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Moralistes of Modern Life: the Subjectivization of Moralistic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century France

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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Abstract

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This dissertation studies the breakdown of classical moralistic discourse in the post-absolutist moment and traces the newly flexible forms of this self-defined “literature of social observation” over the course of the eighteenth century. Tied to the specific context of absolute monarchy, moralistic literature had analyzed the world in function of analytical grids and rigid codes, and hence generated a literature of closed forms: maxims, portraits, *caractères*. I argue that the static completeness of moralistic literature reached its limits of possibility under the Regency, when the migration from the closed system of the court to the “open” system of the city radically destabilized the finite and fixed nature of social categories and their codes – presuming this had ever been a social reality, though it had in fact been represented as such in moralistic texts. Analyzing generically diverse texts which have never before been put into dialogue – *Le Spectateur français* (Marivaux), *Le Neveu de Rameau* (Diderot), and the *Tableau de Paris* (Mercier), I study a feature of the emergence of urban modernity that has heretofore remained overshadowed by Benjaminian studies of the nineteenth-century capital: the figure of the urban spectator. Informed by eighteenth-century aesthetics and *drame* theory, my dissertation argues for the figure of the urban spectator as the mediator and model of a public in the making. No longer an implied, disembodied narrator, the spectator’s emergence produced not only new ways of writing, but also of knowing, what La Rochefoucauld referred to as “les choses de la vie.” This dissertation focuses on narrative texts that stage the spectator in the act of beholding; that is to say, narratives in which moralistic discourse is subjectivized.

For Mum, who walked every step of this journey with me.

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And to Paolo, for waiting so patiently for me at the finish line.

Introduction

i. From Spectacle to Spectator

This dissertation engages a strain of moralist literature in eighteenth-century France which struggled both aesthetically and politically with the urban fabric it sought to describe. Studying the ways in which *Le Spectateur français*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and the *Tableau de Paris* stage not only the spectator, but the very act of beholding, I examine the increasingly subjectivized discourse of moralist literature in eighteenth-century France. The publication of Addison and Steele's *Spectator* (1711), Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) and Dubos' *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719) catalyzes the reconfiguration of the role and centrality of the figure of the spectator. These reflections on the receptive and creative capacities of the spectator of theater, the beholder of painting, the proto urban ethnographer, are doubtless inflected by Lockean empiricism and bear the marks of sensualist philosophy. The opening up, within the new model of beholding, of a space for the spectator, necessarily accounts for contingency in new ways. Drawing new attention to the experience and the "aesthetics of the moment," to borrow Thomas Kavanagh's term, the itinerant narratives generated by the figure – at once literary and social – of the spectator both engage and represent a public in the making, a public in search of its identity and voice – a public that will, at the close of the century, become cohesive and identifiable.

While heretofore the authority to judge a work of art had been relegated to *les gens de métier* (that is, learned, specialized men), Dubos' reflections in particular transfers authority to the individual, feeling subject. Firstly, this move democratizes the act of spectatorship. Secondly, it relocates the primacy of the act of spectatorship on the level of the spectator rather than on that of the work of art. No longer respecting the rules of classical poetics but rather responding to an aesthetic experience, the spectator accrues new importance not only in the "field" of painting but also in that of theater.

The role of the spectator becomes increasingly radical over the course of the eighteenth century. At the confluence of theoretical reflections on painterly and theatrical reforms, Diderot's *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (1757) and his *Discours de la poésie dramatique* (1758) are the first to theorize the emerging *drame bourgeois*. This new theatrical model would move from the constraints (visual and representational) of the classical stage, giving way to "l'invention d'un théâtre de l'image."¹ The artificiality and theatricality of the stage – both in what it represents and how – is dismissed in favor of naturalness and harmony. Kings and courts are replaced by fathers and families. The theater remains an institution of moralizing instruction, but one that engages the spectator differently; the *drame* would morally instruct the spectator by moving him to action. In other words, the individual, feeling subject is moved and responds to the scene.

In the paradigm shift from poetics to aesthetics we note the emergence of a feeling subject who, placed before the work of art, affectively responds to and is absorbed

¹ Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 6.

by the object. Conversely, under the neoclassical model, there is a rigidly demarcated separation between the work of art and the spectator. Indeed, as Bryson has suggested, authority is no longer defined as what is outside representation, in the place of the spectator. Rather, it has been diffused, redistributed, both outside and within the object: its very nature has changed. In the neo-classical tradition, it was the idealized society as a whole (the City) that judged, by the rules of art, a work of art. Here, if society continues to be present in the respect the critic shows for the rules of art, the “doxa,” it is nevertheless also the critic as a “feeling” *individual* who judges the object of imitation, based on his emotional, “aesthetic” response, his identification with and absorption into the object.²

If the spectator emerged in this particular way at this particular moment, it was due to greater social reconfigurations as well. Regency France is characterized by seismic mutations of the cultural imaginary. This period of uncertainty and change allowed for greater social participation and change, bringing to the fore the figure of the urban spectator in the wake of the Sun King.

The absolutist culture propagated by Louis XIV strove to eliminate the contingencies that would make its semiotics – upon which its “culture machine” relied – less than entirely coherent. Part of this guarantee of semiotic coherence depended on the exclusion of the spectator position from the sovereign spectacle, and from the act of meaning-making more generally. For Louis XIV occupied the entire space of representation; he was the sun around which all things and people gravitated. In this way, the spectator of the sovereign spectacle was relegated to the margins, at a distance from princely displays. Indeed, in the move of royal spectacles to Versailles in 1664, all of Paris became a distant onlooker to royal performance. The absolute monarch is therefore to be imagined as a uniform organizational principle, the central point of reference. This is articulated explicitly, for instance, in the *manuels de civilité*, propagated by Richelieu, which outline the rigidly complex, hierarchized (and hierarchizing) code of ritual at court. Such well-known *manuels* as Courtin’s *Le Nouveau Traité de civilité* (1672) detail the highly visible and symbolic gestures performed at court, perhaps most importantly where one is to position oneself in relation to the king.³ As Russo observes, courtly life is always and already mediated by the king; everything is staged and hierarchized in function of the sovereign and his diverse figurations, this single point of reference.⁴

² Scott S. Bryson, *The Chastised Stage: Bourgeois Drama and the Exercise of Power* (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1991), 24-25.

³ Elena Russo, *La Cour et la ville: de la littérature classique aux Lumières* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002), 15.

⁴ Russo, *La Cour et la ville*, 18.

The hold of the absolutist model waned long before September 1, 1715, Caplan argues, but its yoke is thrown off definitively with the death of the Sun King.⁵ The portrait of the king becomes just that: the portrait of the now-absent monarch. This semiotic disentanglement (the king is no longer his portrait, the portrait is a portrait of the king) does not in itself engender the semiotic crisis that shakes Regency France; along with the dismantling of previously stable systems of signification wrought by Law's system – and by fiscal mobility more generally – the post-absolutist moment witnesses the challenge of the very possibility of signs as transparent containers of Being, a doubt in semiotic coherence.⁶

ii. “Modern” Moralism Discourse?

Classical moralist literature, in France, is tied to the specific context of the absolute monarchy: its codes, its cosmography, its sovereign epicenter. The emblematic works of this literary tradition – La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* (1664) and La Bruyère's *Caractères* (1688) – coincide with the zenith of the French monarchical (absolutist) regime.⁷ The rigidly codified culture under the Sun King both provided a grid through which the moralist read that which he observed, and provided fixed categories into which he classified his observations. Indeed, classical anthropology studied the world in function of finite, preordained codes and reproduced these variables in a number of “closed” forms – *caractères*, maxims, portraits. Eliminating difference and perpetuating fixed categories, each person and thing bore a *mark* – a character; that is to say, everything bore a sign which made it socially visible. Classical characterology was based on the assumption that human nature is immutable, universal, and therefore free of the contingencies of time and place.⁸

Yet what happened to moralist discourse when the apparatus to which it had been yoked began to falter? More specifically, how does the moralist observe and write the social within the cultural climate of subterfuge which defines the Regency – social mobility, Law's system, the move from Court to city? This dissertation takes as its point of departure a moment when the “alphabet” of classical anthropology no longer articulated what La Rochefoucauld termed “les choses de la vie.” The static completeness of the moralist tradition reaches its limits of possibility, I argue, in the post-absolutist moment, when the fixed and absolute nature of social categories and their codes – presuming this had ever been a social reality, though it was represented as such in the moralist texts – becomes radically destabilized. For indeed, under the Regency, Paris became the locus of semiotic confusion; new economic potential

⁵ Jay Caplan, *In the King's Wake: Post-Absolutist Culture in France* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999), 1.

⁶ Caplan, *In the King's Wake*, 7.

⁷ Cyril Le Meur, *Les moralistes français et la politique à la fin du XVIIIe siècle: le prince de Ligne, Senac de Meilhan, Chamfort, Rivarol, Joubert, Hérault-Sechelles devant la mort d'un genre et la naissance d'un monde* (Paris: Champion, 2002), 12.

⁸ Daniel Acke, “La Notion de caractère dans les *Journaux*?” *Marivaux subversif?* ed. Franck Salaün (Paris: Desjonquères, 2003), 211.

engendered a blurring of previous markers of difference. In this way, the “alphabet” of the classical moralist no longer provided either a perceptual and descriptive grid, or an adequate vocabulary of representation. Confronting an urban fabric which now demanded to be decoded, a new figure became at this point visible within moralist literature: that of the spectator. As Ketcham has noted, “the self can be preserved in the securely bound realm of the estate, but it can only be lost in the multifarious encounters of the city with its profusion of signs and social symbols, mere tokens which turn all men into merchants.”⁹ In between words and images, and the things they had previously represented, a space of interpretation was opened, a space in which a new figure emerged: that of the spectator. The seeing, speaking subject became visible within the narrative frame, an embodied observer and describer of “les choses de la vie.” I tie the rise of the spectator to the migration from the closed system of the court to the “open” system of the city, and will analyze, in what follows, this feature of the emergence of urban modernity.

The particular strain of moralists included in this study are set apart from their contemporaries in three specific ways: they are generically innovative, they are visible within their text, and conceive of a cohesive public rather than of a swatch of society (in other words, they imagine a public rather than *la société*). Though classical moralist literature wanes throughout the eighteenth century – perhaps in favor of such emerging genres as the novel and the drame – such moralists as Veuve-nargues, Chamfort, Duclos, Sénac de Meilhan, Séchelles, publish works which respect the conventions of classical moralist literature. In his 1787 *Considérations sur l’esprit et les moeurs*, Sénac de Meilhan echoes La Rouchefoucauld’s claim that the maxim serves its moral purpose best since the reader can commit it to memory easily. Sénac in fact reveals himself to be completely at odds with the moralists considered in this study; not only does he champion the fragment form of moralist literature, but condemns the attempt to establish relations. In the Encyclopedic and taxonomic age, it is difficult to think of anything as “detachées,” much less “les pensées:”

Les ouvrages sont pour la plupart trop longs. On veut définir, diviser, lier, et le ciment tient plus de place que les pierres qui composent l’édifice... les pensées détachées, lorsqu’elles sont bien exprimées, font plus d’effet et se gravent mieux dans la mémoire que si elles étaient noyées dans un chapitre. Elles réveillent l’attention du Lecteur et lui épargnent, ainsi qu’à l’Auteur, de longs et inutiles circuits.¹⁰

Similarly, Hérault-Séchelles, in his 1788 *Codicille politique et pratique d’un jeune habitant d’Epône*, alludes to contemporary scientific thought while missing the mark entirely. Like the classical moralists and Sénac, Séchelles believes in the primacy of memory and repetition/reproduction rather than understanding:

L’utilité des classifications est d’indiquer les groupes

⁹ Michael Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 45.

¹⁰ Sénac de Meilhan, *Considérations sur l’esprit et les moeurs* in Cyril Le Meur, *Trésor des moralistes du XVIIIe siècle: Maximes, pensées, portraits, anecdotes, bon mots, écarts, propos* (Paris: Le Temps des cerises, 2005), 138.

où nous devons chercher les choses déposées dans notre mémoire; le jalonnement des échelles sert à marquer les limites entre lesquelles il faut chercher une quantité. Ces deux méthodes resserrent le champs du tâtonnement, diminuent l'incertitude et épargnement du temps.¹¹

The examples I provide above may falsely imply that eighteenth-century moralists are largely preoccupied with contemporary scientific reforms; this is largely not the case, and these examples serve to illustrate how differently they understand and observe the social and scientific worlds. Highly political, Chamfort assumes a much different view of the monarchy than his moralist predecessors, one according to which he defines the monarchy as that “sous quoi le peuple est écrasé depuis quatorze siècles.” I have illustrated ways in which a certain strain of eighteenth-century moralist literature preserved the generic specificity of the genre (the fragment form) and narrative position of the narrator relegated to the margins of the text. Reading Chamfort’s *Produits de la civilisation perfectionnée, maximes, pensées, caractères, anectodes* reveals the extent to which the moralist point of view is outside of ever-changing urban reality and attracted to a particular swatch of society. Indeed, Chamfort’s fragments read as a gallery of portraits (of Mme de Pompadour, Louis XV, Mme Denis, Mme la comtesse de Boufflers, le duc de Choiseul, M. de Barbançon, among many others).

Moralist literature can be identified by three distinctive feature, van Delft has suggested: the proliferation and preservation of thematic topoi, in function of the assumption that “tout est dit” (that there is nothing new to say about the world)¹²; a commitment to brevity, or in other words, the art of the essential; and finally, a refusal of fiction and fable. Originating in the tradition of classical characterology (Theophrastus), moralist literature relies to a large extent on character-writing. The notion of character, central to our discussion here, has both a social and a literary veilance: it refers at once to a particular conception of the individual, and relies on typology. Simultaneously, it refers to both a literary discourse and genre (“la forme brève du caractère”).¹³ The social world is perceived to be a constellation of types (characters), translated into a characterological description that fragments the social according to these types. This fixist and classificatory anthropology sought to create the illusion of social coherence and stability.

In his study of the figure of the moralist and classical moralist literature, van Delft articulates *The Spectator* of Addison and Steele as the culminating point of moralist literature in France. I, on the other hand, take it – and Marivaux’s “imitative” *Spectateur français* – as the point of departure for this study. Van Delft declares that “une seule chose était sûre: sa vie entière était concentrée dans son regard. Cet homme était un

¹¹ Hérault-Séchelles, *Codicille politique et pratique d’un jeune habitant d’Epône* in Le Meur, *Trésor des moralistes du XVIIIe siècle*, 157. We could recall here Diderot’s famous exclamation that “il faut aller en tâtonnant!”

¹² Playing on La Bruyère’s famous declaration (“tout est dit”), Dagen writes that “c’est parce que ‘tout est dit’ qu’il y a plaisir à se faire moraliste.” Jean Dagen, *Entre Epicure et Vauvenargues: principes et formes de la pensée morale* (Paris: Champion, 1999), 12.

¹³ Acke, “La notion de ‘caractère’,” 142.

Oeil.”¹⁴ What interests me in Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* journal is the ways in which Mr. Spectator is self-declared – and imagined by the public – to be a participating member of the public he describes. Though he never identifies himself by name, he includes himself in the social observations and descriptions he provides.

The figure of the moralist was not a moral philosopher, but rather a describer of *moeurs*. In his *Considérations sur l’esprit et les moeurs*, for instance, Sénac defines moralist discourse as “la partie de la morale qui a pour objet l’homme vivant en société, dans la cour ou la capitale,” and Duclos affirms that “il s’agit donc d’examiner les devoirs et les erreurs des hommes; mais cet examen doit avoir pour objet les moeurs générales, celles des différentes classes qui composent la société.”¹⁵ If classical moralist literature had sought to provide a description of fixed social categories, unchanging human nature, and anonymous universals, the moralist texts I study imbricate both the figure of the spectator-narrator and his descriptions in the very social fabric he seeks to describe.

This study emerges out of an interest in the puzzling effacement of the figure of the moralist from his social descriptions. Though critical scholarship qualifies the figures of the moralist in highly visual terms, he is never himself visible within his text. Such expressions as *l’oeil du moraliste*, *le métier du moraliste*, *les spectateurs de la vie* abound in contemporary criticism, invoking both a descriptive reliance on the visual, and an explicit spectator-narrator position. There is a moment, however, when the spectator-narrator does become visible in his text, and this is the starting point of our discussion. I am interested in the literary instances of spectators who both generate and organize the moralist observations proffered to the reader which, I argue, advances an argument about individual agency in the face of a newly emergent public sphere, and challenges the ethics of scientific observation (taxonomy) in an age defined – Foucault has suggested – by the drive to classification. Indeed,

character books suggest that this order can simply be seen, that it could be randomly encountered, since everyone can be read and put in the proper slot. Such a structure implies a spectator. The Theophrastian character books did not, however, offer a portrait of the implied spectator; nor did they show him at work.¹⁶

We will be concerned in the explicit spectator-narrators that populate *Le Spectateur français*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and the *Tableau de Paris*. More importantly, we will call to the fore the ways in which these spectator-narrator figures reflect on observational methodologies; in other words, what will be of interest to us here is not be solely *what* these characters look at, but more importantly again, *how* they look – *how* they engage the social world they describe. Marivaux’s eponymous *Spectateur*, Diderot’s *Lui* and *Moi* figures, and Mercier’s *observateur attentif* serve, in this study, as instances

¹⁴ Louis van Delft, *Les Spectateurs de la vie: généalogie du regard moraliste* (Laval: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2005), 237.

¹⁵ Charles Pinot Duclos, *Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle* ed. Carole Dornier (Paris: Champion, 1996), 26.

¹⁶ Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78.

of the subjectivized *moraliste*. That is to say, in each of the works studied in the chapters that follow, descriptions of the social world and its *moeurs* are generated by a spectator-narrator who is conscious of himself as social spectator, and equally conscious of his relationship to the world he describes.

Grand narratives of the Enlightenment make much of the drive toward classification and taxonomy that defined the age, championing what Darnton qualifies as the “diagrammatic impulse” – a tendency to map, outline, spatialize segments of knowledge.”¹⁷ It is by this impulse to catalogue and inventory – that is, to master – knowledge of the people, places, and things of the natural and moral world that we have come to characterize the classical episteme. In the face of this totalizing narrative of systematicity, however, I locate works by Marivaux, Diderot, and Mercier as representative of a critique of order. By their self-termed *libertinage d'idées*, Marivaux and Diderot, for instance, refuse the very possibility of classification; order and categorization impede movement, so central to the authors considered in this study. For, as Diderot affirms, “le mouvement est essentiel à la matière.”¹⁸ While modern critiques of Enlightenment brought to the fore questions about the implications of the totalizing and disciplining function of the synoptic gaze, the move toward abstraction, and the systematization of knowledge, I argue that these questions are already self-consciously articulated in *Le Spectateur français*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and the *Tableau de Paris*. Undoing the very principles that define the classical episteme as well as the tradition of moralist literature, these works challenge what it might mean – generically, ethically, and politically – to order knowledge of the natural and social worlds.

It is most notably in their conception of an emerging public that the works studied here differ from earlier works of moralist literature. I argue that Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* plays on both moralist and journalistic conventions in order to translate the movement and incertitude of the post-absolutist moment in Regency France. At the intersection of moralist and journalistic traditions, *Le Spectateur français* challenges the exhaustive description of contemporary types proffered by La Bruyère; his is a static, closed conception of society. By inscribing the date on each loose leaf, the Spectateur necessarily qualifies his observations as temporally limited, anticipating what Baudelaire refers to as “les mutations journalières.” Periodical publication is both inherently modern and urban; by extension, it is necessarily discontinuous and punctual. The periodical form of the moralist’s observations serves to reinforce his reflections on time; the persistently discontinuous and fragmentary form of the Spectateur’s feuilles and social observations translate the social incoherence he confronts. Rather than attempting to impose a false order and constraint upon a social space in perpetual flux, Marivaux gives shape to this movement of perpetual change itself. Like Diderot and Mercier after him, Marivaux manipulates rhetorical and generic devices in order to give shape to the changing social world, and refuses to seek out continuity. Rather, incongruities – reformulating the editorial and spectatorial traditions of both Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* and of the *Mercure de France* – *Le Spectateur français* displaces the discourse

¹⁷ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 278.

¹⁸ Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau* ed. Jean Varloot (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 125.

of authority by proliferating the narrator position and multiplying the first-person position (in its inclusion of fictitious letters to the editor). In my close reading of “La Cinquième Feuille” I argue that Marivaux turns the sovereign spectacle inside out; in the eponymous Spectateur’s description of *l’Entrée de l’Infante* what figures at center stage are not the sovereign figures, but rather the crowd of spectators who generate the meaning of the scene. This is congruous with contemporary reconfigurations of the role of the spectator in pictorial terms. Indeed,

description does not begin directly with the works of art; it attempts first to characterize and ascertain the mode of aesthetic contemplation. It is no longer primarily a matter of artistic genres, but of artistic behavior, that is, of the impression which the work of art makes on the spectator and of the judgment he passes on his impression for himself and for others.¹⁹

In other words, informed by the new authority transferred to the figure of the spectator, Marivaux proffers reflections not only on the social scene, but on the spectatorial modes by which meaning is both generated and communicated. In this *feuille* the Spectateur reflects on the very act of spectatorship in terms both perceptual and socio-political; that is to say, in terms of both the individual and the crowd. I extend my analysis of the Spectateur’s reflections on social observation to the “Sixième Feuille” in which “modern” reading practices are reconsidered. I link the two *feuilles* in order to advance an argument about *reading the social*. Reading *Le Spectateur français* through the lens of contemporary aesthetic debates that accord a new primacy to the generative and determinant role of the spectator in relation to painting, we ascertain that the authority of the judging public in matters aesthetic is easily transposed in social and political terms.

