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Daniel Roche, Pascal Bastien, Frédéric Charbonneau, Vincent Milliot, Philippe Minard, and Michel Perrot, eds. *Les Lumières minuscules d'un vitrier parisien: souvenirs, chansons et autres textes (1757–1802) de Jacques Louis Ménétra*. Chêne Bourg: Georg, 2023. 456 pp. Illust. 30.00 CHF (pb). ISBN 978-2825713082.

Review by Clare Haru Crowston, University of Illinois Urbana Champagne.

This book represents the second phase of a long-term editorial project by Daniel Roche, one of the foremost historians of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. In 1982, Roche introduced the world to *Journal de ma vie*, the life story of Jacques-Louis Ménétra (1738–1812), one of the only known plebeian autobiographies of eighteenth-century France.[1] Discovered by Roche at the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP), the journal consists of 331 pages of manuscript text, written without punctuation and spelled phonetically. Ménétra wrote the autobiography around 1800, with the assistance of earlier contemporaneous writings. The journal recounts Ménétra's life from a difficult childhood at the hand--and boots--of his father, himself a master glazier, through apprenticeship in family workshops, a lengthy tour de France, his return to Paris, and a settled life as a family man and guild master. The journal ends with Ménétra's account of his active participation in the sectional politics of the early Revolution, his disgust and fear during the Terror, and his sense of relief with the "new order of things" under Napoleon.[2] Roche accompanied the published version of the journal with a six-chapter historical commentary situating Ménétra's text within its broader context of French popular culture and everyday life. Published a year after Roche's *Le Peuple de Paris: Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle*, the commentary drew on Ménétra's autobiography to bring the book's themes to life and, in particular, to reflect on how working people experienced the fundamental changes in French politics, society, and culture from the time of Louis XV to Napoleon.[3]

Little discussed in the 1982 publication, Ménétra's oeuvre in the BHVP includes a second set of texts, consisting of 169 folios containing 4,300 lines of text in a broad array of genres, including poems, songs, and prose reflections, as well as acrostics, epitaphs, and other formulaic pieces. A group of scholars and former students collaborated to complete Roche's scholarly edition of this work, which Ménétra himself had compiled, along with his journal, under the title *Ecrits divers*. Published a decade after the 2011 festschrift celebrating the historian's work [4], itself edited by three members of the team responsible for *Ecrits divers*, this book provides further testimony of the enduring impact of Roche's work and the lifelong esteem he inspired among his students.[5]

Like Roche's edition of *Journal de ma vie*, this work is a publication in two parts. The first consists of transcriptions of the many short texts that constitute the *Ecrits divers*, with spelling, grammar, and punctuation modernized to render the text accessible to readers. The texts are prefaced by a

short introduction by Michel Porret and two articles published by Daniel Roche shortly after the appearance of *Journal de ma vie*. In addition to modernizing the text, the editors have skillfully annotated it, identifying as far as possible the individuals, events, and places that Ménétra referenced. They also identify the published texts that Ménétra appropriated as the basis for many of his own writings, in a pattern of textual borrowing and cross-referencing that was common in the period. The essays themselves are rendered inter-textual through the inclusion of related chapter titles at the bottom of each one (sadly not clickable in the printed edition).

The second part of the volume consists of short essays, each written by a member of the editorial team. In lieu of the extended historical commentary that Roche undertook for *Journal de ma vie*, whose six chapters constitute a short monograph in and of themselves, the editors of this book have chosen the more informal format of the alphabet book (abécédaire) as a means to convey their scholarly assessment. Starting with *aventure*, continuing through *obeissance/ordre public*, and culminating with *zygomatique*, the collection provides twenty-six short chapters on key themes raised by Ménétra's writing, each accompanied by a relevant image from a contemporary engraving. It is surely not an accident that this format mirrors the playfulness, wit, and brevity of the pieces that constitute the *Ecrits* themselves. As the editors promise, the book allows for an engaging and enjoyable reading experience, allowing dipping and browsing, either in Ménétra's text or in the short accompanying essays.

