

The Sublime and Picturesque Aesthetics in John Richardson's *Wacousta*

Recognized by many as the first Canadian novel, John Richardson's *Wacousta or, The Prophecy; A Tale of the Canadas* (1832) has become an "important national symbol," and its place in the Canadian literary canon has been established in the last twenty years (Cronk xvii). Set in 1763 after the Seven Years' War when most French colonial territories in North America were being ceded to the British, *Wacousta* narrates Richardson's historical reimagining of the siege of Fort Detroit during Pontiac's uprising against British rule. Richardson therefore sets his novel in a period marked by the "uncertainties" of the colonial situation in Canada (Duffy 23). Such spatial uncertainties, coupled with the settlers' anxieties of "cultural assimilation" (Edwards 18) engendered by inhabiting the frontier, manifest themselves in the novel as a climate of "terror" (Currie 148). This paper sets out to demonstrate that *Wacousta* oscillates between the sublime and the picturesque, aesthetic practices that were prominent in what D. M. R. Bentley calls the "mental outfit" of the British settlers in Canada (126). I will argue that the picturesque, as a mode of vision, responds to the sublime landscape by attempting to frame and contain the New World in measurable terms, rendering the passionate and obscure as stable and comprehensible through aesthetic control. Richardson thus employs the picturesque mode to restructure the New World so that it affirms the ascendancy of the rational over the passionate. Accordingly, this aesthetic tension extends to a conflict between (and consequently the supremacy of) a communal social vision, associated with the picturesque mode's all-inclusive vision, and the solitary, associated with individuals' passionate and imaginative reactions to objects

and events in accordance with the sublime. In this way, while scholars have often read *Wacousta* through a postcolonially historicized lens, I will situate the novel within eighteenth-century Eurocentric formal aesthetics. I will argue that, contrary to the critical emphasis in recent scholarship, the novel's central conflict is not one of cross-cultural negotiations among the British, the French, and Indigenous peoples, but rather a clash internal to British prospects for establishing colonial settlements in the New World that can itself be resolved into an integrated aesthetic framework. This paper also differentiates itself from popular studies of social visions articulated in early Canadian writing.¹ Although the ways in which the impulses of community and individuality are reflected in *Wacousta*'s aesthetic practice have much in common with Northrop Frye's famous concept of the "garrison mentality" (228), my reading ultimately distinguishes Richardson's vision from Frye's by demonstrating that progression towards social community does not necessarily lead to a breakdown of conventional forms and a breakthrough of "greater freedom," but rather promotes a social (and aesthetic) model that seeks organization (232). Therefore, by reading the novel through the old-fashioned Eurocentric conventions of the sublime and the picturesque against a contemporary preference for more open models of interpretation, this paper will illustrate that *Wacousta*, whose form has been critically underestimated, does not necessitate a resolution of the various incongruous elements, but rather formal aesthetic closure.

Eric G. Walker notes that "the principal domain of the picturesque was landscape art" (8) and so I will begin by establishing *Wacousta*'s landscape as an object of aesthetic contemplation before turning to aesthetic theory (8). In the opening passage of the novel, the narrator asserts the pre-eminence of setting when he states that it is "necessary" for the reader to "understan[d] the localities," the distinct features of the particular place that is Canada, in order to "enter with deeper interest into the incidents of the tale" (Richardson 3). As a result, the narrator claims that he will "sketch a few of the most prominent scenes" (12), a series of compositions to be visually observed, and "impress [the] readers with a panoramic picture of the country," a continuous and comprehensive view of the landscape, in which the "action is more immediately laid" (4). The narrator thereby introduces the narrative in pictorial terms. Richardson further stresses the novel's emphasis on visuality by granting the narrator an awareness of aesthetic practice. At points the narrator claims that "the small plain . . . [was] somewhat elevated, so as to present the appearance of a mound, constructed on the first principles of art" (243),

that of the artistic rule of the “prospect” which “commands” a view (295). Therefore, through the narrator’s emphasis on the visual and his knowledge of aesthetic theory, the picturesque and the sublime modes become appropriate frames of reference by which to approach the novel.

