
H-France Review Vol. 14 (October 2014), No. 169

Ann T. Delehanty, *Literary Knowing in Neoclassical France: From Poetics to Aesthetics*. Lewisburg, Penn.: Bucknell University Press, 2013. 220 pp. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1611484898.

Review by David Sedley, Haverford College.

In her book Ann Delehanty explores the passage from the poetics of the seventeenth century to the aesthetics of the eighteenth century. Among the manifestations of this well-known development in intellectual history, she concentrates on changing ideas about the capacity of literature to provide knowledge whose origins or objects transcend human knowers. The path from poetics to aesthetics, she argues, is strewn with efforts—largely failed efforts—to explain literary experience as a source of transcendental knowledge. Delehanty sees her account as complementing traditional narratives of a shift in focus from poetic objects and the rules for their formation by writers to the aesthetic effects of those objects on readers. The corpus of the book includes a series of French critics as well as an English one: Dominique Bouhours, Nicolas Boileau, René Rapin, John Dennis, and L'Abbé Jean-Baptiste Dubos. Each author receives a chapter in the main body of the book. A chapter is also devoted to Blaise Pascal, whose thought haunts the critics' attempts to justify the experience of literature as having superhuman value.

At the start of her introduction, Delehanty points to a “collective indecision” across the history of criticism regarding whether literature consists essentially of objects with certain forms, or experiences with certain effects. She readily admits that such a generality is “simplistic.” She nevertheless finds it “useful” as a backdrop to what she describes as the “clichéd” version of the history of the transition from poetics to aesthetics (p. 2). As she notes, more recent versions of the history have tweaked the dichotomy between rule-bound and effect-oriented modes of criticism by insisting that the rules that preoccupied seventeenth-century critics always aimed at effects as their goal. Delehanty seeks to advance the scholarship by displacing rules and effects as the primary motors in the move from poetics to aesthetics. Instead, she proposes concerns about what literature can yield in terms of knowledge, specifically transcendental knowledge. In her view, interest in such knowledge accounts for the mounting importance of aesthetic effects, pushing the criticism of literature toward “psychology” (p. 24).

Sections on Plato and Sir Philip Sidney, portrayed loosely as precursors to the critics of the central chapters, offer further background to their trajectory. Plato famously had a dim view of art as imitation. He suggested, however, that art could function as a “summoner,” using contradictory images to induce a state of confusion whereby one recognizes the poverty of appearances and so is led to aspire “beyond representation and toward the realm of forms” (p. 7). Delehanty's critics echo Plato in their tendency to see literature as ideally inciting the reader paradoxically through language to acknowledge truths beyond language. Sidney, on the other hand, had a straightforward, more Aristotelian interest in linguistic representation as a motivator of virtuous behavior. To the extent that such moral instruction applies to human beings on earth, the pursuit of transcendental knowledge by Delehanty's critics runs counter to Sidney's promotion of poetry as a source of lessons about and from ourselves. That is, whereas earlier critics saw literature as pertaining to the human condition, Bouhours, Boileau, and company see it as illuminating “something beyond that condition” (p. 18).

For Delehanty, a figure more Platonic than Sidney, and one closer to her principle cases, is Pascal. The first chapter defines his thought, which resurfaces in the subsequent chapters as a point of reference. Like Plato, Pascal had doubts about mimetic language as a means to knowledge. Not only that, but in Pascal's view, even reason was of limited epistemological help. The problem with language and reason is that as human instruments they depend on a finite perspective that is out of proportion with the infinity of divine truth and so fails to comprehend it. Pascal does, however, signal an alternate route to truth by distinguishing between the *esprit de géométrie* and the *esprit de finesse*. Whereas the geometrical mind knows by reason, the fine mind knows by instinct, intuition, or the heart. Delehanty singles out heartfelt knowledge and outlines its defining characteristics: it is *subjective*, transmitted between persons and possessed as personal belief; it is *sentimental* in that it is felt rather than apprehended intellectually; its acquisition occurs *passively*, not actively; and as a matter of desire more than ability or education, it is *universally* accessible. These features of knowledge conveyed through the heart serve throughout the book to identify the common bent of its assembly of critics. To varying degrees, all the critics, in affirming literary ways to know the transcendent, follow Pascal in his rejection of "the mimetic model of representation" and its "singular perspective" in favor of "another model which goes beyond the finite realm" (p. 52).

