Joanna Stalnaker's *The Unfinished Enlightenment*

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Rebecca asked that I begin by giving a sense of the structure of the Kenshur Prize Committee's deliberations. We began with a pool of fifty-five books from across the field of eighteenth-century studies, embracing the disciplines of literature, history, art history, book history, the history of ideas, the history of commerce and credit, drama, theater arts, musicology, religion, medicine, and science; on topics ranging from actresses, anatomy, animal studies, archaeology, and architecture, to women, work, warfare, and waste. The various books featured a cast of thousands, from the marquee names of the long eighteenth century—Defoe, Diderot, Jane Austen, Jefferson, Vico, Immanuel Kant—to artisans, nabobs, whores, and even homeless dogs. Our voyage around the world in the eighty or so days we had to read, transported us from England, France, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and North America, to the Caribbean, China, Africa, the Levant, and India, and we were presented with an array of innovative and exciting approaches to the field, ranging from the applicability of cognitive science to eighteenth-century theories of mind to the relationship of legal personality and the law of strict liability to concepts of intentionality and novelistic character, and from the imbrication of colonialism and Orientalism to the pervasiveness of an emergent culture of diagram.

I begin with this description of the extraordinary work that the committee encountered in what was universally agreed to be an exceptionally strong year both in order to acknowledge our wistful sense of regret that we were not able to honor *all* of the excellent books that we were privileged to read—rumors of the demise of the field have been greatly exaggerated—but also to set in relief the truly exceptional qualities that made Joanna Stalnaker's *The Unfinished Enlightenment* leap from the pile.

This is an extraordinary book—original in its claims and approach, sophisticated and subtle in its argument, rigorous in its methodology, remarkable both for the dazzling array of disciplines (natural history; literary studies; Enlightenment philosophy; the history of science and aesthetics; the history of ideas) it draws on, and for its commitment to the intricacies of literary form. I want to make a quick stab at summarizing the argument and pointing to some of my own personal favorite moments, before raising a couple of questions about the implications of the argument. For what makes Joanna's argument a veritable *tour de force* are not only the questions it raises and answers, but also the questions it makes possible, which is part of what I hope we can talk more about today.

Joanna argues that the Enlightenment should be understood as an immense collective undertaking to describe—and re-describe—the world. Description has long been a second-class citizen in literary studies, the Sancho Panza, maybe even the mule, to narrative's Don Quixote. "Descriptions," as Flaubert puts it in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*: "there are always too many in novels," and those of us who have taught Ann Radcliffe or James Fenimore Cooper are all familiar with the quasi-Pavlovian response of undergraduates to long descriptive passages (skim, skip, or sleep). Joanna's book makes it impossible to think of description as secondary, much less as boring or skippable, for she shows that description lies at the heart of the eighteenth century's intellectual projects. What this entails is both a reappraisal of our understanding of the disciplinary divisions between literature and science, and a total recasting of the way we conceptualize description itself.

The book meticulously traces the vicissitudes of description as an epistemological and literary problem through careful readings of the work of natural historians such as Buffon, Daubenton, and Bernardin de Saint Pierre; the encyclopedists, Diderot and D'Alembert; less-well-known descriptive poets like Saint Lambert and Delille; and the urban topographies of Louis Sébastien Mercier's tableaux of pre- and post-Revolutionary Paris. What Joanna shows is how the competing truth claims understood to be lodged in different modes of description evolved into the modern disciplinary divisions between literature and science.

The stakes of description, as Joanna shows, are incredibly high—what is the world?—and Enlightenment writers knew it. That there is and can be no complete description—no Borgesian map able to replicate the terrain on the same scale; no synchronic form able to arrest the evanescence of history, the growth and alteration of animals and plants, the speed of technological change—creates both a predicament and an opportunity for Enlightenment writers. In Joanna's account, description reflects but also propels changes in scientific and literary knowledge: even as the unfinished or incomplete nature of description provides the impetus for further exploration (as philosophers seek to fill in the gaps they are able to discern), so too is generic experimentation fueled by efforts to figure out how best to capture the complexity, diversity, and mutability of the world in language, as Enlightenment describers not only recognized the incomplete nature of any description and anticipated its obsolescence, but also self-consciously incorporated its fragmentary nature into the very form of their works. In this sense, the unfinished nature of any given description of the world helps generate the very dynamic of Enlightenment, fostering a heightened degree of reflexive thought vis-à-vis a permanently unsettled status quo. The methodological impossibility of offering a complete and exhaustive description of the world, and the different kinds of truth claims associated with different modes of description, thus become the engine of epistemological transformation for Enlightenment thinkers in ways that help engender the modern division of knowledge into disciplines. Description thus resides at the heart of epistemological struggles to distinguish science from literature and one discipline from another, that continue to structure modernity's relation to knowledge.

Because the world can be rendered from multiple angles, descriptions are necessarily partial, which requires that the describer become an animating force, able to collate perspectives and discern hidden relations and obscured aspects of the object. The multiplicity of knowledge and the partial and fragmentary nature of description in the digressive, excessively detailed, formally fractured, encyclopedic texts that make up the book's archive means that unity—and here is one of Joanna's truly electrifying claims—comes to reside in the figure of the Enlightenment describer, who offers a subjective—or rather authorial—perspective that is not grounded in lyric self-expression. One might say that the describer describes (in much the same way that the thing things?).

