

Nouchine Behbahani argues that the interaction between humans and nature, as depicted in *Julie*, is critical to helping human personalities and understanding of the environment (Behbahani 145-53). Several scholars have examined the relationship between

man and nature as a source of inspiration and believe this experience facilitates deep thought and intuition and leads to unity with nature in Rousseau's thought (Lane Jr. and Clark 74). William T. Hendel describes the Alpine landscape as a natural theater stage that attracts Saint-Preux's attention in *Julie*, making him forget himself and experience a "new world" (Hendel 49). Gilbert F. LaFreniere considers Saint-Preux and nature in the Alps through a new aesthetic understanding of wild landscapes and their impact on psychological balance and the transcendence of human inner experiences (LaFreniere 55-57).

The current article confirms the findings of these studies. However, it takes an ecocritical lens by approaching Rousseau's narrative in *Julie or the New Heloise* to redefine the relationship between humans and the environment. Ecocriticism is a branch of literature that bridges literature and environmental studies. Literary scholars' narrative explorations of how writers depict nature lead to environmental insights, politics, and activism (Tajane et al. 2164). Ecocriticism challenges the traditional human/nonhuman dichotomy through close readings of literary texts and shows that it is fundamentally invalid. From an ecocritical perspective, literary works portray nature not as an inanimate backdrop but as an active agent with a dynamic existence. New materialism and material ecocriticism hold that nonhumans possess agency and that anthropomorphizing them can allow humans to empathize with them (Kautz 173). The task of ecocriticism is to highlight the agency of nonhuman beings in the natural system, validate the interconnection between all living beings in the system of existence, and encourage humans to reconsider their relationship with nature.

Trachtenberg's "environmentalism of the man" is based on three principles: respect for nature, non-instrumental perspective, and unity with the environment. This study takes a step further and examines the first three books of *Julie or the New Heloise*, emphasizing the role of nature as a subject. We argue that nature is not an inanimate background for description in the novel's first part. Instead, it is an active subject that transforms characters. Rousseau's narrative is full of markers that suggest that not only is nature the

scene of characters' reflections but it also influences and transforms them. The human-nature relationship transcends admiration or a non-instrumental gaze; it acts, provokes deep reactions, and helps better know the world. As a result of such a reading, we are able to redefine the relationship between the solitary walker and the passive environment. This study aims to demonstrate that this connection is a two-way dialogue in which nature influences man as a subject while also being experienced, shaped, and made meaningful by human consciousness. In the story, nature's non-anthropocentric agency plays a significant role in characterization and plot.

Nature, a Source of Human Pleasure and Energy

In the novel's first part, nature provides a safe place for beautiful moments of love between Julie and Saint-Preux. Nature not only houses them but also is a source of energy and pleasure. Nature's beauty increases the passion of the two lovers and multiplies the pleasure of their love moments. Conversely, these two lovers are also a gift to nature, and they choose the heart of nature to celebrate their most beautiful moments. The two main characters' love and presence symbolically reward nature. The reward for nature is respect. Man and nature thus have a mutual relationship and can influence each other:

Je choisissais les lieux que nous devions parcourir ensemble; j'y marquais des asiles dignes de nous retenir; nos cœurs s'épanchaient d'avance dans ces retraites délicieuses; elles ajoutaient au plaisir que nous goûtions d'être ensemble; elles recevaient à leur tour un nouveau prix du séjour de deux vrais amants, et je m'étonnais de n'y avoir point remarqué seule les beautés que j'y trouvais avec toi (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre XIII de Julie* 36). [I picked out the spots where we should wander about together; I noted the sanctuaries worthy of a pause; our hearts overflowed in advance in those delightful retreats, they added to the pleasure we

tasted in being together, they in turn received a new value as the haven of two true lovers, and I marveled that I had not discovered alone the beauties that I found there with you (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 50)]

In this passage, nature has the power to influence characters. It provides a safe space for their romantic solitude, arouses their pleasure and energy, and surprises them. Nature also acquires heightened beauty in these love moments. The landscape is not a passive backdrop; in Alissa Kautz's sense of *projection*, Julie projects human meaning onto it, and those projections shape her feelings and the quality of her romantic experience (Kautz 180). The active involvement of nature in their romantic experience and the intensification of their feelings demonstrate nature's agency. Besides reflecting human feelings, nature can also change the quality of human experience as an agent.

