John Bender and Michael Marrinan, Eds., *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century.* Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005. xiv + 287 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. $60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8047-4741-5; $22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8047-4742-3.

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A New Archaeology of the Enlightenment

Despite the sustained critique the Enlightenment has endured in modern times, at least since Horkheimer and Adorno, it stubbornly persists as an object of study and even admiration in scholarly circles. We may even be witnessing, since the 1990s, a resurgence of academic interest in the Enlightenment as a cultural and intellectual phenomenon in its own right, rather than merely as the prolepsis of Revolution. Understandably so, I think. Daniel Gordon has noted that a wave of scholarship from the 1930s to the 1970s that sought to present the positive contribution of the Enlightenment to modernity was particularly strong among "liberal intellectuals of German Jewish origin for whom the Enlightenment symbolized the alternative to racism and totalitarianism."[1] It hardly seems surprising that university professors under assault today in the United States for what right-wing commentators consider a nation-destroying "liberalism" would also seek in the Enlightenment an alternative to the fanaticism and intolerance of a radical American "conservatism" in which such professors are defined as Other. The medievalist Sylvia Tomasch describes the phenomenon of the undenoted or "virtual Jew" by which non-Jews served in fourteenth-century England as a "perfect displacement" for absent Jews (expelled in 1290), a present Other against which Christian English society sought to define itself.[2] Have liberal intellectuals in the United States become the putative "virtual Jews" of the right-wing American consciousness, a present Other against which a largely religious society seeks to define itself? If so, the renewed academic interest in the Enlightenment has a cause not at all dissimilar to that of Ernst Cassirer or Peter Gay.

Enlightenment studies cannot now be merely a response to an intellectually fanatical right, however. It must also respond to the intellectually sophisticated left--that is, to the postmodern movement that has had such influence in the American academy since the 1970s, when an ascendant technocratic, capitalist order stood as the growing hegemony that leftist activists who had cut their political teeth in the maelstrom of the Sixties strove to redirect or overthrow. Academics and intellectuals of this generation often saw the Enlightenment as the source of the ills of modernity. As a revolt against modernity, postmodernism was therefore also a revolt against the Enlightenment. Historians of this academic generation, perhaps as a result, sometimes overlooked the subtleties of Enlightenment-era thought in order to trace, endlessly it seems, the genealogy of the French Revolution. Other scholars, either from intellectual or political discomfort, happily ignored the contributions of postmodern thought altogether, thus producing erudite but frustrating intellectual histories of the Enlightenment as if Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault never said anything worth saying.

A newer generation of scholars, however, is determined to have theory and erudition confront each other to the benefit of both. Daniel Gordon's edited volume of essays, *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment* (2001), is one of the first interventions along these lines. The essays therein seek to correct misperceptions sanctioned too often by rigid postmodern academism and refocus attention on the structure of Enlightenment thought itself. Such refocusing--rather than merely idealizing the Enlightenment--shows that the complexities and dilemmas Enlightenment-era thinkers faced are

relevant to life and thought right now, perhaps especially in the United States. Like Gordon's volume, Bender and Marrinan's excellent new volume, *Regimes of Description*, insists that the Enlightenment cannot be limited by abstract and negative critiques. In particular, the contributors to this volume seek to show that postmodernism cannot without hypocrisy reject the past, especially the eighteenth century, because the methods of inquiry that still govern postmodern questions were established then.

Regimes of Description is the result of a conference of the same title sponsored by the Stanford Seminar on Enlightenment and Revolution in January 1996. As a collection of eleven essays by distinguished scholars, the volume reveals well a spirit of rigorous but also open interdiscipinarity that has undoubtedly made the Stanford Seminar on Enlightenment and Revolution one of the most important annual events in the field. The essays in this volume range from such subjects as the history of science to linguistics, political economy, art, literature, architecture, and aesthetics. Each contributor seeks to write what the editors describe on the back cover as "the archaeology of the nature and history of description in the digital age." In pursuing this task, each essay separately advances provocative new ideas that open the field of eighteenth-century studies to "description" as an important topic for understanding--and rewriting--the origins of modernity in the eighteenth century.