According to Edmund Burke, “passion[s]” (72), notably those of “Terror” (80), “Obscurity” (82), and “the Infinite (109),” are products of the sublime aesthetic perception. The sublime, as an overwhelming state, fills the individual’s mind so that it can “entertain no other” object (79). This state of feeling can be understood as moving beyond the limits of reason by slipping into what Philip Shaw calls “the absolute unknowable void” (2). Sublimity then refers to “the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know and to express a thought or sensation is defeated,” and thus, one experiences that which is “excessive, unmanageable, [and] even terrifying” (3). We encounter all of these effects of the sublime mode in Richardson’s novel, where it is used repeatedly to dramatize the fear of the unknown in the overwhelming space of the New World during a “period,” according to the narrator, that “was so fearful and pregnant with events of danger” (Richardson 16). The narrator further describes the atmosphere in the novel as one marked by “the dark shadow of the broad belt” (29) of “the semicircular sweep of wild forest” (24) that threw “all that part of the waste which came within its immediate range” into “an abyss, the depth of which was lost in the profound obscurity” (239). This pervading mood is characterized by an impervious and impenetrable darkness that obscures one’s vision beyond the fort, as all elements in “immediate range” become imperceptible to the eye, an experience which Madeline, the Colonel’s niece, describes as “leaving nothing but a formless and confused picture of the whole” when she attempts to recollect the events “associated with her flight” from the fort (364). While the narrator depicts the setting in terms of a visual representation, that of a “picture,” he describes its content as vague and indefinite, and consequently without visual order, which produces a boundless and unintelligible whole that resists the process of being framed.

Richardson’s “confused picture” is in accordance with Burke’s sublime aesthetic of “the Infinite,” which has the tendency to stimulate and “fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror,” the most “genuine and truest affect of the sublime” (Burke 109). Burke notes that the infinite can be induced by two artificial forms of infinity: “Succession and Uniformity” (111). While succession renders the infinite by impressing the imagination with the idea of “progress beyond actual limits” (111), uniformity produces “rotund” (112)

forms that yield no “check” to the eye (111). In the above description of *Wacousta*’s setting, the forest is described as an immeasurable “abyss” (239), thus partaking in the principle of succession, while its “semicircular” shape adheres to the aesthetic value of uniformity by providing a continuous and indefinite line of vision with no angles on which the eye can rest (24). In this way, the aesthetic qualities of terror, obscurity, and the infinite that characterize *Wacousta*’s atmosphere align closely with Burke’s definition of sublimity.

It is not only *Wacousta*’s setting that adheres to the aesthetic traits delineated by Burke, but also individual characters in the novel who respond to the affective quality of the sublime atmosphere. Namely, the figure of Wacousta, a British officer masquerading as an Indigenous man, elicits sublime fears because he transgresses both racial and spatial boundaries, and thus disrupts a stable sense of place and identity by resisting the process of being aesthetically, physically, and interpretively contained, much like the visual frame of the novel. Wacousta possesses the ability to move between, and surpass the bounds of, physical spaces. Although the members of the garrison believe “it appeared impossible any thing wearing the human form could pass them unperceived” (Richardson 23) Wacousta was “around [them], though unseen” (31). In this sense, the members of the garrison imaginatively transform Wacousta into a spectral presence, participating in what Shaw calls an “experience” that “slip[s] out of conventional understanding,” precisely because Wacousta’s physical mobility lies beyond the limits of reason (2). While Wacousta is able to transcend spatial boundaries, he also roots his identity in indecipherability by simultaneously inhabiting the familiar and the unfamiliar through his racial ambivalence, which frustrates fixed notions of identity predicated on a stable racial binary between, in this case, white and non-white. The narrator claims that Frederick, Colonel de Haldimar’s eldest son, “s[ought] to reconcile the contradictions that existed between [Wacousta’s] dress and features and the purity of the English he had just spoken” (Richardson 264). Frederick’s desire to interpret, and thus to “reconcile,” is a desire to fix cultural difference in a containable visible object; yet, his inability to secure a stable control of the boundary between the familiar and the unfamiliar—the native dress and the British accent—produces in him an uncanny response to Wacousta, who unsettles established racial binaries through what Justin D. Edwards calls a “vision of fluid identity” (7). Wacousta is therefore a boundless figure who escapes the conventions of both spatial and racial fixity by remaining an obscure presence that generates “terror” (Richardson 63) and “almost superstitious awe” in the members of

the garrison (93). In aesthetic terms, Wacousta is an embodiment of what Robert Lecker calls the “force of chaos” (51) that threatens the notion of visual order and that, I will argue, escapes aesthetic containment by remaining an obscure presence for the greater part of the novel.