Like Marivaux, Diderot tests the limits of genre in *Le Neveu de Rameau* which, by its generic hybridity, refuses classification itself. I argue that Diderot’s reappropriation of the classical forms of dialogue and promenade serves to generate a text whose form mimics the perpetual movement of the social space it seeks to describe. This generically unclassifiable work gives shape to the inconsistencies and incongruities of the social world and the individual’s lived experience in this world, rather than imposing a stabilizing grid upon this space. Deviating sharply from the conventions of classical moralist literature, Diderot seeks to destabilize the very possibility of both narrative and social order for, as Lui states, “il n’y a rien de stable dans ce monde.”²⁰ For indeed, in moralist discourse, “the ease with which everyone could be placed in one’s proper cubicle may also have contributed to a sense of the fixed and absolute nature of social categories. Such a book would offer the illusion that the organization of society is natural and visible.”²¹ This is challenged in and by *Le Neveu de Rameau*, however, whose very form mimics the reflections advanced by Moi and Lui, especially in terms of the ethics of classification. Lui engages a lengthy critique of order – both scientific and social – whereby the very act of taxonomy is called to task. To taxonomize the natural and the

¹⁹ Annie Becq, *Genèse de l’esthétique française moderne de la Raison classique à l’Imagination créatrice: 1680-1814* (Pisa: Pacini editore, 1984), 298.

²⁰ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 135.

²¹ Brand, *The Spectator and the City*, 87.

social worlds is to partition a being that should be considered in its entirety, Lui argues. This line of argumentation will be taken up by Mercier in his *Du Théâtre* and *Tableau de Paris*, as we shall see in Chapter 3. In Chapter 2, I argue that like *Le Spectateur français* and the *Tableau de Paris*, *Le Neveu de Rameau* is generated and organized by two spectator-narrator figures; the dynamics of performance the define both the text and its characters foreground both the figure of the spectator and the act of social spectatorship. Readings of Diderot's theoretical texts on painting and theater (*Salon de 1767* and *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*), as well as a reading of *Le Fils naturel* support my reading of *Le Neveu de Rameau* as a work in which the spectator-narrator generates and organizes the narrative.

These figures, imbricated in the urban fabric that they describe, are a novel feature of eighteenth-century moralist literature. I argue for *Le Neveu de Rameau* as the first and properly urban moralist work. The perspective of the moralist who observes and describes from street level, rather than abstracting from above, is insisted upon in Diderot's work. Diderot's reflections on both bodily and social organization are supported by the fact that Lui and Moi inhabit the space they both observe and describe; their urban practices are insisted upon and as such underscore their authority as urban spectators of the Parisian scene. The public spaces that Moi and Lui inhabit (the café de la Régence and the Palais-Royal), I argue, advance Diderot's reflections on sensibility, and articulate a complex relationship between the individual and an emerging literary and political public sphere. While Diderot proffers no topographical descriptions of the capital, what is underscored in *Le Neveu de Rameau* is the social symbolics of space.

The question of the ethics of spectatorship, classification, and genre is radicalized by Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris*, in which both the spectator and the city come into sharp focus. Indeed, in his description of the capital, Mercier brings the people, places, and things of Paris into sharp focus (unlike Marivaux and Diderot) in order to give shape to the capital's moral physiognomy. It is in the context of his reflections on the *drame* that Mercier first articulates the project of writing "un livre de Paris," and in Chapter 3 I argue that Mercier's *Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* lays the theoretical foundation for the descriptive project that ultimately comes to fruition as the *Tableau de Paris*. In order to collapse the vertical hierarchies that had been preserved by classical theater, Mercier democratizes the dramatic scene. Yet his ambitions exceed the potential of the theater, I suggest, at which point he expounds a novel conception of the *drame* as *tableau* – the *tableau* of everyday life.

As with Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, I suggest that Mercier's ambitions for theatrical reform – both generic and political – far exceed the potential of the theater; he has recourse to a *new* descriptive model, one that would be as temporally as it would be spatially expansive. Marivaux, Diderot, and Mercier alike struggle to give rise to a generic form that would transcend generic constraint; for Marivaux it is the fragmentary form of the loose leaf, for Diderot, the multiplicity of genres and the pantomime, and for Mercier it is the *tableau*.

In the 1050 chapters of the 12-volume *Tableau de Paris*, written over the course of eight years, the elaboration of the democratic disposition of the dramatic scene is *mise en scène*. We have, with the *Tableau*, a descriptive project in which the king and the *marchande de mode* figure equally, in which equal proportion is granted to the city's great monuments and to its prisons. Not only do the extremes of *le grand luxe* and *la*

grande misère cohabit the capital in Mercier's description, but they also touch. This horizontality is reflected in the *Tableau*, I suggest, by Mercier's refusal of either thematic or chronological order imposed on the text.

In his attempt to provide an encyclopedic description of Paris, Mercier's act of writing struggles to keep pace with the perpetually-shifting object it confronts; for indeed, Mercier is not only writing space, I argue – that is, physical Paris – but, unlike previous topographical descriptions, also a rhythm of change. Writing a present which figures as such rapid succession of change that it is always already past, Mercier invents a literary form which mimics the rate of change with which he grapples – the temporally and spatially expansive *tableau*. “Comment peindre,” Mercier queries, “ce qui, dans son extrême mobilité, échappe au pinceau?” In response to this challenge, Mercier not only invents a new way of writing the city, but necessarily, also, a new way of observing the city. That is to say, Mercier's new descriptive mode, I propose, requires a new observational practice. Indeed, if the *tableau* is for Mercier a most dynamic descriptive model, so, too, is the observational practice it foregrounds; the ambulatory observer investigates one object – Paris – from various vantage points and perspectives: from atop Notre-Dame, a balcony, a chair, from inside a moving carriage, or a cave-like cabaret. As Mercier claims, “tout a droit d'intéresser l'observateur attentif.” It is in fact the figure of the *observateur attentif* that figures at the heart of our discussion of the *Tableau de Paris*. We will be interested in examining the ways in which the spectator-narrator gives shape to the urban space he describes.

I argue that in both *Le Spectateur français* and *Le Neveu de Rameau* what is foregrounded is the (lived) experience of a moment, what Kavanagh refers to as “the aesthetics of the moment.” What is underscored by Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, however, is the urgency of the moment. The present figures in Mercier's description as Paris as ever-elusive. This gives rise to a descriptive practice in which the eye of the spectator and the pen of the narrator must work in tandem; for, indeed, one cannot trace Paris fast enough, it would seem. This sense of descriptive urgency is transposed on the social, to be sure; Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, in its description of the insalubrity of the capital and of tolerated injustices, attempts to communicate a sense of social urgency. In his attention to *all* elements of the Parisian landscape, the *observateur attentif* must aim to render everything – especially social inequity – *visible*.

While I argue that Mercier expounds a novel conception of *tableau* that is both temporally and spatially expansive – in response to the perpetually shifting form of his object of knowledge – I conclude that the *Tableau de Paris* is not hinged upon a monolithic model of time, and suggest that this description of the capital, in fact, unfolds across two temporal places, describing at once the hyper-accelerated rate of change of the surface of the city while lamenting the lagging pace of social reform, revealing what I refer to as the paradox of progress.

iii. The Urban Modern Moralist

In each chapter that follows, I analyze the figure of the spectator-narrator who is both the generative and organizational principle of the work. In interrogating *l'énonciation* of the urban observer in eighteenth-century texts that have been never been

considered together, this study adds to a body of scholarship on eighteenth-century literature and the city which to a large extent thematizes the city without taking into account the figure of the urban spectator. The title of this dissertation, “*Moralistes de la vie moderne*,” engages Baudelaire’s *Peintre de la vie moderne* in order to foreground the ways in which *Le Spectateur français*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and the *Tableau de Paris* challenge the “temporalité abstraite” that typifies moralist literature.²² The notion of a moralist – like the painter – of modern life engages two notions of prime concern to us in this study: that of the spectatorship of everyday life and that of temporality.

In the chapter “Croquis de mœurs,” Baudelaire argues that
pour le croquis de mœurs, la représentation de la vie bourgeoise
et les spectacles de la mode, le moyen le plus expéditif et le moins
coûteux est évidemment le meilleur. Plus l’artiste y mettra de
beauté, plus l’œuvre sera précieuse; mais il y a dans la vie triviale,
dans la métamorphose journalière des choses extérieures, un
mouvement rapide qui commande à l’artiste une égale vélocité
d’exécution.²³

In each of the chapters that follow I examine the ways in which Marivaux, Diderot, and Mercier inscribe temporality in their works. I argue that they manipulate generic conventions in order to give rise to forms of urban observation that would mimic the perpetual movement that typifies the surfaces they describe. Here, Baudelaire insists on the daily metamorphosis of the surface *things* of life and the challenge this poses to the painter of modern life. Baudelaire’s insistence on the concomitant acts of observation and description echoes sharply with concerns that are very visible in Marivaux, Diderot, and Mercier – but while Baudelaire is fascinating by the rapid rate of change of things, the topography of Paris and its things do not become visible until Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*. For this reason, in this study, I have sought to qualify *Le Spectateur français*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and the *Tableau de Paris* as moralist texts whose concerns deviate from classical conventions. The too-rigidly demarcated advent of *modernity* has, in French literary studies, effaced the antecedents of a (strain of) literature of moral observation that sought to contend – in terms both literary and social – with the social and urban upheaval that defined eighteenth-century Paris. While the argument here is not a teleological one, tracing a direct lineage between Marivaux, Diderot, Mercier, and Baudelaire, it does create a space of dialogue between critical scholarship of nineteenth-century urban literature and its early modern antecedents.

²² Jean-Charles Darmon, *Le Moraliste, la politique et l’histoire, de La Rochefoucauld à Derrida* ed. Jean-Charles Darmon (Paris: Éditions Desjonquères, 2007), 11.

²³ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (Genève: Éditions La Palantine, 1943), 46.

Chapter I

Staging the Sociable Spectator in Marivaux's *Spectateur français*

Marivaux's *Spectateur français*, like both Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau* and Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, poses a challenge in terms of generic classification. Subsuming both the generic and discursive conventions of classical moralist literature, of the essay, and of journalism, *Le Spectateur français* articulates something particularly new about the subjective place of the social observer and describer. Published over the course of four years (1721-24) with an unreliable periodicity, the twenty-five sheets that constitute *Le Spectateur français* foreground the act of beholding; that is to say, it is a text that stages the spectator. Marivaux's text – narrated by the character known only as Le Spectateur français, *zélé pour le public* – appears in the wake of a moment when the first aesthetic texts articulate a new mode of beholding that transfers the role of the spectator from one of reception to one of production. Both in France and across the Channel we witness a remapping of the relationship between seeing subject and object – aesthetic, social, political – in the writings of Addison, de Piles, and Dubos, for instance. These reflections on the receptive and creative capacities of the spectator of theater, the beholder of painting, the proto urban ethnographer, are doubtless inflected by Lockean empiricism and bear the marks of sensualist philosophy. The opening up, within the new model of beholding, of a space for the spectator, necessarily accounts for contingency in new ways. Drawing new attention to the experience and the “aesthetics of the moment,” the itinerant narratives generated by the figure – at once literary and social – of the Spectator both engage and represent a public in the making, a public in search of its identity and voice – a public that will, at the close of the century, become cohesive and identifiable.²⁴ As Acke has suggested, “la vie morale à l'époque des Lumières ne se focalise plus sur des types exemplaires ou ridicules, mais sur l'individu et la formation de celui-ci dans sa confrontation avec la société;” the emphasis – as in the case of Marivaux's *Spectateur français* – is on “les individus prenant conscience d'eux-mêmes et de leurs possibilités par rapport à la société.”²⁵

Writing the Experience of a Moment: The Essay, Periodicity, and the Public

The “Première Feuille” of Marivaux's *Spectateur français* opens with a reflection not only on the constraints of literary form, but more specifically on the ways in which thought is subservient to form. Arguing that generic conventions produce an artificial

²⁴ I borrow the term “aesthetics of the moment” from Thomas Kavanagh's study, *Aesthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

²⁵ Daniel Acke, “La Notion de caractère dans les *Journaux*” *Marivaux subversif?* ed. Franck Salaün (Paris, Desjonquières, 2003), 211.

and arbitrary “liaison des pensées,” the eponymous Spectateur suggests that – contrary to (literary) tradition – it is in fact his thoughts will give shape to his journal.²⁶ In turning from “cet exercice forcé [que l’esprit humain] se donne en composant,” the Spectateur insists on the sinuosity and spontaneity both of his “réflexions” and of the shape these will take on the page.²⁷ For indeed, it is not form that dictates his writerly project, but rather *le hasard*:

Je ne sais point créer, je sais seulement surprendre en moi
les pensées que le hasard me fait [...] mon dessein n’est de
penser ni bien ni mal, mais simplement de recueillir fidèlement
ce qui me vient d’après le tour d’imagination que me
donnent les choses que je vois ou que j’entends, et c’est
de ce tour d’imagination, ou pour mieux dire de ce qu’il
produit, que je voudrais que les hommes nous rendissent
compte, quand les objets les frappent.²⁸

The question, then, is how to give shape to a project dictated by the “aesthetics of the moment,” by the imaginative response provoked within the spectator by remarkable things seen and heard? In outlining his project for his reader (whom he addresses directly in the pages of his journal), the Spectateur underlines the contingency of his reflections; resisting regularity – discursive, formal, narrative – *Le Spectateur français* proceeds without any preordained plan and depends solely on the contingency of experience. By extension, both the object of inquiry (*le tour d’imagination produit par les choses vues et entendues*) and the observer-narrator position (*les hommes*) are plural, which underscores a conception of this discourse and form as subjective and heterogeneous.²⁹ Just as Mercier strives toward an ideal of formless form in his *Tableau de Paris* (1781-1788), so, too, does Marivaux draw attention to the ways in which his work resists form – or at the very least, to the ways in which the work provides a self-reflexive critique of the form it adopts, as we shall see presently. For these reasons, the essay was aptly suited to Marivaux’s project of literary innovation by virtue of the fact that it was a remarkably untheorized genre, whose formal conventions remained relatively flexible.

Even some forty years after the publication of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*, d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie et dictionnaire raisonné* [...] article, “Essai,” makes evident the undefinability of the essayistic genre. The perfunctory nature of D’Alembert’s treatment of the literary essay stands in sharp contrast to his exhaustive development of

²⁶ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français, Journaux et oeuvres diverses* eds. Frédéric Deloffre and Michel Gilot (Paris: Bordas, 1998), 114.

²⁷ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114.

²⁸ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114-115.

²⁹ The Spectateur makes clear to his reader that it is not the objects observed but rather the effect provoked in the observer that will constitute the pages of his journal. Just as Addison and Steele had vowed to disseminate a “Knowledge no longer bound up in Books, and kept in Libraries and Retirements, but obtruded upon the Publick [...]” so, too, does the Spectateur declare that the matter of his reflections is made up of things seen and heard (“les choses que je vois ou que j’entends”) in the world. Addison and Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1:507.

the scientific *essai* (experiment) in the area of chemistry, in particular. Indeed, d'Alembert's cursory discussion of the literary essay is indicative of the extent to which the essay is a genre unbound by formal rules of composition and undefined by contemporary poetics.³⁰ This generic fluidity and heterogeneity is reflected in d'Alembert's article:

Ce mot [essai] employé dans le titre de plusieurs ouvrages, a différentes acceptions; il se dit ou des ouvrages dans lesquels l'auteur traite ou effleure différens sujets, tels que les essais de Montaigne, ou des ouvrages dans lesquels l'auteur traite un sujet particulier, mais sans prétendre l'approfondir, ni l'épuiser, ni enfin le traiter en forme et avec tout le détail et toute la discussion que la matière peut exiger. Un grand nombre d'ouvrages modernes portent le titre d'essai; est-ce modestie de la part des auteurs? Est-ce une justice qu'ils se rendent? C'est aux lecteurs à en juger.

In accordance with eighteenth-century usage, the term "essay" regroups such varied sub-genres as *discours*, *enquêtes*, *considérations*, *pensées*, and *lettres*. While casting its generic net remarkably widely, the essay refers, primarily, to literary forms which both define themselves in contradistinction to the *traité*, and articulate the figure of the essayist in contrast to that of the author – as does Marivaux in the opening pages of his *Spectateur français* and in the "Sixième Feuille" which we will discuss later in this chapter.

In Marivaux's journal, the essay form seems to subsume "les formes brèves" of classical moralist literature (*caractères*, maxims) insofar as it remains committed to the brevity of form. The *Spectateur's* essays, however, reveal an aesthetics of the fragment which disrupts the regularity of discourse – as we shall discuss presently. The insistence on the ideal of the formlessness of form in the opening pages of *Le Spectateur français* is echoed in d'Alembert's qualification of the essay as a work which takes up an area of inquiry without "le traiter en forme." Unlike the novel, for instance, which, as Lukács has suggested in his *Theory of the Novel*, "triumphs over the formlessness of the everyday," the essay parallels in its form what Marivaux terms *le libertinage d'idées*; indeed, the essay gives shape to the kinetic observations and experiences of the *Spectateur*.³¹ That is to say, the essayist aims to mimic formlessness rather than to triumph over this or, in Adorno's formulation, "the essay proceeds methodically

³⁰ Peter France, "Société, journalisme et essai: deux spectateurs" *Études sur les Journaux de Marivaux* ed. Nicholas Cronk and François Moureau (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001), 47.

³¹ *Libertinage d'idées*, an expression used by Marivaux most remarkably in the "Cinquième feuille" of his *Spectateur français*, refers to the irregularity and movement of thoughts: "Je me sens aujourd'hui dans un libertinage d'idées qui ne peut s'accommoder d'un sujet fixe" (*Spectateur français*, 132). Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 130.

unmethodically.”³² Resistant to the imposition of order, the essay therefore “exists outside any organization of knowledge.”³³ Indeed, the fluid form of the essay mimics the movement inherent in empirical observation; as Bense has asserted,

he writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind’s eye collects what he has seen, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing.³⁴

The essayistic enterprise accords primacy to the processes of observation, investigation, and judgment, and by its inherently discontinuous and indeterminate nature, gives shape to the spontaneity and sinuosity of experience. As the Spectateur avows to his reader,

Je conclus donc du plus au moins, en suivant mon principe: Oui! Je préférerais toutes les idées fortuites que le hasard nous a donné à celles que la recherche la plus ingénieuse pourrait nous fournir dans le travail. [...] **je suis né de manière que tout me devient une matière de réflexion**; c’est comme une philosophie de tempérament que j’ai reçue, et que le moindre objet met en exercice. Je ne destine aucun caractère à mes idées; c’est le hasard qui leur donne le ton.³⁵

Relinquishing both authorial authority and subservience to literary form, the Spectateur makes of himself the observational and textual principle of his journal (*Je conclus donc du plus au moins, en suivant mon principe*).³⁶ Extending this notion of authorial inclusivity, D’Alembert’s mention of the role of the essayist points to two elements which are central to Marivaux’s writerly project in *Le Spectateur français*: the modernity of the project, and its inherent publicity. Indeed, as Scott Black has suggested,

³² T.W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form” *The Adorno Reader*, trans. Brian O’Connor (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 101.

³³ Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), 4.

³⁴ Max Bense, “Über den Essay und seine Prose” *Merkur* 1:3 (1947), 418. Cited by Adorno in “The Essay as Form,” 104.

³⁵ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 117. Let us note here the idea of a temperament that enables one to become a particular kind of observer and describer of the modern urban constellation. For Diderot this will be the figure of the marginalized philosopher and for Mercier, that of the *observateur attentif*. Marivaux’s formulation, “je suis né de manière que tout me devient une matière de réflexion” parallels Mercier’s assertion that “tout a droit d’intéresser l’observateur attentif” (*Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai dramatique*).

³⁶ Indeed, establishing a distinction between *un auteur* and *un homme*, the eponymous Spectateur relinquishes – from the outset – any claim to discursive authority: “Lecteur, je ne veux point vous tromper, et je vous avertis d’avance que ce n’est point un auteur que vous allez lire ici [...] Je ne suis point auteur, et j’aurais été, je pense, fort embarrassé de le devenir” (12).

“representing the contingent and the new, the essay was the means by which the modern could apprehend itself.”³⁷

In what follows, I will argue that Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* emerges at the generic confluence of the moralist, essayistic and journalistic traditions. Reworking the fragment forms common to both moralist literature and the periodical press, Marivaux adds to this an essayistic form. The essay allows Marivaux to give shape to a public which, in the wake of seismic political, social, aesthetic transformations, is defined by perpetual flux. The essay provides Marivaux with a literary form suited to his ideal of formless form, one which shall be dictated by the spontaneity of a moment and the subjective response it wakens in the observer-narrator. Writing a shifting space, however, Marivaux has recourse to both a genre and a public platform that necessarily inserts an element of punctual time to his project: that of the periodical. The *Spectateur français* finds at its center a seeing, writing self – the critical figure of the Spectator – whose project of social description is defined by the contingency of the moment and the mediation of a public in the making.

Some four years prior to undertaking his project of social description in *Le Spectateur français*, Marivaux publishes in the *Mercure* a series of letters which are now collected under the title *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris* (1717-18). In their opening pages, he writes: “Il est difficile de définir la population de Paris, mais je vais pourtant tâcher de vous en donner quelque idée.” Solicited by his fictitious interlocutor, Madame ***, the *Lettres* open in the style of the *lettre galante*, while quickly shifting into that of the *lettre critique*. While the narrator opens with an avowal of obedience to his mistress, neither Madame *** nor the narrator’s affection for his mistress stand as focal point of the *Lettres*; rather, it is the people of Paris who come into sharp relief: “Vous avez raison de vouloir être instruite des moeurs et du caractère des habitants de Paris, et de tout ce qui se pratique dans cet abrégé du monde.”³⁸ I engage Marivaux’s *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris* here to articulate it as a point of interval between La Bruyère’s characterology and Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* in order to argue that in his project of spectator journalism, Marivaux reappropriates both moralist and journalistic conventions in order to stage what is carried out by, for instance, Donneau de Visé and later Addison and Steele – a project of publicity.