In another example, Saint-Preux acknowledges that he has a sensitive soul that changes with the most minor variations in the weather or nature, becoming happy or sad. Here, nature symbolizes inconstancy and instability, reflecting Saint-Preux's sensitive and unstable soul:

O Julie! que c'est un fatal présent du ciel qu'une âme sensible! Celui qui l'a reçu doit s'attendre à n'avoir que peine et douleur sur la terre. Vil jouet de l'air et des saisons, le soleil ou les brouillards, l'air couvert ou serein, régleront sa destinée, et il sera content ou triste au gré des vents (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre XXVI à Julie* 53). [O Julie, what a fatal present from heaven is a sensible soul! He who has received it must expect to know nothing but pain and suffering in this world. Lowly plaything of the air and seasons, his destiny will be regulated by sun or fog, fair or overcast weather, and he will be satisfied or sad at the whim of the winds. (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 73)].

In this passage, Saint-Preux *projects* human roles onto the weather: the sun, fog, and winds are said to regulate his fate. In Kautz's terms, this is *projection*: human meanings are ascribed to nonhuman elements while those elements remain narratively passive. Even so, the environment still affects human: Saint-Preux becomes content or sad at the whim of the winds. Under projection, the nonhuman thus exerts agency by shaping feelings and attention. Nature functions as an agent here, but its agency is *influence-based* rather than intentional (Kautz 183-85). Since nature is inanimate, it does not exhibit a clear and conscious act. However, we understand that it has affected the human psyche according to its effect on Saint-Preux. In Kautz's account, agency takes two forms: intentionality-based and influence-based. Based on the framework of the universal agency of matter, "all matter has the ability to influence other matter" (Kautz 183). On this basis, nonhuman entities can count as agents without attributing intention or consciousness. Thus, nature can influence the world, creating an influence-based agency (183). Therefore, nature in *Julie* is not a neutral and passive background for human actions. As an agent, it affects characters' feelings, actions, and even their identity. In the book's first part, Rousseau's ecocritical approach is based on this view, in which nature and man interact reciprocally. Nature is present, influencing the characters' feelings and identities. It is a partner of man in his lived experiences.

Nature, a Stimulus for Remembering

The novel shows many different functions related to nature's agency. Saint-Preux describes moments wandering in the cold of winter in the Alps in the 26th letter. Nature reflects his inner feelings in this letter. First, he calls nature dead and the rocks sad and horrible. This is not the frozen nature that is sad and horrible, but rather his mind's attribution of human characteristics to it at that moment. In a distraught state, he wanders among the frozen rocks until he sees Julie's residence from afar. Suddenly, all his feelings

change. Sad and horrible nature becomes the source of life and hope for him:

Le premier jour je fis mille efforts pour y discerner votre demeure; mais l'extrême éloignement les rendit vains, et je m'aperçus que mon imagination donnait le change à mes yeux fatigués. Je cours chez le curé emprunter un télescope, avec lequel je vis ou crus voir votre maison; et depuis ce temps je passe les jours entiers dans cet asile à contempler ces murs fortunés qui renferment la source de ma vie (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre XXVI à Julie* 54). [The first day, I tried a thousand times to make out your residence; but the extreme distance made my efforts futile, and I realized that my imagination was deluding my weary eyes. I ran to the parish Priest to borrow a telescope with which I saw or thought I saw your house, and since that time I have spent whole days in that asylum watching the lucky walls that enclose the source of my life (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 74)].

Through its visual characteristics, nature gives him a new possibility of sight (the view overlooking Julie's house). That point evokes his romantic memories with Julie. These memories transform Saint-Preux's state of mind and affect his psyche. Julie's house transforms nature from a sad and terrible environment into a setting that establishes a deep emotional bond with love memories and the feelings arising from them. In ecocritical terms, the geographical location of that place, due to its view of the beloved's house, completely alters its human experience, so nature can be considered an agent. By being present in this new location in nature, the human psyche interferes with human experience by creating new meanings and emotions.

When Saint-Preux returns to the same place with Julie in the fourth part of the novel, there is no snow, cold, or frozen rocks. Instead, everything is lush and green. As Saint-Preux sees the same boulder where he watched Julie's house in the previous part,

memories come alive. Saint-Preux claims that the presence of signs can re-evaluate memories emotionally:

En les revoyant moi-même après si longtemps, j'éprouvai combien la présence des objets peut ranimer puissamment les sentiments violents dont on fut agité près d'eux (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 4, Lettre XVII à milord Edouard* 19). [Seeing them again myself after such a long time, I experienced how powerfully the presence of objects can revive the violent sentiments with which one was formerly seized in their presence (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 425)].