Why "description?" In the introduction, Bender and Marrinan quote the Marquis de Condorcet's hopeful prophecy that the "language of science" would one day, as it approached perfection, "make knowledge of the truth easy and error almost impossible" (p. 2). The digital revolution, however, seems to have dashed any hope that the language of science could one day almost perfectly describe nature, thus providing accurate knowledge. Is the remarkable achievement of the digital sequencing of the human genome, Bender and Marrinan ask, a "description" that reveals the true "essence of humanity"? They answer in the negative: the ability to represent in digital code "does not free us from the hermeneutic constraints of describing"--constraints, they note, that the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert outlined more than two centuries ago in the entry for "Description" (p. 4). Digital code may be a "mechanical filter," Bender and Marrinan argue, but it is not knowledge in a modern sense. It is, at best, a tool useful for generating descriptions, and thence knowledge. The discursive rules or parameters that define the modern principles of "description," the editors insist, were established in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and it is upon these principles that "the specialized disciplines of modern inquiry were erected" (p. 215). To understand--in order to rewrite--the origins of modernity and modern consciousness in an age that needs the Enlightenment but which cannot forget the challenges of postmodernism, therefore, requires us to study the conditions within which modern forms of "description" arose.

Bender and Marrinan do not propose an intellectual history of description, but rather an archaeology of the "regime" of description as revealed in the "archive" of available artifacts from the eighteenth century. This nod to Foucault is not at all meant to be flippant. Although they conceive the goal of "archaeology" somewhat differently than Foucault did, archaeology is indeed the appropriate term for the work carried out in the essays contained in this volume. Each essay seeks to go beyond a study of the mere formalizations of science, art, literature, and architecture in order to grasp the underlying structures that organize these disciplines. "Regime," as used here, seems to correspond to what Foucault dubs an "episteme," that is, a deep structure of human consciousness, or a linguistic and epistemological domain that provides coherency to a particular mode of discourse. In this case, the regime under analysis emerged in the eighteenth century and established the discursive parameters sanctioning the modern modes of description. We might just as well use the term "representation" here in place of "description," and we end up with the main theme of Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* [The Order of Things] (1966)--to be honest, I cannot think of any reason not to do so. Despite the seemingly different connotations of these words, the one somehow artistic the other scientific, they, like "regime" and "episteme," correspond. In his "archaeology of the human sciences" (the subtitle to the English translation of *Les Mots et les choses*), Foucault writes that he seeks to "determine the basis or archaeological system

common to a whole series of scientific 'representations' or 'products' dispersed throughout the natural history, economics, and philosophy of the Classical period"--the "Classical" period being Foucault's term for what historians generally call the Enlightenment era, roughly from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth.[3] As Hayden White explains, Foucault's primary subject is "the representation of the order of things in the order of words in the human sciences."[4] So, on the face of it, Regimes of Description appears to be a continuation of Foucault's project in *The Order of Things.*

But only on the face of it. Whereas *The Order of Things* is about rupture, Regimes of Description seeks to be about continuity--indeed it must. For Foucault, archaeological analysis reveals fundamental discontinuities of Western consciousness in which epochs of epistemic coherency in the human sciences arise and die catastrophically. There is no rational progress associated with these ruptures. One rupture, in the sixteenth century, resulted in the Classical Age, another, in the nineteenth century, in the Modern. Following Nietzsche, Foucault himself heralds a new episteme in which the power of language to represent (or describe) the order of things will finally die and a pre-metaphorical, and hence pre-scientific and pre-religious, consciousness will be reborn. The periods of epistemic coherency Foucault describes emerge irrationally; they have nothing logically to do with each other. "The order on the basis of which we think today," writes Foucault, "does not have the same mode of being as that of the Classical thinkers."[5] To assent to Foucault's argument, then, is to admit that Enlightenment principles of description are entirely incommensurable with contemporary ones. The study of the Enlightenment becomes in this argument merely antiquarianism, the worship of the past as a foreign country. And so, the editors of *Regimes of Description* deny the rupture between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth, between the Classical, Modern, and even Postmodern Ages. They assert that the "archaeology of the "regime" of description does not reveal a rupture so much as three interlocking arenas," namely, arenas of description, describing, and the undescribed within which Modern and Postmodern thought intertwine (p. 4).

