

## Introductory Comments

REBECCA L. SPANG

It is a special pleasure for me to introduce Joanna since I first met her a decade ago at ASECS, when her talk won the award for the best paper by a graduate student (and where we discovered that one of her closest childhood friends was someone I had taught and liked very much when I was a graduate student Teaching Fellow). I also had the pleasure of hearing an early version of her analysis of Mercier presented to the Modern French History seminar at the Institute for Historical Research in London and I recall very clearly how exciting the work was, already then as a dissertation, for the way it pulled the rug out from under Baudelaire and a whole set of claims about the distinctively fleeting and ephemeral nature of the nineteenth century.

Joanna's first book, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* was published by Cornell last year (and we are very grateful to Cornell University Press for allowing us to acquire copies of the book at a considerable discount). It is in honor of *The Unfinished Enlightenment*, of course, that we are all gathered here today. I want to make a few introductory comments and then I will turn things over to the Prize Committee members who are present, Lynn Festa and Trish Loughran—Dror Wahrman was also on the Committee, but he is in Israel this semester and cannot join us today—as well as to Guillaume Ansart and Joanna herself for a more detailed discussion.

I think what is really striking about Joanna's book is that she has managed to make a fascinating and highly readable study from her analysis of some, frankly, often dull and pretty much *unreadable* texts. Her sources run from the semi-canonical (such as Mercier and Buffon—though I have to say that neither was mentioned *once* when I took "Introduction to French Literature, part one" as a sophomore in college) to the truly obscure poetry of the chevalier de Piis. Perhaps my favorite example from all these texts in Piis's canto on the letter "C," that hollow marvel that can both rival the letter "S" (with the help of a *cédille*) and save French words from being infested with too many "Q"s. So great are the accomplishments of "C" that poor "K" is left to fall into shocked oblivion.

(Stalnaker, 144)

Joanna finds in all these texts an encyclopedic imperative, one that was distinctive to the eighteenth century and that propelled writers' attempts to describe everything from the mechanics of a stocking-weaving apparatus to the length "from the heel to the tip of the toenails" of forty different breeds of dog. As they described machines and plants, animals and alphabets, it would *seem* that writers such as Diderot, Daubenton, and Delille all happily inhabited a world—so unlike our own—in which the distinction of literature from science (or, as Joanna specifies, of *belles lettres* from *les sciences*) did not exist. In a sense they did live in such a world and it is one of the great strengths of Joanna's book to emphasize just how very *unlike* our own epistemological landscape the eighteenth century actually was. (Though some might wonder if this was the case for the entire "eighteenth century" or simply for France in that time period.)

Yet Joanna also proposes that the encyclopedic ambitions of such authors meant that description by the late Enlightenment had become a site of methodological tensions and competing truth claims. Precisely because they were willing and able to envision "de-

scription” as so many different kinds of an activity, their texts fragmented—the tensions and competing claims were never resolved and Enlightenment description, as Joanna writes, “fell between the fault lines” of nineteenth-century forms of knowing.

Here at IU and in the Humanities more generally, I think we are all familiar with the cracks that have opened over the past decades in what was once an almost equally encyclopedic project, the idea of the liberal-arts university as a “universal” community. In an age of Wikipedia, Googlebooks, and corporate collaborations, who needs history professors, literature scholars, or indeed, “pure research” in general? In the moving conclusion to her book, Joanna answers this question, reminding us that reading in fragments will never do as a form of reading, however fragmentary the text. For her contribution to the study of both the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries, I am delighted, on behalf of Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies at Indiana University, to present Joanna Stalnaker with this year’s Kenshur Prize.