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Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010. xvi + 240 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-8014-4864-5.

Review by Matthew W. Maguire, Kenyon College.

Few books venture a more striking contrast between title and subtitle than this one. If the promise of an "Unfinished Enlightenment" bestirs dim imaginings of an enthusiast's spirited polemic on behalf of some as yet unrealized aspiration of social or political import, "Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia" settles heavily upon the reader with the ominous promise of meticulous textual analysis in pursuit of an almost infinitely expansive subject. The contrast posed in the title is intimately related to the argument within, but in a fashion at once intelligent, instructive, surprising and sometimes delightful.

The breadth of descriptive writing in the eighteenth century confounds the categories that scholars are tempted to bring to it. Though Stalnaker's book is different from the work of historians like David Sorkin in countless ways, like him she is devoted to dismantling the barriers of inquiry, assumption and genre that emerged in part as a result of internal tensions within the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the French Revolution, but that did not exist within the Enlightenment itself. Hence descriptive writing includes with equal facility diverse technical writing about precision mechanics and pastoral poetry, insouciant essays about fashion as well as inquiries into comparative animal anatomy alike.

For Stalnaker, eighteenth-century description took form within unique and short-lived historical conditions. Its task was to bring the aesthetic, analytical, persuasive and ethical possibilities of language to the exactingly precise representation of the world, in a moment where accelerated scientific investigations of nature, a nascent historical consciousness and an accelerating sense of time—as well as a proliferation of distinct reading publics—created a tangle of interrelated dilemmas that ultimately issued in the separation of literary writing and science, and with it, a language peculiar to specialists of sundry preoccupations and language suitable for popular or general use. Description and the "describer"—first as the agent of an action, then as an identity or even a vocation—attracted the sustained attention of Buffon, Diderot and several other Encyclopédists, of Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, Louis-Sébastien Mercier and many others.

That many of the solutions offered by descriptive writers rapidly ascended to widespread interest and influence—and became superannated with comparable speed—is, of course, a source of special fascination for historians. But their historical evanescence also makes them difficult to excavate and understand. Stalnaker remarks that description was and is a genre of writing alternately irritating and invisible to both the tradition that precedes it and the posterity that succeeds it.

To the champions of traditional schemes of literary classification derived from, *inter alia*, Aristotelian sources, description was an aesthetic calamity, unmoored from traditional rhetorical or poetic categories, too often unmotivated by clear rhetorical purpose. For readers who inherit the disciplinary distinctions and literary predilections of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the genre of description discourages prospective explorers for different but equally potent reasons. Descriptive poetry—prone to

verse of elaborate circumlocution alluding to natural beings and elements, festooned with lengthy technical explanations in the footnotes, explained by scientists as prominent as Cuvier—soon became a byword for unreadable poetry. Technical descriptions of machines and anatomy were subject to rapid scientific revision and supersession and suffered a similar fate. Stalnaker's task is thus above all one of memory: "it is for this reason above all that I have written this book, as a testament to their [i.e., the describers'] persistent efforts to describe the world in the face of epistemological and cultural transformations that would soon make their descriptions obsolete" (p. 7).

Stalnaker's "testament" takes both a manifest and a latent, more subtly argumentative form. The chapters constitute a trajectory of description in the French Enlightenment, from taxonomic descriptions of nature in Buffon and his temporary collaborator Daubenton to the social, moral and political descriptions of Paris by Mercier. In Buffon, one finds an affirmation of description against various existing alternatives, including quantitative analysis, painting, and poetry. It is in particular the capacity of descriptive prose to represent myriad and diverse contexts in time that, for Buffon, give it a decisive advantage over painting for an understanding of nature, since painting is relatively static and must limit the contextual information it imparts to the viewer—even as mathematics deprives readers of the sensible information that permits the recognition of natural forms.

Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's *Études de la nature* intensifies and recasts Buffon's descriptive accounts of nature, finding in even the most unremarkable flora an object of unending descriptive possibilities. His wondrous description of flies upon a strawberry plant is replete with analogies and aesthetic harmonies (pp. 76-77), and Saint-Pierre cheerfully renounces both system and entomological identification. Elsewhere, he muses upon how microscopic beings might encounter the same plant, as well as the "natural harmonies" that connect the invisibly small to the imposingly grand and anything in between. In this way, he hoped descriptive writing would reveal nature's beauty and analogical abundance, rather than denuding it of them via analytic or mathematical methods that proceeded from Descartes.

In partial contrast to Saint-Pierre, the poet Jacques Delille aspired to a union of verse with scientific understanding, in order to present a simultaneously analytical and lyrical understanding of, for example, different kinds of metals, from lead to platinum. Yet Delille shared with Saint-Pierre a sense of description's power to evoke a world of extraordinarily dense and multiplicitous relations among all things, and thus to expand the scope of reader's sympathy not just to what is similar or useful to his readers, but to all that exists. Here as elsewhere, descriptive writing is not a subordinate, rather dry literary accompaniment to science and analysis, but a way of bringing the precise matter of observation into an aesthetically and morally integrative whole.