These three "arenas" have been used to organize the essays of the volume into three sections. Section one, "Description: Fantasies of General Knowledge," is perhaps closest to Foucault's thought. The essays in this section discuss the rise of a new "regime" of description in the eighteenth century. Section two, "Describing: Imagination and Knowing," contains various essays on art and aesthetics that demonstrate how this new regime delineated between imagination and knowledge. The essays in section three, "The Undescribed: Horizons of the Known," explore the complexities of the Enlightenment regime of description in order to show how it encompasses postmodern questions and issues. In all, the essays in these three sections reveal something far more interesting and complex than a homogeneous Enlightenment; they reveal competing fields (or arenas) of discourse attempting to resolve a fundamental dialectic of modern consciousness.

Lorraine Daston's essay, "Description by Omission," which opens section one, is one of the most Foucauldian essays in the volume. Studying seventeenth and eighteenth-century investigations into luminescence, Daston finds that the discursive category of the scientific fact mutated sometime between 1660 and 1730 from something unique to a universal of nature. The practice of description changed accordingly from the prolix account of anomalies to the parsimonious explanation of sameness (p. 12). Daston argues that this mutation resulted from a new conception of science that was incommensurable with a previous one: in effect, she sees an epistemic rupture between the Baroque and Classical epochs. For eighteenth-century savants such as Charles Dufay, science was the systematic investigation into a uniform and universal nature; the particulars and details that fascinated Robert Boyle in the seventeenth century were an impediment to describing that uniformity, so they were summarily rejected. Daston offers no logical cause for this epistemic mutation at the turn of the eighteenth century. At best the reason was ideological. For the philosophes, Daston implies, a universal nature provided a new universal authority no longer exercised by the traditional canon of authority.

Londa Schiebinger's essay, "Nature's Unruly Body," also connects the rise of the Enlightenment regime of description to changing structures of power and authority. Schiebinger argues that the systemization of Natural History in the eighteenth century placed limits on description, effectively rejecting the particular and "local" in favor of the "universal"--at least as defined by male European prejudices and priorities. Eighteenth-century savants limited description to what they decided were universal categories, thus transforming what had once been knowledge into ignorance. This transformation, Schiebinger explains, both curtailed the freedom of women and justified colonialism. Daston and Schiebinger's Enlightenment seems to be the same one against which postmodern thinkers often have railed. In the third essay, "Mithridates in Paradise," Jürgen Trabant agrees that an Enlightenment spirit of systematizing universalism also structured attempts to describe the world's languages. Trabant, however, sees in the development of linguistics a German Protestant Enlightenment alternative to French Catholic Enlightenment universalism, an alternative that reveled in lost unity and sought in the world's languages a descriptive linguistics of diversity rather than a universal *grammaire philosophique.* In Trabant's stimulating essay, we perceive evidence of the "arenas" of the regime of description, rather than a sharp epistemic rupture leading to the rise of a hegemonic universalism. Likewise, Mary Poovey's essay, "Between Political Arithmetic and Political Economy," rejects both modernist teleology and postmodernist eschatology in order to "interrogate the conditions in which modern disciplines [here economics] have emerged *alongside* the problematics that distinguish them" (p. 76, emphasis original). According to Poovey, political economists by the nineteenth century demoted the relevance of particular "facts" in favor of universalizing theories, not to reject the particular out of hand, but to "soothe the psychological distress generated by too many particulars" (p. 68).

The essays of section two continue what in effect becomes a compelling dialogue with Foucault, a sophisticated rejection of his thesis of a modern-postmodern epistemic rupture by revealing the multiple domains of Enlightenment thought. In "Problems of Description in Art," Wolfgang Klein goes so far as to proclaim that we have never been postmodern: "so long as description remains fundamental to knowledge," he asserts, "it is premature to declare an end to modernity" (p. 79). Tracing the archaeology of realism in art, Klein argues that the modern regime of description appeared with Isaac Newton and the rise of empiricism. This regime never died, Klein argues, because the interdependence of representation and reasoning in the "Newtonian mode of cognition" established a need to make intelligible through description the excess of information in the world. Eighteenth-century realist novelists and twenty-first-century geneticists face the same problem, Klein asserts. Only the technologies differ.

