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Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics, and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xi + 346 pp. Notes, index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8018-8476-4.

Review by Geoffrey Turnovsky, University of Washington.

The cultural field of the French Enlightenment has offered fruitful terrain for exploring the “modernization” of intellectual practices, with scholars especially drawn to the philosophe, on one hand, as a precursor to the authoritative intellectual of the twentieth-century, and to the Rousseauist outsider, on the other, who anticipates the alienated Romantic. These figures materialized in sharp opposition to each other, of course. Yet they shared key traits as emblematic of their modernity, most notably a common claim to transcendence and singularity, which they articulated in the form of a claim to autonomy from a social and political elite that, for centuries, had established the framework in which intellectual activities — along with their practitioners and products — would acquire visibility and value.

In her provocative, exhaustively researched and immensely rich *Styles of Enlightenment*, Elena Russo proposes an alternative account built on the apparent historiographical paradox according to which the eighteenth-century figures generally celebrated today as “modern” actually looked backwards for their self-presentational vocabulary to the *ancien* camp of the seventeenth-century quarrel between Ancients and Moderns. In this respect, the philosophes and what Russo calls the “partisans of the sublime model” of intellectual selfhood — for instance, Antoine-Léonard Thomas who in his 1773 *Essai sur les éloges* described the *homme de lettres* as “a man to whom nature has given an inescapable preeminence; he is the protector of the nation, its sovereign, its king” (pp. 202-03) — constructed themselves as the heirs to the classically-oriented paradigms forged by Boileau or Racine, whose elevation had consisted in their “official” designation as the defenders of timeless ideals. In a recurring, ambiguous but illuminating turn of phrase, Russo classifies this group of writers as a “new wave of the ancients” (pp. 32-34).

Styles of Enlightenment in turn highlights “against a historiography that has trivialized it” (p. 8) those in the eighteenth century who took up the banner of the Moderns and advanced what Russo calls *le goût moderne*. Ironically, she points out, these writers — with Pierre de Marivaux being the most important among them — “soon came to be seen as anything but modern” (p. 259) by subsequent historians of the Enlightenment. This is because their “modernity,” as it was constructed in the framework set by the Ancients/Moderns quarrel, lay in a condition that would ultimately not be associated with any progress in intellectual life but would instead come to represent everything that the modern era had to overcome: the integration of writers into the fabric of an elite culture of refinement and leisure, whose core principles and practices they incorporated into both their “literary” expression and individual compartments. *Le goût moderne* thus drew on the rituals of aristocratic

pastime, celebrating pleasurable interactions, effortless wit and improvisational abilities — qualities that were subsumed within the larger and, for Russo, crucial concept of *esprit* — , along with the capacity to adapt to shifting circumstances and interlocutors. Theorists of worldly sociability had since the seventeenth century elevated this latter quality as *discernement*, which conveyed a keen awareness of the current conditions in which one found oneself in order to gauge how best to please. The Moderns were therefore also modern by virtue of their self-consciousness and willingness to perform. With irony, playfulness, as well as with considerable anguish, they embraced the protean, rhetorical nature of their socialized selves as the essence of their identities rather than sought to transcend this mutability for distorting or corrupting this essence. Yet it was precisely their reflective embeddedness in the “here and now” — and specifically, in the here and now of the aristocratic social life from which the philosophes declared their independence — that has consigned these *littérateurs*, dismissed as *beaux-esprit*, to the dustbin of history.

Russo thereby traces an unexpected genealogy of modernity, one that reaches back into the fount of Classical-era *mondanité* and its engagement by *gens de lettres* in such formats as treatises of civility or salon poetry. The first chapters of the book reconstitute and flesh out an “almost unbroken line” leading from the circle of Madame de Rambouillet and its “aesthetics of *galanterie*” to the *goût moderne* of the early part of the eighteenth century: “Even though such continuity remains mostly unacknowledged and unformulated, most of the aesthetic and ethical criteria operative in the eighteenth century were put into place at that earlier time” (pp. 36-37). Her argument is strong and thoroughly compelling. And the analysis is incisive, indeed, all the more so given its counter-intuitive inclinations. Russo strives to throw familiar phenomena — for instance, conventionalized categories like *marivaudage*, referring to the amorous banter that has come to characterize Marivaux’s dialogue — into fresh new light.