The rocks serve as memory cues; the same objects and vantage point evoke the encoding context of Saint-Preux's earlier experience (the view toward Julie's house) in his mind. Because those environmental features were encoded alongside the intense feelings of that moment, encountering them now reactivates the scene and its affective charge. The landscape thus shows influence-based agency; its presence shapes Saint-Preux's current emotional state by triggering the old memory network.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the environment as a non-human subject that affects the human subject in a narrative, but this should not lead to the denial of this role. The difficulty with imagining the environment as an agent is that there is no obvious and conscious act of it in the narrative. Our perceptions are the result of changes made by the non-human agent to the psychological experience of the human agent. Hence, we only see the effects of agency on the characters' mental states. Therefore, although it is implicit and unconscious, nature is active in narrating the story. It was demonstrated in the first part of this research that nature in *Julie* not only transcends the principles upon which "environmentalism of the man" is based but also becomes an active and agentic subject capable of transforming humans. While "environmentalism of the man" focuses more on a one-sided

relationship with nature and the expression of human feelings in nature as a background, our approach in this study emphasizes the way the environment affects humans and its active role in the narrative. In *Julie*, bringing attention to nature's agency elevates the "environmentalism of the man" to a new level of interaction and a two-way dynamics between humans and non-humans. This new perspective on the environment challenges our traditional view and improves our understanding.

Nature in Economy and Politics

The second part of this study examines Trachtenberg's concept of "environmentalism of the citizen" in *Julie or the New Heloise*. Rousseau depicts man's relation to nature in society through the fourth, fifth, and sixth books of *Julie*. He defines the environment within the political and economic system, and, by shaping individual characters, he establishes a republican culture. Our hypothesis in this section is that in the second part of *Julie*, through the narrative of Clarens house and the Elysium Garden, Rousseau introduces a small model of an ecological society in sustainable coexistence with nature, which employs the principle of justice in the distribution of resources, self-sufficiency, sustainable agriculture, etc., to establish a balanced moral-economic-political system. This study explores Trachtenberg's "environmentalism of the citizen" by illustrating Rousseau's vision of a moral society based on a small agricultural economy, which reinforces republican values and cultivates citizenship in the republican system.

Axel Goodbody examines garden literature's contribution to reimagining human-nature relations in the Anthropocene. By analyzing Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise*, and Michael Pollan's *Second Nature*, the author shows gardening as an ethical and imaginative practice that models sustainable and cooperative interaction with the natural world (Goodbody 16-23). In a conference paper, Mark Cladis argues that Clarens House and the Elysium Garden propose nature as an ethical guide for rethinking the human-nature relationship in the face of environmental crisis

(Cladis 5-12). Jérôme Brillaud points out that Elysium is a pedagogical and philosophical space where concealment of labor and modest cultivation develop moral virtue and reflect an ecological way of thinking (Brillaud 4-6). Colas Duflo explores *Julie, or the New Heloise*, as a utopia where private virtue supports public order, rethinking how emotion, morality, and politics interact in the Age of the Enlightenment (Duflo 9-11).

Taking Rousseau's perspective, Trachtenberg defines "environmentalism of the citizen" as a relationship between man, morality, economics, and politics. In contrast to "environmentalism of the man," he views humans as active inhabitants who transform their environment for a better life. Based on this concept, he considers man a social being, a member of society interacting with his environment. The environment cultivates the citizens' characters through culture and economy, which provides the basis for a republican government. As members of a political community, virtuous citizens put the public good above their own interests. As a result of these civic virtues becoming the norm in a society, the citizens will behave according to the requirements of republican governments (Trachtenberg "Rousseau and Environmentalism" 490). Therefore, human interaction with nature relies not on exploitation but communal living, sustainable farming, and cultivating moral virtue. The society Rousseau depicts in *Clarens* in the second part of the book is an example of this "environmentalism of the citizen," in which agriculture manages the economy by organizing production and consumption, structuring local resource circulation, shaping labor and productivity structures, and anchoring moral norms and civic values in a rural and sustainable production system. Moreover, agriculture strengthens the republican social order by shaping norms and educating citizens. *Clarens* outlines a practical moral economy model rooted in agriculture and natural product production.

In letter X of the fourth book, Rousseau describes Julie's house as located in nature, where its inhabitants' peaceful order and selflessness exemplify his belief that living in harmony with nature can nurture moral character. Rousseau discusses *Clarens*'s

“domestic economy” as an example of the intersection of ethics, economics, and the environment. This letter is also significant in this study as it reveals all the ideas that Trachtenberg identifies in Rousseau's works as “environmentalism of the citizen.”

The first principle of life in Clarens, perfectly harmonious with nature, is that utility has replaced appearances and luxuries. Its simple countryside look reflects its agricultural and rural lifestyle and creates a pastoral atmosphere that supports its economy. In *Emile* and *The Second Discourse*, Rousseau discusses how living in direct contact with nature cultivates virtues like coexistence, pity, and impartiality. Clarens house, located in a landscape of flowering hills, water plains, and wild mountains, is Rousseau's ideal habitat for man.