Because literature deals in representations as its stock-in-trade, the record of a literary criticism that would shun representation is bound to be mixed. This history begins in chapter two with Bouhours, who "overlays a theological and a literary concept," marrying "Pascalian thought with the latest literary criticism of the period" (p. 54). In doing so, he is drawn to the notion of the *je ne sais quoi* as a form of the ineffable. He endows it with the aspects of Pascal's heartfelt knowledge and attributes it to what he describes as revelatory experiences of friendship, nature, and literature as well as Scripture. The "easy analogy" between sacred and profane implied by this diffusion of ineffability proved controversial, since not everyone in early modern France subscribed to the Jesuit doctrine that good works on earth sped one's progress to heaven (p. 62). Nonetheless, Delehanty argues that Bouhours's assertions laid grounds for comparison between human and divine realms—and humanly and divinely inspired texts in particular—that other critics would explore, map, and cultivate.

The first of these critics is Boileau, the subject of chapter three. Delehanty finds that in his early reflections on the sublime, Boileau expresses, more than Bouhours, a "separation between the realm of representation and that of transcendental truth," corresponding to decisive movements "from the artist to the audience, from the art object to the art experience, and from the judgment to the sentiment of the audience" (p. 80). These distinctions respect the balanced emphasis on poetic rules and education as well as feelings in the Longinian text that Boileau popularized, *Peri Hypsous* (*On the Sublime*). As his thinking develops, however, he accentuates the importance of emotions more. This sentimental bias reinforces arguments made by other Ancients that great literature evokes timeless and universal emotions and so is impervious to the advancement of reason touted by Moderns like Charles Perrault. In its "final development," Boileau's concept of literary response asserts an "inalienable connection" between sublime art and the Bible (p. 94). At the same time, his fear of religious backlash against conflating literature and Scripture leads him to downplay formal features, favoring "the experience of the sublime" at the expense of "its production" (p. 97). Delehanty thus wonders whether the later Boileau loses track of the literary work and is even talking about poetry anymore.

In the next chapter (four) Delehanty interprets Rapin's criticism as an incremental step away from the combined criticisms of Bouhours and Boileau. Like them, he asserts that literary knowing happens in the heart and so originates in divinity. Here the definition of heartfelt knowledge returns to connect Rapin's thought to the Pascalian model. Rapin "shares with Bouhours and Boileau the desire to make more precise the distinctions between the purviews of reason and the heart" (p. 114). But while for Bouhours and Boileau literary knowledge is also *about* divinity, for Rapin such knowledge concerns human affairs. (Moreover, it is not just literary: great things and persons—think Louis XIV—can generate sublimity

as much as poetry can). Sublimity does transmit knowledge otherwise inaccessible to reason, but the feelings thereby released ultimately serve to enable reason and instill virtue.

Delehanty turns to the English Dennis in chapter five, where she observes “how literary criticism was changing in order to reconcile religion and poetry,” and yet in the process was revealing incompatibilities between the two (p. 127). Dennis contends outright that poetry and religion have the same means and goals. In order to make this argument, he concentrates entirely on the effects of poetry and keeps them separate from the transcendental. Poetry prepares the mind to know higher things, but those things do not come from poetry per se. Understood as a propaedeutic to religion, poetry cooperates with religion but stays off its turf. Dennis’s notion of a poetic state of preparedness for divine truth or truths reflects a “model of mind” according to which reason must be reformed by the passions (p. 132). Philosophy insists to the contrary that the passions must be corrected by reason and so goes about things the wrong way. Only poetry can restore the harmony among the faculties that was lost after the Fall and so reorient the mind toward divinity. Despite this special relationship between poetry and religion, fault lines between them surface. When Dennis “wants religion to make use of reason or poetry to contain divine revelation,” his theory of mind gets “murky,” and when that happens, he retreats “away from suggesting that poetry can reconcile the human faculties as entirely and as extensively as revelation” (p. 138). The accords between poetry and religion, and so between the passions and reason, threaten to buckle under the weight of the transcendent.