Klein's essay raises an important point, hinted at in section one, particularly in Poovey's essay, about the Enlightenment regime of description. Rather than an attempt to impose a hegemonic homogeneity of rational universalism upon the world, modernity is essentially a dialectic between the universal and the particular, a struggle to make intelligible the infinitely receding horizon of plenitude in the world. Modern thought, then, is an attempt to comprehend an open world of infinite diversity first thrust upon European consciousness with the discovery of the New World and the breakdown of religious authority. In "Imagining Flowers," Elaine Scarry brilliantly contemplates this dialectic of modern thought by speculating why the imagining of flowers brings together in the mind both the universal and the particular in a way unavailable with other objects. We like flowers, Scarry implies, because they allow at least a momentary resolution to the struggle of modern consciousness, and thus they are remarkably calming and beautiful to us.

Wolfgang Ernst's "Not Seeing the *Laocoön*?" and Alex Potts's "Disparities between Part and Whole in the Description of Works of Art," continue Klein and Scarry's inquiry into the dialectic of the Enlightenment regime of description. For Ernst, the mystery of whether or not Lessing actually saw the Laocoön sculpture in the Vatican before developing his aesthetic theory in the 1766 essay *Laocoön* is solved by understanding that the Enlightenment regime of description sought to resolve the problem of

intelligibility by combing particulars into a rational whole. Since the sculpture in the Vatican was in pieces, Lessing clearly preferred textual representations or reconstructed plaster casts of it. Potts argues something very similar regarding Winckelmann's evocation of the Laocoön torso reconstituted in the mind's eye as a "single resonant whole" (p. 138): "The possible disparity between apprehending parts of a phenomenon and the seizing the phenomenon in its totality," notes Potts, "emerged as a real issue in eighteenth-century culture" (p. 136). Winckelmann's concern to evoke an object of art in its wholeness was therefore a dynamic "particular to modern art" that echoed "a larger dynamic at work in the modern scientific questing to grasp things" (p. 150).

What emerges from the essays in sections one and two is that the Enlightenment regime of description is not structured by universality or the hegemony of universalizing reason, but is characterized rather by a struggle for intelligibility that gave rise to a dialectic between the universal and particular. The dialectic is not resolved by the reduction of variety to sameness, or even the repression of difference, but by the apprehension of a whole in the midst of diversity. Taking the recognition of this fact as a starting point, the essays in section three debunk the postmodern myth of its origins as a rebellion against the "hegemony of Enlightenment rationality" (p. 153). Rather, postmodern questions and issues, these authors argue, arose in the Enlightenment.[6]

In "Between Mechanism and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*," Peter Hanns Reill demonstrates that late Enlightenment thinkers themselves came to recognize the poverty of Newtonian instrumental mechanism long before Horkheimer did. Rejecting the epistemological arrogance of mechanism--a seventeenth-century trend "easily adapted to support political absolutism, religious orthodoxy, and established social hierarchies"--late Enlightenment thinkers, Reill claims, adopted an "epistemological modesty" that limited the power of reason to reduce the complexity of an ever more full and ever changing world (p. 156). Neo-mechanists such as d'Alembert and Condorcet no longer saw mathematics as a "model of reality," but only as an "instrument of discovery." Enlightenment vitalists such as Buffon and Schiller replaced mathematical analysis altogether with an analogical reasoning that perceived a world of "variety and similarity" and "unity in diversity," rather than a world of "uniformity and identity" (p. 156-59). For the Enlightenment vitalists, therefore, intelligibility resulted from the interaction of the singular and the general. Reill quotes Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* to this effect: "the love of the study of nature supposes two seemingly opposite qualities: the wide-ranging views of an ardent mind that embraces everything with one glance, and the detail-oriented laboring instinct that concentrates only on one element" (p. 159).

