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Tili Boon Cuillé, *Divining Nature. Aesthetics of Enchantment in Enlightenment France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. xiii + 350 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781503613362.

Review by Hanna Roman, Dickinson College.

Tili Boon Cuillé's newest book, *Divining Nature*, is a truly valuable contribution to the state of French Enlightenment studies today, convincingly demonstrating what is becoming increasingly apparent: that this movement was neither a clean break with the past, nor a definitive rejection of religion and spirituality, nor a neat split between the sciences and the arts. Through four close readings, each juxtaposing observations and discourses of the natural world with theories of art, theater, opera, poetry, myth, and music, Cuillé illustrates the importance of taking Enlightenment disciplines on their own terms and questioning the divisions and assumptions that have since been placed upon them. In so doing, she shows the deep ties between theories of nature and theories of aesthetics in the creation and interpretation of works of art—ties that were based not only in empiricism and reason but also in inspiration and belief.

To use the terms of eighteenth-century epistemology, the book itself is a system, a beautifully constructed machine. The author proposes to follow the methods of her actors, "proceeding systematically from their scientific methodology to their aesthetic conclusion," in order to reveal the kinds of questions they were asking about the experience or "spectacles" of both nature and art (pp. 22-23). Indeed, the processes of knowing nature and creating art both revolved around the idea that the natural world was a theater, of which spectators could only see the final illusion represented on stage. The mechanics behind the scenes that produced this image were not visible to the human eye, and thus the observation of the world or the stage had to include an element of intuition or guesswork—hence the word "divining" in the title of this book. As Cuillé describes it, this sensing of *rappports* between the visible and the invisible, between the world and the mind was "a moment of insight or a leap of faith" (something scholars of the Enlightenment have traditionally been hesitant to assign to the definition of reason), both a "vital stage in the empirical method" but also an activity linked to "spirituality and the occult" (p. 12). As Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison have argued, through inductive reasoning considered to mark advancements in natural knowledge at the time, empiricism and reason were at once epistemological, aesthetic, and spiritual processes. [1] Cuillé raises the profile of aesthetics in the hierarchy of eighteenth-century knowledge—an important addition to scholarship as aesthetics has often been narrowly defined or tacked on as an after-effect of scientific knowledge, instead of integral to it. Aesthetics was always "part and parcel of epistemology," the bridge between "sensation and sentiment" (pp. 17-18). To experience and admire the "spectacle of nature" was to

know nature itself. Wonder and even religious experiences such as the sublime were not anti-scientific, but rather pushed viewers to want to know more and to continue to imagine what they could not directly see.

Each chapter of the book pairs two well-known eighteenth-century authors in this new light, unpacking for today's readers the elisions and subtle dialogues between the arts and natural sciences. A more holistic view of Enlightenment intellectual activity, of what it meant to know and experience, is presented. Furthermore, each chapter ends with a discussion of the physical spaces of wonder and enchantment where the authors' ideas would have been enacted in the Enlightenment, from natural history museums and the opera to cathedrals and academic societies. The reader of Cuillé's book is grounded in a material reality, but also understands the continuity between ideas, texts, and spaces of knowledge that helped to maintain a sense of wonder in the Enlightenment.

The first chapter brings together Buffon and Rameau, examining how these authors represent nature in their works. Cuillé works with the idea of wonder in this chapter, moving beyond Daston and Parks' contribution to the subject, and contending that Enlightenment reason did not abandon older and more spiritual meanings of wonder as it moved towards secularization.[2] Instead, the search for natural law and first causes was also a search for natural harmony, and physical and religious explanations of natural phenomena were not always clearly delineated. Both the naturalist and the musician saw themselves as possessing the talent and "the heightened ability to perceive simultaneously form and force, structure and process [...] to mediate between the particular and the general" (pp. 36-37). Through *rappports* and inductive reasoning, they 'divined' the backstage workings of the spectacle of nature. Of particular significance (at least for myself, as a scholar of Buffon) in this chapter is Cuillé's analysis of Buffon's reading of Genesis at the beginning of his *Époques de la nature* (1778). In a few short pages, she articulates what I have always believed about the natural historian and his contemporaries (however much they argued about the finer points of the matter): that he did not reject faith and belief, but rather used them as tools in the construction of natural knowledge. Buffon's work revealed that "Enlightenment can [...] be acquired via revelation or research" (p. 51).

