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Review of Suzanne Dumouchel, *Le Journal littéraire en France au dix-huitième siècle. Émergence d'une culture virtuelle* (2016)

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Reviews

Suzanne Dumouchel, *Le Journal littéraire en France au dix-huitième siècle. Émergence d'une culture virtuelle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2016). 332 pp. ISBN 9780729411745

In a 1736 article in his weekly periodical *Le Pour et le Contre*, Antoine François, abbé Prévost evoked a genre of writing he described as ‘articles littéraires’ [literary articles], referencing two contemporary periodicals that, according to him, practiced this new genre, the *Mercure de France* and *Journal de Verdun*:

On trouve constamment dans l'un et dans l'autre un mélange de nouvelles et de littérature; mais le *Mercure* faisant son objet principal des lettres et de tout ce qui concerne les sciences, les arts et les spectacles n'accorde qu'une partie de ses soins aux nouvelles; et le *Journal* s'attachant au contraire de recueillir tout ce qui peut satisfaire les nouvellistes, n'y mêle quelques articles littéraires que pour les faire servir d'intermèdes à ses relations historiques.

[One finds regularly in both journals a mix of news and literature, but since the *Mercure* has as its main object letters and all that concerns sciences, the arts and theatre, it devotes only a part of its attention to news, and since the *Journal* on the contrary seeks to gather all that may satisfy newsmongers, it only throws in some literary articles to make them serve as intermezzos to its historical reports.]¹

This modern usage of the term ‘literary’ to refer to what eighteenth-century contemporaries might have better known as the field of *belles-lettres* underlies Suzanne Dumouchel's central hypothesis

in her 2012 doctoral dissertation, now published in book form. The hypothesis is that, despite the absence during the eighteenth century of the term ‘journal littéraire’ [literary journal] (which only came into existence in the nineteenth century), a distinct category of publications that could be described as literary journals did indeed emerge during the period 1714–77. These periodicals were defined, formally, by their varied content (the ‘mélange de nouvelles et de littérature’ that Prévost referred to). Sociologically, by providing non-elite audiences with new ways to access knowledge and culture, they helped shape a new ‘virtual culture’ or public sphere, famously associated by Jürgen Habermas with the European Enlightenment movement.

Dumouchel's monograph sets out to unite these two approaches, formal and sociological, but is not altogether facilitated in this by the somewhat methodical structure she adopts. In the first, and by far the longest sections of her study (Parts I and II, in her numbering), Dumouchel describes the formal elements that defined French eighteenth-century literary periodicals, focusing primarily on their varied content. To do so, she studies five periodicals that she considers broadly representative of the genre, the venerable literary institution *Mercure de France* (1672–1820), the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse* (1730–32) by Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines and François Granet, abbé Prévost's *Pour et Contre* (1733–40), the *Année littéraire* (1754–76), edited by Voltaire's sworn enemy, Elie Catherine Fréron, and the *Journal des dames* (1759–78) first founded by Charles-Claude Florent Thorel de Campigneulles and

1 Quoted in Dumouchel, p. 199.

then continued by a succession of editors. While one could quibble about her choice of titles — the little-read *Journal des dames* might seem the odd one out in this company — Dumouchel's approach does the genre justice by pointing out the different kinds of 'trivial' texts (in the sense that Yves Jeanneret gives to the term) that went into a typical issue of one of these periodicals: short works of fiction ('nouvelles'), news items (confusingly also called 'nouvelles', but the equivalent of modern-day journalism), poetry, theatre reviews, readers' letters (mostly fictional), accounts of the proceedings of various academies, the occasional advertisement, and above all the reviews of other works, which placed these periodicals in the tradition of review journals such as Pierre Bayle's famous *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1684–1718).

In the two first parts of her monograph, Dumouchel adopts a largely descriptive approach, setting out the main features of each text genre, and providing examples illustrating them, ranging from gallant 'nouvelles' to what we might describe today as narrative journalism items on the 'Bête du Guévaudan' [Beast of Guévaudan] or the assassination attempt on Louis XV. Importantly, even in news items, information was not simply reported, but also staged, in a fictionalized exchange between authors and readers. Collectively, she argues, these texts therefore contributed towards educating the reader, both by their express content and by modelling a form of sociability and exchange in the dialogues initiated by the personae of the journalist-authors.

Touching on matters of genre, Dumouchel further underlines the overall influence of fictional genres on the content of these literary periodicals. Novels, especially the shorter genre of the 'nouvelle', enjoyed an enduring appeal that inflected much of the periodicals' content. Not only did fictional elements and framing devices creep into news items, as manifested by the catch-all term 'nouvelle' that was applied to both. Fiction was also

the mainstay of the works reviewed in the reviews section. In reviews of historical works, the most important criterion in critics' value judgements was the quality of the narrative, rather than exact historical accuracy. And in accounts of the visual arts, journalists similarly focused not on artistic technique, but on the narrative dimension of the scenes pictured. The persona of the journalist-author, finally, also took on distinct fictional traits, similar to the first-person narrator in a novel, or one of the correspondents in an epistolary exchange.