The *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris* appeared from August 1717 to August 1718 in the pages of the *Nouveau Mercure* without having been accorded a title by Marivaux; the *Lettres* were indexed, however, as *Les Moeurs de Paris par le Théophraste moderne*. Imposing both a literary and discursive filiation between Marivaux’s *Lettres* and the Theophrastian tradition – of greatest import, La Bruyère’s *Caractères* (1688) – l’abbé Buchet, editor of the *Nouveau Mercure*, positioned the *Lettres* within a literary legacy I

³⁷ Scott Black, “Social and Literary Form in the *Spectator*” *Eighteenth-Century French Studies* 33:1 (1991) 26. Interestingly, d’Alembert imagines the “modern” project of the essay in terms of a judging public (*c’est aux lecteurs à en juger*), which in fact parallels the opening line of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* (discussed previously): “Lecteur, je ne veux point vous tromper, et je vous avertis d’avance que ce n’est point un auteur que vous allez lire ici.”

³⁸ Marivaux, “Lettres sur les habitants de Paris” *Journaux et oeuvres diverses* eds. Frédéric Deloffre and Michel Gilot (Paris: Bordas, 1998), 9.

argue Marivaux himself may have been writing against. While throughout Marivaux's *Lettres* – and his journalistic writing more generally – he writes against authority and authoritative judgments, his rejection of these is most explicitly argued in his refusal of the epitaph, *Théophraste moderne*. Addressing himself directly to “l’auteur du Mercure” Marivaux launches “une querelle” against the editor, l’abbé Buchet:

Moi qui [ne prétends rien au génie des hommes de cet ordre]; moi qui n’y peux rien prétendre; moi dont tous les petits ouvrages sont nés du caprice; moi qui, sans m’embarrasser des lecteurs qu’ils auraient, vouldus me satisfaire en les faisant, et n’eus d’autre objet que moi-même, je me trouve chargé du poids d’un nom qui compromet, avec le public, le peu que j’ai de forces.³⁹

The insistent use of the first person (repeated seven times in the above passage alone) positions Marivaux in contradistinction to the weight of a tradition that compromises both his authorial individuality and the public, with which he aligns himself here. “Né[e]s du caprice,” his “Lettres” are *new*. In this way, Marivaux refuses not only the discursive authority of those writing in the lineage of Theophrastus (for characterology was very much in vogue at this moment on both sides of the Atlantic) but also the narrative form – closed and complete – of this discourse. Marivaux’s qualification of his observations as letters rather than *caractères* suggests a shift in the authorship and readership he envisions.⁴⁰ In his resistance to being inscribed within the classical moralist tradition, Marivaux claims that one who has “autant de génie que les hommes de cet ordre” needs not have recourse to claiming their name or to calling upon their authority. Why, then, does Marivaux claim such distance from La Bruyère? Why does he refuse this epithet of *Théophraste moderne*?

While the *Mercure* designates Marivaux’s *Lettres* as *caractères*, Marivaux himself defines both his reflections and the position of his narrator-observer in altogether different terms. The moralist tradition in which the *Mercure* inscribes the *Lettres* studied the world in function of finite, preordained codes and reproduced these variables in a number of “closed” forms – *caractères*, maxims, portraits. Reading the social in terms of fixed categories, each person and thing bore a mark – a character; that is to say, everything bore a sign which made it socially visible. Classical characterology was based on the assumption that human nature is immutable, universal, and therefore free of the contingencies of time and place. In contrast to the closed form of the *caractère*, however, Marivaux proposes a form of reflection defined by its variety and indeterminacy: “Je continue au hasard, et je finis quand il me plaît. Cet ouvrage, en un mot, est la production

³⁹ “Lettre écrite par M. de Marivaux à l’auteur du Mercure” in “Lettres sur les habitants sur Paris,” 22.

⁴⁰ *Le Nouveau Théophraste ou réflexions critiques sur les moeurs de ce siècle. Ouvrage dans le goût des Pensées de Pascal* (1700), *Le Théophraste moderne, ou Nouveaux caractères sur les moeurs* (1700), *Apologie de Monsieur de La Bruyère, ou Réponse à la critique des Caractères de Théophraste* (1701), *Ouvrage nouveau dans le goût des Caractères de Théophraste et des Pensées de Pascal* (1697), *Portraits sérieux, galands et critiques* (1696), *Sentiments critiques sur les Caractères de Monsieur de La Bruyère* (1701).

d'un esprit libertin, qui ne se refuse rien de ce qui peut l'amuser en chemin faisant."⁴¹
This declaration underscores the movement and spontaneity that define the concomitant acts of observation and of writing, generated by the narrator's fancy rather than a preordained project.

This insistence on the unfolding of a narrative free of any itinerary defines Marivaux's "Lettres" – and indeed his journalistic writing more generally – as the writing of a moment. He qualifies his reflections as contingent upon the events of the present moment, announcing a commitment to contemporaneity – which is, indeed, the journalistic enterprise: "je commence par [parler à Madame ***] des choses qui se passaient quand je fis cette relation," Marivaux declares.⁴² The assertion that his "Lettres" represent the transcription of current events and impressions (rather than things) "chemin faisant" – that is, in reaction to the impressions of an unforeseen moment – define both the observer and his narrative as itinerant.

The *Lettres* reveal a preoccupation with order: the order of (the occurrence of) one's thoughts, the literary ordering of observations, but also – and here, somewhat paradoxically in Marivaux's text – social order, or rather *orders*. Expressing an ideal of narrative form that would follow the movement of his thoughts, Marivaux declares that he has "point prétendu établir d'ordre dans la distribution des sujets; cela [lui] a paru fort indifférent," relinquishing a project of definition.⁴³ The urban observations of the narrator of the *Lettres* presents a narrative contingent, then, upon both his fancy and the spontaneous moment: "comme je n'ai d'ordre que le hasard dans cette relation, je ne ferai point difficulté de vous dire ici ce que j'aurais pu vous dire ailleurs."⁴⁴ In contrast to La Bruyère's promise of exhaustive finitude in *Les Caractères*, Marivaux writes, toward the end of his letter entitled, "Le Peuple," that his interlocutor is not to expect an exhaustive portrait of *les gens du peuple*: "ne vous attendez pas, madame, que j'épuise la matière là-dessus; je n'en dirai plus qu'un mot" – refusing the closed nature of the *caractères*, and inscribing an aperture within his narrative – the space for dialogue and debate.⁴⁵ Deferring the completion of his reflection, he declares to his interlocutor: "une autre fois, madame, nous verrons le reste."⁴⁶

I have qualified Marivaux's treatment of order as paradoxical because while he unable to categorically refuse order, he can all the while disrupt it. While articulating his

⁴¹ Marivaux, "Lettres sur les habitants de Paris," 9.

⁴² The use of the verb *parler* rather than *écrire* here underscores the conversational nature of the epistle, here drawing on the conventions of both the *lettre galante* and the *lettre critique*. Conforming to the norms of polite sociability, but also in the spirit of dialogue rather than dissertation, the *lettre galante* is in fact, Scudéry proposes, "a conversation between absent persons." For more on this, see Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 143.

⁴³ Marivaux, *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris*, 8.

⁴⁴ Marivaux, *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris*, 15.

⁴⁵ In his prefatory remarks to *Les Caractères*, La Bruyère promises his reader "un projet de moeurs plus complet, plus fini et plus régulier [pour] la postérité." Jean de La Bruyère, *Les Caractères, ou les moeurs de ce siècle* (Paris: GF, 2007), 79.

⁴⁶ Marivaux, "Lettres sur les habitants de Paris," 39.

ideal of a formless form, he reads the urban text in terms of order; that is to say that while Marivaux imagines the social constellation of Paris to be made up essentially of four orders (*le peuple, le bourgeois, les femmes, les [divers] esprits*) his descriptions cannot contain, define, the character of each. I would suggest Marivaux's aspirations toward a narrative order without order arise in response to a social space whose character he qualifies as equally contingent upon time and place, as ultimately "undefinable."⁴⁷ The representation of "le beau désordre de la nature"⁴⁸ is ensured by the posture of the narrator, one whose "esprit se moque de l'ordre."⁴⁹ The observer of the people of Paris is, in fact, the organizing principle of this narrative. The first person dominates these "Lettres," which serves to underscore these reflections as subjective impressions rather than authoritative maxims. Relinquishing all authority to judge, Marivaux insists not on the definition of the object of knowledge itself, but rather on his observations as individual judgments; such repeated introductory formulae as, "voici la réflexion que je fais là-dessus," inscribe the observer within the frame, and thus underscore his refusal of any position of authority. The narrative insistence the subjectivity of observation and judgment is foregrounded by the persistence of such expressions as, "je ne sais," "je vous dit," "je peins," "pour moi," and "je regarde." Staging the act of critical social observation, Marivaux encourages – within the pages of the *Mercure* – his "nonprofessional readers to have faith in their personal judgment and to offer their opinions on the question raised."⁵⁰

The taxonomy of Parisian *gens d'esprit* put forth in "Suite des Caractères de M. de M****" is ordered analogically to a military corps: "Paris fourmille de beaux esprits: il n'y en eut jamais tant; mais il en est d'eux, à peu près comme d'une armée; il y a peu d'officiers généraux, beaucoup d'officiers subalternes, un nombre infini de soldats."⁵¹ Yet the merits of each are probed not in function of the degree to which they conform to proscriptive poetics, but rather to the taste of a judging public.⁵² Indeed, Marivaux's definition of these literary players includes a description of the reading public; but just as this reading public stands as tribunal of *les esprits*, so, too, is the reading public judged.

"Imaginez-vous, madame," the narrator writes,
un espace entre l'excellent et le médiocre; c'est celui
[que les subalternes] occupent. Leurs idées sont

⁴⁷ "Je n'aurais jamais fait, si je ne voulais rien omettre dans le portrait du génie du peuple, inconstant par nature, vertueux ou vicieux par accident; c'est un vrai caméléon qui reçoit toutes les impressions des objets qui l'environnent" (Marivaux, "Lettres sur les habitants de Paris," 12).

⁴⁸ Marivaux, "L'Indigent philosophe," 310.

⁴⁹ Marivaux, "L'Indigent philosophe," 283.

⁵⁰ De Jean, *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 60.

⁵¹ Marivaux, "Lettres sur les habitants de Paris," 33.

⁵² "Je vous aurais parlé plutôt d'une autre sorte d'auteurs, si je n'avais jugé qu'ils tiendraient à injure de se voir au rang de ceux qu'on appelle beaux esprits: ce sont les philosophes et les géomètres. J'ai quelquefois pensé au peu de cas que ces messieurs-là semblent faire des productions de sentiment et de goût; aussi bien qu'à la distinction avantageuse que le public fait d'eux" (Marivaux, "Lettres sur les habitants de Paris," 34).

intermédiaires; ce n'est pas que ce milieu qu'ils tiennent soit senti de tout le monde; il n'appartient qu'au lecteur excellent lui-même de les y voir; et leur caractère d'esprit, généralement parlant, leur fait tour à tour trop de tort et trop d'honneur: trop de tort parce que bien des gens, machinalement connaisseurs du beau, ne se sentant pas assez frappés du ton de leurs idées, les confondent avec les médiocres: trop d'honneur, parce que bien des gens aussi, n'ayant qu'un goût peu sûr, peu décisif, les jugent excellents sur la foi du peu de plaisir qu'ils prennent à la lecture de leurs ouvrages.⁵³

The narrator-observer of the *Lettres* in fact stages this act of public and decisive judgment which relies on no authority other than that of self. Indeed, a parallel is to be drawn, in the *Lettres*, between those readers, “machinalement connaisseurs du beau,” and the rigidity of the *philosophes géomètres*. Unlike the *bel esprit*, *architecte* rather than *géomètre*, the philosopher proceeds by rigidity of system rather than by *souplesse* of sentiment. Indeed,

Le bel esprit, en un mot, est doué d'une heureuse conformation d'organes, à qui il doit un sentiment fin et exact de toutes les choses qu'il voit ou qu'il imagine; il est entre ses organes et son esprit d'heureux accords qui lui forment une manière de penser, dont l'étendue, l'évidence et la chaleur ne font qu'un corps; je ne dis pas qu'il ait chacune de ces qualités dans toute leur force: un si grand bien est au-dessus de l'homme; mais il en a ce qu'il en faut pour voler à une sphère d'idées, dont non seulement les rapports, mais la simple vue passe le géomètre.⁵⁴

The proliferation of social categories, and multiplication of nomenclatures, echoes the climate of semiotic confusion which typifies the Regency moment, as discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation. Marivaux's “Lettres sur les habitants de Paris” foreground the primacy of subjective perception, the description of a “public” in the making, and the commitment to the moment.

By the time Marivaux's *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris* appear in the pages of the *Mercure* the public had accrued significant weight. While it is a widely accepted truism that the public came into virtual existence through the medium of print culture in eighteenth-century France, Donneau de Visé and the *Mercure Galant* propelled a certain conception of publicity which took hold in the 1670s. It will be my claim that critical debates about literature, as well as mutations in the configuration of aesthetic experience,

⁵³ Marivaux, “Lettres sur les habitants de Paris,” 33.

⁵⁴ “Le bel esprit, il est vrai, ne s'est pas fait de la géométrie une science particulière; il n'est point géomètre ouvrier, c'est un architecte né, qui, méditant un édifice, le voit s'élever à ses yeux dans toutes ses parties différentes; il en imagine et en voit l'effet total par un raisonnement imperceptible et comme sans progrès, lequel raisonnement pour le géomètre contiendrait la valeur de mille raisonnements qui se succéderaient avec lenteur” (Marivaux, “Lettres sur les habitants de Paris,” 34).

both engendered the relative democratization of judgment, taste, and spectatorship. Marivaux's project of social description in his *Lettres* points – if not to a refusal of order – at least to a disruption of this. Included within the pages of the *Mercure*, the *Lettres* circulate among a critical, debating public which sees itself represented. In what follows I will argue that Marivaux reappropriates and plays on particular journalistic and essayistic conventions in order to provide a *tableau* of everyday urban life – one which is generated by a critical spectator.

Press and Publicity in Ancien Régime France

Marivaux's rise on the journalistic scene is marked by the publication of his *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris* in the pages of the *Nouveau Mercure*, as we have already seen. Due in large part to Deloffre and Gilot's 1988 editorial project, the term "journaux" has come to designate Marivaux's *Spectateur français*, *Le Cabinet du philosophe*, *L'Indigent philosophe*, as well as the various pieces produced for the *Mercure* (the *Lettres contenant une aventure* and *Lettres sur les habitants de Paris*, for instance).⁵⁵ It is, however, neither historically nor generically accurate to employ the term "journal" to designate this group of Marivaldian texts which by their generic hybridity are difficult to categorize. For eighteenth-century usage of *journal* in fact refers to periodicals whose purpose was the dissemination of information pertaining to scientific and literary *nouveautés* such as the *Journal des savants* or the *Journal de médecine*.⁵⁶ Destined for a less erudite public, the general information press was comprised of the *gazette* (bi-weekly periodicity) and the *mercure* (monthly periodicity). The former treated mainly affairs at Court, while the latter engaged the arenas of literature and politics (both national and international). The periodical press was, under Louis XIV, controlled by a system of privilege; indeed, the state sponsored only three periodicals which ensured the diffusion of state-sanctioned "information" (read ideology) in the domains of politics (*La Gazette*), erudition and scientific progress (*Le Journal des savants*), and what we might refer to as culture control (*Le Mercure galant*). The *Mercure galant* was authorized by the state in order to "rendre compte de l'actualité et la mettre sous une forme socialement et idéologiquement compatible avec l'image d'une France 'toute catholique.'" ⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The regrouping of these works under the rubric *journaux*, a loose generic term, speaks to their generic hybridity and consequent resistance to generic classification (underlined by the ambiguous nature of the term *oeuvres diverses*).

⁵⁶ François Moureau, "Journaux moraux et journalistes au début du XVIIIe siècle: Marivaux et le libertinage rocaille" *Études sur les Journaux de Marivaux* ed. Nicholas Cronk and François Moureau (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001), 25.

⁵⁷ François Moureau, "Journaux moraux et journalistes," 25. It should be noted that the opposition press was relegated to extra-territorial publication, almost exclusively in Holland. In contrast, the English free press had been active since 1695, at which point renewal of the *Licensing Act* was refused. In response to the competition represented by more active publication centers, France was forced, under the Regency, to loosen its stronghold on the production laws pertaining to the periodical press.

Literary criticism gradually transferred the authority to judge away from official institutions and fostered “l’exercice diffus d’un pouvoir transformé en esprit critique.”⁵⁸ Indeed, it was the act of talking about books that engendered the transformation from *société* to *public*.⁵⁹ To be sure, the *Mercure* also played a decisive role in the generation of a new public, but also, as critics such as Merlin and DeJean have suggested, in the democratization of readership – connected, I will argue presently, to debates on the democratization of spectatorship (spear-headed by de Piles and Dubos, in particular, as we shall see presently). With his publication of *Le Mercure galant*’s first issue in 1672, Donneau de Visé makes explicit his commitment to facilitating, in the pages of his periodical, public debate on literary matters by engaging his readers as active participants as members of the republic of letters. Laying the stage for such public participation in matters previously reserved for erudite dissertation, Donneau de Visé’s project of participatory publicity was feared by members of the Ancients camp, most vociferously among them La Bruyère, who condemned the ways in which the *Mercure* encouraged “unqualified” readers to “faire la critique” as would a learned critic.⁶⁰ Interpretation, he declares throughout the chapter “Des Ouvrages de l’esprit,” should be left to the professionals. Donneau de Visé, however, defended everyone’s right to judge. As DeJean has argued,

Donneau de Visé’s decision to use his newspaper to invest readers with the authority to judge literary texts signaled a major turning point for criticism: from an ivory tower discourse the classical age had inherited from humanism and the pronouncements of scholars speaking for and to an audience of their colleagues, criticism began moving into the public sphere and becoming something closer to a form of collective judgment. Donneau de Visé was promoting the democratization of criticism [and staged critical scenes] in the most public print forum available at the time.⁶¹

The *Mercure*, and print more generally, came to be understood as point of mediation not just between members of this society become public, but between “the public” and the particular. Indeed, the point of intersection between public and particular is articulated in the form of epistolarity, by which Donneau de Visé invited his readers to debate on matters literary, and which will be taken up by Marivaux in his *Spectateur français*. While the case of Donneau de Visé and the *Mercure* reveals a public cultural sphere in the making in 1670s France, Addison and Steele, with their *Spectator*, provide a different kind of model of publicity, with the Spectator figure who becomes not only a literary but also social figure. It is in dialogue with the project of periodical publicity of the *Mercure* and *The Spectator* that I situate Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*. The

⁵⁸ Hélène Merlin, *Public et littérature en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1994), 380.

⁵⁹ Merlin, *Public et littérature*, 379.

⁶⁰ For DeJean’s discussion of La Bruyère’s project of publicity, see *Ancients Against Moderns*, 58.

⁶¹ DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns*, 64.

journalistic genre, which inherently deals with the shifting surfaces of social life provides Marivaux with an established literary form which gives shape to the experience of the moment.⁶² Yet the conceit of Marivaux's *Spectateur français* is that its appropriation of particular journalistic conventions – the loose leaf, periodicity, epistolarity – are fictionalized, as we shall see presently. The public generated and given virtual shape by Donneau de Visé and the *Mercure* sees itself staged in *Le Spectateur français*, where Marivaux performs the literary and social projects of both the *Mercure* and *Spectator* to specifically ethical ends. For the mobility of the loose leaf and capacity for circulation makes of it both the product of the spectating, writing subject, but also makes of it a *chose publique*.

***The Spectator* of Addison and Steele, and the Rise of Spectator Journalism**

Despite the fact that its success hinges, to a large extent, on the conceit of a single first-person narrator (Mr. Spectator) by whose hand each of the *Spectator* issues would have been composed, *The Spectator* is in fact at every level a collaborative project. Conceived of by Addison and Steele, it is the shared project of countless contributors.⁶³ This society of sorts is mirrored in the fictional *Spectator Club* which Mr. Spectator introduces in No. 2. A group of six socially diverse men constitute Mr. Spectator's "own club."⁶⁴ Mr. Spectator announces in the first Paper that he will "publish a sheet full of thoughts every morning, for the benefit of [his contemporaries]." Indeed, this is the case; for *The Spectator* is published with regular periodicity. From March 1711 to December 1712, one sheet is published daily, save Sundays. The reliability of *The Spectator*'s production contributed to its imbrication in the fabric of everyday (polite bourgeois) London life. The material object of the printed sheet was central in both the dissemination of the content and in the creation of actual *Spectator Clubs*; both mobile

⁶² Indeed, "journalism inherently deals with the changing surfaces of social life, with public events and political rumor, with fashions, changes in taste, and recent successes in the arts." Michael Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 135.

⁶³ Contributors were many, and included Eustace Budgell, Laurence Eusden, lady Mary Wortley Montague, Thomas Tickell, Alexander Pope, Ambrose Philips. In June 1714, Addison, with Eustace Budgell and Thomas, undertook a second series of *The Spectator* (Nos 556-635) without Steele's collaboration, which appeared three times per week until December of that same year. Nablow has noted that these *spectator club* members reappear in subsequent papers, interacting with other "types" yet unlike novelistic characters, "the exist for their own sake rather than for the sake of plot." Ralph A. Nablow, *The Addisonian Tradition in France: Passion and Objectivity in Social Observation* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1990), 49.

⁶⁴ "Wherever I see a cluster of people, I always mix with them, though I never open my lips but in my own club." He provides the portrait of the members of his *Spectator Club* in No.2: Sir Roger de Cloverly, Sir Andrew Freeport, Captain Sentry, Will Honeycomb, and two men he does not refer to by name: "a member of the Inner Temple" and a clergyman.

and financially accessible, the sheets constituted a focal point around which people congregated in order to discuss. Conversation was, in fact, Mr. Spectator's chief aim; to influence contemporary morals through the exercise of polite sociability (of which conversation is, obviously, a form). "It was said of Socrates," Mr. Spectator affirms, that he brought philosophy down from heaven, to inhabit among men; and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables, and in coffee-houses.