There is also enormous breadth and variety to this investigation. The *goût moderne* is explored in its complex interconnections with an exhilarating range of questions regarding aesthetics, style and genre; authorship and intellectual identity; politics, philosophy, and ethics. In the second half, extending the theme of performativity, the book shifts to the theater with a chapter on the appropriation of the stage as a forum for eloquence and for the celebration of the sublimated intellectual — *le grand homme* — by those such as Louis-Sebastian Mercier who rejected the paradigm of *esprit*. The following chapter examines how late eighteenth-century audiences then rebelled against this philosophical drama along with the passive, spectatorial role that it imposed on them. Russo draws on a remarkably eclectic, inter-disciplinary corpus including plays, novels, journalistic writings, historical texts, art-works and art criticism; and she shows great dexterity and finesse in her mobilization of what are at times markedly divergent discourses and texts. Chapter six examines the anti-imperial historiography of another key *moderne*, Montesquieu, who, in his antipathy for the all-seeing, elevated point of view, repudiates the grand narrative approach of Voltaire and his predecessors, Fénelon and Bossuet, in order to “follow[...] unfamiliar pathways and rearrange[...] the events along new axes” (p.170). Russo analyzes the stylistic implications of this vision, which play out in Montesquieu’s penchant for incorporating *esprit*-inspired rhetorical flourishes — “disjointed sentences [*style coupé*]” and “surprising expressions [*traits saillants*]” (p.180) — into a genre calling for a loftier discourse. This language is then connected to his concept of the emotions (drawn in part from Descartes) and to his philosophical vision, steeped in an Augustinian “anthropology of *inquiétude*” (p. 185). Finally, Russo turns seamlessly to Montesquieu’s political theory, which, she contends, integrates the

characteristic openness of the *goût moderne*, emphasizing pluralism, pleasure and conciliation rather than the uncompromising cohesiveness that Rousseau and the Revolutionaries would stipulate.

This range is, in my mind, one of the book's great strengths, offering new insights into what is persuasively shown to be a fertile intellectual counter-culture. It also opens up a wealth of intriguing, pertinent questions, which present themselves as opportunities to probe further the underappreciated legacy of the *goût moderne*. Indeed, one effect of the effort to rescue the ethics and aesthetics of *esprit* from its intensely negative caricature in the eighteenth century is a tendency to paint the anti-*esprit* neo-classicists as an overly homogenous group. In their ranks, Russo identifies established philosophes: Voltaire, d'Alembert and La Harpe, as well as philosophically-inclined but distinct figures such as Diderot and Thomas. Then there is Mercier who plays in Russo's study a particularly prominent role in the cultural reaction to *les modernes*. And in the offing is the revolutionary oratory of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, Jean-Paul Marat and Jean-Louis Carra (p. 98). There is a lot going on in this congregation of writers, and certainly, the rich analysis of *goût moderne* in its many permutations calls for an equally rich consideration of the varieties and nuances of the rejection of this key paradigm.

