

In Praise of History's Losers: A Redemptive Reading of the Obsolete Enlightenment

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Judith Halberstam has recently dedicated a book, called *The Queer Art of Failure*, “to all of history’s losers.”¹ Though Joanna Stalnaker prefers to call her Enlightenment “unfinished” (in *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* [2010]), I think part of the charm and power of the book lies with its careful attention to people who, by many standards (for example: those of the local tenure committee) might be said to have failed. We hear about giants like Buffon, of course (and Linnaeus is mentioned a few times, though not featured). But we also get hapless pipsqueaks like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, who stands up to Buffon the same way little boys and girls stand up to their fathers: by avoiding them.

Yet it’s not really people at issue here but books in various states of disarray, breakdown, incompleteness, and even auto-erasure. Thus in Part One of her study, Stalnaker assembles engrossing accounts of two of the periods more massive yet problematic undertakings in natural history: on one hand, Buffon’s constantly enlarging (yet hopelessly incomplete and non-uniform) *Natural History*, from which his collaborator Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton makes what seems (to me, at least) like an indecorous exit; and, on the other hand, Bernadin de Saint-Pierre’s painfully digressive *Etudes*, which was later subjected to a Romantic hatchet job, yielding a novel that is remembered but which Stalnaker shows is like a amputated pinky in proportion to the glorious, if misshapen, body of the whole work, most of which has been left behind.

In Part Two, Stalnaker turns to two of the period’s ‘popularizing,’ or semi-educational forms: encyclopedia entries and descriptive (and thus encyclopedic in its own right) poetry. Here we encounter the sheer incommensurability of the Encyclopedists’ utopian representational project, which sought to make all knowledge visible and materially accessible not just via print but through a series of labyrinthine cross-references that surely were (for most *real* readers) moot, unless that reader had room in his cupboard for a complete set of these massive books (and the muscles to move between them). This isn’t your mom and dad’s Funk and Wagnalls or even the Encyclopedia Britannica but a far more expansive attempt to represent knowledge as an organic whole, a fantasy of wholeness and completion that can only end, in Stalnaker’s word, “unfinished”—or (in Halberstam’s terms) in failure. In these chapters, we hear at length about Diderot’s encyclopedia entry on something called “the stocking machine,” an entry devoted to a machine that, Stalnaker suggests, may never have been built and written for a reader who almost surely will not understand it, even if he manages to read it, which, given its laborious complexity, is doubtful. The same problems attach to Jacques DeLille’s descriptive poems, “failed

¹Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), np.

poetic projects” that are now out of print because they leave their readers “stranded” in a sea of “fragments.”²

Part Three of *The Unfinished Enlightenment* focuses for the most part on just one figure: Louis Sebastian Mercier, the man who gave us one of the keywords around which Stalnaker organizes her thinking (the *descripteur*) but also a disappointed revolutionary whose dreams of social justice are violently frustrated when the Revolution runs amok. Mercier devotes himself early in his life to a project of reform that, if successful, threatens to erase from view the corrupted objects he describes. In this way, his work seems to have to choose between leaving the corrupt things he describes unreformed (one kind of problem) or actually changing them and thus making his work irrelevant to future generations (another kind of problem). Like the other figures in this book, Mercier’s life’s-work is threatened by a mix of material circumstances, including the properties of language itself (which is stressed, Stalnaker tells us, by “the representational challenges posed by the ideal of complete description”), the material properties of printed texts (which must be written and published in a temporal sequence), the gall (or will-to-power) of other authors (who capitalize on his success by creating accompanying maps he did not want created), the idiocy of certain political bodies (who ban his books in the city he describes), and the fickleness of his readers (who are, Stalnaker tells us, “disappointed” by his later, post-revolutionary work in *Le Nouveau Paris*).³

These twin chapters on Mercier serve as one of the places in Stalnaker’s book where, I think, we get a glimpse of the political stakes of the representational project she describes. Against the fantasy of wholeness or completion dreamed of (but never, of course, perfectly achieved) by the likes of Buffon, Saint-Pierre, Diderot, DeLille, and even the young Mercier of the *Tableau de Paris*, we are confronted here, as Mercier himself was, with the violent synecdoches of revolution: amputated heads and restricted liberties that are eerily, horribly—but also, I have to admit, somewhat thrillingly—embodied by the counterevolutionaries who stalk around Paris wearing on their heads the hair of the dead. As Stalnaker tells us, these counterevolutionaries “formed a new sect,” created by the pressures and possibilities of the Terror itself, a sect “whose initiates showed their devotion to guillotine victims by making wigs out of their hair.” In this passage, Mercier describes “toothless women” who “rush to buy” the locks “of guillotined young fops.” Mercier calls this (hilariously—and horribly) “the reign of blond wigs,” and muses that it is “as if women had wanted to brave the bloody irony with this reprisal.” And Stalnaker sympathizes with this interpretation and extends it: “Although the women,” she writes, “cannot literally resurrect the guillotine victims, they create,” in this ritual act, “a powerful symbol of resurrection.”⁴

Despite the struggles the authors in this study face as they try to keep words in line with things, this anecdote about the blond wigs shows us something about how quickly material circumstances can jettison one representational project in favor of

²Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 124, 148.

³Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 67, 208.

⁴Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 198. Mercier is quoted by Stalnaker, 198.

another. From the hopeless and yet somehow hopeful plenitude of the prerevolutionary Enlightenment, we are confronted here with new assemblages of parts and wholes that demand new literary forms (what Mercier calls irony). We see some of the same material pressure in the rare glimpse we get, in Chapter Two, of the French colonies, which Saint-Pierre actually visits, enabling him to see for himself a world of flora and fauna that Buffon only heard about in other naturalists' descriptions or looked at via other artists' renderings. Just as the section on the blond wigs offers us up new representational logics to think about—synecdoche, symbol, irony—this brief moment in the colonies makes mention of analogy, as when, for example, Stalnaker comments on the colonial practice of “describing unfamiliar objects by making analogies to familiar ones,” a common practice throughout the peripheries of the imperial world, where “European colonists frequently named exotic plants” (not to mention exotic spaces: like New York or New Amsterdam) “by analogy to European ones.”⁵

These flashes of alternative representational logics—the differing relation of part to whole that we find in synecdoche or the differing relation to doubling and difference that we find in irony and analogy—serve as intriguing counternarratives to the ones that Stalnaker focuses on throughout *The Unfinished Enlightenment*. And to return to my original point: this is part of the power of Stalnaker's book and part of its deep erudition. It returns us to a time whose major projects were left incomplete not just because their authors tired of writing them or their readers tired of reading them but because the world changed and with it the representational imperatives placed on language changed too—as did, seemingly, its possibilities.

By ending with the Revolution, Stalnaker prompts me to ask: What is the relation between an amputated head and an amputated book like Saint Pierre's? That is not a question she answers. Indeed, it is the *kind* of question she resolutely refuses to engage at different moments of the book, when her mind wanders—or perhaps, when she politely anticipates that her readers' minds might be wandering (as mine sometimes did) to other times and places. In her account of descriptive poetry, for example, Stalnaker notes that “one way of interpreting” this ungainly and outdated genre is to “see it as paving the way for romantic poetry” just as later in the book she notes that “one way of concluding” a book on eighteenth-century description “would be to trace the literary heritage of Enlightenment descriptive practices into the nineteenth century,” in order to show how, for instance, “Balzac looked to Buffon as a model of for his encyclopedic compendium of social types.”⁶ In both cases, however, Stalnaker encourages us to resist the temptation to temporalize or, rather, to periodize in ways that will make the strange genres she studies more familiar to us, thus accommodating a future that Buffon and Daubenton, Diderot and DeLille, not to mention Mercier (who partly lived through it) never dreamed of. A “richer interpretation” she insists, “would be one that does *justice* [emphasis mine] to descriptive poetry as a poetic project in its own right” or to description more generally as something that must be reckoned with in and of and for itself.⁷ For “to conclude”

⁵Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 89-90,

⁶Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 147, 212.

⁷Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 147.

a book on the unfinished Enlightenment by subjecting it to a teleology produced after the fact (by the nineteenth-century novel or the Romantic lyric) “would be to suggest that the true realization of the Enlightenment’s descriptive project lies in nineteenth-century masterpieces that have been consecrated by literary history,” and to do this would be, as Walter Benjamin says, to side with history’s winners rather than its losers.⁸

Of course, the zero-sum game that is capitalism, that brings with it the logic of winning and losing with which I have framed my remarks, animates much of Benjamin’s thinking about culture—as when he writes of the long history of class struggle in this way:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist [like Benjamin] views them with cautious detachment.⁹

The difference between Stalnaker and Benjamin, however, is that Benjamin suggests we try to resurrect history’s losers by seeing the totality of a historical process. Stalnaker, by contrast, does not find redemption in historical breadth but on the wings and beady eyes of the flies on Saint-Pierre’s strawberry plant. She refuses to create a narrative about what came next because she wants to think about a moment and its representational logics in its own terms (and she does this, quite nimbly, without denying that something *did* come next).

In this way, Stalnaker has written a book about history (as about many other things, like painting, science, cartography, and the mechanical arts, to name just a few). But in the end, this is a book about books and more especially about the people who make books matter: writers and readers, whose ways of being with a book and with language are shown here to be irreducibly contingent upon a fragile moment and limited place. There is some attention in *The Unfinished Enlightenment* to the material questions of production and reception (how could there not be, when we speak of such grand, multivolume projects?), but for the most part the encounter here is not with paper and printers but with language itself, bound in time and space. The words that repeatedly recur throughout *The Unfinished Enlightenment* thus point us to what we might call a historicist phenomenology of reading and writing, offering—with words like disorienting, fragmented, digressive—an inventory of readerly affects, each one of them corporeally bound by the body of the reader who feels them. In this way, we see the birth of the aesthetic in a perceptual encounter with language that, through the medium of the book, an author can share with his reader, both in and—thanks, now, to Stalnaker—out of (his) time.

⁸Stalnaker, *Unfinished Enlightenment*, 212.

⁹Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 256.