
H-France Review Vol. 11 (December 2011), No. 257

Marian Hobson, *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment*, edited by Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, SVEC 2011:04. 384 pp., 7 b/w illustrations, footnotes, bibliography and index. £65/€80/\$100 (cl). ISBN 9-7807-29410-0113.

Review by Elena Russo, Johns Hopkins University.

This volume gathers several important articles by Enlightenment scholar Marian Hobson and makes them available to the English-reading public for the first time. Many of them were published in French and have been deftly translated by the editors, Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman. They acknowledge their debt to Hobson's oeuvre, and this book feels very much like a labor of love. All the primary sources quoted in these studies are presented both in the original French and in translation. The term "networks," which provides the connecting thread for the collection, must be intended not only in the obvious sense of networks of communication and exchange within the Enlightenment republic of letters, but also as systems of interrelated thoughts, patterns of influence cutting across writers, disciplines and modes of knowledge; as the "arrangement or structure with intersecting lines and interstices" (to quote the OED): a meaning that is especially pertinent with some of the thinkers featured here, in particular with Denis Diderot's method of arguing and writing.

The articles span a period from 1973 to 2005 and highlight the singular coherence of Hobson's methodology and concerns. A pioneer of interdisciplinarity before it became conventionally cool, Hobson reads some of the canonical works of the French Enlightenment such as Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* and *Le Neveu de Rameau* or Rousseau's second *Discours* through the lens of the history of medicine, probability theory, linguistics, philosophy of language, art history, architecture and mathematics. A constellation of authors such as Leibniz, Newton, Lacaze, Bordeu, Buffon, Laplace, Hogarth, Kant and more are brought into play. There is more to her method than the history of ideas: it is more like the *style* of ideas. As the editors point out, the focus is on revealing "the deep conceptual structures at work in literary texts" (p. 1), and those structures are inherent to the language and the rhetoric of the works examined here. Most of these papers are exemplary close readings that take us deep into the argumentative fabric of the work.

The 1973 "The *Paradoxe sur le comédien* is a paradox" (originally published in the journal *Poétique*, at the time the most prominent vehicle of structuralist poetics in France) is perhaps the most instructive piece ever written on this work and on Diderot's argumentative style in general. Close to forty years after its publication, it is still fresh and will remain so for years to come. One of the factors that make it a classic (besides the fact that it nails down its complexity so thoroughly) is the fact that its theoretical underpinnings are fully incorporated into Hobson's keen intuition and sensitivity to the work's distinctive language (something that, in this reader's opinion, cannot be said of, say, Paul de Man's celebrated readings of Rousseau or, for that matter, of much of the theoretically informed readings of that time). To outline the argument briefly: Hobson goes well beyond the much rehashed theory of the unfeeling actor, and shows instead how this theory—which is, to put it bluntly (this bluntness being all my own), something of a red herring—allows Diderot to ask unsettling questions not only about French

theater, but also about the relationship between the arts, stylistic tradition, and the “real.” Diderot sets up a series of oppositions, of “provocative contrasts,” “Janus-faced concepts,” “binary” and “ternary patterns of endorsement” (p. 61) that seem to be “mocking” the spectator, the actor, the theater “and perhaps the reader too” (p. 35). Indeed, “the reader is constantly batted back and forth in a network of oppositions” (p. 58) that Hobson carefully unravels and deciphers for us. While Hobson is committed to the notion that Diderot struggled to invent a coherent aesthetic project, she does not shy away from highlighting his ultimate failure and his situation within the constraints of the critical language of his time. The dilemmas in the work, she argues, are the result of “Diderot’s ambivalent relationship to eighteenth-century concepts, in particular the opposition between the real and the ideal, the real and the beautiful, the natural and the false, all of which make up the problem of aesthetic truth of the period” (p. 35). These are indeed fundamental questions raised by Diderot’s aesthetics, and it is refreshing to see them confronted so directly.

Another chapter, “Sensibility and spectacle: the medical context for the *Paradoxe*” situates this work within the debate between sensibility and irritability, between vitalistic and mechanistic accounts of sensibility and highlights its unacknowledged debt (via doctor Théophile Bordeu) to the work of Montpellier doctor Louis Lacaze. The purpose is to tackle the *Paradox*’s complex argument about causality in human action, its denial of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary action (both kinds coming to clash in the actor and in *Rameau’s Nephew*). The relevance of medical discourse to the fictional portrayal of the performing self is further thrown into light in the paper following this one (“Pantomime, spasm and parataxis: ‘Le Neveu de Rameau’”), which weaves together medicine and rhetoric. Hobson shows that Diderot’s atomistic conception of the body “as a mass of quasi-autonomous organs” (p. 94) and his desire to find a way to understand “organisation that can do without a soul or any immaterial principle” (p. 95) manifests itself in the syntactical structure of the representation of the Nephew’s pantomime, which is represented as “spasmodic,” that is, as a series of jerky gestures, uncoordinated, swings that are at odds with the Nephew’s claims of self-determination and autonomy, and which are perfectly rendered in the paratactic syntax of the Nephew’s actions.[1]