The readership of *The Spectator* is, by No.10 (Monday, March 12, 1711), established – at least according to Mr. Spectator, who reports in his Paper of that day to be greatly satisfied to hear "this great city inquiring day by day after these [his] papers, and receiving [his] morning lectures with a becoming seriousness and attention." His publisher, Mr. Spectator writes, assures him that there are three thousand sheets distributed daily, and twenty readers to one sheet – bringing his readership to approximately 60, 000 daily.

Indeed, by virtue of its wide circulation and avid readership, *The Spectator* succeeded in assuming the role of arbiter, regulator, and prescriber in relation to bourgeois taste and ideals.⁶⁵ The spectatorial essays take as their focus diverse elements of a predominantly urban landscape, the commerce of its inhabitants and the mores of the middle-class.⁶⁶ As Mackie has noted, *The Spectator*, like *The Tatler* before it, are preoccupied with the stuff of everyday life in eighteenth-century England: "dressing and dueling; visiting and conversing; reading and writing; love, courtship, and marriage; education and religion; commerce and finance; business and pleasure."⁶⁷ *The Spectator* essays, themselves commodities, aim not simply to itemize or comment on the things that constitute everyday urban life, but rather to become imbricated in its very fabric in order to regulate and reshape it.⁶⁸ It therefore played a crucial role in the determination and identification of a newly recognized cultural "class." The novelty of the Addisonian project, as suggested by Habermas, was that for the first time the public was represented to itself in an "unmediated" way: in *The Spectator*, the public held up a mirror to itself; it did not yet come to a self-understanding through the detour of a reflection

⁶⁵ Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). See also for a discussion on the regulation of bourgeois taste and ideals exercised by *The Spectator: The Spectator: Emerging Discourses* ed. Donald J Newman (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2005) and Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984).

⁶⁶ "Commerce" is to be understood here in both the economic sense of the term (networks of monetary exchange), and as it applies to the social exchanges between members of the bourgeoisie.

⁶⁷ Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode*, 2.

⁶⁸ Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode*, 2.

on works of philosophy and literature, art and science, but through entering itself into 'literature' as an object. [...] The public that read and debated this sort of thing read and debated about itself.⁶⁹

Just as it promulgated coffee-house culture and consolidated the ideals and identity of the "middle class," so, too, did *The Spectator* create more virtual communities and virtual modes of sociability. Specifically, by its letters to the editor format, Addison and Steele's periodical essays provided a means by which their readers could also *talk back to* Mr. Spectator. The epistolarity of (parts of) *The Spectator* created a public who, on the printed sheet at least, participated in the creation of an image which would be reflected back at it.

But who *was* this Mr. Spectator and what was the nature of his relationship to his reading public? Mr. Spectator devotes nearly the entire first paper to his self-portrait, detailing not his physiognomy but rather his character and, by extension, the ambitions of his spectatorial project. Like the narrator-observer of Marivaux's *Spectateur français* and, more generally, the eighteenth-century philosopher figure, the eponymous character of Addison and Steele's essays is an Everyman figure: at the margins of the social group he observes, aged, learned and well-travelled, of an average estate.⁷⁰ "I have given the reader," Mr. Spectator announces, "just so much of my history and character, as to let him see I am not altogether unqualified for the business I have undertaken." Yet this unnamed and unmarked Mr. Spectator could be anyone at all. Withdrawn from the world yet circulating within it, Mr. Spectator lives "in the world, rather as a spectator of mankind, than as one of the species" (No. 1).⁷¹ This participatory remove allows him to study his object without being absorbed or engulfed by it:

I have made myself a speculative statesman, soldier, merchant, and artisan, without ever meddling with any practical part in life. I am very well versed in the theory of a husband, or a father, and can discern the errors in the economy, business, and diversion of others, better than those who are engaged in them, as standers-by discover blots, which are apt to escape those who are in the game. [...] in short, I have acted in all the parts of my life as a looker-on, which is the character I intend

⁶⁹Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 43.

⁷⁰"I have passed my latter years in this city, where I am frequently seen in most public places, though there are not above half a dozen of my select friends that now me; of whom in my next paper shall give a more particular account" (No. 1).

⁷¹As is discussed in Chapter 3, this will echo with Mercier's praise of Molière, Richardson, and Newton in his *Du Théâtre*, where these figures serve as models for a particular kind of spectatorship – one which is studied and scientific, which establishes relationships between the visible and invisible, one which marks the distinction between *simple spectateur* and *observateur attentif*.

to preserve in this paper. (No. 1)

Letters to the editor often present claims that Mr. Spectator has been spotted in various coffee-houses, and attest to the power of his absence (“you are present in your absence,” No. 553). The public’s claims to have seen Mr. Spectator, this figure who is *all eyes*, attests to the extent to which his disciplining gaze has been internalized by a public who understands itself to be surveyed (*surveillé*). Mr. Spectator’s gaze is therefore experienced “comme forme de pouvoir moral exercé sur la communauté des lecteurs.”⁷² Unmarked and unnamed, this Everyman figure could be anywhere and could be watching anyone. The emergence of Mr. Spectator, the omniscient Everyman figure, engendered the coalescence of a public of particulars who saw themselves in this figure, and able to “identify with a disembodied public subject that [they] can imagine as parallel to [their] private person,” a process that Warner describes as “self-abstracting disinterestedness.”⁷³ Insofar as he stands as the model for a public critic who observes and describes matters literary, political and ethical, Mr. Spectator gives rise to a series of imitations – among them Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*.

The enthusiasm for *The Spectator* was not, of course, restricted to its English readership. Before he first French-language translation had appeared, imitations had begun to flourish across the European literary landscape. The first of these was Juste van Effan’s *Misanthrope*, published 11 May, 1711 in The Hague – in the weeks following the first installments of Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* – followed by his *Bagatelle* (May 1718-April 1719). The French translation of *The Spectator* appeared in 1714 in Amsterdam, entitled *Le Spectateur ou le Socrate moderne*. The publication of this translation of Addison and Steele’s periodical essays catalyzed a broad literary and cultural trend, spurring the appearance of countless “spectators” or variants thereof – *observateur, censeur, glaneur, espion, misanthrope, spectatrice*. These spectator journals share a common project of promoting the self-reflexive, critical individual social observer, in contrast, for example, to the official discourse of the *journaux savants*. Despite the fact that spectator journals continued to flourish across Europe over the course of the eighteenth century, none of these came close to attaining the status or success of the periodical founded by Addison and Steele.⁷⁴ Scholars most often define the spectator journals as a class of periodicals unto themselves, dissociated entirely from the *Journal des savants*, the *Gazette*, and the *Mercure* in particular, on the basis that the

⁷²Xavier Cervantès, “Pour une approche littéraire du Spectator” *Lectures d’une oeuvre: The Spectator, Addison and Steele* ed. Georges Lamoine (Paris: Éditions du Temps, 1999), 49.

⁷³ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 164.

⁷⁴ “On ne connaît guère d’autre Spectateur dans l’histoire de la philosophie morale, que celui qui fut publié à Londres au commencement de ce siècle. Ceux qu’on a lus depuis, ont plutôt été des Spectres que des Spectateurs. À peine se sont-ils montrés dans la République des Lettres qu’ils ont disparu.” *Le Spectateur français ou le nouveau Socrate moderne, Annales philosophiques, morales, politiques, historiques et littéraires, où l’on voit le tableau de ce siècle* (Paris: Rainville, Debray, 1791) 1 in Alexis Lévrier, *Les Journaux de Marivaux et le monde des “spectateurs”* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007), 15.

spectator journals engage no single *pôle de connaissance* (scientific, political, “cultural”) – despite the fact that the periodicals derived from *The Spectator* were far from isolated from the periodical press of the eighteenth century.⁷⁵ Ketcham’s claim that “the *Spectator*’s most obvious impact on eighteenth-century literature was to formalize the conventions of the periodical essay” is undermined by the fact that while scholars agree that these journals represent a specific strain within the periodical press, there is great variation in how they demarcate their area(s) of inquiry; this attests to the fragility of a genre whose typology is not clearly identifiable.⁷⁶ Though the titles of these works are often an indication, they are just as often misleading, and therefore constitute an unreliable generic marker. However, we can identify four principal characteristics common to the imitators of Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*; these four generic markers are identified by Pallares-Burke in her study of Delacroix’s *Nouveau Spectateur*.⁷⁷ Firstly, these spectator journals were unanimous in their praise of *The Spectator* as an inimitable, immortal work which could never be equaled, much less surpassed. For instance, Van Effan observes in his *Bagatelle* (21 November, 1718) that “ce qu’on y trouve de bon dans les principes de tous les Spectateurs de bon-sens est si excellent, que je ne conçois pas que l’esprit humain puisse aller au-delà.”⁷⁸ By extension, the spectator periodicals aimed, like their English counterpart, to serve not as moral barometers but as moral compasses. Secondly, these papers announce themselves as a new type of journalism which – by virtue of its material form, the loose leaf – takes philosophy out of the library and makes it accessible (*The Spectator*, No.1). The mobile sheets, which as Delacroix observed, “renferment beaucoup de sens et peu de paroles,” herald a modern and vulgarized philosophy, in contradistinction to the weighty book which represented the dogmatic and inflexible classical discourse.⁷⁹ Thirdly, the persona of the spectator-narrator permeates these periodical essays; a Diogenes figure who observes a social (usually urban) world from the margins, of this world but no longer an active participant within it; aged, learned, and well-traveled. Lastly, “the constant refrain of the followers of Mr. Spectator is the need for sharing their public mission with other people who would also play the role of spectators.”⁸⁰ In sum, while the spectator journals of the eighteenth century could be regrouped in function of four particular generic markers, they were, above all, a highly generically flexible strain of the periodical press.

⁷⁵ Alexis Lévrier, *Les Journaux de Marivaux*, 122.

⁷⁶ Michael Ketcham, *Transparent Designs*, 138. For more on this, see Shelley Charles’ study of Prévost’s *Le Pour et contre* in *Récit et réflexion: poétique de l’hétérogène dans Le Pour et contre de Prévost*, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 1992:2 (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1992).

⁷⁷ Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, “A Spectator of the Spectators: Jacques-Vincent Delacroix” *Enlightenment, Revolution and the Periodical Press. Studies in Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* ed. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Jeremy D. Popkin 2004:6 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004), 145-57.

⁷⁸ Maria Lúcia G. Pallares-Burke, “A Spectator of the Spectators: Jacques-Vincent Delcroix,” 146.

⁷⁹ Delacroix, *Le Spectateur français, ou le nouveau socrate moderne* 1791) disc. iv.

⁸⁰ Pallares-Burke, “A Spectator of the Spectators,” 149.

The Centrality of the Spectator: The Case of de Piles and Dubos

While DeJean argues that the creation of a new public was relegated to the realm of print culture (“the opening up with which the new public was associated was a democratization, not of spectatorship, but of readership,” she asserts), I argue that the reader and the spectator are two instances of a larger call for the democratization of judgment and of critique, and am interested in Marivaux’s staging of the act of social spectatorship.⁸¹ However, Donneau de Visé’s publicity project, expressed explicitly in the first issue of *Le Mercure galant* (1672), appears only one year prior to de Piles’ *Dialogue sur le coloris* (1673). The literary and “aesthetic” spheres produced reflections, concomitantly, not only on the democratization of judgment and taste, but on the public expression of these. Debates surrounding both literature and painting generated – in eighteenth-century France – a new conception of the role and importance of the figure of the spectator. The new attention paid to the aesthetic experience of the spectator is transposed in the social and political domains where – as in the case of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* – the focus is on the ethical imperative of feeling, of sensible spectatorship.

Under Louis XIV, painting became a political instrument of the State. In response to the threat posed to the monarchy by the members of the *Maîtrise*, under whose jurisdiction the commission of paintings fell, and who held a “theoretical monopoly” over the trade, Mazarin, supported by Colbert, seized central control of painting by instituting, in 1648 in the name of the King, the *Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture*.⁸² The artistic production of the Academy was overseen, starting with the founding of the Prix de Rome, by Le Brun, who dictated the parameters within which all engravers, decorators, mosaicists, and goldworkers were to work.⁸³

Doctrinal purity stated that painting must communicate an eternal truth, therefore locating itself outside of local space and time. The ideology of providence of course not only informed academic theory but protected the political agenda which sought to promote and protect the image of the eternal glory of the King.⁸⁴ Striking at the heart of the stranglehold the Academy had sought to hold over painting as a rigidly controlled semiotic system, de Piles challenges the notion of painterly permanence; in his 1708 *Cours de peinture par principes*, de Piles accords a new primacy to the spectatorial moment, the “coup d’œil” – the instant in which the painting impresses itself upon the feeling subject who beholds it. If under Le Brun (the subject matter of) painting was to communicate a signified “meaning,” de Piles argues for the valorization of the “sensual

⁸¹ DeJean, *Ancients Against Moderns*, 37.

⁸² Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment*, 134. The founding of the *Académie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* was in fact the result of a lengthy and heated struggle for power between the *Maîtrise* and the monarchy. For more on the history of this conflict, see Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment*, 129-133.

⁸³ Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment*, 134.

⁸⁴ For an illustration of this confluence of the painterly and the political – or in other words, the politics of painting under Le Brun – see Kavanagh’s discussion of Le Brun’s Second Conquest of the France-Comté (Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment*, 135-138).

signifier over the discursive signified.”⁸⁵ Painting must now account not only for the spectator position, but account for the determinant role played by the spectator in the generation of meaning of the object of art, the spectator as feeling subject who stands before the canvas.⁸⁶

In Dubos’s 1719 *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, authority is conferred upon the public in matters of perception, judgment, and pronouncement (which is to say that for the first time, connoisseurs – as opposed to those *du métier* – assumed the authority to speak and write about painting). Dubos’ declaration that “les jugements du public l’emportent à la fin sur les jugements des gens du métier” reconfigures both the process of aesthetic judgment, and the notion of authority in the critical discourse on art. Dubos’s reflections on the relationship between the non-specialist spectator and the work of art in fact divest *les gens du métier* of the authority they had heretofore held over the public. This shift is a step towards the democratization of aesthetic – and by extension political – judgment, as we shall see presently in our discussion of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*.⁸⁷ The admission of the non-specialist spectator into a space previously reserved for the masters of rules and skill of the Academy necessarily challenged the role that was to be played by this new spectator figure. Indeed, the newly central position of the amateur engendered a seismic “mutation dans le discours sur l’art” marked by the transfer of authority from *les gens du métier* to *les hommes* who constituted this newly forming entity that would be referred to, if tentatively, as *le public*.⁸⁸

Dubos is the first to explicitly dismantle the notion of aesthetic authority as conceived in classical terms in his 1719 *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*. Prescriptive rules and *apprentissage* no longer qualify the voice of discursive authority. In the prefatory remarks to “La Première Partie” of his *Réflexions*, Dubos declares that he offers his reflections

comme les représentations d’un simple citoyen, qui fait usage des exemples tirés des tems passés, dans le dessein de porter sa République à pourvoir encore mieux aux inconvéniens à venir. S’il [lui] arrive quelquefois d’y

⁸⁵ Thomas Kavanagh, *Aesthetics of the Moment*, 144.

⁸⁶ On the corporeality of the sensual response to aesthetic experience, and on “literal, corporal taste” in seventeenth-century France, see Erec R. Koch, *The Aesthetic Body: Passion, Sensibility, and Corporeality in Seventeenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 179-225 in which Koch analyzes the transformation and intersection of corporal taste and normative (moral, artistic) taste.

⁸⁷ I justify my use of the term “aesthetic,” though it does not come into usage until Baumgarten’s 1750-58 *Aesthetica*, by the fact that the discourse with which I am engaging here – debates surrounding spectatorial response in the moment of perception – is, in fact, properly *aesthetic*; that is to say, Dubos, for instance, elaborates a series of reflections on the body’s response to external stimuli. Similarly, Koch specifies that in his project, the body is “aesthetic, in its etymological sense since its physiological functioning is directed toward the production of sensibility, that is to sensation and passion or affect” (Koch, *The Aesthetic Body*, 12).

⁸⁸ Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Couleur éloquente: rhétorique et peinture à l’âge classique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), x.

prendre le ton de législateur, c'est par inadvertance, et non point parce [qu'il se] figure d'en avoir l'autorité.⁸⁹

Relinquishing any claim to discursive authority, Dubos addresses his reader through the use of the inclusive first-pronoun, *nous*, thus underscoring his alignment with his reader. Dubos, himself neither poet nor painter, identifies himself as a member of the public which he seeks to define throughout his work: "Que le public juge bien des poèmes et des tableaux en général. Du sentiment que nous avons pour connaître le mérite de ces ouvrages."⁹⁰ In this way, Dubos conceives of himself as *un homme*, rather than *philosophe*, *auteur* or *homme du métier*, generating the effect of participatory dialogue rather than distantiating dissertation.⁹¹

In the process of aesthetic judgment, Dubos claims that the *règles* of classical poetics are insufficient guides in determining a work's value. The *Réflexions* posit the claim that the value of the work of art is determined in terms of the impression it has on the spectator, who judges its effect by means of a sixth sense: *le sentiment*. Indeed, "le sentiment enseigne bien mieux si l'ouvrage touche et s'il fait sur nous l'impression qu'il doit faire, que toutes les dissertations composées par les critiques, pour en expliquer le mérite et pour en calculer les perfections et les défauts" (340). The sole gauge of the art work's value is therefore *experiential*. Reason, learning, and influence therefore become bankrupt authorities in Dubos's model, for "le raisonnement doit se soumettre au jugement que le sentiment prononce. C'est le juge compétent de la question."⁹² The

⁸⁹ Dubos, Jean-Baptiste. *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*. (Paris: Pissot, 1770), 4. Note here the use of the terms "citoyen" and "République" which evoke the Republic of Letters, a community in which all members are particular citizens, rather than subject to a single (sovereign) body. Collapsing the verticality of social and academic hierarchies, the Republic of Letters became the model for inclusive politics. Indeed, this Republic, a virtual community, constituted, in eighteenth-century France, "the public sphere that become the ground for political discourse that contested the closed culture of the monarchy." Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 1.

⁹⁰ Title of Section XXII.

⁹¹ Where Dubos presents his reflections as those of *un simple citoyen* who claims no authority either in the art world or over his reader, Boileau concludes his *Art poétique* with a reassertion of his role as poetic authority: "Vous [me verrez] offrir ces leçons que ma muse au Parnasse,/Rapporta jeune encor du commerce d'Horace;/Seconder votre ardeur, échauffer vos esprits,/Et vous montrer de loin la couronne et le prix./Mais aussi pardonnez, si, plein de ce beau zèle,/De tous vos pas fameux, observateur fidèle,/Quelquefois du bon or je sépare le faux,/Et des auteurs grossiers j'attaque les défauts;/Censeur un peu fâcheux, mais souvent nécessaire/Plus enclin à blâmer que savant à bien faire." Nicolas Despréaux Boileau, *Art poétique. Oeuvres II*. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), 146.

⁹² Dubos, *Réflexions*, 136. This echoes de Piles' articulation of the two strains of spectatorial "work" – that of the eye and of the understanding ("l'oeil et l'entendement"). The former is an immediate, corporeal response to external stimuli, while the second relies on studied and socialized reflection. Let us note here that the duality of aesthetic response, the work of the eye and of the understanding, is also articulated by Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris*, where he declares that his description of Parisian moral

activity of this sixth sense, inherent in each man, is explicated through bodily analogies in order to underscore the unmediated process of perception through sentiment: “raisonne t’on pour savoir si le ragoût est bon ou mauvais,” Dubos queries, insisting on the notion of brute, pure, bodily taste.

If this sixth sense, the organ of judgment, is inherent in each man, then each man has the capacity to judge. No longer are *les gens du métier* in a position to ascribe value to a work of art and to dictate its reception, and indeed they become for Dubos those figures least qualified to judge a work of art. In this conferral of authority upon the non-specialist members of *le public*, the value and meaning of the work of art become contingent, as we shall discuss presently in the context of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* (Cinquième Feuille). Indeed, the spectator is autonomous: Dubos insists on *la voie du sentiment* over and above *la voie de discussion [et] d’analyse*, for sentiment cannot be acquired and is therefore authentic and unmediated. In this way, discernment is the result of experience and not of *apprentissage*; Dubos levels a hefty charge against *l’esprit de système* – as will Marivaux in his *Spectateur français* – arguing that “on en croit l’homme préférablement au philosophe parce que le philosophe se trompe encore plus facilement que l’homme.”⁹³

L’homme must not, therefore, be led astray by the philosophizing systems of the *raisonneur*. Artists and critics, he claims,

jugent mal des ouvrage pris en général, par trois raisons.
La sensibilité des gens du métier est usée. Ils jugent de
tout par voie de discussion. Enfin ils sont prévenus en
faveur de quelque partie de l’art et ils la comptent dans les
jugements généraux qu’ils portent pour plus qu’elle ne vaut.⁹⁴

In short, their perception, and necessarily therefore their judgment, is prejudiced. “Ils ne jugent pas en hommes doués de ce sixième sens dont nous avons parlé, mais en philosophes spéculatifs,” Dubos claims.⁹⁵ Similarly, Diderot will condemn the artist’s prejudiced eye in his *Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, calling for artists and their apprentices to put away all models in order to “voir vrai.” For habit, the result of socialized cultural norms, corrupts the eye. They look for what they know, what they were trained to see.⁹⁶

Dubos articulates the artist’s relationship to his work in strikingly similar terms to Marivaux, both arguing that habit not only corrupts perception but also forces the artist’s hand. Where Marivaux will qualify the work of the *auteur* (in contradistinction to *l’homme*) as the act of “donner la torture à son esprit pour en tirer des réflexions qu’on n’aurait point, si l’on ne s’avisait d’y tâcher,” Dubos sketches the portrait of the artist whose esprit has been suffocated by the demands of method:

[Le sentiment de l’artisan] a été émoussé par l’obligation

physiognomy is “tracé tel qu’il est sorti de dessous [sa] plume, à mesure que [ses] yeux et [son] entendement en ont rassemblé les parties.” Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, in *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit* ed. Michel Delon (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1990), 26.

⁹³ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 362.

⁹⁴ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 398.

⁹⁵ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 399.