The letter also notes that Julie and Wolmar farm their land rather than renting it out. Creating a mutually beneficial relationship between man and nature through self-employment and land ownership prevents environmental destruction and transforms a pristine environment into a social environment. This farming culture organizes their social life, work roles, economic relationships, and moral values. Furthermore, the community sustains the cycle of nature by allowing a sustainable demand for land to provide for inhabitants' needs and not harm the environment.

Additionally, Rousseau argues that crop selection based on the region's conditions, such as soil type, strengthens household economies and improves harvest quality. The core principle of sustainable agriculture is to match crops to local natural conditions, so the land becomes an ecological and enduring contributor to the Clarens economy. The expression “economic reason” refers not merely to financial savings, but to a more thoughtful economy of natural resources, highlighting how avoiding overreliance on a single crop can support land sustainability in the long-term:

La baronnie d'Étange n'a que des prés, des champs, et du bois; mais le produit de Clarens est en vignes, qui font un objet considérable; et comme la différence de la culture y produit un effet plus sensible que dans les blés, c'est encore une raison

d'économie pour avoir préféré ce dernier séjour (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre X à milord Edouard* 274). [The Étange Barony has only meadows, fields, and woods; but the production of Clarens is in vineyards, which are extensive, and as the difference of cultivation here has a more considerable effect than is the case with wheat, this constitutes yet another economic reason for having preferred to reside here (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 364)].

This excerpt reflects the “natural economy” that Rousseau sets in contrast to an economy driven by limitless desire and consumption.

Besides the moral aspects of land ownership, Rousseau's narrative shows an ecological rationality based on the synergetic interaction between humans, beasts, and soil. Using human and animal power to cultivate land is one of the best ways to improve land productivity and preserve soil ecological capacity:

M. de Wolmar prétend que la terre produit à proportion du nombre des bras qui la cultivent: mieux cultivée, elle rend davantage; cette surabondance de production donne de quoi la cultiver mieux encore; plus on y met d'hommes et de bétail, plus elle fournit d'excédent à leur entretien (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre X à milord Edouard* 274). [Monsieur de Wolmar contends that land produces in proportion to the number of hands that till it; better tilled it yields more; this excess production furnishes the means of tilling it better still; the more men and beasts you put on it, the more surplus it supplies over and above their subsistence (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 364)].

According to Wolmar, the more labor and care are invested in the land, the more thoroughly it is plowed and the greater is its yield. In other words, as livestock and people work the land, it

becomes more productive, and the soil fertility cycle improves. Moreover, they preserve other animals' ecosystems since they will not need to convert more pastures and forests into farms. In a study, Milheiras et al. examine the impact of agroecological practices on food security, farmer resilience, and soil health in Sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that human labor, livestock, and natural soil cycles can complement traditional practices like synthetic inputs and sustainable, ecologically friendly techniques (Milheiras, et al. 55). This logic, described by Mr. Wolmar, where land productivity increases through greater involvement of human labor and livestock, closely mirrors what is known today as “manuring” and “Integrated Crop-Livestock Systems.” Besides labor or production, animals contribute to soil fertility and ecological balance in these systems. “Manuring” is ecologically sustainable and enhances productivity through natural nutrient cycles. As outlined in recent agroecological research, “manuring” is considered a key strategy within agroecological intensification (Milheiras, et al. 56; Wezel, et al. 8). In Rousseau's integrated farming model, livestock increase enriches the soil by returning natural animal manure to it and enhances its ecological capacity to produce surplus yields. This closed-loop system (land → human labor + livestock → living soil) reflects contemporary agroecological principles. According to Rousseau, humans, animals, and nature must actively cooperate to ensure the integrity of the ecosystem and maintain food security. In their absence, a vital link is removed in the chain, and the balance of the system is affected.

Rousseau stresses the importance of choosing a diet that aligns with the natural cycles of available food resources. The ease of access to natural abundance justifies dietary choices (Assouly 354). Rousseau criticizes meat consumption and suggests a simple plant-based diet based on accessible, natural foods. Julie follows a predominantly plant-based diet. She consumes only locally grown foods with a short, sustainable production cycle. The following example shows Rousseau's emphasis on vegetables, fresh fruits, and dairy products:

Julie . . . n'aime ni la viande, ni les ragoûts, ni le sel, et n'a jamais goûté de vin pur: d'excellents légumes, les œufs, la crème, les fruits, voilà sa nourriture ordinaire; et, sans le poisson qu'elle aime aussi beaucoup, elle serait une véritable pythagoricienne (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre X à milord Edouard* 281). [Julie . . . likes neither meat, nor stews, nor salt, and has never tasted wine straight. Excellent vegetables, eggs, cream, fruit; those are her daily fare, and were it not for fish of which she also is very fond, she would be a true Pythagorean (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 373)].

