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Divining Nature: Aesthetics of Enchantment in Enlightenment France by Tili Boon Cuillé (review)

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Tili Boon Cuillé practices comparative literature not in the intercultural sense but in the interdisciplinary sense, as reflects her training in French literature, history, and musicology. *Divining Nature* takes place primarily within the borders of France, though with allusions to English and Scottish texts and thinkers. Rather than crossing geographical borders, it crosses temporal borders between the Old Regime, Revolution, and First Empire; disciplinary borders between science, literature, visual art, theatre, and religion; and contextual borders including the natural history museum, opera, cathedral, and imperial palace. This ambitious book offers a fruitful model of interdisciplinarity.

Divining Nature proposes a way of reconstructing the intellectual expansiveness and multifarious cross-fertilization of the Enlightenment. Its blurring of boundaries appositely organizes the structural relationships between fields whose defined borders did not exist then as they do today. The study of Diderot, for example, is anachronistically parsed by modern disciplinary divisions (literature, theatre, visual art, philosophy). Who has fully considered the implications of the staggering scope of his interests, and their interrelations?

The book argues that in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth, religion, science, and art were united by an empirical turn, a constitutive component of which was wonder or enchantment, describing the limits of the empirically knowable, the uncertainties of pure deduction or rational philosophy. Wonder harmonized effects related to theology, aesthetics, and epistemology, yet was not reducible to any of these. Wonder dissolved the distinction between reason and instinct, knowledge and belief, allowing intuitive leaps similar to artistic inspiration. An empirical method or sensibility treated the aesthetic effects of the harmonies of nature, figured in myriad intuited *rapports*—resemblances or relationships—whose counterpart was the merging of self and other in an aesthetics that, Cuillé brilliantly observes, aimed "to turn spectators into participants" (259).

Chapter 1 suggests a shared relationship with the empirical method in the unlikely pair of Buffon and Rameau, drawing a convincing parallel between the role of *rapports* and logic of wonder in the *Histoire naturelle* (1749–1804) and the architecture of wonder in *Zoroastre* (1749), culminating in an exemplary reading of a sequence of displacements

of the apparent locus of divinity within the play and between the stage and the spectator. Chapter 2 explores the common development of a kind of proto-expressionist (my term) theory of art criticism in Diderot and Rousseau, which depends on a double identification with the inspiration of the artist (enthusiasm) and the emotions represented in the artwork (pity). Chapter 3 somewhat awkwardly abandons the paired-figure structure to focus on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's bestselling *Paul et Virginie* (1788), by way of Bernard-Germain de Lacépède, and Jean-François Le Sueur's adaptation of the book into an opera. Chapter 4 moves into the Napoleonic era, addressing the French response to Ossian in relation to the work of Germaine de Staël.

Cuillé vividly demonstrates that Enlightenment aesthetics are not—or not only—rigidly moralizing, but also supple, their epistemological scope vast, as their practical scope, uniting science, art, music, religion in common endeavour. She offers a corrective, telling a different narrative of Enlightenment aesthetics, not, as others have done, contrasting "the 'Enlightenment mechanists' to the 'romantic organicists'" (258), one hinging instead on sensationalist and vitalist appreciation of interdependence in nature. To what extent can Staël, an admirer of Herder—a key figure of the Counter-Enlightenment—be understood as an Enlightenment figure? From one perspective, this is really a book about the rise of Romanticism from the seeds of the Enlightenment—*rapports* and movements *hors de soi*, blurring of artistic, ontological, epistemological boundaries, the mutability of the self. Though the lack of a systematic historiographical discussion makes this contribution somewhat difficult to discern, its radical consequence is the dissolving of the tired categories of Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism in the concept of a "sentiment of divinity" that binds her argument.

At times somewhat ethereal, *Divining Nature* insufficiently explores the historical substance of its intellectual connections when it lapses into a disembodied and apolitical history of ideas. An example is Cuillé's analysis of the painter Joseph Vernet's *Death of Virginie* (1789), illustrating the dénouement of *Paul et Virginie*, her argument for shared aesthetic principles between author and painter hinging on the presence of spectators on the shore who witness the spectacle of Virginie's death, the shipwreck, and storm at once. The spectatorial response to tragedy and suffering, modulated by physical and aesthetic distance, is a crucial component of the aesthetics Cuillé posits. She is correct, yet the circumstances of the creation of this painting, and the differences between it and the illustration that Vernet provided for the 1789 edition

of the book (which lacks the spectators) needed to be further explored to ground this, not to mention the remarkable role Vernet played in saving the author from despair after a disastrous reading of the manuscript before Necker, and the intimate relation between author and painter in which the painting was born. In other places, the absence of political contextualization, for example Cuillé's neglect of the absolutist concept and deployment of spectacle, or of the radical changes in sensibility, institutions, and personnel wrought by the Revolution and Empire, gives her account a sometimes bloodless quality.

Despite its relatively minor faults, *Divining Nature* is laudably ambitious. In a moment of strident and sometimes caricatural critique of the Enlightenment as a bastion of whiteness, colonial violence, and epistemic imperialism, *Divining Nature* offers a more capacious, nuanced, and agile vision, one based on epistemological humility, the transcendence of personal, cultural, and conceptual boundaries, and the rooting of aesthetic pleasure in the sympathetic identification with the other. It also offers a vision of interdisciplinarity that attempts to recover what was so remarkable in the period, rising to the challenge of the figures chosen, all of whom were spectacular polymaths, and it is a corrective to the departmental cloistering of modern academia and the resurgent essentialisms of contemporary political and cultural life. We may aspire to be as expansive as Diderot, and as difficult as Rousseau.

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