Hobson is interested in the patterns and rhythms of language and syntax that criss-cross texts more than in fully-formed argumentative content. Of course, such an approach is especially suited to Diderot because, as she shows throughout those readings, his argument does not unfold progressively, but shuttles back and forth between advancing a hypothesis and contesting it, setting for the reader a meandering path that invites her constantly to keep on her guard, giving a body to those thoughts by way of staging dialogues among problematic characters such as the Nephew and *Moi*, or Jacques and his master. The chapter on “*Jacques le Fataliste*: the art of the probable” is enlightening in that respect, for in her careful mapping of the clash between the text’s self-proclaimed necessity and the evidence of logical inconsequence that the narrative carries out, Hobson, rather than “trying to distinguish between the serious and the playful,” prefers to “follow the narrative thread from one moment of logical inconsequence to the next” (p. 146). The cluster of stories that constitute this novel highlight a shattering of the linear, abstract causality endorsed by mathematicians like d’Alembert. As Hobson explains it, “reality showers us with contradictory events and intersections between a vast range of causal chains which meet and overlap” (p. 160). Very small probabilities come to fruition since “they represent an element in an infinitely complicated but necessary process” (p. 162).

The long study on Rousseau (“‘Nexus effectivus’ and ‘nexus finalis’: causality in Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’inégalité* and the *Essai sur l’origine des langues*”) analyzes the different modes of causality in these two works. The first, “nexus effectivus” (that is, in Kant’s terms, *effective* causal

connection, or *efficient cause*, which prevails in mechanistic science) is at work in part one of the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, though, of course, as Hobson notes, Rousseau refuses to invoke this mechanistic causality in part two of the *Discours*, that is, in his account of the emergence of social inequality. She sees the reason of this “hiatus” in Rousseau’s refusal to naturalize (or to endorse) the history of inequality, in his unwillingness to consider the emergence of social man as the inevitable and necessary outcome of a chain of events.

The second form of causality, “nexus finalis” (final cause, finalism or teleology, which reveals nature in terms of its purposiveness) is invoked by Rousseau in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*. Here the entry into society is accounted for by an extraordinary image of divine cosmic intervention (“He who willed that man be sociable touched his finger to the axis of the globe and inclined it in line with the axis of the universe. With this slight movement I see the face of the earth change and the vocation of mankind decided”).^[2] Hobson proceeds to examine this shift in light of Rousseau’s return to Calvinism and his abandonment of his previous leanings toward atheism. She then goes further, situating this shift in historical causality within the context of the Calvinist attempt to match biblical chronology with natural history, in that rich tradition, contemporaneous of Rousseau, that might be called “biblical anthropology.”

The piece entitled “Diderot’s *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*: language and labyrinth” is notable for giving much space and attention to a question that was prominent at the time and was amply debated by Diderot, but that might seem quaint or esoteric today, and that is the issue of linguistic inversion in Latin and French and its consequence for the translation of poetry. In fact, Hobson argues that what is at stake in that debate is nothing less than the logical ordering of the mind and whether language takes precedence over thought and shapes it. Hobson shows that this work is Diderot’s response to the Port-Royal grammarians, to the abbé Batteux, to Condillac and Rousseau, who had all staked their own positions in that quarrel.

The final cluster of articles (for the sake of brevity I have omitted a few which are equally deserving of close attention) focuses more explicitly on aesthetic issues and on the ways Diderot tried to break away from traditional, academic ideas of beauty as harmonic measurements, and to replace them with his own notion of “perception of relations,” based not on calculations but “on an unconscious and unexpressed feeling” (p. 296). Hobson also uncovers the relevance of architecture and engineering in the formation of Diderot’s aesthetic ideas. Through his connection to engineers and architects in Mme Le Gendre’s circle (such as Soufflot, Blondel, Perronet and others), Diderot comes to reflect on the link between architecture and the human perception of space. In the Salon of 1767, the “ideal model” is developed through analogies tested by experience, “by an unconscious process which involves slow understanding of unexpressed relations” (p. 293). In “How to take the measure of a character,” Hobson draws a fascinating parallel between proportion in artworks and in physiognomy. The latter draws on the former in order to define what belongs to the species; in Lavater’s work, proportions “illuminate what is often called the ‘characteristic:’ in many cases they define the typical expression of a particularity, of a biological species or a moral character, of a social position” (p. 299).

Marian Hobson has charted her own distinctive path through her long and productive career. Her approach is both philosophical and historical (by that I mean sensitive to the individuality of authorial voices and styles). Her thought has been informed by an extensive acquaintance with philosophy, notably the work of Jacques Derrida, but her sharp intuition as a reader and her taste for intellectual adventure preserves her from too strict an adherence to his theories.^[3] There is also a host of contemporary philosophers writing in the Anglo-American tradition who now and then make an appearance in the folds of her argument (Alfred Tarski, W.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, the linguist Noam Chomsky) like enigmatic

deities presiding over the unfolding of a line of thought. But one should not complain too much, since they contribute to shaping her original perspective. This is an inspiring volume that has much to teach scholars of the Enlightenment hailing from a broad range of disciplines.

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NOTES

[1] In the language of the Montpellier medical school a spasm is a reaction to exterior pressure. See *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment*, p. 101.

[2] Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris, Gallimard 1959), vol. 5, p. 401 (quote translated by the editors of this volume).

[3] Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

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ISSN 1553-9172