In eighteenth-century terms, Julie is a “Pythagorean,” refraining from eating animal flesh. However, she consumes fish and eggs. This dietary choice is grounded in two principles. First, fruits, vegetables, eggs, and dairy products can be produced at a small-scale, local economy without converting ecosystems to large-scale industrial agriculture. This diet minimizes human intervention in local ecosystem life cycles. Ecocritically, we can see it as a responsible consumption model supporting nature's regeneration. Avoiding industrial meat consumption also conserves water and land resources and reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Second, as Rousseau explains in the *Second Discourse*, people are inspired to be compassionate by pity, a natural repugnance at witnessing another being's suffering. By refusing to contribute to animal suffering, vegetarianism reflects a moral stance: respect and empathy for nonhuman life.

Human-nature relation takes on a new dimension in the letters Wolmar and Milord Edouard exchange. It begins when the harvest from cultivated land enters the consumption cycle. Nature is positioned within an economic and political framework that serves human needs and maintains equality and unity in the community. “. . . for Rousseau, agrarianism does not involve simply an agricultural relationship between people and the land they occupy, i.e., their natural environment. At the same time, it

involves a relationship people have *with each other*, constituting their social (and political) environment” (Trachtenberg “Rousseau and Environmentalism” 492). A low surplus in the fields hints that Julie and Wolmar intend to avoid producing excess goods for economic gain. Surpluses should be exchanged directly within the local community using real, non-monetary exchange mechanisms rather than cash transactions. Additionally, people circulate land income locally, reinforcing a closed ecosystem where profits and surpluses remain within it. Because the community keeps its resources and profits circulating locally, nothing leaks away to outside interests. Everyone shares what they have and helps one another, so people’s needs are met close to home. The result is a fairer society where significant gaps between rich and poor shrink and where people stick to their principles. With less reason for envy or one-upmanship, social tensions fade.

Wolmar explains that a small amount of cash inevitably circulates. However, it is spent solely on essential household needs rather than luxury items. Wolmar and Julie deposit surplus wine and wheat income into an emergency fund for necessary expenses. Nevertheless, Julie keeps this fund modest. Donating any excess keeps a balance between financial prudence and her moral virtue. Alternatively, the household's financial balance never turns negative because production and consumption occur within a closed, self-sustaining, stable economy. There is no surplus to waste, no shortage to create dependence on external sources, and no excess to destroy the environment. Therefore, collective participation preserves social justice and equality and strengthens the community's political structure.

Rousseau unequivocally opposes the rental of agricultural land. The most complete reason is that tenants have a short-term perspective. Their goal is to maximize profit at the lowest cost. That means they will deplete soil, water resources, etc., without restoring. Pursuing quick profit leads to ecological degradation and harms future generations in the long term. Wolmar represents a contradictory approach. He invests in additional labor and intensive cultivation to rejuvenate soil quality and productivity. He achieves

two goals simultaneously: retaining environmental value for future generations and securing the financial benefits sought by the tenants. This collective impact will provide a long-term value for frugal and food sufficiency. The more people are employed, the more people are fed. As the system returns benefits to its members, they will be more aware of their actions. External market dependence is also reduced, allowing individuals to experience greater political freedom and communal cohesion. “Triangulating the relationship between polity, morality, and environment, Rousseau’s thought provides an integrative logic through which to imbue the environment with both moral and political salience” (Ploof 307).

Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* reveals a deeply integrated model that connects nature, morality, economy, and politics through everyday ethical practices. In the Clarens community, domestic routines, agricultural self-sufficiency, responsible consumption, and social cooperation exemplify Trachtenberg's concept of “environmentalism of the citizen.” Nature shapes virtuous citizens whose moral behavior is aligned with economic justice and political stability. Ecological republicanism arises from cultivating land and human characters where sustainable agriculture meets non-exploitative economics and communal ethics. Rousseau's account envisions a political ecology in which citizenship is characterized not only by legal or civic rights but also by an ethical relationship with the land and its residents.

Nature as a Moral and Cultural Force

After outlining Clarens's moral-economic order, Rousseau introduces another significant spatial figure: the Elysium Garden. Rather than being a mere ornamental landscape, Julie's favorite retreat is a place where nature is alive as a moral and cultural force. An enclosed, secluded garden shaped by natural spontaneity and human direction brings together ethical life, emotional restraint, and ecological awareness. Unlike the wild state of nature or the

corrupted luxury of urban gardens, Julie's Elysium represents a third path, shaped by care, moderation, and cohabitation with nature. It symbolizes Julie and Saint-Preux's love, intertwined with a return to nature. "Virtuous love . . . finds its symbol in the Elysium, where utmost closeness and friendship are given high expression. It evokes a warm and lasting embrace rather than a fleeting moment's pleasure, friendship rather than love" (O'Neal 63).