Dubos, the last critic on Delehanty’s roster, occupies chapter six and represents the culmination of the trend away from divine and toward terrestrial knowledge. The genius needed to make great art is implanted by God, but after that, the artist does the rest, and the artistic product is secular. Whereas Rapin and Dennis would have poetry give lessons in human virtue, Dubos allows it to offer “possible exemplarity, not moral transformation” (p. 153). Furthermore, insofar as it fulfills an instinctive need for distraction, the purpose of poetry is not just “secular” but “material” too (p. 153). Dubos does appeal to the knowledge of the heart modeled by Pascal and deployed in previous criticism, but he understands the heart as a medium of aesthetic judgment rather than divine revelation. In this role, the heart takes precedence over reason: reason can determine *why* art pleases only after the heart indicates *that* art pleases. The “radical” elevation of the heart relative to reason entails the demotion of science as a key to knowledge: “When we follow reason, we find ourselves making mistakes continually. If we trust our sentiments, however, we rarely go amiss. This leads Dubos to an outright rejection of science” (p. 166). Yet, as Delehanty suggests, the victory of literature has a leveling effect. The status to which Dubos elevates literature—defined as a distraction necessitated by human physiology—is difficult to distinguish from that of any sensation or brain activity triggered by interaction with the material world.

In a brief conclusion, Delehanty reflects on the group tendency of her critics to flounder in attempting to describe how literature conveys transcendental knowledge. As she remarks, the fact that one has trouble explaining how human language handles superhuman matters is not much of a surprise. Nevertheless, deep into the eighteenth century, critics like Francis Hutcheson and Samuel Johnson persisted in theorizing how literature might do just that, and often in the same terms of sublimity and the *je ne sais quoi* as their forerunners. In the end, Delehanty chalks up such obstinacy to the urge to stop one’s wonder at art from being reduced to a vain and fleeting *divertissement*.

As the preceding paragraphs imply, Delehanty mounts a sharp argument. Aside from a few obscure patches, section builds on section and chapter builds on chapter, all written in clear, no-nonsense prose. She brings a fresh and coherent perspective to a complex, watershed moment in the modern history of ideas. In and of itself, that is no mean accomplishment. Naturally, the acuity of this intervention comes at a cost. Since the works of Bouhours, Boileau, Rapin, Dennis, and Dubos are all viewed through a Pascalian optic, the precision of Delehanty’s analyses flows from preliminary discussion of Pascal, which stabilizes his thought so that it may function as an analytical instrument. This is a tall order given the multifarious and volatile nature of that thought. On the one hand, the rigor of Delehanty’s method

impresses. She extracts a template of heartfelt knowledge from the *Pensées* and then holds it up against each critic to trace a neat line of influence. Also, since Pascal's impact in the history of ideas, compared, say, to the impact of Descartes, is sometimes underestimated or ignored, Delehanty's approach provides a salutary corrective.

On the other hand, she has to do a considerable amount of pounding, or cutting, in order to massage Pascal's ideas into a consistent setting for the story she wants to relate. She neglects, for example, ways in which Pascal's thinking and career manifested dialectical relations between the categories that she paints as diametrically opposed. The pattern repeated in this study involves critics elevating poetry by associating it with religion but then backing away in order not to incur religious ire. While early modern authors no doubt looked to religion for models of literary value, the reverse happened too. In the *Provinciales*, a text not considered by Delehanty, Pascal applied theology to literary structure as much as the other way around. Authors like Jean Racine in France and John Milton in England (whom Dennis considers to be "the sublimest" of English poets) offered still stronger cases where religion revolves around literature, at least to a significant degree.[1] Part of the issue here stems from the artificial division between literary theory and practice assumed at the root of Delehanty's project. Her exclusive reliance on theoretical texts gives her account an old-fashioned feel, reminiscent of the scholarship of Samuel Monk from 1935, to which Delehanty refers prominently in her conclusion.[2] Such an approach fails to do justice to a period when criticism as a discrete genre did not exist as it would later.

It would be churlish, however, to complain overmuch about weaknesses, particularly when they correspond to strengths. The gaps in Delehanty's book do not prevent some exciting implications from cropping up beyond the horizon of the argument proper. One of these has to do with the field of literature, which during the early modern period was in an embryonic state. Delehanty uses the terms "literature" and "literary" uncritically, but in fact her narrative exposes fault lines between the cluster of practices that those terms would eventually designate and the practices of religion and science. So, while the voices of Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Viala are not heard in this book, the reader is nonetheless invited to bring them into fruitful dialogue with Delehanty's voice.[3] Her thoughtful book therefore contributes substantially to ongoing discussions of how literature arrived at its station in modern culture.

NOTES

[1] John Dennis, "Remarks on a Book Entitled, Prince Arthur, An Heroick Poem" (1696), *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, 2 vols., ed. E. N. Hooker (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), 1-106.

[2] Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, (New York: Modern Language Association, 1935).

[3] I am thinking, for example, of Viala's *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985) and the discussion of the *Provinciales* on pp. 173-5. As for Bourdieu, see, among many pertinent works, his *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172