It must be said that this editorial approach may not fully satisfy those looking for a more sustained and developed analysis of the text. The essays often raise as many questions as they answer and the distribution of authorship among many editors results in a degree of repetition that becomes evident if one reads straight through from A to Z. The slight disappointment with the level of historical analysis is relative to the richness of the material and the insight it promises to historians across a wide range of fields. Whereas the text of the *Journal of My Life* was composed well after the events recounted, these writings composed throughout his adult life--and sometimes precisely dated--allow us to probe them cautiously for access to Ménétra's contemporaneous experience of events. They provide crucial insight into the role that writing and textual production played throughout his life, emphasizing the intimate connections between writing, singing, jokes, and story-telling, as well as the constant process of reflection expressed in his writing through musings about his own identity and his relation to others, as well as about the political and social order of his time and the nature of the divine.

On the theme of orality, for example, readers of the journal will be aware of the key role of drinking and visiting cabarets as a form of male sociability, especially among his fellow companions on the tour de France and alongside neighborhood cronies after his return to Paris. The *Ecrits divers* provide us with many songs Ménétra wrote himself, or, more often, adapted from existing standards, allowing further appreciation of the role of orality and singing in popular culture. His sentimental and often cringy love poetry (also liberally borrowed from existing works) and his pious declarations about the nature of the divine are fascinating to read against the obscene verses celebrating all possible conjugations of the verb *foutre*.

For historians of eighteenth-century labor and the guilds, Ménétra's diatribes against the corporate hierarchy provide invaluable insight into how a man who defined himself in many ways by his mastery of his craft, and who retained a lifelong nostalgic adherence to the collective masculine solidarity of the *compagnonnage*, yet passionately loathed the guild hierarchy. These sentiments are vehemently expressed in the journal where we have the choral version of his

revolt, which must have been sung loudly and with gusto in Parisian cabarets. Ménétra's multiple writings devoted to the French Revolution constitute another highlight of the collection. They range from extended reflections on the genesis of the Terror to accounts of specific revolutionary *journées* to defenses of his own conduct directed against political rivals. His "Sur la Journée de Neuf Thermidor An [II]," for example, the day of Robespierre's downfall, is a riveting and extremely rare first-hand narration of how an eager adherent of the early Revolution—one who played a key role in sectional leadership—experienced the chaotic events of the day. His bitter attack on the rivals who sought his own downfall sheds light on the atmosphere of neighbor against neighbor, denunciation, rumor, and conspiracy through which Parisians experienced the upheavals of the Terror and its aftermath.

One of the key areas of focus of the editors, which inspired the title *Les Lumières minuscules d'un vitrier parisien*, is the status of Ménétra as a plebeian author and thinker, and his engagement with the texts and themes of the French Enlightenment. Like many Parisian children of the mid-eighteenth century, Ménétra learned reading, writing, and arithmetic in his local parish school. As a choir boy, he also acquired musical training and some exposure to Latin. The *Ecrits divers* reveal two central tenets of Ménétra's philosophical reflection that preoccupied him through his adult life. The first was a constant and defiant insistence on individual liberty against the constraints of a highly collective and hierarchical society, while the second, and related, position was his rejection of the authority of the Catholic Church, which he regarded as a font of hypocrisy and which he disavowed in favor of belief in a benevolent Supreme Being.

Where did Ménétra acquire these ideas? As a Parisian glazier, was he unique in engaging in such sustained and self-conscious acts of philosophical and religious speculation? Or was he unique merely in recording his thoughts in prolific written form and having that record survive? The editors, like Daniel Roche before them, attribute Ménétra the intellectual to a mixture of factors, some collective and some individual. On the collective side were his parish school education (which some three-quarters of Parisian children enjoyed), the self-confidence and cultural exposure he acquired through apprenticeship and many years of travel across France as a journeyman, and, on his return to Paris, access to the burgeoning print literature and critical public sphere of the capital. More particular to Ménétra, the editors suggest, were his capacity to command an audience with story-telling, jokes, pranks, and song, and what shines through in his writings as an innate thirst to know himself and the world around him and to express his thoughts orally and in writing. His conversation was sufficiently interesting to win him the friendship of Jean-Jacques Rousseau when their paths crossed in Paris, and Rousseau became the North Star of the glazier's philosophical quest.