The narrator also portrays Wacousta as a presence that haunts the “collective imagination” of the garrison by promoting sentiments of “powerful and absorbing dread” in the minds of each member (Richardson 161). Wacousta induces those in the garrison “to indulge in communion with [their] own thoughts” rather than “to communicate them to others” (Richardson 161), as the soldiers’ “vague and idle fears” as well as the unexplained horrors can only be represented in the form of the unspeakable, in keeping with the sublime experience which exceeds the limits of expression (308). As a result, the mysterious presence of Wacousta, emblematic of the sublime atmosphere more generally, stimulates an excess of imagination in the members of the garrison and encourages contemplation in isolation. Similarly, Charles, the Colonel’s youngest son, describes his experience of Wacousta’s presence as “[s]ick, dizzy, and with every faculty of [his] mind annihilated” since the sublime mood provokes and “absorbs [his] mind, to the exclusion of every other feeling” (213). Although in this passage Charles is alluding to Holloway’s execution in general terms and not to the emergence of the figure of Wacousta, who triggers the execution specifically, revenge and overpowering emotions are implicated in Colonel de Haldimar’s “error,” which partakes in the sublime modality (514). As such, in the face of sublimity, Charles is overwhelmed by its powers that debilitate, arrest, and oppress his faculties, which leads to the experience of cognitive failure. The sublime also produces an overactive imagination: when Jack Fuller encounters “the mysterious visitant,” he claims to “ha[ve] worked up his naturally dull imagination to its highest perception of the supernatural” (343). Fuller’s imagination promotes a non-rational level of experience that violates the boundaries of what is empirically knowable. The sublime thereby fosters excessive imagination, leaving “the inward mind [to] remain unchecked” (34).

While the sublime evokes an excessive emotional response in the members of the garrison, and, consequently, promotes contemplation in isolation that leads to the breakdown of “communionship” (Richardson 16), the figure of Wacousta himself points to a disintegration of social order through his unchecked passions. The narrator describes Wacousta as “lurking within the precincts of the fort with a view to the destruction of all that it contained” (22). He possesses the intention of dismantling the social institution of the

garrison, which would lead to further social chaos, as well as impulses that compel violence, as he claims that “the hour of retribution was at hand, and revenge, the exclusive passions of the gods, shall at length be mine” (491). Richardson therefore depicts excess passion as a problematic response in the New World precisely because this lack of emotional restraint, partaking in the sublime or induced by it, leads to social disorder and violent compulsions.

The picturesque mode, however, functions to check impulses associated with the sublime by reasserting visual control over the scene through an aesthetic restructuring of the New World. Carole Gerson suggests that *Wacousta* mediates between “early American engagement with Romance,” such as the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper, and “the waxing British practice of realism,” such as the writings of Sir Walter Scott, both of which, I argue, participate in the picturesque aesthetic (Gerson 82). Emerging between 1730 and 1830 with Italian landscape painters such as Salvator Rosa, the picturesque phase was a precursor to Romanticism and became the nineteenth century’s dominant mode of vision, understood as the ability to see nature with a painter’s eye (Trott 1998; Hussey 1927). The picturesque mode was both realistic and ideal because it strove to imitate and correct “nature” through artistic representation (Hussey 18). Notably, Uvedale Price established the picturesque as a third aesthetic category, in addition to the sublime and the beautiful, by including aspects of both (Glickman 1998). In opposition to the sublime, Price defines the essential qualities of the beautiful as the perfection of smoothness, the uniformity of surface, and the limited variety in features to promote “absolute equality” among them (Price 43). The painter’s use of “contrast,” combining the smoothness and uniformity of the beautiful with the vastness and obscurity of the sublime, thus became the essential picturesque requisite (Trott 75). While the sublime escapes the limits of representation, the picturesque is limiting in scope because, as Nicola Trott argues, painters “had to decide” (77) when “it ceased to be possible to delineate” (79). In this sense, the picturesque landscape, as a pictorial unit, is best understood as an aesthetic “blend” striving for an all-encompassing, yet representable, vision (Nevius 44).