Yet significantly, Joanna never reduces the describer to a static figure: if the world the describer endeavors to describe is mutable and changing, so too is the figure of the describer, who moves from the natural historian's self-consciousness to the encyclopedist's self-critical reflexivity to the deliberate transformative use of description as a form of redescription in Mercier's topographical histories of Paris. Whereas Buffon and Daubenton and even Diderot and the descriptive poets sought to *represent* the world, the revolutionary Mercier sought to use description to change it. For Mercier, description doesn't imitate history; it incarnates it.

Almost every arena that Joanna touches on in the book is illuminated from a fresh angle. The deceptively simply claim that description owes more to natural history than classical poetics overturns long-standing literary genealogies that have, almost without exception, sought to de-

rive their understanding of literary description from rhetorical treatises. Joanna's discussion of Buffon and Daubenton's debates over the nature of description in natural history takes on and recasts Michel Foucault's influential account of the "Classical order" of the Enlightenment in *The Order of Things*. Foucault's Linnaean-based characterization of Enlightenment natural history as the touchstone of the classical episteme has been surprisingly tenacious in literary and historical studies, and the ongoing centrality of this model has far-reaching implications, inasmuch as it locks in place an idea of Enlightenment as a totalizing, closed taxonomy in which everything under the sun has its place already marked out in a designated pigeonhole. Linnaeus's taxonomy acknowledges only those aspects of an object that adhere to the system and blocks out, in the process, any sense of the incommensurability of words and nature, any temporal alteration, any observational quiddity. By challenging the dominance of this account, and bringing the work of the French natural historians back to center stage, where it belongs, Joanna is not just unsettling standard accounts of eighteenth-century natural history; she is also asking us to rethink one of the fundamental epistemological frameworks locking modern concepts of the Enlightenment in place.

One of the great strengths of *The Unfinished Enlightenment* is the extraordinary care and deliberation with which its fine-grained argument is constructed into near-flawlessness. Many conversation-changing books elaborate their theoretical machinery and then convert everything into grist for their particular mill with a single-minded intensity that crushes the texts they offer in evidence and homogenizes the broader cultural contexts (all while snuffing out any recognition of a possible counterargument). Although such books dazzle, they often only seem true for as long as one remains absorbed in their framework. Part of the way Joanna makes these sweeping claims so convincing has to do with the incredibly acute and attentive readings of the individual texts that are offered all the way through the book. The analysis never seems forced or leveraged from above, because they are so tenderly extracted from the material with which she works. And this is all the more impressive since she has rounded up texts—long-neglected descriptive poetry and rhetorical treatises, but also natural histories, technological explanations of machines, the plates of the *Encyclopédie*, and urban topographies of the Revolutionary Paris—that take us well beyond the usual suspects. Joanna offers a wonderful account not just of Buffon's prose descriptions of the natural world but Daubenton's anatomies; not just of the text-based description of manufactured things and technology in the *Encyclopédie* but also of the complexities of the plates and diagrams; and she moves beautifully from Bernardin de Saint Pierre's musings on the impossibility of a thousand natural historians ever offering the complete description of a single strawberry to the sprawling descriptive poetry of the late century, in which the encyclopedic ambitions of the describer encounter the limits of their own knowledge. Not least of the book's accomplishments is that it manages to float the reader across the epistemological dam that separates our worldview from that of the eighteenth century to show why this relatively obscure poetry—having struggled through a number of them, I can aver that the only thing more unreadable than these poems is their immensely discursive footnotes—is simply fascinating.

This actually brings me to the two questions I wanted to raise in closing. The first has to do with the way we think about the literary methodology of the argument. The figure of the describer connects up in fascinating ways to other recent scholarly attempts to understand the emergence of narrative modes that are *not* located within the individual subject, such as the models of free indirect discourse studied by critics like Ann Banfield, D.A. Miller, and Frances Ferguson; the impersonal, interchangeable observer so central to the New Science's ideal of 'objectivity' taken up by historians of science like Peter Galison and Loraine Daston; and the imper-

sonal recording devices and 'virtual' perspectives made available through technologies such as the microscope and the telescope investigated in Bender and Marrinan's *Culture of Diagram*, and also familiar to us from the work of New Media theoreticians in an era of CGI and digital interfaces. My first question is where you see this interest in this impersonal, not-quite-subjective perspective taking us: what does it make possible? Are there things it blocks out? what price is exacted for the assumption of this perspective? One of the short-comings of many discussions of this impersonal, non-subjective perspective is that they don't always register a specific relation to history. This is something you quite decisively do in your reading of Mercier, where description *se veut révolutionnaire*. So I wanted to ask you a rather broad question about the correlation between changes in literary form and historical transformation. To what degree can the historical turns aligned with parts of your argument be correlated to the evolution of the position of the describer, to what degree does the alteration in an individual optic map onto mass change?

And that leads me to my final query, which has to do with the complexity of re-attaching, if you will, the intensely "close-read" to the big picture—a kind of forest/tree issue. I was wondering if you could say something about the methodological difficulties of containing this project. The material the argument embraces could—like a Borgesian encyclopedia or like Bernardin de Saint Pierre's single strawberry, the description of which could consume the lives of many naturalists—swell to fill volumes. It's clear that an attempt at exhaustiveness or sequential Encyclopedic enumeration can lead only to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*-like delirium, but I wanted to ask about how, in analyzing these problematics, you went about balancing the competing demands of a close-reading 'miniaturist' model with the *grandes lignes* of a more sweeping account?