The garden's isolation by nature and its protection seem to evoke for Julie the *state of nature*, that original state of harmony between the primitive human and nature, untouched by *amour propre*, free from social corruption. Nozomi Orikata reads the garden's seclusion as a moral sanctuary. It shelters Clarens's former tutor and mistress from the corruption, insulating them from the illicit passions that such decay provokes (Orikata 4).

Rousseau evokes Saint-Preux's imaginative senses when describing the Elysium Garden. The combination of his sight, hearing, and atmosphere convinces Saint-Preux that he is the first human to enter this natural space. The illusion quickly collapses to reveal that Elysium's nature is imaginary based on subjective perception. Eventually, he realizes that the garden is an artificial creation, carefully crafted by Julie to simulate untouched nature. Rousseau clarifies that living with nature is not a unilateral and passive engagement but an active, mutually influencing relationship in which human intent and artifice shape its habitability and beauty. As Trachtenberg observes in his article, "Rousseau's account, therefore, makes salient not only that, for humans, habitat is constructed, but further that its physical and social features are inextricably bound, as mutually influencing aspects of a single system" (Trachtenberg "Rousseau on Hazard and Habitability. The Beginnings of a Social Interpretation of 'Natural' Disasters" 9-10). This study argues that Rousseau outlines a social interpretation of environmental vulnerability by showing that environments are shaped not only by natural forces but also by social, economic, and political relations. The Elysium Garden illustrates Rousseau's view that livable nature results from both natural force and human

intention, showing how society and the environment are dynamically related.

In Letter XI in Book IV, Julie acknowledges her intervention in nature, offering a before-and-after comparison of the garden. Her skillful direction of the environment creates an illusion of untouched nature. *Julie* and *Emile* both exhibit guided natural development. Rousseau consistently defends the return to nature and the cultivation of human virtue near nature while maintaining that it is impossible to return to the original *state of nature*. Instead, he envisions a “second nature,” a consciously structured environment that allows humanity's innate moral potential to flourish. In the Elysium Garden, Clarens, and *Emile*, Rousseau trusts a virtuous and competent figure who assumes a mentoring and guiding role. In the first two instances, Julie creates a naturalistic environment that supports organic growth while subtly directing it. This guided nature retains a degree of autonomy. However, it flourishes only within the mentor's framework, demonstrating Rousseau's vision of a harmonized system in which natural freedom and structured cultivation can coexist.

There is a tension between Rousseau's advocacy of primitive and unspoiled nature in *The Discourse on Inequality* and his artifice in Julie's Garden and Clarens Estate, where nature is carefully curated and managed aesthetically. This contradicts Rousseau's concept of “return to nature.” An ecocritical lens can help interpret and resolve it. Several key questions must be addressed to examine this issue: What conception of nature does the text privilege: wild, domesticated, or restored? What role does the guide figure (Julie) play regarding nature?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to situate Julie's Garden within Rousseau's broader intellectual framework. As we noted previously, Rousseau argues that modern humans cannot return to the *state of nature*. At the same time, he rejects a society corrupted by *amour-propre*, both morally and civically. As Saint-Preux compares the Elysium to artificial Chinese luxury gardens and Julie emphasizes the importance of preserving plant and animal ecosystems, it becomes clear that the Elysium is shaped by respect

for nature instead of luxury or dominance. Elysium (and the Clarens estate more broadly) functions as the intermediary space between the loss of the *state of nature* and morally corrupted urban modernity. The *state of nature* represents a wild, disordered, and free state that humanity has irrevocably transcended through socialization, reason cultivation, and *amour-propre*. Conversely, rationality, technology, language, social division of labor, and private ownership have alienated humans from their original moral sensibility and entangled them in vanity and competitive pride. Rousseau's idealized space emerges in Julie's Garden, a mediated environment that bridges unspoiled nature and corrupted modernity, offering moral regeneration through guided engagement with nature.