The editors' assessment of the profundity and originality of Ménétra's work is conveyed clearly by the book's title. Ménétra may rightly claim a place in the Enlightenment pantheon, but the awkwardness of his verse, his derivative reliance on other texts, and the banality of his philosophical speculations led them to emphasize the paltriness of the light he cast. The lessons to be drawn from his literary oeuvre, they suggest, lie not in the contents of his writings or any stylistic achievements, but in the example he provides of the extensive access plebeian subjects could gain to Enlightenment thought and, as a corollary, their potential freedom from traditional notions of piety, decency, deference, and respect. In short, we are to consider this a work of cultural and social history, not intellectual.

That judgement seems fair enough and does not detract from the intrinsic interest of the oeuvre, but even on those terms, there are some noteworthy absences in a collection that otherwise spans an admirable range of themes. First, like Roche, the editors make much of the centrality of sexual pleasure for Ménétra, the freedom to pursue and engage in carnal delight being fundamentally connected to his quest for freedom of thought and belief. They are careful to note the way sexual coercion and rape feature in the glazier's list of adventures alongside flirtation, casual sex, and longer-lasting affairs. What is lacking is a sustained reflection on the place of gender, both masculinity and femininity, in the worldview and self-understanding of Ménétra: G stands here for "grande gueule," (p. 281) rather than "genre." The centrality for Ménétra of a collective masculinity centered on the workshop and cabaret is a recurring sidenote, but it does not benefit from even a few pages of sustained discussion. F is for "femmes" (p. 273) and the essay catalogues Ménétra's relations with a series of women who played a crucial role in his life: the paternal grandmother, who raised him; the wife, with whom he had a difficult relationship; and the long series of widows, wives, daughters, nuns, and other women whom he described as the "game" for his hunt. The essays feel like a missed opportunity not to have attempted to read Ménétra against the grain to understand what notion of women's desire, pleasure, fear, violence, and overall agency emerge from the text, either in Ménétra's imaginary or that of the women he encountered.

A final quibble is that in this era of technical wonders, one wonders how computational techniques might have been brought to bear on the textual analysis. For example, text mining might have allowed the editors to identify more precisely where, how, and from whom Ménétra borrowed published texts, which would in turn have shed greater light on his process of composition and his familiarity with print materials. Such techniques might also have allowed for a more rigorous and systematic analysis of the themes, of the word choice of this author, and perhaps would have allowed his minuscule light to shine a little brighter.

For the many readers who have benefited immeasurably from Menetra's voice, with its unique combination of pride in craft skill, love of humor and practical jokes, curiosity about the self, and profound engagement with the life of the mind, the appearance of this new edition is a very welcome second opportunity to learn from and spend time in the company of the master glazier. The publication of this volume is yet another reminder of the great legacy Daniel Roche has left behind.

NOTES

[1] The book, which contained a foreword by Robert Darnton, was subsequently translated into English by Arthur Goldhammer and appeared in English as Daniel Roche, ed. *Journal of My Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[2] Roche, ed. *Journal*, 236.

[3] Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris, Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1981). The book was published in English as Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture*, trans. Marie Evans in association with Gwynne Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

[4] Vincent Millot, Philippe Minard, Michel Porret, eds. *La Grande Chevauchée: Faire de l'histoire avec Daniel Roche* (Paris: Droz, 2011).

[5] News of the tragic passing of Philippe Minard reached me as I was reviewing proofs for this review. I wish to express my admiration for his brilliance as a historian and my gratitude to him for his friendship and support over the years.

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