Although there is no evidence of Richardson’s active engagement with landscape painting conventions in his fiction, Cooper and Scott, on whom Richardson modelled *Wacousta*, possess an awareness of the picturesque aesthetic. By the time Cooper wrote *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), argues Blake Nevius, “the prospect” (21) conditioned by his knowledge of European landscape painting aesthetics, “had become integral” to his work (41).

According to Nevius, the prospect establishes “the larger spatial context” as well as “the relative disposition of objects” within it in order to “enhance as well as control” the spectator’s perception of the composition (30). Cooper thus understood the picturesque not only as a descriptive mode of representation, but also as an exercise that achieves visual control over the object of representation. Similarly, Walker suggests the Scottish landscape achieved “pictorial fame” through Scott’s promotion of picturesque Scotland (12-13). Walker notes that Scott’s “frequent invocation of Rosa,” in *Waverley* as well as other novels, is “the best evidence we have that [Scott’s] pictorial sensibility conformed to orthodox tenets of the picturesque movement in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (7).

Whereas Scott’s use of the picturesque primarily “serve[d] as a catalyst” for his “historical imagination” notes Walker, I argue that Richardson’s picturesque vision allows for the clarification of New World obscurities by checking sublime elements (21). The narrator’s shift in modes of perception in the latter half of the novel thus enables him to order the chaotic components found in the first half of the narrative. Notably, the picturesque qualities of the landscape surrounding Fort Detroit can be seen in the following description:

Darkness was already beginning to spread her mantle over the intervening space, and the night fires of the Indians were kindling into brightness, glimmering occasionally . . . when suddenly a lofty tent, the brilliant whiteness of which was thrown into strong relief by the dark field on which it reposed, was seen to rise at a few paces from the abrupt point of the forest . . . and on the extreme summit of a ridge, beyond which lay only the western horizon in golden perspective. (Richardson 431)

In this scene, the narrator makes use of contrast—the prime pictorial value of the picturesque mode—which adheres to the aesthetic principle of *chiaroscuro*, or contrast produced through “light and shade,” imported from Italian landscape painting conventions (Nevius 32). This practice of *chiaroscuro*, seen in the narrator’s exercise of “darkness” and the “golden perspective,” enhances the spectacle by emphasizing difference within a single frame. The narrator’s description also makes use of “roughness and sudden variation” of form, another characteristic of the picturesque, seen in the “abrupt point of the forest” and the “summit of the ridge” set against the “relief” (Hussey 14). According to Christopher Hussey, the use of formal variation “marks the peculiarity of their appearance” and “arouses the mind of the spectator” (15). It is worth noting that the narrator explicitly distinguishes this scene of the Native camp for its picturesque value, as “there was no trace of that blended

natural scenery that so pleasingly diversified the vicinity of the sister fort" (Richardson 285). Such articulation demonstrates that the narrator possesses an awareness of landscape painting as a mode that seeks "diversi[ty]" through internal contrast and variation, and that also strives to correct "natur[e]" through artistic representation. By drawing the reader's attention to Fort Michilimackinac's lack of "blend," the requisite quality of the picturesque which would make it "pleasing" to the eye, the narrator can assert the picturesque value of Fort Detroit, where the novel primarily takes place.

Richardson further establishes the picturesque quality of Fort Detroit when he claims that "gradually the mists, that had fallen during the latter hours of the night . . . convey[ed] the appearance of a rolling sheet of vapour retiring back upon itself, and disclos[ed] objects in succession, until the eye could embrace all that came within its extent of vision" (Richardson 50-51). The "variety of objects, shapes, and hues" that compose a picturesque landscape, notes Gilpin, although "inharmonious in themselves," may be "harmoniously united by one general tinge spread over them" (qtd. in Hussey 52). Such a tinge not only provides a principle of unity in the composition of Fort Detroit by "disclosing" the previously obscure scene of the mysterious appearance of Wacousta in (and the disappearance of Frederick from) the fort that occurred during the "latter hours of the night," but also, by "contrasting a dreamy atmosphere over the scene and softening the contrast of light and shade," yields a vision of an all-embracing landscape (qtd. in Hussey 52). As William Hazlitt suggests, a "mist drawing a slender veil over all objects" is "picturesque" and "ideal" by creating the effect of removing the scene "from the actual and the present," and in *Wacousta's* case, removing it from the sublime and immediate (qtd. in Nevius 51).