As a mediating space and ecological work, Julie's Garden reimagines the human-nature relationship in the Anthropocene. Hence, the Garden transcends its function as a private retreat to become an ecologically and ethically significant space. Goodbody presents Julie's gardening method as a model for a new relationship with nature based on attentiveness, cooperation, and care rather than control. "Gardening, or rather, a particular kind of gardening characterised by attentiveness to nature, willingness to adapt to it and care for it, conducted in a spirit of co-production rather than imposition of human will, has become a model for the relationship with global nature which we should work toward if humanity is to survive in the Anthropocene" (Goodbody 10). In Elysium, nature has been shaped for domestication and harmonious coexistence instead of dominance and exploitation. Its design deliberately retains organic disorder and asymmetry in the arrangement of plants to evoke a sense of naturalness. The space is designed to let vegetation grow freely and blend seamlessly into the surrounding landscape without displaying any signs of artificiality. Julie and Wolmar maintain native flora in alignment with the local ecosystem and plant grass even on uneven, excavated ground. No traces of human intervention are visible, and Saint-Preux initially rejects the idea that such a landscape could be designed.

Birdsong resonates around the small lake, where birds gather for food and water, undisturbed by predators. To create a

welcoming habitat, Julie has sown a random mixture of grass, straw, and plants in two garden sections. Disruptive animals are intentionally excluded to ensure birds feel secure to nest regularly. Julie regards these creatures as the true master of the garden, while regarding herself as a guest:

. . . je vois que vous voulez des hôtes et non pas des prisonniers. — Qu'appellez-vous des hôtes? répondit Julie: c'est nous qui sommes les leurs; ils sont ici les maîtres, et nous leur payons tribut pour en être soufferts quelquefois (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre XI à milord Edouard* 295). [. . . I see that you want guests and not prisoners. Who are you calling guests? answered Julie. It is we who are theirs. They are the masters here, and we pay them tribute so they will put up with us occasionally (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 391)].

Humans are not positioned as superiors in this garden but as equals to other living creatures. Restoring a small birdbath evokes peace and happiness in Julie and her family, reinforced by the repeated word “refreshment” throughout the letter. She calls the garden a piece of paradise, imbuing it with spiritual significance. Elysium also replaces the grove near there, where Julie held romantic encounters with Saint-Preux in her youth. However, it becomes a place of spiritual solace and of maintaining her virtue after her marriage to Wolmar and the loss of her mother. “Julie practices gardening as a form of therapy: her garden becomes a place of moral improvement, where illicit passion is replaced by virtue” (Goodbody 17).

Moreover, this birdbath marks the destination of the winding water path, symbolizing paying tribute to the birds that inhabited and nested there. Seed scattering, the limitation of overbearing human presence to make birds feel safe, and the provision of straw, wool, and moss for nesting are all concrete expressions of human desire to cultivate a mutualistic relationship

with wildlife in which both humans and non-humans participate actively. Humans fulfill their role by attending to birds' and plants' needs and respecting their peace and security. Birds and plants also contribute actively to ecological synergy and cooperation by selecting this site for habitat and reproduction.

In her letter to Saint-Preux, Julie acknowledges the active agency of plants, stating that she was only involved in initial planting and care; beyond that, the plants themselves, driven by their intrinsic vitality, participated in cohabitation:

Tout ce que vous voyez sont des plantes sauvages ou robustes qu'il suffit de mettre en terre, et qui viennent ensuite d'elles-mêmes. D'ailleurs, la nature semble vouloir dérober aux yeux des hommes ses vrais attrait, auxquels ils sont trop peu sensibles. . . . Ceux qui l'aiment et ne peuvent l'aller chercher si loin sont réduits à lui faire violence, à la forcer en quelque sorte à venir habiter avec eux; et tout cela ne peut se faire sans un peu d'illusion (Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes de J.-J. Rousseau, réimprimées d'après les meilleurs textes, sous la direction de Louis Barré, Vol. 3, Lettre XI à milord Edouard* 297). [Everything you see is wild and robust plants; it's enough to put in the ground, and they grow on their own. Moreover, nature seems to want to veil from men's eyes her true attractions, to which they are too insensible. . . . Those who love her and cannot go so far to find her are reduced to doing her violence, forcing her in a way to come and live with them, and all this cannot be done without a modicum of illusion (Rousseau, *Julie, or, The New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps* 394)].

According to Julie, humans must limit their interference with nature to truly enjoy its manifestations. In *Julie*, Rousseau criticizes excessive human intervention in nature, arguing that coexistence depends on respecting nature's spontaneity. However, she simultaneously refers to intervening in nature, such as transplanting flora into the garden to construct a quasi-natural ecosystem, as *violence*. Using the verb *forcer* ("to force"), she describes such actions as expressions of human dominance. She

claims that humans manipulate and disrupt the ecological order and perpetrate soft *violence* by displacing plants from their original ecosystems. Thus, the measures implemented to support the flourishing of local plants and animals in the garden are an attempt to mask and atone for *violence*. Selecting resilient native species, paying “rent” to birds, and channeling water via winding paths, all recognize nature's conscious but “responsible” dominance. This approach aligns with Daniel A. Farber's *ecopragmatism*, which encourages modern humans to make thoughtful and ethical decisions rooted in a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the environment (Farber 9-14).