In Chapter 2 Diderot and Rousseau are in dialogue, via the question of the representation of life in art and on the theatrical stage. Could the imitation and illusion of life—degrees of verisimilitude—arouse as much "enthusiasm" (one of Cuillé's key words in this chapter) as the observation of life itself (p. 86)? The bridge between experience and belief is explored, focusing on questions that both philosophers pondered about the extent to which works of "illusion" and "enhanced reality" could not just imitate but remake the world, through the creative ability of the person who made these works—the "genius" who could, effectively, produce an experience of feeling and reason akin to reality. More than just emulating reality, such works moreover participated in the construction of what Cuillé calls a "relational truth" beyond "isolated facts, objects, or signs"; that is, "a more universal, enduring, or persuasive truth" (pp. 139-40). The chapter attests to the power and importance of fiction in the eighteenth century, showing how aesthetic form was not only a means of pleasure and divertissement, but also shaped collective experience, belief, and identity.

Chapters 3 and 4 continue to examine fiction and the merging of truth and belief into credible and influential histories. The former looks at Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's classification and depiction of nature in his *Études de la nature* and specifically in *Paul et Virginie*. Saint-Pierre's

novel collected facts and observations about Mauritius but did not simply present them to the reader. Instead, *rapports* were ‘divined’ and “a collectivity or a whole”—a new, more lyrical and well-balanced nature—was created, one that presented the island as a “botanical garden” (pp. 145-48). This was the harmonious, generalizing lens through which the French sought to view the lands, and especially the islands, they colonized.[3] It was meant to both convince and inspire readers, engendering a quasi-religious feeling, a “sentiment of divinity, casting past fiction to belief” (p. 196). In the conclusion of the book, Cuillé suggests that the fields of environmental studies and ecocriticism might benefit from an understanding of the importance of spirituality in the creation of knowledge and the perception of the environment in the Enlightenment. In the chapter on Saint-Pierre especially, the argument might have been strengthened by engagement with the literature of these contemporary fields, in order to further investigate the power of not only natural history but fiction, language, imagination, and spirituality in European interactions with and treatments of real environments. Moreover, such a discussion would help to better acknowledge the serious and harmful consequences that arose from believing nature to be a unified and harmonious spectacle and making the places (in this case, the islands) colonized by the French conform to this point of view.

In Chapter 4, the ability of fiction to shape belief—this time on the scale of national identity—is studied through questions of authenticity, translation, and verisimilitude in the French reception of the Ossian epics, notably Mme de Staël’s interpretation. These poems had a powerful impact on how French writers constructed and shaped the history of their country, moving from a national story of Classical origins to one of a Gallic past. Scholars such as Daniel Brewer and William Max Nelson have investigated the French Enlightenment’s obsession with time, and especially with transforming the past into something useful and relevant for the nation’s future.[4] Cuillé shows how these questions and anxieties emerged from within fiction and poetry, and how the construction of identity and association of France with a purer and more ancient Golden Age came out of the epic poem’s ability to blur time and to make the past seem present “regardless of whether or not the past actually transpired.” In this way, the reader feels memories that he or she may not have actually experienced, and a shared belief, a sense of “melancholy,” in the ruins of a common past is created (pp. 207-08). Cuillé’s approach here, and throughout the book, is a fascinating and important contribution to the rethinking of Enlightenment that is happening in scholarship today: far from rejecting myth, religion, and spirituality, its authors relied profoundly on these forces in the articulation of “curiosity, reason, analysis, and judgment” (p. 254). Aesthetics, religion, and reason indeed went hand in hand in the formation of knowledge in the eighteenth century.

NOTES

[1] Objectivity in eighteenth-century natural sciences came from “extracting nature’s essences” in order to discover a more perfect, purer, and generalized archetype. The natural historian should not be “enslaved to nature as it appeared” but should go beyond the accidental, towards an ideal (Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* [New York: Zone Books, 2007], pp. 69, 59).

[2] Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

[3] On the perception of islands as allegories for Eden and objects of European fantasy, see Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1800* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 4-9.

[4] Daniel Brewer, *The Enlightenment Past: Reconstructing Eighteenth-Century French Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); William Max Nelson, *The Time of Enlightenment. Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year One* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

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