While the tinge unites the incongruous parts of the landscape, the prospect mediates the sublime elements by commanding the view. By making use of the prospect, Richardson's narrator is able to assert visual control of the scene by aesthetically settling the landscape he observes. The picturesque setting noted above is one the narrator claims to have "selected for the theatre of *our* labours" (Richardson 6; emphasis mine). While the static medium of landscape painting directs the observer's eye by providing visual stability through controlling the prospect as a framing device, S. Leigh Matthews argues that the narrative "we" in *Wacousta* asserts "ocular possession" of both the geographic and "psychic space" of the novel by suggesting that "the reader's own gaze will be directed by the narrative one" (138). Martin Jay, writing about perspectival vision in visual art, notes that the painter's "[g]aze . . . was

conceived in the manner of a lone eye looking . . . unblinking, and fixated,” and thus static, which reduces the gaze to a single point-of-view (7). The viewer/reader consequently contemplates the visual field from a single vantage point that is exterior to the world the narrator describes. The technique of perspective, which can be understood in terms of Nevius’ description of the convention of “the prospect,” not only allows the reader emotional and physical stability by viewing the scene from a single, fixed point-of-view, but also distances the reader from the events, which helps to imaginatively contain the threatening sublime elements of the New World environment (30). The effect of the prospect is enacted when the narrator claims that “throughout the obscurity might be seen the flitting forms of men” (Richardson 21). The dispassionate eye of the reader creates a gap between him- or herself as a spectator and the sublime spectacle of the actual and immediate soldiers moving about the scene. In this sense, the eye mediates through distance, which is to say by perspective, by transforming the soldiers into mere “forms of men” while simultaneously capturing the entirety of the scene. A more stable and clearer vision of the Canadian landscape is therefore made possible by what Sandeep Banerjee refers to as the picturesque’s “scaling back,” a process that renders previously sublime objects “more describable and representable [by] bring[ing] them within the ambit of ordinary existence” (2). Thus, Richardson renders common “scenes with which the European is little familiarised” (3).

The built form of the garrison itself becomes an embodiment of the picturesque mode’s all-encompassing and all-commanding desire. The narrator describes a section of the garrison as rising “considerably above the other [buildings],” which “commanded a full view of the lake, even to its extremity of frowning and belting forest” (Richardson 291). Much like the prospect, the fort allows a fixed and stable perspective, what Banerjee calls a visual “anchor,” for the members of the garrison to order the landscape, and thus, a perspective that can capture the whole scene in its “extremit[ies]” by delineating limits (5). As occupying the garrison is a form of stasis in a sublime world of flux, the fort enables the officers within the garrison to overlook and visually “circumven[t]” the surrounding scene (Richardson 24). The narrator describes the soldiers as containing the exterior space through ocular control, as “all the circuit of intermediate clearing, even to the very skirt of the forest, was distinctly commanded by the naked eye” (146), while “each [soldier] seemed to embrace every object on which the eye could rest, as if to fix its position indelibly in his memory” (207). By

occupying a stable perspective, the garrison attempts “to fix” and mitigate the scene through distance, much like the narrator. When “the naked eye” fails, the soldiers in the garrison resort to the aid of their “telescopes,” further enabling a panoramic observation (407). Hence, as Matthews suggests, the Detroit garrison’s “panoptic vision” (137) forms the basis for exercising visual control through a constant and steady perspective that enables “an all-encompassing” view of the forest (138).