Hence, nature is not denigrated in this garden but somewhat domesticated or cultivated to enable modern humans to rediscover their natural selves. Mutual benefit and respect for non-human species precede unilateral dominance in this ecosystem. Humans enhance the ecosystem by utilizing means that align with the natural capacity of living organisms to flourish. This conscientious process of aligning horticulture with natural processes creates space for organic growth.

The release of fish in the pond and Julie's efforts to dissuade Saint-Preux from hunting birds for pleasure demonstrate Rousseau's ecological awareness and commitment to life preservation. Julie's recognition of the fish's suffering indicates nonhuman agency. Julie acknowledges fish as sentient, suffering subjects. The fact that Julie enjoys watching fish go back into the water and listening to birds shows that she empathizes with the environment and experiences pleasure based on *pity*. This version of pleasure orients toward ethical coexistence with the ecosystem. Instead of dominance, it aims to liberate and to help all living beings to flourish. Since Rousseau believes humans are not superior to other creatures, his philosophy is compatible with ecocritical ethics. Through Julie's moral attitude toward nonhumans, Rousseau reconceptualizes pleasure in the context of ecological ethics. Rousseau regarded such morally grounded enjoyment, based on active coexistence with nature, as a foundation for *bonheur*, or true happiness.

Conclusion

In light of the discussion in the first section, it can be argued that nature's agency shapes the characters' inner states in *Julie's* first three books. This agency is influence-based; while nature is not a subject in the conventional sense, it exerts a powerful formative influence on human mental development. Through sensory and psychological experiences, it shapes Saint-Preux's and Julie's moral identities. According to Trachtenberg's concept of "environmentalism of the man," humans seek passive enjoyment in nature, developing a deep affective connection. Although this reading examines Rousseau's interpretation of the human-nature relationship, human agency remains dominant. However, our literary analysis of *Julie* implies a dynamic relationship. Nature provides agency to characters by activating their memories, feelings, and intuition. Memory stimulation changes the characters' lived experiences by calling upon their emotional archives. Thus, *Julie or the New Heloise* elevates the human-nature relationship from passive contemplation to reciprocal dialogue. Nature educates the characters' emotional, cognitive, and moral faculties by awakening their senses and memory. A sustained interaction with nature is necessary to cultivate the virtues of the "environmentalism of the citizen" implemented in Clarens and the Elysium Garden in the novel's second half.

Clarens house and Elysium Garden represent the "environmentalism of the citizen," an ecologically based moral, economic, and political system. At Clarens, small-scale and self-sufficient agriculture provides a moral pedagogy for cultivating republican virtues and an economic model. By linking effort and income, the culture of collective labor on the land encourages respect for nature. Citizens understand their relationship with the land as reciprocal. Their subsistence depends on the land, and they must contribute to its ecological health. Mutual care transforms human relationships from competition to collaboration. As a result, civic virtue and cooperative politics fall into the collective *we*.

In Clarens, a closed economy facilitates local exchange between community members. In this socio-ecological cycle, wealth circulates locally and reduces social inequality and envy. In addition, economic independence promotes political freedom by allowing citizens to make collective decisions unaffected by the market. Avoiding luxury and consumerism strengthens *amour de soi* and accustoms citizens to self-sufficiency and moderation. This moral education gradually develops compassion and respect for others. It reduces class divisions, discourages excessive wealth displays, and prevents corruption. The citizens remain focused on addressing collective problems for the common good.

In this view, the environment becomes a place to cultivate political virtue. The citizens who acknowledge the totality of their production and consumption cycle are responsible for the natural world. Furthermore, they understand their freedom as rooted in a local agrarian economy. In a socio-natural sense (Trachtenberg, "Rousseau and Environmentalism" 492-93), such a network is resilient to external tyranny and internal corruption. The citizens become resilient when they recognize, through interactions with nature, that individual well-being depends on collective well-being.

Elysium represents the cultural dimension of this socio-natural system. Julie harmonizes nature and art in this semi-wild, well-guided space. Nature occupies the role of host in this garden, with humans becoming guests among birds and plants. The stream that feeds the birds' trough, the plants allowed to grow freely, and the prohibition of recreational hunting, all symbolize a new contract between humanity and nature based on mutual benefit in exchange for care. A living laboratory, the Elysium cultivates moral virtues through reciprocal respect between human and non-human life. Clarens and Elysium constitute complementary facets of an "ecological republic." The virtuous citizens have been educated by nature to build an economic and political structure based on self-reliance and social justice.

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