In "Transparency and Utopia," Anthony Vidler, like Reill, challenges the ideal of postmodernity as a rebellion against the supposedly universalizing and even totalitarian hegemony of Enlightenment reason. In particular, Vidler critiques Foucault's architectural interpretation of the "fundamentally intrusive" and panoptic nature of "Enlightenment space" as "geometrical, rational, gridded, and above all transparent, universal, and seamless, equally illuminated and illuminating" (p. 176-77). Eighteenth-century architects such as Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Étienne-Louis Boullée, Vidler observes, were at least as or even more interested in "the representation of power through symbolic forms and sublime effects" than they were in constructing disciplinary apparatus (p. 183). Their concern with an architecture of the sublime led not to a desire to abolish darkness in favor of enlightenment, but to a fascination with the interplay of light and dark--with the "dialectic between transparency and obscurity" necessary for the production of sublimity (p. 197). "The radiant spaces of modernism," Vidler concludes, "are not calculated on the final triumph of light over dark, but rather on the insistent presence of the one in the other" (p. 198).

Finally, David E. Wellbery demonstrates the similarity of Enlightenment and contemporary aesthetic theory, disputing the idea that Enlightenment aesthetics, typified by Lessing, sought a "unity of the arts"--once again the elevation of the universal over the particular--at odds with modern aesthetic

assumptions of the "disunity of the arts" (p. 201). In fact, Wellbery argues, it is the idealist aesthetics of spirit, arising with Kant and Hegel that sought the unity of the arts in the "meta-medium" of language. When idealist aesthetics lost its force by the beginning of the twentieth century, Wellbery asserts, "aesthetic media" once again became pluralized. At that point, the problems and purposes Lessing dealt with in *Laocoön* resumed in the work of modern aesthetic theorists, making Lessing citable, or intelligible, once again.

In all, the eleven essays in this volume are adventurously speculative and succeed in refocusing our attention on the intricacies of thought in the eighteenth century. The volume unfortunately lacks a concluding essay to bring together eleven unique essays into an easily intelligible whole. Rather than resolve the Enlightenment dialectic of universal and particular by seeking unity in diversity, the volume resists its wholeness--and thus, perhaps, asserts its postmodernity. To switch metaphors, the volume refuses to allow a final triumph of transparency over obscurity. Either way, I have tried to provide here that totalizing essay--but, as the authors of the *Encyclopédie* enjoin us to realize, a description can never replicate an object perfectly. I cannot, therefore, hope or desire to have provided the only possible reading of such a difficult set of texts. In rendering their particularity intelligible as a whole, I have ignored much of the sophistication and erudition that makes them unique. Illuminating one reading shrouds others in obscurity. I can only suggest that one follow Buffon's advice and read the book both with "the wide-ranging views of an ardent mind that embraces everything with one glance, and the detail-oriented laboring instinct that concentrates only on one element."

LIST OF ESSAYS

- John Bender and Michael Marrinan, "Introduction"
- Lorraine Daston, "Description by Omission: Nature Enlightened and Obscured"
- Londa Shiebinger, "Nature's Unruly Body: The Limits of Scientific Description"
- Jürgen Trabant, "Mithridates in Paradise: Describing Languages in a Universalistic World"
- Mary Poovey, "Between Political Arithmetic and Political Economy"
- Wolfgang Klein, "Problems of Description in Art: Realism"
- Elaine Scarry, "Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)"
- Wolfgang Ernst, "Not Seeing the *Laocoön*: Lessing in the Archive of the Eighteenth Century"
- Alex Potts, "Disparities between Part and Whole in the Description of Works of Art"
- Peter Hanns Reill, "Between Mechanism and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*: Vitalizing Nature and Naturalizing Historical Discourse in the Late Enlightenment"
- Anthony Vidler, "Transparency and Utopia: Constructing the Void from Pascal to Foucault"
- David E. Wellbery, "Aesthetic Media: The Structure of Aesthetic Theory before Kant"

NOTES

[1] Daniel Gordon, ed., *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), p. 1.

[2] Sylvia Tomasch, "Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew," in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 243-260.

[3] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), xi-xii.

[4] Hayden White, "Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground," in *The Tropics of History: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 235.

[5] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, xxii.

[6] Gordon also rejects the origins of postmodernism in the thought of either Nietzsche or Horkheimer and Adorno. See "On the Supposed Obsolescence of the French Enlightenment," in Postmodernism and the Enlightenment, pp. 201-221.

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