The garrison members themselves also produce this visually regulated spectacle by demarcating boundaries between fort/wilderness, civilized/savage, reason/impulse, and British/Other in order to depict the New World in conceivable terms. As several scholars have noted, these binary constructions respond to anxieties concerning the disintegration of purportedly fixed physical, conceptual, and cultural borders by promoting simplistic oppositions that prescribe the domination of the New World (Hurley 37; Duffy 57; Lecker 57). However, they also serve a formal function by visually enhancing the scene through contrast. For example, while the garrison is associated with “vigila[nce]” (Richardson 19) visual orientation, and “noiseless” (21) preparations, the wilderness is associated with sounds and “yell[s] of despair and a shout of triumph burst” (63). Such a construction secures the garrison’s control over the conceptual boundary between inside and outside by demarcating limits and promoting absolute sensory difference; the wilderness begins and ends with sounds while the garrison is limited to the purely visual, in addition to adhering more generally to the formal principle of contrast. Similarly, the narrator describes the garrison as “picturesque in effect” through its “square” (32) formation, providing a check for the eye, while the “encampment of the Indians” is described as “round,” a form associated with the sublime qualities of uniformity and succession (243). The novel’s binary constructions therefore not only enable the articulation of British order in (and domination of) the New World, but also produce a conceivable world by enabling the production of clear boundaries that demarcate difference. In aesthetic terms, the novel’s polarizing tendency participates in the picturesque mode by allowing the beautiful (the ordered) and the sublime (the chaotic) to exist simultaneously within a single frame of vision while also reinforcing difference. As Michael Hurley observes the novel’s “symmetry reflects the need to control, willfully to check and dominate the impulsive, the spontaneous, or the irrational” by asserting visual (and by extension aesthetic) mastery over the scene (55).

The complete ascendancy of rationality, and thus the checking of the sublime elements, can only be achieved through a restructuring of the sublime into realism, a mode that participates in the picturesque aesthetic. Namely, the narrator recounts the story from multiple perspectives in order to convey an all-encompassing vision of the unfolding events of the siege. As Gaile McGregor has rightly pointed out, numerous “chapters elapse before we are given any explanations about those mysterious events in the forest that provide the impetus for the entire plot” (7)—an impetus, I argue, that can only be revealed through a picturesque framework. McGregor further states that the novel’s organization around the siege results in a narrative structure that is “circular” and “static” rather than linear, as the latter half lacks that sense of “movement” found in the first (8). Richardson’s aesthetic shift, however, accounts for the unevenness of the novel as he first introduces the “success of a stratagem which,” according to the narrator, “forms the essential groundwork of our story” through a sublime modality and recounts it in a realist manner (Richardson 11). This lack of narrative progression can be seen when the narrator claims: “to explain satisfactorily and consistently the extreme severity of the governor, some secrets and personally influencing motive must be assigned; but to these we have intimated, what we now repeat, – namely, that we hope to bear out our story, by natural explanation and simple deduction” (Richardson 416). The novel opens with no explication, just mystery, but the events are “repeated” from alternative perspectives in order to be clarified and accounted for; that is, to be “explained satisfactorily” such that all the parts of the tale cohere. In this sense, these “simple deductions” produced through the picturesque aesthetic will enable the reader to arrive at conclusions through logic and reason, rather than through imagination as an affective response to the sublime elements. Similarly, the narrator states that Wacousta’s ambiguous presence and motives for revenge were “dispelled in the course of his narrative” (446). Through the narrator’s retelling, the non-rational levels of experience are eradicated, or “dispelled,” through explanation. The novel thus turns into realist fiction, a form, according to John Moss, which “attempts to clarify the complexities of human experience” (35). While most of the events are introduced in a sublime manner, they are ultimately, as Manina Jones puts it, “recuperated realistically” (n. pag.). As Jones suggests, Richardson “reconfigures the troubling, unstable world” of the frontier “in the stable terms of realism,” thereby reproducing a picturesque aesthetic, one hinged on “natural” representation, which establishes a trajectory towards a unified vision of the siege that is grounded in realism (n. pag.).