While providing a rich overview of the variety of genres to be found in these literary periodicals, Dumouchel's ambitious scope also raises some issues regarding chronology and national specificity. These concern, essentially, the ways in which periodicals changed over the period her study covers, 1714–77. Pierre Bayle's ideal Republic of Letters, an imagined, transnational community of readers evoked in the title of his own *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*, and repeatedly referenced by Dumouchel to describe her own corpus, may seem an odd choice in this context. Indeed, it has been argued that by the mid-eighteenth century, the Republic of Letters was no longer a functional conceptual category, at least not in the sense that Bayle had given to the term as an expressly transnational community of readers. Bayle himself had operated in the interstices between nations, as a Huguenot journalist addressing a European-wide audience, but himself based in the Dutch Republic. This is in contrast to Dumouchel's corpus of exclusively French journalists, who all published their works in French, in Paris, and operated within the boundaries of a French state framework. Indeed, by the 1760s, the original, international Republic of Letters had largely given way, throughout Europe, to more nationally defined literary fields. Dumouchel notes that as the Seven Years War (1756–63) unfolded between France and England, journalists began to adopt a more jingoistic tone, for example in two 1762 articles in

the *Journal des dames* and *Année littéraire* on French versus English patriotism. Thus, when Dumouchel pays attention to literary periodicals' role as vectors for broader processes of cultural transfer, it is from within these new, national contexts. Prévost's *Pour et Contre*, in particular, is singled out for the special attention the author paid to English culture, presenting himself as a cultural mediator in translating for his French readership the finest literary productions of their cross-channel neighbours. As described by Dumouchel herself, then, the nationalistic contexts referenced by journalists would seem at odds with the older ideal of the Republic of Letters she uses to describe their productions.

In the monograph's final section, part III, titled 'Du lecteur au public' [From Reader to Audience], Dumouchel turns a more sociological lense on her corpus of literary journals. Her leading question here is how these literary periodicals created a 'communauté virtuelle' – in English one would say a virtual interpretive community – among their readers. Theatre, in this section, serves as a general conceptual framework for the kind of literary sociability showcased by these periodicals, with Dumouchel arguing that they effectively staged various forms of interaction between authors, the outside world, and their imagined readership. Periodicals, first of all, created a 'communications scenario' (p. 73) that sought to theatrically perform culture, by using devices such as the first-person journalist-narrator, and the fictional reader's letter. They also created multiple forms of dialogue. Periodicals dialogued among one another by referencing each other and participating in broader, societal debates such as the debate about inoculation. Individual journalists also engaged in sometimes lively exchanges with real or imagined opponents — as perhaps most memorably illustrated by Fréron's well-known, repeated attacks on Voltaire. In the realm of theatre criticism, although French critics long continued

to espouse a text-based view of theatre, reviewing scripts rather than performances, they did begin to pay attention, if only grudgingly, to the reactions of theatre audiences or 'le public'. Through all these devices, Dumouchel claims, literary periodicals initiated their readers into the practice of literary criticism, signalling 'la prise de conscience du lecteur lui-même et son affirmation face aux autres' [readers' growing awareness of themselves, and their affirmation in relation to others] (p. 223).

This statement, and many others like it, is however not altogether unproblematic, for it points to the missing element in this otherwise very thorough study of eighteenth-century literary periodicals: the real readers of these publications. The exchanges or dialogues Dumouchel describes remain in the realm of the virtual. As already noted, the readers' letters occasionally published in these periodicals were almost invariably fictional, and thus reflected an ideal readership rather than a real one. The reactions of theatre audiences to the latest tragedy played at the Comédie-Française, similarly, were not quite the same thing as a real exchange between the journalist writing a review in the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse*, and the real readers of the *Nouvelliste du Parnasse*. And in her monograph, Dumouchel presents no actual evidence about the 'prise de conscience du lecteur lui-même' apart from the periodicals' mimetic representation of such a readerly awakening. Yet surely, if there is one thing that the last four decades of book history have taught us, it is that readers habitually fail to respond to texts as their authors would have them do so — a notion Dumouchel pays lip service to, in citing de Certeau's work on readers' interpretive autonomy, but whose implications she does not fully draw out in her own work.

In the book's final section, she therefore does some clever conceptual footwork, drawing on the notion of the 'virtual' as a way to model society, i.e. to shape a public sphere by enacting it textually, in order to work around this issue

of missing readers' reactions. This final section is also where the heavy theoretical artillery is rolled out, with references to Kant and Antoine Lilti's association of the public sphere with print culture, Gabriel Tarde's idea of a 'rapport sympathique' [sympathetic rapport] arising between readers simultaneously reading the same texts, similar to Anderson's imagined communities, and of course Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. Other notions, such as that of a deterritorialized 'espace médiatique' [media space] also make their appearance here (appearing to contradict, somewhat, the earlier accounts of heightened nationalist sentiment during the Seven Years War.) This last section, then, points to a more structural issue in this monograph, namely its failure to successfully synthesize the two approaches it adopts to periodicals. It reads, finally, like

two separate works: a first one describing the formal characteristics of eighteenth-century French literary periodicals, and a second one presenting some interesting — but not fully operationalized — ideas about the relation between periodicals and the public sphere. In the final sections, especially, the absence of real readers' reactions to the five periodicals studied feels like a bit of a let-down, given the study's focus on literary dialogue and journalist-reader exchanges. *Le Journal littéraire en France au dix-huitième siècle* provides the reader with a rich overview of the genre of the literary periodical, but ends up leaving her with a vivid evocation of a dialogue in which the voice of only one of the interlocutors is fully heard.

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