⁹⁶ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 389.

de s'occuper de vers et de peinture, d'autant plus qu'il aura été souvent obligé à écrire ou bien à peindre, comme malgré lui, dans des moments où il ne sentait aucun attrait pour son travail. Il est donc devenu insensible au pathétique des vers ou des tableaux, qui ne font plus sur lui plus le même effet qu'ils y faisaient autrefois et qu'il font encore sur les hommes de son âge.⁹⁷

Likening the artisan to the aging doctor who, after years of practice is no longer moved by the dying man, and to the anatomist who dissects without seeing the corpse as a body that once lived, Dubos qualifies *les gens du métier* as unfeeling subjects.⁹⁸ Indeed, “plus on est ignorant, mieux on juge” – which he terms a paradox.⁹⁹

The fact that Dubos locates the organ of judgment, *le sentiment*, in each man would appear to democratize the capacity for judgment, for as we have seen, “tous les hommes, à l'aide du sentiment intérieur qui est en eux, connaissent, sans savoir les règles, si les productions des arts sont de bons ou de mauvais ouvrages, et si le raisonnement qu'ils entendent conclut bien.”¹⁰⁰ Yet, as we have seen, the capacity for judgment, while equal in all men, is not exercised to equal degrees. In fact, Dubos' claims – while radical at the outset – are tempered as his reflections advance. His notion of dismantling authority altogether is in fact a transfer of authority – from *les gens du métier* to *le public*. His assertion that all men possess the capacity to judge is qualified by the eventual admission that *le public* to which he refers is in fact an enlightened and cultivated public, that is to say those endowed with the (exercised) capacity to discern and to compare:

Le public, dont il s'agit ici, est donc borné aux personnes qui lisent, qui connaissent les spectacles, qui voyent et qui entendent parler de tableaux, ou qui ont acquis de quelque manière que ce soit ce discernement qu'on appelle goût de comparaison. Le sentiment dont je parle est dans tous les hommes mais comme ils n'ont pas tous les oreilles et les yeux également bons, de même ils n'ont pas tous le sentiment également parfait. Les uns l'ont meilleur que les autres, ou bien parce que leurs organes sont naturellement mieux composés, ou bien parce qu'ils l'ont perfectionné par l'usage fréquent qu'ils en ont fait, et par l'expérience.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 384-85.

⁹⁸ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 385.

⁹⁹ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 383.

¹⁰⁰ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 348.

¹⁰¹ Dubos, *Réflexions critiques*, 352. This enlightened public, articulated as the intermediary between *les gens du métier* and “le plus bas étage du public,” is erected by Dubos as a precursor to what will later become *l'opinion publique*. For in fact, the *Réflexions* advance a conception of the public's judgment as *opinion publique*, in its nascent form, insofar as it is declared that despite the fact that the public's judgment may not initially be unanimous, it will eventually be so – uncannily sketching the form of the tribunal of public opinion. There is a parallel to be drawn between the transfer of authority in the realm of the aesthetic and the transfer of political authority. As Baker has

Just as Dubos confers the authority to look at, write and talk about art upon *le public*, so, too, does Marivaux dismantle the authorial stronghold in his *Spectateur français*. The disavowal of discursive authority, the (fiction of) epistolarity, and the materiality of the loose leaf, and the Spectator observer-narrator (by whom the narrative is generated and around whom it is organized) function to assert that just as in relation to the art object, the spectator is endowed with the capacity, the right, and the authority to look at, write and talk about, the social space s/he observes. “Lecteur,” the Spectateur cautions, “je ne veux point vous tromper, et je vous avertis d’avance que ce n’est point un auteur que vous allez lire ici.”¹⁰² Indeed, throughout his *Journaux* and novels alike, Marivaux is committed to undoing the notion of writerly authority. L’Indigent philosophe exclaims, “Je veux être un homme et non pas un auteur” and *Le Cabinet du philosophe* begins with a lengthy reflection on the dichotomy between authorial and “natural” discourse. This initial sentence of *Le Spectateur français* disrupts the readerly contract; for if this is not an author, who is he, by what authority does he write, and what is the status of his text? The distinction Marivaux establishes at the outset is between the irreconcilable processes of *réfléchir en auteur* and *penser en hommes*. The tension established by Marivaux in this “Première Feuille” of his *Spectateur* is between the contrived labour of the *auteur*, and the natural process of reflection of *les hommes*.¹⁰³ Indeed, this discursive differentiation echoes the distinction made by Pascal in his *Pensées*: “Quand on voit le style naturel, on est tout étonné et ravi, car on s’attendait de voir un auteur, et on trouve un homme. Au lieu que tous ceux qui ont le goût bon, et qui en voyant un livre croient trouver un homme, sont tout surpris de trouver un auteur.”¹⁰⁴ Where Pascal articulates this distinction in function of style, Marivaux’s interest is in the creative process. Authorial reflection is artificial because it is contrived. It gives shape not to the expression of a subjective process of understanding, but rather to an established set of conventions and, therefore, reflects a set of expectations. That is to say, the author reproduces. Explicitly refusing to be identified and aligned with the author figure, the Spectateur exclaims that “ainsi [il n’est] point auteur, et [n’aurait] été, [il] pense, fort embarrassé de le devenir. Quoi! Donner la torture à son esprit pour en tirer des réflexions qu’on n’aurait point, si l’on ne s’avisait d’y tâcher.”¹⁰⁵ Conversely, *l’homme* – or more precisely, *les hommes* – does not engage in the authorial “exercice forcé qu’il se donne en

suggested, there is “a transfer of authority from the public person of the sovereign to the sovereign person of the public.” Keith Baker, “Politics and public opinion under the Old Regime,” *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* ed. Jack R. Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 83.

¹⁰² Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114.

¹⁰³ The turn of phrase employed by Marivaux in this instance is remarkable: “Car enfin, le choix de ces pensées est alors purement arbitraire, et c’est là réfléchir en auteur. Ne serait-il pas plus curieux de nous voir penser en hommes?” The use of the plural, the first-person plural pronoun, and the reflexive verb makes of the Spectateur one man among many; more importantly, he considers himself to be on an equal plane with these *hommes*, his readers. *Nous voir penser* suggests the notion of participatory public, in which all men speak and listen to each other: *le public*.

¹⁰⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Renouard, 1812), 272.

¹⁰⁵ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114.

composant” but rather follows the (relatively) free form of his reflection in the manner of *libertinage d'idées*: “je ne sais point créer, je sais seulement surprendre en moi les pensées que le hasard me fait.”¹⁰⁶ It is therefore evident that the essay, by virtue of its focus on the observing self and its fragmentary form, serves as a favourable form for Marivaux’s project.

While La Bruyère’s prefatory remarks, for instance, serve in a sense as the defense of his voice as that of legitimate authority, *Le Spectateur français* opens with the declaration that the claim of authority has been relinquished. With Marivaux’s spectator figure, we have the assertion of authority on radically different grounds: the assertion of experiential authority. If La Bruyère’s fragments of social description read, in a sense, as a transcription of *choses vues*, the Spectateur declares that what is of interest is, rather, the effect that these *choses vues* have on the individual seeing subject.¹⁰⁷ Marivaux’s insistence on the effect that an object provokes in the subject underscores the primacy of subjective perception and utterance (*je vois, je juge, j’écris*).

Unbind the Books:

Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*, Loose-Leaf Journalism, and the Conceit of Epistolarity

Throughout *Le Spectateur français* there is an insistence on the circulation of the loose-leaves and, by extension, on the public created by this circulation. The conception of *le public*, accessibility and circulation elaborated in Marivaux’s journalistic text bring to the fore new modes of sociability. While the discourse of moral authority is refused by both Marivaux and his Spectator figure, the “Sixième Feuille” makes explicit the tension between the bound book and the loose leaf, challenging a hierarchy of genres, of discourse, and of readerly practices. “Je m’amusais l’autre jour,” the Spectateur recounts, “dans la boutique d’un libraire, à regarder des livres.” The book is at once established as object of divertissement (*je m’amusais*) and material object, *l’objet-livre* (*regarder des livres*). The tension between the bound book and the loose leaf is everywhere apparent throughout Marivaux’s *Journaux* (in particular, the opening section of *Le Cabinet du philosophe*), but serves in the Sixième Feuille as focal point. This sheet recounts the chance encounter between the Spectateur and “un homme âgé [...] d’esprit grave,” and the bookseller who (almost) silently observes their exchange. The old man demands, upon entering the book shop, some literary novelty, to which the bookseller responds by

¹⁰⁶ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114.

¹⁰⁷ As already cited: “Mon dessein n’est de penser ni bien ni mal, mais simplement de recueillir fidèlement ce qui me vient d’après le tour d’imagination que me donnent les choses que je vois ou que j’entends, et c’est de ce tour d’imagination, pour mieux dire de ce qu’il produit, que je voudrais que les hommes nous rendissent compte, quand les objets les frappent.” Further comment should be made here on the relationship between Marivaux’s call for the effects of *les objets qui frappent* to be expressed on the page rather than *les objets* themselves, and Dubos’ aesthetic model according to which value of a work is measured in function of the effect it has on the spectator (registered as a judgment in taste exercised by the organ of sentiment).

offering *Le Spectateur français*. Outraged, the old man exclaims, ““Fi! Que voulez-vous qu’on fasse de ces feuilles-là? Cela ne peut être rempli que de fadaïses, et vous êtes bien de loisir, d’imprimer de pareilles choses.”¹⁰⁸

L’homme grave suggests that the loose leaf is as insubstantial in moral matter as it is in material form, insisting on “la médiocrité de sa forme.”¹⁰⁹ He implies that the loose leaf does not immediately disclose its value, in his response to the bookseller’s query about whether he has previously read *Le Spectateur*: “Moi! Le lire; non, je ne lis que du bon, du raisonnable, de l’instructif, et ce qu’il me faut n’est pas dans vos feuilles.”¹¹⁰ The image evoked throughout is one of weight: the sheer heft and volume of the *Traité de Morale* stands as counterpoint to the “feuille d’impression que vous allez soulever d’un souffle!”

Adopting an ironic narrative posture, the Spectateur holds a *Traité de Morale* up to *l’homme grave*, proffering that “c’est de la morale, et de la morale déterminée, toute crue.” We should note here the play on the expression “toute crue” which, in French could mean either harsh and crude, or unquestionably believed. The work therefore transmits information to a passive, receptive reader; “de la morale déterminée” insists on the closed nature of classical moral discourse which would leave no room for a reader’s response, precluding the contingency of interpretation. The insistence on the *déterminée* and *crue* nature of what is read (or rather, what is disclosed unquestioningly to the reader) does not account for the reader’s position in relation to the work, or to *l’objet-livre*.

The passive receptivity of the act of reading transmits, by extension, a sense of edification (“là-dessus il se sent comme entouré d’une solitude philosophique, dans laquelle il goûte en paix le plaisir de penser qu’il se nourrit d’aliments spirituels dont le goût n’appartient qu’aux esprits graves”). This sense of gratification through “edification” is, therefore, described in the Sixième Feuille as a solitary activity. The *solitude philosophique* and recognition of moral “edification” *en paix* oppose *Le Spectateur* to this more unproductive practice of reading, the effects of which do not extend beyond (the reader’s contact with) the bound volume. For in the end, what has *l’homme grave* “learned” from the reading of his *Traité de morale*, “un gros livre,” which represents for him *le bon, le raisonnable, l’instructif*?

The opposition of the Spectateur and *l’homme grave*, in the Sixième Feuille, serves to underline the divergence between two readerly practices which give on to two modes of being in the world. More specifically, I would suggest that this dichotomy between the *gros volume de morale* and the loose leaf, beyond insisting on the materiality of the book-object, foregrounds the loose leaf as enabling new modes of sociability. The *Traité de morale* precludes the possibility of plurality of perspective and of discussion: its moral content is *déterminée et toute crue*, producing a reader characterized by his *sérieux* and *grave* countenance. The classical moral tradition, emblemized here by the *Traité de Morale*, stands as a closed system unable to generate new meaning, because unable to function as a facilitator of genuine dialogue: “À notre âge, il est beau de soutenir l’ennui que peut donner une matière naturellement froide, sérieuse, sans art, et scrupuleusement conservée dans son caractère.”

¹⁰⁸ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 139.

¹¹⁰ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 138.

Conversely, it is around the loose leaf *Spectateur* that the eponymous spectator, the old man, and the bookseller come together in discussion. Both its *support* and *matière* catalyze discussion and debate between these figures of polarized perspectives. The dialogical process does not project an outcome of conversion but rather aims to dislodge prejudice, and to cultivate judgment and discernment. While *l'homme grave* ultimately leaves the bookshop empty-handed, “mécontent et décontenancé” he asserts that their “conversation [se] réconciliera [peut-être] avec la suite des brochures.” In this way, the *Spectateur* has not succeeded, through his ironic posturing, in converting *l'homme grave* as a reader of his papers, but rather in dismantling the man’s preconceived notions of what constitutes value and meaning – and if he does not entirely dismantle his prejudice, he at the very least rattles it, challenging the “mépris qu’il a fait du *Spectateur*, sans le connaître.”

By extension, the loose leaf threatens notions that *l'homme grave* holds in relation to distinction and taste:

Est-il de la dignité d’un personnage de cinquante ans, par exemple, de lire une feuille volante, un colifichet? Cela le travestit en petit jeune homme, et déshonore sa gravité; il déroge. Non, à cet âge-là, tout savant, tout homme d’esprit ne doit ouvrir que des in-folio, de gros tomes respectables par leur pesanteur, et qui, lorsqu’il les lit, le mettent en posture décente.

The *Traité de morale* is therefore not the facilitator of a social practice but is, rather, a mark of distinction. The gravity of the *savant* and *homme d’esprit* is ensured by their possession of the heavy moral tome as ornament; the act of reading the massive volume is pure social sign (rather than social action) – the *posture décente* refers not to the resulting decency of one’s actions but rather to the social decency (*politesse*) to which one is elevated. For of course, “le goût n’appartient qu’aux raisons graves.” It is, however, on the loose leaf that “high” and “low” converge, blurring previous markers of both generic hierarchy and social distinction (the latter always promoted and preserved by the former, as we shall see in much greater detail in Chapter 3 with our discussion of Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*).¹¹¹

¹¹¹ This hierarchy of genres and formats mirrors a social hierarchy, as underlined in the intertext with Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*: “Upon the hearing of several late disputes concerning rank and precedence, I could not forbear amusing myself with some observations, which I have made upon the learned world, as to this great particular. by the learned world I here mean at large, all those who are any concerned in works of literature, whether in the writing, printing or repeating part. To begin with the writers; I have observed that the author of a folio, in all companies and conversation, sets himself above the author of a quarto; the author of a quarto above the author of an octavo; and so on, by gradual descent and subordination, to an author in twenty-fours. This distinction is so well observed, that in an assembly of the learned, I have seen a folio writer place himself in an elbow-chair, when the author of a duo-decimo has, out of a just deference to his superior quality, seated himself upon a squab. In a word, authors are usually ranged in company after the same manner as their works are upon a shelf” (No. 529).

The Sixième Feuille therefore showcases the commercial value of the loose-leaf. As previously noted, *commerce* refers both to networks of monetary exchange, and to the social exchanges between members of a given community. As I have discussed, the commercial value of *Le Spectateur*, as figured in the Sixième Feuille, is measured by the extent to which it succeeds in facilitating discussion between divergent personalities and perspectives.¹¹² Dialoguing, judging, members of a public – a readership – congregate around both the content and material apparatus of the periodical sheet, creating a network of social exchange. By extension, the commercial value of the journal – in monetary terms – is alluded to by the Spectateur’s reference to *l’achat des brochures* which passes through his *libraire*. The insistence in both cases is on the materiality of the loose-leaf which, by virtue of its near-weightlessness (*feuille d’impression que vous allez soulever d’un souffle!*), enters into circulation and is easily exchanged.¹¹³ The Sixième Feuille stages the “coming together” of three nodal points: the bookseller, the Spectateur, and *l’homme grave*. None of these figures actually relinquishes their position (the Spectateur still defends the loose leaf, *l’homme grave* leaves not entirely convinced). It is the plurivocality of the public that Marivaux underscores throughout the *Spectateur français*.

This notion of polyphony produced by the reading public is furthered by Marivaux’s inclusion of (fictional) letters to the editor in his *Spectateur français*. Multiplying the deictic marker “I” in the text, these letters have both the effect of exponentially multiplying the seeing, speaking subjects and of foregrounding the ways in which the public is brought together – if fictionally – in and by the loose leaf pages of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*. The first-person is the domain of the novel in the early eighteenth-century context, yet is, consistently, for Marivaux – in all of his *Journaux* – the fundamental principle of narrative and editorial organization. If Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* represents the *things* that make up fashionable London life, it is evident that Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* is curiously devoid of transcribed things. Indeed, he accords primacy to the experience of a seeing *I*. As we have seen, the Spectateur outlines his aims, in the Première Feuille, as being the collection of his impressions. The representational and descriptive focus is therefore strikingly akin to Dubos’ account of the process of aesthetic judgment; an object is remarkable only in terms of its effect on a spectator. The use of the plural, *les hommes*, emphasizes the subjectivity of the act of social observation, as understood by Marivaux; the first-person plural, *nous*, establishes a community of *seers and speakers* – among which the Spectateur includes himself. Just

¹¹² I insist here on the divergence between the efficacy of *Le Spectateur* as facilitator of a particular mode of sociability as represented in the Sixième Feuille, and the extent to which this was actually the case with Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*. The micro-level of the Sixième Feuille in a sense details the ideal outcome of the loose-leaf as enabler of a new mode of sociability, while the macro-level of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters bears a different testimony to the efficacy of Marivaux’s journal for reasons that have been discussed above (chiefly, due to the unreliability of its periodicity).

¹¹³ As Moureau has noted in “*Journaux moraux et journalistes*,” Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* was financially accessible to a wide segment of the Parisian public. In 1721 the *Mercur*e sold for 25 or 30 sols per *numéro*, and one entrance ticket to the Comédie-Française cost 40 sols. The daily salary of an unskilled worker was 1 sol. *Le Spectateur français*, at 6 sols, was by far a more affordable cultural divertissement.

as the loose leaf is set into circulation in material and discursive terms, so, too, does Marivaux play on this hyper-mobility in the editorial and rhetorical devices employed within his *Spectateur français*.

While Addison and Steele's *Spectator* included letters to the editor, Marivaux establishes an epistolary fiction in his *Spectateur*. For unlike his English model, Marivaux at no time provided an address by which "le Spectateur français" could be contacted, or letters forwarded to the "editor." *Le Spectateur français* in fact plays on the letter's inherent tension between private and public, and explicitly operates as a mediator between these "spaces." In the Neuvième Feuille, the Spectateur proclaims that he will offer three letters sent to him by a young girl (though in fact the first of these "letters" is interrupted mid-way through the essay), announced at the end of the prior Feuille. The letters, he claims, were sent to him because the young girl "souhaite que je les rende publiques." The Spectateur then addresses the letters' interlocutors (the girl's father and her ex-lover), asserting that he "exhorte les personnes, que deux de ces lettres regardent, à les lire avec attention quand [il les donnera: il] ne leur demande que cela, persuadé qu'elles produiront l'effet que cette infortunée en attend." Of course, the fiction here is double: neither are the letters "authentic" nor is Marivaux's readership widespread enough to ensure that the father and ex-lover would become double-readers (of the Spectateur français and of the letters addressed specifically to them). The letter therefore becomes an exemplary document: its originary intimate nature moves its reader, engaging her/him in a sentimental complicity. For unlike Addison and Steele's inventory of novelties, the Spectateur describes people, places, and things not as curious commodities but as sympathetic objects/subjects that move the reader. Indeed, this is the very foundation of the "public" he sketches throughout his loose leaves.

Staging the Sociable Spectator in Marivaux's *Spectateur français*

Juxtaposed with the Sixième Feuille which is essentially, I argue, about the ways in which particular readerly practices create particular publics, stands the Cinquième Feuille which expounds Marivaux's conception readership. The Sixième Feuille extends the notion of legibility and presents a series of reflections on reading social space. The Cinquième Feuille recounts the arrival of the Infante to Paris; yet, curiously, the sovereigns are relegated to the margins of the scene. It is the crowd who comes into sharp focus as the Spectateur reflects upon how the spectators construct both the meaning and the value of the spectacle. Peripherally stands an old cobbler, whose exchange with the Spectateur generates a final reflection on the politics and ethics of spectatorship.

The Cinquième Feuille opens with the discursive frame typical to each feuille, in which the Spectateur recapitulates the main narrative thread of the previous issue, most often deferring its continuation. Similarly, the Spectateur begins by deferring the continuation of the Spaniard's recollection of the dream, interrupted by the contingencies of the moment. The conditions that made the Spaniard's narrative possible then (28 février 1722), have been effaced by the contingencies of this moment (le 10 avril 1722). This narrative discontinuity – fragmentation, even – is propelled by the primacy of the

present. For indeed, as the *Spectateur* asserts, “je me sens aujourd’hui dans un libertinage d’idées qui ne peut s’accommoder d’un sujet fixe.”¹¹⁴

Having imposed this discursive frame, the *Spectateur* declares, “Je viens de voir l’entrée de l’Infante.” The use of the immediate past articulates a particular relationship between the act of spectating (*voir*), writing, and event. The insistence seems to be on a temporal tension between the act of beholding and that of writing, on an attempt to collapse the temporal disjunction between both activities (we do not read, for instance, *j’ai vu l’entrée de l’Infante*).¹¹⁵ This sheet announces itself as historical narrative: what will be recounted, the reader presumes, is the historical event of the Infante’s arrival to Paris. The sentence directly following this declarative *je viens de voir l’entrée de l’Infante* disrupts readerly expectations, however; for no account of the historical “event” shall be provided. In fact, the importance of *l’Entrée* as event lies elsewhere in the eyes of the *Spectateur*: “j’ai voulu parcourir les rues pleines de monde, c’est une fête délicieuse pour un misanthrope que le spectacle d’un si grand nombre d’hommes assemblées.” The event is therefore not the Infante’s *Entrée* but rather the congregated group – *le peuple*. The historicity of the event serves as pretext for the congregation. This constitutes a substantial difference between Marivaux’s account of the arrival of the Spanish Infante and contemporary descriptions of the historical event, which foreground the material details of the spectacle.