The desire in *Wacousta* to impose order onto the Canadian landscape extends to a desire to impose certain forms of political order in the New World. That is, the conflict between the sublime and the picturesque also extends to a conflict between individuality (associated with excess passion) and the social, which can also be seen as a conflict between the solitary and the communal. According to Shaw, the sublime is “a divisive force, encouraging feelings of difference and deference,” while the picturesque “encourages a spirit of unity and harmony” (9). In political terms, “the impulse of the one, we might say, is individualistic, even dictatorial, while that of the latter is social and democratic” (9). Although it is more difficult to make a claim for the picturesque as absolutely social, as the sublime and the picturesque cannot be understood as mutually exclusive, it is certain that the sublime “concerns the solitary” (Trott 72) as it confines feelings of terror to the mind of individuals that lead to impulses of “self-preservation,” while the picturesque gestures towards social harmony through compassion and restraint of personal feeling to preserve public order (Hussey 57). Some scholars, however, have understood *Wacousta*’s primary conflict as one of cross-cultural negotiations amongst the British, the French, and the Indigenous peoples, rather than a clash internal to British prospects for establishing a colonial settlement in Canada.² Yet, the narrator explicitly states that “the cause of the Indians and that of the [French] Canadians became . . . identified as one,” (10) while Wacousta, Pontiac’s advisor and the leader of the rebellion, is non-Indigenous since “Cornwall is the country of [his] birth” (449). Furthermore, the uprising is not based on a desire to maintain sovereignty, but on Wacousta’s desire to achieve revenge for the love triangle between himself, the Colonel, and Clara Beverly, which occurred in Scotland before the Colonel had joined the European fortress in Canada. For these reasons, I agree with Robin D. Mathews’ claim that the novel’s central concern is about “two views of possible white society,” that is, a conflict between “the individual and the community” and not a clash of cultures (295). Mathews notes that Richardson sets his novel after the British conquest of New France, explaining his concern for “the kind of government and social order that is to prevail in Canada,” which would in turn account for the political anxieties articulated in the novel (296). Following Mathews, I argue that the first social vision found in *Wacousta* is embodied by both the Colonel and Wacousta, who “remain unbalanced, one-sided, excessive, [and] extreme” in their pursuit of individual ambition even though the Colonel is motivated primarily by his strict adherence to English military protocol and Wacousta by revenge as Hurley has also argued (33).

The narrator describes Wacousta as “a refinement of cruelty” and “a remorseless savage,” who finds satisfaction in the suffering of others, which proves “the dire extent to which [his] revenge . . . could be carried” (Richardson 442). He is one, as Clara claims, “who ha[s] no pity for the innocent,” and who is thus predisposed to inflict violence on others in his quest for personal revenge (525). While the narrator portrays Wacousta as compelled by passion in his actions, the Colonel is described as logical and rational in his. The narrator claims, “Colonel de Haldimar was not one given to indulge in the mysterious or to believe in the romantic. Every thing was plain matter of fact,” which demonstrates that his perception and actions are based on empirical evidence and reason (423). However, while the Colonel is “[w]ithout ever having possessed any thing like acute feeling,” and as such deemed dispassionate, his strict and “severe” (417) governance, in accordance to “the Articles of War,” is also excessive in nature and formalism, and consequently, unreasonable (35). In the New World marked by terror, the Colonel demonstrates behaviours that are governed by emotion and impulses of self-preservation, much like Wacousta. For example, the Colonel’s intention to grant clemency (a compassionate act associated with a social awareness of another’s anguish and remorse) to Halloway—a prisoner found guilty of treason for opening the fort’s gate (and thus violating the boundary between inside and outside) during his guard—dissipates with the appearance of Wacousta (425). As a result of his emergence onto the scene, the Colonel is overcome by passion and turmoil such that “all idea of the kind was chased from his mind” (425). While the Colonel does not possess the same violent impulses as Wacousta, although “misjudged” in his measures and “not absolutely cruel,” he does react passionately to the appearance of Wacousta, which displays the same instinctive behaviour (426).

This emphasis on individuality (the pursuit of one’s own self-interest) as a mode of social conduct and organization is most notably seen in members of the garrison seeking military advancement. Captain Blessington claims, “this insatiable desire for personal advancement—is certain to intrude itself; since we feel that over the mangled bodies of our dearest friends and companions, we can alone hope to attain preferment and distinction” (26). The members of the garrison profit from the death of fellow members, as they themselves attain a higher rank “over [others’] mangled bodies,” and thus, indulge in personal interest rather than that of the collective in their ambitious military framework (26). Murphy, a soldier who is emblematic of this individualistic disposition, claims “it sames to me, I say, that promotion

in any way is all fair and honourable in times of hardship like these” (26-27). He cannot recognize the moral implications, as all is “fair,” in his desire for social climbing; even obtaining “honour” at the detriment of other soldiers he deems just. While Murphy’s personal conduct is rooted in self-interest, the Colonel’s governance is also in keeping with this notion of individualism, as he also believes in a system of personal advancement. As *Wacousta* is escaping, the Colonel yells “[q]uick to work: and mark, who first seizes him shall have a promotion on the spot,” which asserts the ascendancy of his personal revenge on *Wacousta* over the interest of the garrison (527). The Colonel and *Wacousta* therefore both represent a shared vision of social order, one associated with the sublime.

