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Montesquieu, *My Thoughts*. Translated, edited and with an Introduction by Henry C. Clark. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012. xxvi + 779 pp. Thematic table, concordance, select bibliography, index. \$27.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-86597-824-9; \$14.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-86597-825-6.

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“One must clearly distinguish when an author has meant to speak a truth, and when he has meant to utter a witticism.” This reflection of Montesquieu, numbered 520 in this collection, points to one of the deep challenges in editing a collection such as this. Henry Clark has done an admirable job and provided a great service in offering an accessible and readable translation of one of Montesquieu’s more enigmatic contributions. There are nonetheless important interpretive issues that are raised by this work.

*My Thoughts* is a collection of musings compiled in three volumes by Montesquieu over the course of his literary career from the 1720’s up to his death in 1755. It was known to only a few during Montesquieu’s life and not published in its entirety until late in the nineteenth century. In the early editions of this work, editors sought to systematize what appeared a random ordering and chose to present the thoughts in an imposed thematic arrangement. Later twentieth century editions, including the Louis Desgraves edition of the *Thoughts* published by Laffont in 1991 on which this translation is based, published the work in the order in which it appeared in the manuscript.[1]

While Montesquieu suggests in the opening passages that the purpose of the collection is to offer reflections, thoughts or ideas that he has not put into his works (Thoughts 1 and 2), the relationship between the content of this and his broader scholarly work, and most specifically his published writings, remains complex. For one, it has been remarked by recent scholars of Montesquieu that the *Thoughts* served as forms of mental shortcuts pointing to particular passages in works he had read, sometimes completed with asterisks and later notations where the relevant literary or historical passages had been noted word for word.[2] From this perspective, the *Thoughts* can be perceived as a form of literary laboratory, shedding light on Montesquieu’s methodology and providing insight into the genesis of a number of reflections and arguments that made it into his later published work. For certain passages, Montesquieu offers notes to himself, presumably indicating the published texts of his own where some of these various reflections found their place.

While it might be thought that one could follow the chronology of the *Thoughts* through the chronology of his published works to shed light on the progress of his thinking and as a background to his writing, this again proves problematic. The text of the *Thoughts* does not present itself in a simple chronological form, given numerous revisions and additions over the years, both by him and by an array of his personal secretaries. Editors of this text have had to pay attention to various phrases crossed out (as they might have been deleted much later on after the first draft) as well as later additions and insertions. It appears that for Montesquieu, this work served not just as a compilation of reflections and musings, but as a form of living document or text in which ideas could be put down, revised and rethought, even if they never found a place in his published opus. From this general perspective, the *Thoughts* serve as a preliminary testing ground for more polished literary work, both in its content and in demonstrating a methodology of both commentary on sources and polishing the expression of this commentary.

That said, it is clear that a fairly large number of these passages were sidestepped and not offered a place in his published work. This raises several challenges of interpretation, including the status of these reflections for offering insight into the mind and person of the author: Do these *Thoughts* give us access to a more authentic version of the author, or one less concerned about the power of the censors? How do we come to terms with a mind so deeply engaged with so many questions of both a deep and frivolous nature? Likewise, how should these reflections be weighed alongside his published commentary on similar themes? This becomes even more difficult with the lack of a developed literary context for several reflections. Some passages form a thematic chain, and some are thought to be the core of aborted literary projects, such as his *Treatise on Duties* (of which sections appear in *Thoughts* 1251 to 1280). For the most part, however, the reflections stand alone and touch upon diverse subjects such as the nature and politics of religion, the challenges of modern commercialism, the ironies of history and the working of customs, morals and sentiments. Without a broader argumentative or interpretive context, the challenge of the meaning of these reflections and the tone in which they were written or should be read—that is, in part, the difference between the expression of an intended truth or just a witticism as referred to in the outset of this review—remains obscure.

Composing this English edition could not have been an easy task given the size of the text (over 675 pages), the breadth of the subject matter and the rhetorical brandishing of Montesquieu himself that does not always lend itself easily to translation. The editor has provided a useful set of notes in the introduction that raise some of the challenges of translation and make explicit some of the linguistic choices that have been made.

Despite these challenges, there is no doubt that this translation of Montesquieu's *Thoughts* provides a great deal of insightful and useful reflection for moralists, historians and those with an interest in Enlightenment thought. In providing the first full English translation of this work, along with a thematic table, a good bibliography and excellent index, this edition will offer an important resource for students and scholars who would not otherwise have access to the work in the original French (a critical edition in French as part of Montesquieu's *Oeuvres complètes* published by Gallimard is still in preparation). Indeed, even for one habituated to consulting the text in French, this English translation is very readable and may offer new insights or at least provide the chance for new focus on what remains a captivating but elusive and ultimately somewhat mysterious piece in Montesquieu's opus.

## NOTES

[1] Montesquieu, *Pensées et Spicilège*, edited by Louis Desgraves. (Paris: Laffont, 1991).

[2] Catherine Volpilhac, "L'Etoile et le papillon ou les notes de lecture aux *Pensées* de Montesquieu," *Revue Montesquieu* 7 (2003-2004): 9-23.

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