The divergence between *Le Spectateur français* and, for instance, *Le Mercure* is evident in the treatment of the entrance of l’Infante Marie-Anne-Victoire to Paris, March 2, 1722. Antoine de La Roque and his collaborators at the *Mercure*, compose a number entitled “Réception et route de l’Infante Reine depuis Châtres, et son entrée solennelle dans Paris le lundi 2e mars 1722.” La Roque’s account accords primacy to the decoration and pompous apparatus of the event (making much, for instance, of the carriage in which the king and l’Infante are carried), while the people is but a background ornament (“la populace répandue dans les rues, sur le chemin et dans les capagnes, formait une multitude qu’on ne saura nombrer”). While Gevrey has described Marivaux’s exclusion of the explicit depiction of contemporary political events as a “stratégie d’évitement de l’Histoire et de la politique,” I would argue that by rearticulating the focus of the scene,

¹¹⁴ I should qualify this by saying that it is the almost-present, for in fact *Le Spectateur français* is, with the exception of embedded dialogue, entirely narrated in the past tense, recounting experiences that are more or less “recently passed.” Unlike Barbier, Hardy, and Mercier who, at the end of the century chronicle the experiences of urban encounters in the most-present moment, the *Spectateur*’s sense of the present is not necessarily determined by the co-presence of spectator and object, or the concomitance of the spectator and scenario he narrates.

¹¹⁵ The acts of observation and of writing are characterized as carried out almost in tandem. The use of the immediate past rather than the *passé composé* underscores the temporal proximity of what is seen and what is written. While the arrival of the Infante is not described as a historically past event, it is not, either, related in the style of reportage (which is associated with the hyper-present: *j’écris ce que je vois, je vois, je suis en train de voir*).

Marivaux is foregrounding both a new mode of social spectatorship and the ethical imperative of this.¹¹⁶

The first-person pronoun dominates the first four paragraphs of the Cinquième Feuille, insisting on the subjective relationship between the observer and the scene (and breaking with the aim of objective journalism): *je viens de voir, j'ai voulu parcourir, j'ai aperçu, je me suis approché, j'ai fait, je lui ai demandé*. In this way, the scene is recounted as a sort of personal testimony, the Spectator's account of his experience of observing the crowd, rather than a historical account of l'entrée de l'Infante. The inscription of the first-person pronoun within the frame – from the outset – creates a sense of the narrative that follows as having been constituted, generated, by a seeing subject. Curiously, the focus shifts in the first line from the Infante to the crowd itself, at which point a pronominal shift also occurs: “J'ai voulu parcourir les rues pleines de monde, c'est une fête délicieuse pour un misanthrope que le spectacle d'un si grand nombre d'hommes assemblés; c'est le temps de sa récolte d'idées.” The *Je* of this sentence is one and the same with le misanthrope. This split between the first and third person makes an actor of the spectator at the moment at which he engages in observing the crowd. This pronominal doubling also serves to situate the Spectator-narrator at once within and outside of the scene he is contemplating.

Both the inscription of the first-person pronoun within the framed sovereign scene, and the center-stage role of *le peuple*, reveal the Cinquième Feuille, in particular, to be a “new kind of spectacle” – one which foregrounds the act of beholding. The Spectateur paints the portrait not of l'Infante, nor of the magnificent things of royal pomp, but rather that of *people looking*. More precisely, the novelty of the Spectateur's observations and reflections lie in its inquiry into the perceptual (sensual) and relationship between spectator and object, and into the capacity of the congregated spectators “to constitute and to construct the event itself from their point of view.”¹¹⁷

Indeed, the *things* that make up the sovereign spectacle, this display of *magnificence*, are in fact entirely absent from the Spectator's account. Even more shockingly, the sovereigns themselves are missing from the spectatorial account of the (experience of) the scene. In the place of *things*, spectators populate the text. Marivaux relegates the sovereigns (l'Infante and the young king) to the margins of the spectacle; though the chapter is in fact framed by references to the sovereign figures, the focus of the *Feuille* is, rather, the spectators themselves. In this way, the traditional sovereign spectacle is in a sense turned inside-out: for if the king had previously occupied all representational space and constituted the essence of the spectacle, the proportions of the figures are inverted. As Marin has noted in his *Portrait du roi*, within the absolutist framework, the king was often staged as *metteur en scène* and protagonist.¹¹⁸ Indeed,

¹¹⁶ Françoise Gevrey, “Marivaux journaliste et moraliste: la stratégie d'inscription de l'Histoire et de la politique dans ses périodiques” *Le Moraliste, la politique et l'histoire* ed. Jean-Charles Darmon (Paris: Desjonquères, 2007), 114.

¹¹⁷ Suzanne Pucci, *Sites of the Spectator: Emerging Literary and Cultural Practice in Eighteenth-Century France. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 2001:9 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2001) 7-8.

¹¹⁸ Louis Marin, *Le Portrait du roi* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981). See also Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le Prince sacrifié: théâtre et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris:

“his commanding presence and authority within the official spectacle and his external perspective which legislated its ceremonial production tolerated no rival.”¹¹⁹ While within the absolutist model representations of the sovereign were displayed before – not *for* – a beholder who was constituted by the monarch’s gaze without ever being able to return this gaze, the Cinquième Feuille stages a scene of beholding in which the spectators do not passively consume the awesome sovereign spectacle, but rather one in which the spectators themselves “[constitute and construct] the event itself from their point of view.”¹²⁰

If the monarch had previously constituted the focal point of the sovereign spectacle, perspective is dispersed in the Cinquième Feuille; that is to say, the Spectateur insists on the plurality of positions and perspectives and on the ways in which these determine judgment. This is a scene in which meaning is neither *déterminée* nor *crue*, but contingent upon the spectator’s position. Indeed, the Cinquième Feuille stages three different modes of beholding represented by the spectatorial figures who constitute the Feuille: the Spectateur, the subaltern philosopher (cobbler), and the crowd (*la populace*). In fact, the sovereign is divested not only of his capacity to constitute his subjects through his gaze but is demoted to the status of object within the Spectateur’s narrative account of the scene.¹²¹

This is a *feuille* about people looking; or, more precisely, about how people look and what effect is generated by the act of beholding. The Spectateur announces his project to observe the crowd in a remarkably protoethnographic manner: the assembly represents, for him, the occasion to “parcourir les rues pleines de mondes” in order to observe “un si grand nombre d’hommes assemblées,” his anthropological subjects (“c’est le temps de sa récolte d’idées”). The crowd, he notes, is *to his eyes* uniform; indeed, “ce n’est plus des hommes différents qu’il contemple, c’est l’homme représenté dans plusieurs mille.” The Spectateur’s reflections on the generic character of the crowd are interrupted by his sighting of the poor cobbler – the only remarkably singular figure within this scene – who remains working steadfastly as the crowd congregates in excitement before the sovereign spectacle. Insisting on the alienation of *ce philosophe subalterne* in relation to the congregated men and women, the Spectator edifies the demarcated space of the workshop as distinct from the “open” and “public” space

Éditions de Minuit, 1985). By extension, Marivaux undoes this notion of representation in his theatre, for instance, in which there is typically one character who stages scenes (most often involving *tromperie* and intrigue) in order that he might, himself, spectate. For a discussion on the figure of the *metteur en scène* in Marivaux’s theater, see Philip Koch, “On Marivaux’s Expression ‘se donner la comédie’” *Romanic Review* (1965:56) 22-29. On the notion of the *double registre* – the act of simultaneously being spectator and actor – see Jean Rousset, *Forme et signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1962).

¹¹⁹ Suzanne Pucci, *Sites of the Spectator*, 7.

¹²⁰ Suzanne Pucci, *Sites of the Spectator*, 7-8.

¹²¹ Suzanne Pucci has remarked that this marks a radical break with modes of official representation on a first level, but that it goes so far as to challenge the very possibility of absolutism, since the absolutist model fundamentally precludes the notion of contingency.

occupied by *la populace*. The separate space of the workshop, this “*asile contre la foule*,” is the position from which the subaltern philosopher glances periodically at the crowd while remaining at the margins of the spectacle, structured similarly to a parterre from which he distractedly surveys the scene – that is, not the sovereigns or the spectacle mounted in their honour, but rather the assembled crowd.¹²²

In an attempt to glean what *form* ideas of a philosophical nature might take for a man of the cobbler’s *condition*, the Spectator approaches the man, transgressing the boundary of the workshop. Inquiring about the cobbler’s dismissal of the spectacle, the Spectator exclaims, “Comment! Vous travaillez, pendant que vous pouvez voir de si belles choses, mon bon homme!” The opposition is then established between two mutually exclusive activities: that of labour and that of spectatorship. The subaltern philosopher argues that the scene before them is too beautiful for lowly people of his sort, that beautiful things are destined only for those who can afford leisure. In his qualification of those enthusiastically drawn in by the sovereign spectacle as “*fainéants*,” the subaltern philosopher defines the act of spectating as necessarily unproductive. Conversely, the cobbler declares that he is bound by the demands of utility and duty: his labour produces something material and therefore useful, and his social station requires that he have no greater desire (*appétit*) than to “*vivre bon serviteur du roi et des siens*.”¹²³ The beautiful is relegated to a separate, distinct, domain.

It is this sense of resignation to the restrictions of social station that is foregrounded by the subaltern philosopher’s discourse on the class-contingency of participation in the sovereign spectacle (or in spectacle more generally – exclusion from the crowd). Yet what emerges still more clearly is the extent to which *idées reçues* not only construct *ce brute Socrate*’s perception of the scene but frame his way of being in the world. There is both literally and figuratively a frame demarcating the workshop, which delimits the cobbler’s view. He claims to be as happy as a king within his boutique, surrounded by his materials and apprentices; yet the moment he looks beyond the frame of this confined workspace, “*sitôt [qu’il voit] tant de beaux équipages et tout ce monde qu’il y a dedans, [il n’a] plus de coeur à l’ouvrage*.”¹²⁴ A tension emerges from the cobbler’s discourse between his sense of being bound to the duty of productivity and *utilité*, and what ultimately stands as a reproduction of *idées reçues* on the class-confinement. Indeed, the subaltern philosopher both consumes and reproduces a discourse on the class-contingency of spectatorship: “*j’aimerais, mardi, mieux le croire que de l’aller voir*,” consuming the accounts put into circulation by those who actually witnessed the scene rather than beholding the scene himself.¹²⁵ In this way, the cobbler engages the social discourses surrounding his station which frame his experience of the world, rather than engaging with the object itself. His assertion that “*cela est trop beau pour de petites gens comme nous*” imposes a class-specific frame around the sovereign spectacle, though his periodic glances “*sur cette foule de gens curieux qui s’étouffaient*” suggest that it is not without interest, that the cobbler is not drawn to the scene. This notion of the fixity of frame which would define the spectatorial configuration of a scene – the

¹²² Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 133.

¹²³ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 133.

¹²⁴ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 133.

¹²⁵ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 133.

composition/subject, its beholder, the frame – produces nothing *new* in the Spectator’s account of the scene. In fact, the cobbler’s discourse precludes dialogical possibility; the Spectator interrupts first with a smile, and closes without even a reply, “sinon qu’il avait raison.”

Having exhausted his interaction with *ce brute Socrate*, the Spectator turns his attention to the assembled crowd, or more specifically, to “sa façon de voir.” Moving from the “cela est trop beau” of the subaltern philosopher to the “Oh! que cela est beau!” of *la populace*, the Spectator foregrounds his interest not in *what* the crowd sees, but *how* they see. Yet what is evident is that this is not a Feuille committed to a definition of *le beau*, but rather to a reflection of a spectating public. In both the Fifth and Sixth *feuilles* discussed above, characters are always watching other characters – a sort of spectatorial triangulation that positions the Spectator figure as mediator of two poles, the public and the particular. Habermas posits that the structural transformation of the public sphere engendered a decorporealization, a detheatricalization of the public (unlike the representative sphere by which authority and power were guaranteed by display) in its relegation to a printed arena of public, rational debate. *Le Spectateur français*, however, stages scenes of tension between these two modes of public participation.

As we discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation, classical anthropology studied the world in function of finite, preordained codes and reproduced these variables in a number of “closed” forms – *caractères*, maxims, portraits. While *Le Spectateur français* subsumes the fragmented forms of moralist literature, of the essay, and of journalism, the effect is far from one of fixity and “closed” description. Conversely, Marivaux’s hybrid text is what I would term an itinerant narrative: the narrator is committed to the experience of a spontaneous moment and to the effect of this upon his senses. The Spectateur’s attention to the moment introduces a new conception of temporality to a literary tradition that had foreclosed the notion of perpetual change. For as we saw in the introductory remarks of this study, classical characterology was based on the assumption that human nature is immutable, universal, and therefore free of the contingencies of time and place.¹²⁶ Abandoning these fixist and closed classificatory principles – social, scientific, and literary – Marivaux presents a series of reflections on the changing surface of the social, the relationship between individual and *le public*, and articulates the central space of the figure of the Spectator – both literary and social.

¹²⁶ Acke, “La Notion de caractère dans les Journaux,” 211.

Chapter II

The Social Spectator Speaks: Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*

Je me sens aujourd'hui dans un libertinage
d'idées qui ne peut s'accommoder d'un sujet
fixe.

Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*

J'abandonne mon esprit à tout son
libertinage. Je le laisse maître de suivre la
première idée sage ou folle qui se présente.

Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*

From his theoretical reflections on the *drame* to his art critical contributions to Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, from his novels to his philosophical and political writings, Diderot accords a ubiquitous role to the figure and function of the spectator. As we discussed in Chapter 1, the early eighteenth century saw the reimagining of the position and role of the spectator in relation to the work of art. In the paradigm shift we sketched in our Introduction to this study – from poetics to aesthetics – we noted the emergence of a feeling subject who, placed before the work of art, affectively responds to and is absorbed by the object (in contradistinction to the neoclassical model which maintained a rigidly demarcated separation between the work of art and the spectator.) The authority to judge a work of art had heretofore been determined by a technical respect for the rules of art, the *tekné*, is transferred to the feeling individual who not only identifies with the object but is absorbed into it.¹²⁷ Over the course of the second half of the century, the role of the spectator becomes increasingly central to the emerging conception of bourgeois drama, in particular – at the confluence of theoretical reflections on theatrical and painterly reform. To be sure, the theater takes on new social and intellectual importance in eighteenth-century Paris as the very relationship between representation and public is being reimagined.¹²⁸

Like Marivaux's *Spectateur français* and Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau* brings to the fore the centrality of the spectator in a changing urban space – Paris – by rethinking networks of relations. In a work on *la morale* and *les mœurs* such as *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot subverts the conventions of moralist discourse by inscribing – like Marivaux and Mercier – the urban spectator-narrator within the textual frame. That is to say, unlike La Bruyère's *Caractères*, for instance, the

¹²⁷ Scott S. Bryson, *The Chastised Stage: Bourgeois Drama and the Exercise of Power* (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1991), 24-25.

¹²⁸ Bryson, *The Chastised Stage*, 5.

spectator-narrator of *Le Neveu de Rameau* is not relegated to the textual periphery; rather, the figures of Lui and Moi are deeply anchored in the urban fabric they observe and describe. Indeed, unlike *moraliste classique* whose gaze falls upon the social world from above, and unlike the taxonomist who abstracts by synoptic views, Lui and Moi describe the changing social world from within. What results from this observation and description at ground level is what I term an itinerant narrative; in other words, a narrative without fixed aim or fixed (textual) order. While *Le Neveu de Rameau* can scarcely be termed a literary promenade per se, the text reproduces mobility and movement on many levels. Indeed, Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau* foregrounds the figure of the urban spectator who is both himself mobile within the text, and whose (system of) thought is equally mobile; the result is a reconsideration of the very possibility of moralist discourse as discourse of authority.

The Function of Frame

The question of frame is central to this study of the eighteenth-century urban spectator, and in particular, the ways in which particular texts negotiate the inability to contain, constrict, delineate (thought, narrative, space). In the case of Marivaux, we considered the importance of the loose-leaf, and in that of Mercier, we study the deferral which concludes each chapter. The resulting effect is a perpetual textual openness, the impossibility of containing thought or its representation (that is to say, what the urban spectator sees and how he describes it). In Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, lines of demarcation are traced in order to be transgressed, blurred, or effectively effaced. The limits of space (Paris, the café de la Régence) and systems of representation (genre, language) are brought into relief in *Le Neveu de Rameau* in order to be challenged and then shattered; in Diderot's text, nothing can be contained.

As is commonplace throughout the Diderotian oeuvre, *Le Neveu de Rameau* is framed by the reflections of a first-person narrator. Itemizing his daily urban routine, this narrator describes the things and people that populate the Palais-Royal, the site of his evening promenades. This description gives onto the narrative of his encounter with “un des plus bizarres personnages de ce pays” – all recounted in the past tense. Suddenly, the narrative jumps into the present tense: “Il m'aborde... Ah, ah, vous voilà, monsieur le philosophe; que faites-vous ici parmi ce tas de fainéants?” This is not offset in the text either typographically or by quotation marks – the question posed in the present tense opens onto the main part of the text: the dialogue between Moi and Lui. Starobinski refers to this first section of the text as “incipit” – logically enough – but I read this, rather, as frame. The incipit, to borrow Starobinski's term, sets the scene, presenting the characters of Moi and Lui from the perspective of Moi (who addresses an interlocutor referred to only as “vous”), as well as the space they inhabit (Paris). How do we understand this shift in tense, perspective, and genre? Echoing the *Salon de 1767*'s “Promenade Vernet” and *Le Fils naturel*, a textual and narrative frame is insisted upon here only to be transgressed by both the narrator and the reader. An overview of Diderot's articulation of frame and its import in *Le Fils naturel* (1762) and the Salon of 1767 (specifically, the “Promenade Vernet”) will allow us to rethink the notion of frame specifically in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Recapitulating the theatrical and painterly

conceptions of frame put forth by Diderot, will allow us to consider what is enabled by the narrative frame of this text – neither a theoretical reflection on the theater nor of painting, but social and urban description.

In instances such as *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1762), *Le Fils naturel ou les épreuves de la vertu* (1756), and the “Promenade Vernet” (*Salon* of 1767), the spectator transgresses – respectively – the line of demarcation between exposition and narrative, spectator and stage, and spectator and painting. As with *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *Le Fils naturel* opens with Moi’s account of how he came to behold the scene he recounts. The frame established by this incipit is both narrative and spatial. Moi, who is both Dorval’s interlocutor and the (hidden) spectator of the performance, reveals through the “dialogue” with Dorval that the performance that will take place is happening upon the request of the deceased father, Lysimond.¹²⁹ This contextualization demarcates the play *as play*, and functions to heighten the theatricality of the scene. In response to Moi’s request to hear and watch the play, Dorval exclaims that “la présence d’un étranger gênerait beaucoup,” recalling the conception of the fourth wall.¹³⁰ This echoes *De la poésie dramatique*, in which Diderot argues that actors should imagine a fourth wall at the edge of the stage, fully excluding the presence of the spectator.¹³¹ Indeed, Diderot’s notion of the fourth wall engages contemporary polemical debates on architectural reform of the theater space in late eighteenth-century France. For it was only in 1759 that spectators – until then admitted to the stage, from where they watched the play – were relegated to their seats outside of the space of the stage. In *Le Fils naturel*, the concession is made that Moi will be admitted to the scene, provided he remain hidden. (Of course, he is never fully absent or hidden, since Dorval – both his interlocutor and actor in the play – is aware of his position within the “theatrical” space.) This entails the spatial demarcation of the scene, and Moi’s physical transgression of both the narrative and theatrical frame: “J’entrai dans le salon par la fenêtre; et Dorval, qui avait écarté tout le monde, me plaça dans un coin, d’où, sans être vu, je vis et j’entendis ce qu’on va lire, excepté la dernière scène. Une autre fois je dirai pourquoi je n’entendis pas la dernière scène.”¹³² Ultimately, the play is disrupted by the actors’ inability to control their emotional – and consequently, physical –

¹²⁹ By extension, a corollation is established between the figure of Moi and Diderot in the opening sentence: “Le sixième volume de *L’Encyclopédie* venait de paraître; et j’étais allé chercher à la campagne du repos et de la santé lorsqu’un événement, non moins intéressant par les circonstances que par les personnes, devint l’étonnement et l’entretien du canton” (1082).

¹³⁰ Let us note that this in fact reverses Diderot’s conception of the fourth wall, whose purpose is to preserve the interest of the theatrical performance for the spectator by excluding him from the scene (*De la poésie dramatique*, X and XI). Here the concern is not for the effect upon the spectator, but rather the spectator’s effect upon the actors, for the ways in which the spectator’s presence would hinder the actors.

¹³¹ “Soit donc que vous composiez, soit que vous jouiez, ne pensez non plus au spectateur que s’il n’existait pas. Imaginez sur le bord du théâtre un grand mur qui vous sépare du parterre; jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas.” Denis Diderot *De la poésie dramatique*, Diderot: *Oeuvres IV* ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1996), 1310.

¹³² Diderot, *Le Fils naturel*, 1083.

reactions to the scene they are performing (in contradistinction to the model articulated in *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*). At the point of the breakdown of the “jeu des acteurs,” Moi reasserts the narrative and spatial frame that he had both erected and subsequently transgressed:

Lorsque tout le monde fut retiré, je sortis de mon coin, et je m'en retournai comme j'étais venu [...] La représentation en avait été si vraie qu'oubliant en plusieurs endroits que j'étais spectateur, et spectateur ignoré, j'avais été sur le point de sortir de ma place, et d'ajouter un personnage réel sur la scène.¹³³

In other words – those of Michael Fried, for example – the spectator was so moved by the scene that he was nearly absorbed into the scene. Though Moi is ostensibly excluded from the scene he beholds, he nevertheless – despite himself and because of his subjective response – is drawn into – absorbed by – the scene he is spectating.