Charles and Frederick, however, represent a more democratic order, understood as the second social vision articulated in the novel. Charles claims, “for my part, I say, perish all promotion for ever, if it is only to be obtained over the dead bodies of those with whom I have lived so long and shared so many dangers” (27). He believes in a common bond with the other members of the garrison in times of uncertainty and war. While he is able to check his professional ambitions for the sake of the social, he cannot control his emotions as he suffers from excessive sensibility. He is repeatedly told by Blessington, “consider you are not alone. For God’s sake, check this weakness!” (210). In the New World, there is no tolerance for unrestrained and inordinate passion. Characters must be restrained in both professional ambition and personal feeling for public order and for “sympathy for the mass” to prevail, and thus, Charles must die for the ascendancy of the social to succeed (100). As such, after the death of both *Wacousta* and the Colonel, Frederick had “become the colonel of the—regiment,” which enabled him to establish a new order, one rendered social by keeping “the rampart . . . unguarded” (518). The novel’s end thus *gestures* towards a more democratic form of social order, one based on a midpoint between two extremes—that of *Wacousta* and the Colonel’s individualism (sublime) and that of a state of complete social equality (beautiful) as a form of governance that cannot be found in the New World—in keeping with the picturesque mode as an aesthetic blend. It is worth noting that the emergence of Frederick as Colonel, while accompanied by a breakthrough of the individual who “pull[s] away” from the group and moves towards a reconciliation between man and nature by trespassing the boundary between fort and wilderness, is not accompanied by a breakdown of conventional forms as anticipated by Frye (228). Frederick still seeks a social (and by extension aesthetic) model

based on organization. In this way, *Wacousta* distinguishes itself from Frye's diagnostic that an "anti-social" (228) mind seeks order, while the individual seeks "greater freedom" (232). Richardson demonstrates that in the New World, societal impulses are associated with organization and not freedom, as Frederick brings order to the otherwise chaotic, which is to say free, sublime landscape.

Michael Buma states, however, that "the closing moment of *Wacousta*," that of Frederick becoming Colonel of the regiment, "foregrounds the limits of [Richardson's] vision. By the novel's end, the cultures have arguably been brought into coexistence rather than community" (147). Buma further argues that "*Wacousta* never fully resolves the tension it proposes between the stable and unified colonial vision . . . and the various disruptions that trouble it" (148). The picturesque mode accounts for this lack of resolution at the level of plot, as the sublime and the picturesque are not mutually exclusive aesthetic categories such as the sublime and the beautiful; the sublime exists within the representable frame of the picturesque, and thus, the picturesque aesthetic embraces the contradictory nature of the New World. As a result, the tensions between the fort and the wilderness, the British and the Indigenous people, and consequently "the gothic romance and the realist novel" (Northey 18), do not require resolution but rather formal aesthetic integration, as the picturesque describes rather than explains. This formal closure enabled by the descriptive tendency of the novel partakes in what Jay calls the "de-narrativizing impulse in perspectival art" (15). Like the landscape painters who "accept the parts as given and form them into a whole" (Nevius 30), Richardson in his fiction unites the various incongruous elements to form an aesthetically harmonious whole, a frame of the picturesque ideal which is a blend of the beautiful (the ordered) and the sublime (the chaotic).

NOTES

- 1 Refer to studies by Northrop Frye, Gaile McGregor, and Marcia B. Kline of social visions of Canada articulated in nineteenth-century fiction.
- 2 Edwards claims that the novel is preoccupied with the frontier as "a space of physical conflict based on cultural difference," while the narrative "gestures towards a merger of European and Native American culture through the eradication of discourses of difference that have historically separated them" (7, 8). Matthews argues that *Wacousta* "exposes the imperfections of the imperialist vision" and "interrogat[es] some of the cultural notions that uphold the intensity and facility of [the imperialist] gaze" (138). Similarly, Buma suggests that *Wacousta* is Richardson's attempt at a "vision of intercultural unity" (147).

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