Diderot stands as an intriguing exception to this more general ambition. In his *Encyclopédie* article "Bas," his dauntingly prolix description of the technological intricacies of the stocking machine is, as he more or less acknowledges, not so much designed to allow for a complete understanding of the machine, but to inspire admiration for the originality and inventiveness of its designer. It is thus intended to encourage a certain climate of opinion congenial to scientific and technological accomplishment, rather than to reconcile those accomplishments with aesthetic or moral aspirations that (at least on the surface) appear distinct if not estranged from them.

It is above all Mercier, however, that moves Stalnaker's prose and argument to its apex of sharpness and sheen. Mercier "incarnates the figure of the Enlightenment describer" (p. 151), and with him the describer becomes a complete and eagerly affirmed authorial identity. It is in Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* that a single beloved space is perpetually renewed and revised by time, both subjective (the author's attitudes and moods, his often explicitly provisional judgments), and historical (the rush of change in Parisian fashions, neighborhoods and mores), as well as by the pace of Mercier's proposed social and political reforms. Mercier was profoundly enamored with the possibilities of writing, and the *Tableau* included no illustrations or maps. In his cumulative accounts of the city, an abundance of open-ended

dialogical prose allows readers to participate in Mercier's project, creating their own interpretation of Paris' integrated complexities on their own terms.

It is only in Mercier's post-Thermidorean sequel, *Le nouveau Paris*, that his exuberance and dexterously perspectival *élan* fail him. For Stalnaker, the trauma of the Revolution (not least for a Girondin like Mercier) leads the city's inhabitants into an abyss of forgetting and politicized language. Paris itself is no longer "a relatively stable entity to be traversed and described" but "an agent of revolutionary change" (p. 209). Mercier, the describer incarnate, can no longer describe Paris as a totality; an immediate sense of the layered significance of events has proved elusive from his revolutionary experience, and the boundary between descriptive and historical writing increasingly falls away (p. 208). There is a suggestion that description depended upon a presumption of personal, cultural and historical duration that underwrote various renderings of changes in perspective and development. When that is undone by dizzyingly rapid historical and technological change as well as expansive trauma, the enterprise of description falters.

Even as the trajectory of the book follows authors of the eighteenth century, the book permits the reader to circumambulate the increasingly diffuse, if still perceptible, shadow of Michel Foucault in studies of culture. It is, as Stalnaker observes, by way of Foucault that most contemporary scholars have learned to attend to the historical contingencies of knowledge-making and to consequential alterations in what is fashioned or "shows up" as knowledge. It is this learning that brings eighteenth-century descriptive writing into focus for contemporary scholarly inquiry. Yet Stalnaker is also aware that Foucault is often not—to put it gently—obsessively solicitous of intra-contextual differences and particularity, readily consigning entire bodies or thought and their epochs to, for example, an abiding preoccupation with the visual, or the effacement of the author-observer, and prominent and obvious counter-examples (as redoubtable as Buffon, for example) are swiftly forced into his procrustean grid or ignored. More generally, Stalnaker observes that Foucault and Roland Barthes accused (rather systematically and imperiously) various eighteenth-century authors of homogenous systematizing and the ruthless subjugation of knowledge, when something considerably more variegated and subtle awaits readers alive to different possibilities (pp. 103, 114).

Even an intelligent and carefully-written book will have its flaws, and a few inevitably appear in these pages. There are a handful of repetitive passages, and Buffon's famous apothegm "*le style est l'homme même*" is given two distinct and not necessarily congruent interpretations at different points in the argument (pp. 34, 65). Intellectual historians will want to explore further the references to Cartesian notions of "clear and distinct ideas" and the dilemmas this ambient epistemological imperative posed for descriptive writing, rather than move the term into an account of "clear and distinct images" and thus something closer to literary *enargeia* (pp. 13 and 19). The discrete challenges that the French Revolution posed to descriptive writing deserve further attention, all the more so since as the author acknowledges in her conclusion, some of the subsequent epistemological (and one might add, literary and political) distinctions that would occlude descriptive writing are already clearly at work in the writings of Rousseau (p. 213).

In the closing pages of *The Unfinished Enlightenment*, Stalnaker expressly avoids an argument about the legacy of descriptive writing for romantic poetry or the nineteenth-century novel, and gives her readers only a brief reflection on the ultimate separation of scientific writing from literature. As a literary scholar, she is most interested in reflection upon descriptive writing at a moment when, surrounded by technologies of information, "we are once again in an age of encyclopedia" (p. 213), and one in which readers are given many incentives to succumb to perfunctory and fragmented reading. She closes with a plea for patient, careful reading as a prerequisite for authentic literary and historical understanding. Her own book bears eloquent testimony to her closing reflection. While Stalnaker is completely aware of the dangers attending a "naïve humanism" (p. 9), her argument suggests there might be room for a humanism that is less naïve than lucid, one that is uncompromisingly historically acute and thus not

contextually reductive, and that has followed the late twentieth-century hermeneutics of suspicion patiently through to an irenic encounter with its limitations. For this possibility and for many other reasons, *The Unfinished Enlightenment* not only encourages but rewards careful reading.

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