Le Fils naturel concludes with Dorval offering the manuscript of the play to Moi, declaring that “une pièce est moins faite pour être lue que pour être représentée; la représentation de celle-ci vous a plu, il ne m'en faut pas davantage. Cependant, la voilà. Lisez-la, et nous en parlerons.”¹³⁴ Here the acts of participatory spectatorship and reading are contrasted, anticipating Mercier's imperative, “Fermez les livres!” to which we will return in Chapter 3 of this study in order to comment upon the subjective immediacy of spectatorship. Whereas in both his exchange with Dorval and in viewing the dramatic scene Moi is moved (“j'essayais mes yeux”), in reading the manuscript, he laments that the vivid effects of the sentimental scene are nullified:

Je pris l'ouvrage de Dorval. Je le lus à tête reposée, et nous en parlâmes le lendemain, et les deux jours suivants. Voici nos entretiens. Mais quelle différence entre ce que Dorval me disait, et ce que j'écris!... Ce sont peut-être les mêmes idées; mais le génie de l'homme n'y est plus... C'est en vain que je cherche en moi l'impression que le spectacle de la nature et la présence de Dorval y faisaient. Je ne la retrouve point; je ne vois plus Dorval. Je ne l'entends plus. Je suis seul, parmi la poussière des livres et dans l'ombre d'un cabinet... Et j'écris des lignes faibles, tristes et froides.¹³⁵

The transgression of demarcated – framed – space (narrative, pictorial) is perhaps most famously staged in Diderot's *Salon de 1767* in which he performs what Fried refers to as “the most intensive development” of “the fiction of physically entering a group of

¹³³ Diderot, *Le Fils naturel*, 1126.

¹³⁴ Diderot, *Le Fils naturel*, 1126.

¹³⁵ Diderot, *Le Fils naturel*, 1126-27. This echoes with Diderot's conception of pantomime in his *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, in which he communicates the imagination of the author in terms of perpetual presence, as we shall discuss further in the chapter: “la pantomime est le tableau qui existait dans l'imagination du poète, lorsqu'il écrivait; et qu'il voudrait que la scène montrât à chaque instant lorsqu'on le joue.”

paintings.”¹³⁶ The “Promenade Vernet” (a critique of Vernet’s *Port de mer au clair de Lune*) opens with the beholder – Diderot – stepping through the frame into the canvas: “J’avais écrit le nom de cet artiste au haut de ma page, et j’allais vous entretenir de ses ouvrages, lorsque je suis parti pour une campagne voisine de la mer et renommée par la beauté de ses sites.”¹³⁷ What follows is the account of the narrator’s “promenade” as he is guided by his *cicerone* across the seven “sites” (“nous causons, nous marchons”).¹³⁸ Not only are the ekphrastic details of the scene exhaustive, but so are the descriptions of the subjective impressions upon the narrator: such expressions as *je rêvai, j’allais enchanté, j’allais ruminant, c’est à l’effet successif de ces sensations* pervade the text. The narrative complexity of Diderot’s text underscores the spectator’s movement within the scene.¹³⁹ At the close of the sixth “site,” however, the narrative conceit is exposed as we read, “j’ai oublié que je vous avais fait un conte jusqu’à présent et que je m’étais supposé devant la nature (et l’illusion était bien facile), puis tout à coup je me suis retrouvé de la campagne au Salon.”¹⁴⁰ Ultimately, “the spell [is] broken.”¹⁴¹

In both *Le Fils naturel* and the “Promenade Vernet,” the beholder is transported by and into the scene before him. Fully enchanted, flooded with “sensations délicieuses,” and “made oblivious to the passage of time,” the beholder forgets himself.¹⁴² In Fried’s famous reading of the “Promenade Vernet,” he dismisses Diderot’s claim that he establishes the fiction of being within the painting “pour rompre l’ennui et la monotonie des descriptions.”¹⁴³ Unlike Fried, who does not engage the question of descriptive monotony, I argue that the insistence upon and transgression of frame serves as a critique of the limits of narrative (*le récit* – that is, an ordered and monolithic system of representation). In order to *know* (connaître) “autrement que par le récit,” the beholder must be fully absorbed by the object he contemplates and cannot remain at the periphery of its frame. Fried bypasses this question in order to consolidate what he defines as Diderot’s “two conceptions of the art of painting” – the dramatic and the pastoral. According to the first, the figures within the canvas are fully absorbed by their actions or by a common object – the beholder is excluded from this scene. The latter allows for the fiction of the beholder’s inclusion within the scene. Fried concludes that, ultimately, the paradox is overcome: the beholder is always absorbed (by the successful painting). Not only does the incipit call attention to the question of frame so central to Diderot’s

¹³⁶ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 122.

¹³⁷ Denis Diderot, *Salon de 1767 Diderot: Oeuvres IV* ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1996), 594. Let us note the echo between the opening of this *Salon* entry and the opening lines of *Le Fils naturel*, where Moi recounts having left for the country.

¹³⁸ Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, 594.

¹³⁹ As Fried has noted, “the result [of Diderot’s detailed descriptions of the *promenades*] is an extremely rich and complex text, in which narrative, descriptive, lyric, and dialogic elements alternate and intermix; in which tenses fluctuate from one sentence to the next” (Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 123).

¹⁴⁰ Diderot, *Salon de 1767*, 625-26.

¹⁴¹ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 127.

¹⁴² Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 127.

¹⁴³ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 127.

writings on painting and theater, in particular, but brings to the fore a problem addressed by both Diderot and Mercier: namely, that of *récit*. As Mercier argues in his *Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique*, “il faut connaître autrement que par le récit,” echoing Diderot’s claim in his *De la poésie dramatique* that the gesticulated language of theater must “s’écrire à la place du discours.”

Moreover, the notion of the “successful painting” developed by Fried is limiting for my purposes here. Rather than thinking in terms of how the spectator is enchanted by a scene (that is to say, in terms of a work’s power to move), I would relocate the subjective agency on the level of the spectator; in other words, to what extent the spectator is disposed to be moved – a term I will use rather than Fried’s “enchanted.” Both the narrator and reader transgress the narrative frame in *Le Neveu de Rameau* in such a way that they are differently moved by the text; echoing the declaration set forth in *Le Fils naturel* that reading stagnates emotion while spectating moves and incites emotive reaction, the narrative frame is transgressed in such a way that *récit* is cast aside in favour of dramatic dialogue. For the beholder transported by and into the scene – fully absorbed – is “made oblivious to the passage of time,” as we have seen. I am interested, rather, in instances – such as *Le Neveu de Rameau* – in which the spectator is included in/by the scene by virtue of participation; that is to say, he is included because he includes himself (and especially in instances where spectators *register* the passage of time). In the case of *Moi* and *Lui*, a critical distance is maintained between self and spectacle (even, as we shall see in our discussion of pantomime, when *Lui* temporarily forgets himself). What will be of central concern to us in what follows is, precisely, that rather than the stage or the canvas, *Lui* and *Moi* are spectators of the urban space they occupy. While they transgress and rework lines of demarcations (frames) of different kinds – periphery of the city, discursive, subjective/identitary, generic – so, too, is the very object of knowledge (Paris) reimagined in this text. What happens when we’re not talking about one’s relation to a play or a painting, but to the space one inhabits. As Marshall has suggested, “*Le Neveu de Rameau* considers the theatrical characters, actions, and relations which take place outside of the playhouse in the realm of everyday life.”¹⁴⁴ This suggests not that Diderot is interested in the theatricality of everyday life, but rather, I would suggest, in making the space and experience of everyday life the point upon which theoretical reflections of the spectator can converge.

Words and Walks: Dialogue and Promenade as Mobile Form

If the spectator figure of *Moi* climbs through the frame, represented by the incipit, from *récit* to dialogue, can we speak of *Le Neveu de Rameau* as a philosophical dialogue? Like Marivaux’s *Spectateur français* and Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*, Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau* resists generic classification. Indeed, scholars have long debated the generic specificity of the work, subsuming it under the categories of novel (Grimsley), satire (Dieckmann), philosophical dialogue (Coulet), even musical composition (Barricelli). The apparent discomfort surrounding the impossibility of definitively categorizing *Le*

¹⁴⁴ David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 110.

Neveu de Rameau generically is emblematic of the preoccupation, in Diderotian studies, with order. How is the work ordered? How is Diderot's thought ordered throughout his corpus? What does a "lack" of order communicate? How do we read order within this apparent disorder? The scholarly trend to read Diderot's oeuvre either as contradictory or as internally coherent is triangulated by an alternate reading of his corpus, one that acknowledges harmony in the complexity and multiplicity of Diderot's thought. Such critics as Vernière read the Diderotian corpus in terms of contrariety, declaring that "the confusion of materials compromises the effectiveness of the work and also troubles the critic."¹⁴⁵ Conversely, critics such as Rex would argue for the contrariety that often qualifies Diderot's vast body of work as the necessary structure of thought and narrative process, in which discourses "assume their character and shape by pushing against, and even denying, what precedes them, somewhat the way voices in musical counterpoint may be conceived as doing."¹⁴⁶ Readings such as Vernière's read this apparent lack of order in Diderot's work as confused and confusing, while readings such as Rex's argue for order within this seemingly disordered system. Abandoning this linear structure, more recent studies by Saint-Amand and Hayes, for example, have focused on the Diderotian corpus and on Diderotian thought in terms not of linearity, but of dynamism, multiplicity and networks of relations (Hayes, for instance, proposes we think in terms of a rhizomatic system rather than linear – both in Diderot's thought and the expression of this).

While scholars have long debated the generic category that might best encompass this work, I would suggest that the hybridity of the text makes it, in many ways, a text concerned with the critique of order – narrative and social. This is expressed on a first level through the question of genre, a question that preoccupies scholars of the Diderotian oeuvre in general, identifiable in the persistent need to read order in and establish order among Diderot's works. Indeed, the critical impulse to read order in Diderot's texts – as a whole and individually – strikes a dissonant chord, however, with Diderot's own disavowal of the exigencies of narrative order within his texts. The disclosure to Grimm, for instance, with which Diderot opens the *Salon de 1761*, accords primacy to the moment and form of his thoughts and observations, rather than to the form these will take when translated onto the page: "Voici, mon ami, les idées qui m'ont passé par la tête à la vue des tableaux qu'on a exposés cette année au Salon. Je les jette sur le papier, sans me soucier ni de les trier ni de les écrire."¹⁴⁷ There are countless examples – throughout the entirety of Diderot's corpus – of this refusal to make thought subservient to form.¹⁴⁸ The

¹⁴⁵ *Oeuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris, 1990), 167.

¹⁴⁶ Walter E. Rex, *Diderot's Counterpoints: The Dynamics of Contrariety in His Major Works. Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century 363* (1998) (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

¹⁴⁷ X, 107

¹⁴⁸ Diderot opens his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature* (1754): "je laisserai les pensées se succéder sous ma plume, dans l'ordre même selon lequel les objets se sont offerts à ma réflexion; parce qu'elles n'en représenteront que mieux les mouvements et la marche de mon esprit" (II, 9). Similarly, in the *Essai sur la peinture* (1765), we read: "Qui sait où l'enchaînement de mes idées me conduira? Ma foi! ce n'est pas moi" (X, 496).

ideal of a formless form, which we have taken up in the context of *Le Spectateur français* and which we will discuss in our study of the *Tableau de Paris* – is articulated by Diderot in his *Réflexions sur le livre de l'Esprit (Réfutation d'Helvétius)*, in which his discussion of Helvétius gives way to a reflection of Montaigne's style. Here, Diderot praises the *esprit d'auteur* that gives shape to Montaigne's reflections, what he terms an “ordre sourd.”¹⁴⁹ This is the method and the form that must give shape to thought without imposing themselves upon it. We might recall, here, our discussion of *Le Spectateur français*, in which we explored the ways that thought is necessarily subservient to form, and the ways in which generic conventions produce and an artificial and forced “liaison des pensées.”¹⁵⁰ This question of making thought bend to fit preestablished forms is explored by Hartmann, who in his study of Diderot declares that,

when the philosophical text flows into a preformed literary mold, when it wedds conventional forms without reflection, thoughtlessly seeks out conventional representations, or risks integrating topoi and patterns drawn from the cultural arsenal, the message it delivers becomes scrambled, due to the resistance to these attempts through the entrenchment of meaning deposited by these symbolic forms.¹⁵¹

Of course, Diderot is not thoughtlessly depositing the social observations of the *moraliste* into available molds, but is rather reappropriating certain philosophical topoi in order to both challenge narrative and social order, as I have stated, and to underscore the newly participatory role of the urban spectator. In particular, Diderot reappropriates the generic conventions of the dialogue and the promenade in order to give shape to a series of moralist observations whose movement is reflected in their form. In what follows, I will illustrate how questions of movement and of space are embedded in the very form of *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Diderot's text – in both its form of representation and in what it represents – brings into sharp relief points of contact in a spontaneous moment: between the philosopher and his thoughts, Moi and the city, Moi and Lui, a scene and a spectator. Spontaneous (aesthetic) experiences of the moment figure greatly in this study, as part of a larger claim about the new centrality of the urban spectator who is part of the city – and of its moral fabric – he describes. There is a sense in the three works we are studying that the city provides hyper-accelerated stimuli, responses to which the pen cannot trace quickly enough. This sense of movement is expressed by the philosopher who, at the beginning of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, declares:

J'abandonne mon esprit à tout son libertinage. Je le laisse maître de suivre la première idée sage ou folle qui se présente, comme on voit dans l'allée de Foy nos jeunes dissolus marcher sur les pas d'une courtisane à l'air éventé, au visage riant, à l'oeil vif, au nez retroussé, quitter celle-ci pour une autre, les attaquant toutes et ne s'attachant à aucune. Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins.

¹⁴⁹ Herbert Dieckmann, *Cinq leçons sur Diderot* (Genève: Droz, 1959), 87.

¹⁵⁰ Marivaux, *Le Spectateur français*, 114.

¹⁵¹ Pierre Hartmann, *Diderot: la figuration du philosophe* (Paris: José Corti, 2003), 54.

Free of any preordained philosophical and narrative itinerary, the philosopher returns each day to the bench at the Palais-Royal, where he entertains his thoughts indiscriminately (*la première idée sage ou folle*), though entertaining none too long (*quitter celle-ci pour une autre, les attaquant toutes et ne s'attachant à aucune*). Diderot, in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, reappropriates the generic conventions of the dialogue and of the promenade in order to underscore the ideal of what I term an itinerant narrative: one whose form mimics the movement of thought to which it gives shape.

The dynamism and movement of the *libertinage d'esprit* to which the narrator is committed take shape in *Le Neveu de Rameau* in the form of the dialogue which forms the “post-incipit” text. As Dieckmann has suggested, “le dialogue, qui prédomine dans l'oeuvre de Diderot [lui a permis] de représenter directement le mouvement de ses pensées dans leurs surprenants revirements.”¹⁵² It is, indeed, this notion of movement that qualifies *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Yet while *Le Neveu de Rameau* is, on every level, dialogic, Diderot here reappropriates the form of the philosophical dialogue in order to complicate and multiply the discourse of moral authority. Indeed, Diderot reworks the generic conventions of the philosophical dialogue in order to give shape to a series of moralist observations whose movement is reflected in their form. The genre of the philosophical dialogue flourished in the eighteenth century, as part of a move away from the rigid scholasticism of ornamental rhetoric (the Ciceronian model) toward forms of more familiar conversation (we can link this, also, to salon culture and newly important role of the café). As Sherman has suggested, it was the rise of a new bourgeois readership that contributed to the rise of the “refusal of rhetoric” since rhetorical eloquence had long been associated with institutions of power.¹⁵³ Expanding upon Hirzel's claim that climates of social and political change see a rise in the popularity of the philosophical dialogue, Cosentini, like Sherman, attributes the vogue for the genre in eighteenth-century France to the social climate.¹⁵⁴ The text most often provided as example of this (and as counter-example to Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*) is Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* in which we can identify the principal generic characteristics of the genre. The *Entretiens* establish, at the outset, a single voice of authority: the first-person narrator is he who possesses all scientific knowledge that shall be transmitted to the marquise. In this instance, the different characters (je, la marquise) “interact in a purely formal manner,” as DeJean has suggested. Progressing in a linear and ordered fashion, the dialogue provides clear resolutions to the topics investigated.

The stability of this dialogic text is, as I have stated above, often offered in contradistinction to Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, in which dialogue – rather than attempting to order social observations – serves to proliferate perspectives and to provide the most mobile of forms. In a work dealing with moral philosophy, *les mœurs*, contemporary social abuses, music, and education, the discourse of authority is decentered by the very structure of the dialogue form. Dialogic – and not dialectical –

¹⁵² Dieckmann, *Cinq leçons sur Diderot*, 82. Let us note the expression “surprenants revirements,” which calls attention to the spontaneity and temporal nature of Diderot's thought.

¹⁵³ Carol Sherman, *Diderot and the Art of Dialogue* (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 27.

¹⁵⁴ Joan DeJean, “Insertions and Interventions in *Le Neveu de Rameau*” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 9:4 (Summer, 1976), 511.

the exchange between *le philosophe* (Moi) and *le fou* (Lui) impedes the identification of the more authoritative voice of the two. Neither in terms of content nor of methodology does Moi attempt to convince Lui of his point of view; conversely, when Lui declares that “[il n’entend] pas grand-chose à tout ce que [Moi lui débite],” Moi is equally dismissive (suggesting that if jealousy of his famous uncle is all that worries Lui in this world, he effectively has nothing much to worry about).¹⁵⁵ The ultimate deferral of moral authority comes at the close of the work with a contradiction and enigma: Lui, the ever-changing character, asks, “N’est-il pas vrai que je suis toujours le même?” The enigmatic “rira bien qui rira le dernier” imposes an openendedness on the text unassociated with either moralist discourse or philosophical dialogue: the future tense of *rira* points outside of the text to something else, more, to follow. Nothing discussed herein is conclusive or authoritative, nor is the text itself a closed system. What emerges in the first few lines of *Le Neveu de Rameau* is that nothing is stable – neither the perspectives adopted by the spectator-narrators (Moi and Lui) nor the social world they describe. The dialogical form, as well as the positions of Moi and Lui, precludes any notion of fixity, and accords primacy to variability and contingency – as is the case, we will recall, with Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*. Undertaking “un sujet aussi variable que les moeurs,” Moi and Lui banter back and forth in a manner that suggests that *Le Neveu de Rameau* is in fact an instantiation of Diderot’s materialist thought, according to which all *matter* is *movement*.

Moi’s narrative in the incipit of *Le Neveu de Rameau* is interrupted by Lui – Rameau’s nephew – who surprises him: “Est-ce que vous perdez aussi votre temps à pousser le bois? C’est ainsi qu’on appelle par mépris jouer aux échecs ou aux dames.”¹⁵⁶ The dialogue that follows unfolds as, by analogy, as game of chess or checkers; Moi and Lui rally back and forth on matters of education, art, moral philosophy, and the state of contemporary society, music, presenting their thoughts in reaction to each other, as they would move their pieces across the chessboard.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, the form that *Le Neveu de Rameau* takes mimics the movement inherent in what Lui and Moi discuss. Lui is remarkable to Moi precisely because, unlike the nameless men of the crowd, “il secoue, il agite;” in other words, he is the energetic catalyst in an otherwise neutral field.¹⁵⁸ This “homme de génie” is indeed “doué d’une grande sensibilité, mais maîtrisée.”¹⁵⁹ The notion of *sensibilité* permeates Diderot’s writings – both theoretical and literary – and, as we shall see in our discussion of Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*, insists on a particular way of being in the world. Internally dynamic, all matter is inherently endowed with the potential to set in motion and to be set in motion; this latent energy is what Diderot terms *sensibilité*, that “qualité générale et essentielle de la matière.”¹⁶⁰ *L’homme sensible* is he whose latent energy can be catalyzed by external stimuli; in other words, *l’homme*

¹⁵⁵ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 55.

¹⁵⁶ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 34.

¹⁵⁷ This analogy is established by Starobinski in his study of exteriority in Diderot’s text: Jean Starobinski, “L’Incipit du *Neveu de Rameau*” *La Nouvelle revue française* 347: (December, 1981), 51.

¹⁵⁸ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 33.

¹⁵⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 47.

¹⁶⁰ Denis Diderot, *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* ed. Jean Varloot (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 161.

sensible can easily be moved. This translates, in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, to the staging of two bodies acting in reaction to each other, embodied in the dialogue form.

This materialist reading of the text is supported by the instances of *vibration* throughout. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, d'Alembert outlines Diderot's conception of bodies in contact with each other in terms of a communication, a *vibration*: "...Tous les êtres circulent les uns dans les autres, par conséquent toutes les espèces... tout est en un flux perpétuel..."¹⁶¹ The continuity and contiguity of bodies is foregrounded in two sequential – and analogical – pantomimes performed by Lui. Mimicking the grand gestures of a violinist and humming "un allegro de Locatelli," Lui performs a scene that moves both himself and Moi: "il est sûr que les accords résonnaient dans ses oreilles et dans les miennes," Moi reflects.¹⁶² Just as he recovers from the violin performance, Lui sits down to an imaginary harpsichord, declaring at the close of his exhausting recital that "l'enchaînement des dominantes [leur] est familier."¹⁶³ The analogical insistence on musical performance and discourse underscores the resonance between bodies; both intellectual and physical. Here, the musical notions of resonance (*les accords résonnaient dans ses oreilles et dans les miennes*) and sequence (*l'enchaînement des dominantes*) reinforce the ethical and intellectual notions of *sensibilité*. Just as the vibrations of the violin and harpsichord strings resonate within both Moi and Lui, so, too, does their philosophical exchange – their dialogue – figure as a sort of vibration. As Anderson has justly proposed, "conversation is a transmission of many forms of vibration, mental, emotion, physical; its function is to promote the materializing of social groups that produce further organization."¹⁶⁴

The movement embedded in the dialogical form is echoed in that of the promenade, reappropriated by Diderot in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. As we shall see, the classical philosophical dialogue was relegated to the outer limits of the polis, taking place in abstract space. Conversely, Diderot's text opens with an insistence both on the promenade, and on Parisian space proper: "c'est mon habitude d'aller sur les cinq heures

¹⁶¹ Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, 156. By extension, Diderot's use of ellipses is interesting in this passage, which performs this idea of a chain, of the continuity between bodies (here, groups of words which form groups of thoughts).