Which brings up a further question, one that might initially be accessed through the problem of temporality that the study appears to raise. The heyday of the *goût moderne* was, say, the 1710s to the 1740s — Russo identifies 1721 as "the height" of the movement (p. 40) and the works of Marivaux and Montesquieu on which she bases much of her analysis really do not go beyond the 1740s. What then is the nature of the relationship between the culture of *esprit* and the "Enlightenment"? It would seem at first that the *goût moderne* was an oppositional current, existing as a continual challenge to Enlightenment orthodoxy — Russo presents the *bel-esprit* who incarnates the *goût moderne* as the "enemy" of the philosophe (p. 1) — but which was suppressed from "official" history by the ultimate triumph of the *lumières* narrative. In 1721, though, Voltaire was very much aspiring to the ideal of the *bel-esprit*. In the 1740s, he was composing *divertissements de cour* at Versailles. Conversely, once the "Enlightenment" gets going in the middle of the century [1], the *bel-esprit* appears relevant primarily as a negative trope in the self-presentational rhetoric of those committed to the ideal of the "serious" writer. More exactly, it exists as an anxious, fraught device inasmuch as the hostility of the neo-classicists to the ethos of *esprit* so often calls attention to the extent to which they were caught up in it. Diderot's article "Génie" from the *Encyclopédie* put forth an influential statement on the philosophical effort to extirpate from intellectual activity its "intuitive, impetuous side" by promoting linear thought over "simultaneity, digression and multiplicity." But Russo notes, these were "the very qualities that characterize Diderot's own approach to science and the arts" (p. 153).

In other words, the chronology gives the impression that we have here not so much a struggle between two competing visions of modernity as a story of the transformation of *esprit* from a dominant paradigm of intellectual legitimacy into the bad conscience of a new paradigm. An effect of the seventeenth-century integration of writers into polite society, *esprit* becomes the highly charged symbol of this socialization of writers, insofar as elite acculturation remains in the mid eighteenth century the condition of possibility for authoritative intellectual expression, on one hand — writers could hardly bypass the social networks of *le monde* — , but pertains as a condition that must be obfuscated and denied in order to validate that expression, on the other. This is a crucial dynamic of the "sublime" model; the

assertion of transcendence and autonomy on which it rests needs to be accredited by an established public, which at this juncture means a readership of social elites who, in a sense, were prepared to indulge the philosophes in their visions of grandeur.[2] According to the rationality of the *goût moderne*, "[t]he domain of the aesthetic and that of worldliness were coextensive" (p. 143). They remained so throughout the Enlightenment, but while the *bel-esprit* embraced, depicted, and celebrated this fusion, the partisans of the neo-classical paradigm of intellectual identity staked their credibility on its firmly alleged non-existence. The model in this respect was a highly ambivalent one, as is well documented by Russo's study. Not only was Diderot caught up in what Pascal might call a "double pensée," so was d'Alembert, whose rejection of the integration of writers into *le monde* in the *Essai sur les gens de lettres et les grands* — "It was not at the Hôtel de Rambouillet that Descartes discovered the application of algebra to geometry" (cited on p. 197) — was formulated in 1753 at just about the time when he was assuming his long-standing role as a linchpin of the Parisian salon scene. "As for Voltaire's style," Russo goes on to observe, "in such texts as the *Lettres philosophiques* and the *Contes*, it was propelled, not by a desire for the monumental and the eternal, but by the provocation of *esprit* and *saillie*" (p. 262).

That the book concludes on this last point suggests that the reframing of the philosophe and of the Enlightenment more broadly in terms of their acutely ambivalent rooted-ness in an ethics and aesthetics of *mondanité* is one of the more salient aspects of the argument, though it does take longer to emerge relative to the earlier examination of the *goût moderne*. Understandably so given the later timeframe. In any case, the trajectory by which Russo leads us from one to the other is a truly fascinating one. Her book challenges much received wisdom about how *les lumières* unfolded as a critical, "modern" intellectual enterprise, and articulates a compelling, provocative argument. As such, this absorbing, well-written study will be of tremendous interest to a wide range of readers.

NOTES

[1] We might recall Rulhière's famous dating of the "révolution générale qui s'est faite en France dans les lettres et dans les moeurs" in his 1787 reception address to the Académie to 1748-9. See Claude-Carloman de Rulhière, "Esquisse de la révolution générale qui s'est faite en France, dans les lettres et dans les moeurs, vers le milieu du dix-huitième siècle," Discours de réception given June 4, 1787. <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/immortels/index.html>.

[2] "Combien d'émigrés parmi les acheteurs de la première édition de *l'Encyclopédie!*" writes Henri-Jean Martin in *Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), p. 355.

Geoffrey Turnovsky
University of Washington
gt2@u.washington.edu