¹⁶² Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 53.

¹⁶³ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 54.

¹⁶⁴ Wilda Anderson, *Diderot's Dream* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 74. The notion of organization originates in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, where the make-up of the organism is sketched in term of a network (exemplified by the images of the beehive and the spiderweb, in particular). Each being is comprised of a *réseau originaire* from which extend *les fibres* (the fibers are excited by external stimuli, the sensation received is communicated to the *réseau* and is registered in the *réseau originaire*). Constitutive elements (rather than "parts") of this organic "whole" cannot be thought of as individual parts – as elucidated by d'Alembert's claim that "quand vous donnerez le nom d'individu à cette partie du tout, c'est par un concept aussi faux que si, dans un oiseau, vous donniez le nom d'individu à une plume de l'aile..." just as Diderot claims that we cannot think of the senses and the organs in isolation, here d'Alembert is defending the principle of communication and cooperation that both structure and organize matter.

du soir me promener au Palais-Royal.”¹⁶⁵ If the dialogue mimics the movement of the text, the promenade serves to reproduce movement in space – not in abstract space, but in lived, everyday Paris. Indeed, as Caplan has suggested, “to do serious thinking about the ever-changing nature of reality, he required a suitably mobile instrument of thought: dialogue.”¹⁶⁶ This “ever-changing reality” that Moi and Lui observe and describe is not, however, abstract. In contrast to the philosophical dialogue, Moi and Lui are embedded in the fabric of the urban space they observe and describe. *Le Neveu de Rameau* opens with an image of repetition and movement anchored in physical Paris: reference to the act of walking through specific spaces and places – the Palais-Royal, “le banc d’Argenson,” “l’allée de Foy,” the café de la Régence – and also to the people who occupy these spaces – “Légal le profond, Philidor le subtil, le solide Mayot.”¹⁶⁷ This explicit reference to physical Paris, to its places and people (named by their proper names), stands in contrast to the convention of the philosophical dialogue, which tends towards the abstraction of space.¹⁶⁸ “Qu’il soit ouvert ou fermé, champêtre ou urban, l’espace du dialogue classique tend à s’échapper du monde.”¹⁶⁹ As counter example to *Le Neveu de Rameau*, let us take Diderot’s *Promenade du sceptique ou Les Allées* (1747, unpublished until 1830), in which the “Discours préliminaire” elaborates the idyllic place to which his companion, Cléobule, has exiled himself out of disgust for the world. One might find Cléobule’s “petite terre” only after a long journey through labyrinthine forests and lush gardens. In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, however, Diderot, elaborates a moralist text in which the spectator-observers are anchored in the world they observe rather than withdrawn from it, and in which space is configured in terms of continuity and contiguity. Familiar with, and not removed from, the space he describes, Moi reveals to his interlocutor known only as *vous* that “si le temps est froid, ou trop pluvieux, [il se] réfugie au café de la Régence; là [il s’]amuse à voir jouer aux échecs. Paris est l’endroit du monde, et le café de la Régence est l’endroit de Paris où l’on joue le mieux à ce jeu.” It is significant, on a first level, that explicit reference is made to Paris, its places and its characters, at the outset, because this spatialization serves to embed the moralist within the urban and social fabric he is observing and describing. By extension, more than simply physical points of orientation within the text, the Palais-Royal and the café de la Régence serve, by their social symbolics, to further the mobility and multiplicity that Diderot pursues throughout *Le Neveu de Rameau* – in terms both narrative and social. If the classical

¹⁶⁵ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 45.

¹⁶⁶ Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot’s Genealogy of the Beholder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 7.

¹⁶⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 45.

¹⁶⁸ Diderot’s *Promenade du sceptique ou Les Allées* (1747 but unpublished until 1830) illustrates the generic convention of the abstraction of space in the philosophical dialogue. Here, the idyllic place (“sa petite terre”) to which the philosopher, Cleobule, has exiled himself out of disgust for the social world, can be attained only after a long ambulation through labyrinthine forests and lush gardens. The locus of philosophical reflection and rêverie is far from the urban center, unlike the physical space occupied by Moi and Lui in *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

¹⁶⁹ Stéphane Pujol, “L’espace public du *Neveu de Rameau*” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 93 (1993), 675.

dialogue rigidly demarcated the space of philosophical reflection as outside of the city, Diderot relocates the moralist observations of *Moi* and *Lui* to the very place they describe: Paris. This defies classical dialogical conventions, which dictated that the space of frivolity be kept separate from that of philosophical thought. The resulting effect is, in Diderot's text, the creation of public, urban space as the locus of intellectual sociability.¹⁷⁰

Indeed, *Le Neveu de Rameau* is written at a moment during which there is a remarkable increase in the production of urban guide books. While I am not arguing here that this strain of minor literature (discussed at length in Chapter 3) influences Diderot's text directly, I do suggest that it is symptomatic of a larger, new cultural awareness of and attention to the city and to its usages. What I will argue here however, in this vein, is that the insistence in the opening of *Le Neveu de Rameau* on the relationship between the promenade and philosophical reflection might be read in parallel to the evolution of the promenade as both literary genre and social practice in eighteenth-century France.

Considerations of movement and space are woven together at the outset of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, where we read that *Moi*'s day is routinely punctuated by his promenade at the Palais-Royal. In his study of the Parisian *promeneur* in eighteenth-century France, Turcot examines the urban promenade as both social practice, and literary theme and form. Passing in review the various urban and social upheavals that marked the eighteenth century in Paris, and which necessarily rearticulated the individual's relationship to the space s/he occupied, Turcot's study traces the transformations in the perception and usages of the urban promenade. From the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries, the promenade played an important social role, in terms of seeing and – more importantly – being seen. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, there is a “déclassification de la promenade de civilité” which made of it less a performance of visible distinction and more an individual and individuating urban practice.¹⁷¹ *Le Neveu de Rameau* plays upon this tension, however, in its qualification of urban space as multiple sites of sociability. These sites (the Palais-Royal and the café de la Régence) are ties to practices of sociability, but also of spectacle and spectatorship that are central to my study of the figure of the urban spectator.¹⁷² The *traités de civilité* from this period demarcate the socially proper spaces of sociability – there is “bon ton” in being seen strolling in the *jardin des Tuileries* and the *Cours-la-Reine*, for example. Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, the importance of the *promenade* is rearticulated. No longer insisting on *civilité*, the ritual of the *promenade* becomes more of a “divertissement honnête,” one whose social dictates are remarkably loosened.¹⁷³ Eventually, the urban *promenade* became an individual and individuating practice of the city. As Turcot has noted,

¹⁷⁰ Pujol, “L'Espace public dans *Le Neveu de Rameau*,” 176.

¹⁷¹ Laurent Turcot, *Le Promeneur de Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 19.

¹⁷² “C'est moi qu'on voit, toujours seul, rêvant sur le banc d'Argenson,” *Moi* declares (32). The *philosophe-promeneur*, the exceptional man in/of the crowd, is never fully seul, however; he is both seen, routinely, by this impersonal on and aware of being on display. Not just spectacle but also spectator, however, *Moi* goes on to describe his amusement at watching the crowd play chess at the café de la Régence.

¹⁷³ Turcot, *Le Promeneur de Paris*, 19.

certes, la promenade est un loisir, elle rassemble les individus, met en place des systèmes de représentation, d'interaction et de sociabilité, mais elle doit également se comprendre par l'espace physique qui structure sa nature et ses modalités d'utilisation. Rituel de visibilité sociale, elle fonde des usages qui cimentent les rapports sociaux.¹⁷⁴

Le Neveu de Rameau is written at a moment when the social strictures of the practice of the promenade are transforming, and when the literary genre of the promenade is emerging more visibly.¹⁷⁵ What is significant about Moi's daily promenade is that it brings to the fore the questions put forth by Turcot, above, about the relationship between individual and collective, systems of representation, and networks of social relations.¹⁷⁶ Moi strolls everyday at the Palais-Royal, but each day necessarily produces new philosophical reflections and experiences. Rather than reading everyday, at 5 or 6 o'clock, a moral treatise, for instance, Moi visits the Palais-Royal, in a sense reading the text of the city in a new way each day: "C'est moi qu'on voit, toujours seul, rêvant sur le banc d'Argenson. Je m'entretiens avec moi-même de politique, d'amour, de goût ou de philosophie."¹⁷⁷

The symbolics of this Parisian space occupied by *le philosophe* is of great import here; for unlike the philosopher of the classical promenade, Moi occupies Paris proper, as we have already underscored. But the specific space in which philosophical and moral reflection and dialogue occurs is that of the Palais-Royal. While the physicality of Paris proper means that the moralist is embedded in the space he observes and describes, the social symbolics of the Parisian spaces evoked (the Palais-Royal and the café de la Régence) functions in *Le Neveu de Rameau* to further destabilize the very possibility of

¹⁷⁴ Turcot, *Le Promeneur de Paris*, 18.

¹⁷⁵ The notion of uncircumscribable motion and the limits of representation are furthered by the account of Lui's daily ambulatory practice. By day, Moi reveals, he wanders into the city, interacting with various characters and negotiating exchanges both monetary and social. By night, however, he lingers beyond the periphery of the city proper (Diderot, 33). The ambulatory practices of Moi and Lui within the urban space they describe stands in stark contrast to Lui's account of his promenades with his former wife, which would correspond to the practice of the *promenade civile*: "Je promenais ma femme partout, aux Tuileries, au Palais-Royal, aux boulevards," he reveals, adding that she became so sought after during these performative promenades that she left him for another suitor. "Voir comme on la regardait," he laments. This practice of the promenade which aims both to see and to be seen makes of the walker a commodity (like the wife who is sought after); conversely, the routine promenade of Moi and Lui embed them in the city whose social fabric they seek to understand and to debate.

¹⁷⁶ We shall return to this at great length in our study of Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* in Chapter 3 of this study. For more on how the individual appropriates and interprets urban space through the act of walking, see Michel de Certeau, "Pratiques de l'espace, marches dans la ville" *L'Invention du quotidien. I. Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 135-164.

¹⁷⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 45.

order and stability in both the moralist observations of Moi and Lui and the narrative form this takes. Here, philosophical reflection is generated in the space of debauchery (*le libertinage de mœurs*) and of *divertissement* (the game). Just as Marshall suggests that Diderot, in *Le Neveu de Rameau* takes theater into the realm of the everyday, so, too, does he take philosophy into the streets – into the space not of weighty thought, but of flippant game. Indeed, Diderot’s text provides no topographical description of the Palais-Royal, unlike those of Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne, who, toward the end of the eighteenth century, will become fascinated with descriptions of this space as a world within a world.¹⁷⁸ Reference to the Palais-Royal in Diderot’s text engages this space as physical space (Moi and Lui are part of the urban fabric they describe) but also as symbolic space. That is to say, at this historical moment, the Palais-Royal holds particular importance in the cultural imagination as the site of *libertinage par excellence*. It is significant, therefore, that this is the space occupied by Moi and Lui, who are committed to the *libertinage d’esprit* in both the pursuit and representation of their moralist observations. The Palais-Royal was an urban space qualified by a particular freedom from social authority and order.¹⁷⁹ Over the course of the eighteenth century, it became increasingly synonymous with moral debauchery and libertinage. Precisely because the Palais-Royal was a royal space, it was unpoliced and therefore became the breeding ground for behavior of questionable morality. Most importantly, this space was accessible to the public. The Parisian locus of moral libertinage becomes the playground for Moi’s pursuit of his *libertinage d’esprit*. There is, I would suggest, an analogy to be drawn between the moralist discourse of Diderot’s text and the space in which its characters are embedded. While Asfour has suggested that, in its representation of the Palais-Royal, *Le Neveu de Rameau* “represents the questioning and transgression of conventional morals through an analogy between the *libertin*’s pursuit of women in the lawless Palais-Royal and the intellectual’s non-committal exploration of philosophical ideas,” I would argue that there is more at stake in staging the moralist discourse generated by Moi and Lui at the Palais-Royal.¹⁸⁰ I would suggest that what is at stake, here, is not just the “non-committal exploration of philosophical ideas,” though I do agree with Asfour that the perpetual disregard and consequent reattachment of the philosopher to his *pensées* represents a transgression. I see this transgression as more than just the expression of a refusal to “commit” to philosophical ideas, however; I read this

¹⁷⁸ Restif is fascinated by the licentiousness of the space, while Louis-Sébastien Mercier, both in his *Tableau de Paris* and (especially) in his *Nouveau Paris*, sees this miniature Paris as a type of urban laboratory.

¹⁷⁹ It was after 1784 that the Palais-Royal became a bustling urban center. In an effort to repay his debt, the Duc Louis-Philippe d’Orléans commissioned (between 1781 and 1784) apartment buildings to be built around the Palais’ gardens. It was at this point that the Palais-Royal became a particularly active commercial and intellectual (and, because unpoliced, morally unrestricted) locus. The date of the later development of the Palais-Royal in part accounts for why the topography of the “Paris en miniature” appears only in the later eighteenth-century texts of, for example, Mercier and Restif.

¹⁸⁰ Lana Asfour, “Representing Morals: The Palais-Royal, Capital of Vice” *The City in French Writing: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* ed. Síofra Piérse (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004), 125.

transgression as the refusal to “commit” to the imposed (policed) order to which conventionally systematic philosophical reflection must bend (authority).

The philosophical reflections of Moi and Lui are pursued not as a laborious project, but rather as *divertissement*. From the outset, the space occupied by Moi and Lui is defined by *divertissement*: the Palais-Royal and the café de la Régence. As we have seen in our discussion of Marivaux’s *Spectateur français*, the café emerged in the eighteenth century as the space identified with the emergence of a new literary, public, and political sphere. The locus of conversation, the café became synonymous with political debate, and intellectual engagement. It is fitting, then, that the café, site of conversation par excellence, serves as spatial backdrop to the exchange between Moi and Lui. For indeed, Moi does not come here to engage with others in matters political, social, or moral, but rather to watch the men in the café play chess. Indeed, Dierot situates Moi and Lui within this very public urban space, but reformulates the intellectual dynamic. “Si le temps est trop froid, ou trop pluvieux,” Moi reveals, “[il se] réfugie au café de la Régence; là je m’amuse à voir jouer aux échecs.”¹⁸¹ The act of spectating the chess players and their games is an alternative to the promenade at the Palais-Royal, contingent upon weather. What is foregrounded in Moi’s account, here, is a dynamics of spectacle and performance (he finds *amusement* in *watching* the men play chess). As is the case with the Palais-Royal, space is reconfigured in the moralist discourse of *Le Neveu de Rameau*; the philosophical reflections are generated by Moi and Lui within a public, urban space of *divertissement*, not of arduous intellectual exercise.

Moi goes on to describe his amusement at watching the crowd play chess at the café de la Régence in terms strikingly similar to Diderot in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*: “Un après-dîner, j’étais là, regardant beaucoup, parlant peu, et écoutant le moins que je pouvais.”¹⁸² This echoes remarkably with Diderot’s description of his own experience as spectator at the theater: “Je me tenais opiniâtrement les oreilles bouchées, tant que l’action et le jeu de l’acteur me paraissaient d’accord avec le discours que je me rappelais.”¹⁸³ The difference between the two acts of spectatorship, however, lies in the expected correlation between words and gesture. In the case of Diderot at the theater, he plugs his ears *opiniâtrement* in order to judge whether or not the actor’s performance tells the story – a play he already knows well. Does the visual representation on stage conjure up the words of the text? Do gestures correlate to words? Diderot’s *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* is preoccupied with questions of perception (more specifically, with how language structures our perception of the world and our place in it), and with methodical systems of representation (language). Conversely, *Le Neveu de Rameau* calls into question the reliability of a monolithic system of representation. I suggested earlier that the narrative frame – the incipit – calls attention to the limits of *récit*, recalling Mercier’s claim that “il faut connaître autrement que par le récit.” This move from narrative recollection to dialogue, we saw, echoes Diderot’s move from before the canvas to the space within it. Presently, we shall investigate the extent to which language cannot contain Lui’s expression (in our discussion of pantomime); just as language cannot

¹⁸¹ Diderot, 31.

¹⁸² Diderot, 32.

¹⁸³ Denis Diderot, *Lettre sur les sourds et muets Diderot: Oeuvres IV* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1996), 21.

confine expression in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, neither can space. In other words, just as space is never fully closed in this text, neither are systems of representation. For example, the windows of the café shatter as a result of the surprising force of Lui's cough: "Et pour me donner une idée de ce viscere, il se mit à tousser d'une violence à ébranler les vitres du café, et à suspendre l'attention des joueurs d'échecs."¹⁸⁴ Here, the space of the café is shattered – the windows are broken but so is the attention of those absorbed in their games of chess; "the spell [is] broken."

When Bodies Speak: Pantomime

The question of genre and its relation to order has been central to our discussion; Diderot's reappropriation of the conventions of classical dialogue and promenade mimic the movement in space performed by Moi and Lui in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. In the case of the dialogue, we insisted on the ways in which thoughts act upon and in reaction to each other spontaneously. In the case of the promenade, we explored the ways in which the movement of matter is embedded in urban space. The corporeality of philosophical and moral reflection is foregrounded in the very first line of Diderot's text, with the reference to Moi's repetitive movement through the city's sites of sociability. Indeed, thought itself is described as corporeal in Moi's analogous conception of this as his "catins." We have discussed the ways in which bodies act in reaction to each other (dialogically and materialistically), their exchanges and convergence in certain urban spaces of sociability (the café and the Palais-Royal), and the bodily and intellectual practice of walking the city). Indeed, in his *Elements de la physiologie*, Diderot challenges: "je défie qu'on explique rien sans le corps." In *Le neveu de Rameau*, however, we have a multiplicity of *tableaux* in which Lui explique tout par le corps, in which the body is endowed not only with latent energy (*sensibilité*), but is a semiotic system all its own.

Marmontel, in his *Encyclopédie* article, defines pantomime as "le langage de l'action, l'art de parler aux yeux, l'expression muette. [...] c'est surtout aux mouvements de l'âme les plus passionnés que la pantomime est nécessaire. Alors, ou elle seconde la parole, ou elle y supplée absolument." Interestingly, in Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, pantomime does not function as a compensation for language – it functions as a semiotic system among others. While Diderot's reflections on pantomime originate within the context of his theoretical writings on the theater, at the heart of his conception of pantomime is the idea of natural, limitless expression – an idea that permeates his writings on theater, painting, and philosophy. Unquestionably and excessively visual, Diderot's conception of dramatic poetry is highly inflected by his reflections on painting. Just as Dubos, in his 1719 *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, championed the renaissance of pantomime, so, too, does Diderot call for the revival of pantomime, which "évoque le modèle des acteurs de l'ancienne Rome dont l'art consistait à exprimer sans le secours de la parole, puis, plus largement, à représenter des sentiments par les gestes."¹⁸⁵ What is important about the use of pantomime in *Le Neveu de Rameau* is at once its insistence on a highly visual mode of representation, and its insistence on the

¹⁸⁴ Diderot, 39.

¹⁸⁵ Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau*, 121.

body as medium of expression. Diderot's conception of pantomime brings to the fore the relationship between *parole* and *geste*, and is articulated most explicitly in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* and *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*. In the former, he elaborates a sensualist and empirical theory of language and perception. Undertaking an explanation of the process by which we perceive the physical and moral world, Diderot expounds his conception of *la langue parlée* in contradistinction to *le langage par geste* in order to establish the distinction between a language of convention and a natural language. Far from working in competition with each other, these two systems of signification work in tandem.¹⁸⁶ In the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Diderot defines pantomime in contrast to simple bodily action; in other words, pantomime is a bodily speech act.

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The Paris of *Le Neveu de Rameau* can only be understood through the bodies that inhabit it and navigate its sites of sociability. As Stierle has suggested, "c'est par son corps [que Lui] présente la ville et qu'il y inscrit, par la répétition du mime, une figure

¹⁸⁶ This notion of simultaneity is expressed by Moi in his assertion that "Ce qu'il y a de plaisant, c'est que, **tandis que** je lui tenais ce discours, il en exécutait la pantomime" (*Le Neveu de Rameau*, 47).

¹⁸⁷ Diderot, *Discours de la poésie dramatique*, 1336.

¹⁸⁸ Interestingly, in the context of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, which plays on the points of intersection between speech and bodily gesture, Diderot states that "le dialogue est institué entre le discours et le geste" (*De la poésie dramatique*, 1338).

¹⁸⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 108. While in *Le Neveu de Rameau* pantomime engages contemporary theatrical practices of the *comédiens italiens*, it also speaks directly to contemporary polemics on music. The expressive *ivresse* that Diderot lauds in the *comédiens italiens* is apparent in Lui's pantomimes, and is furthered by the musical references made both explicitly and implicitly within these (pantomimes).

réflexive.”¹⁹⁰ We have discussed the ways in which bodies act in reaction to each other (dialogically and materialistically), their exchanges and convergence in certain urban spaces of sociability (the café and the Palais-Royal), and the bodily and intellectual practice of walking the city. In his *Éléments de la physiologie*, Diderot challenges: “je défie qu’on explique rien sans le corps.” In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, however, we have a multiplicity of *tableaux* in which Lui “explique tout par le corps.” For indeed, for Diderot, the body is endowed not only with latent energy (*sensibilité*) but is a semiotic system all its own.¹⁹¹ Indeed, “la pantomime évoque un langage du corps au déaut de la parole, un excès du corps dans le signe.”¹⁹² The punctuation of *Le Neveu de Rameau* with pantomime serves a double function: Lui’s pantomimes at once disrupt generic convention, and expound a conception of natural language (as opposed to conventional language).¹⁹³ In other words, pantomime within *Le Neveu de Rameau* represents Diderot’s “cultivation of an alternative poetics.”¹⁹⁴ While Diderot’s reflections on pantomime originate within the context of his theoretical writings on the theater, at the heart of his conception of pantomime is the idea of natural, limitless expression – an idea that permeates his writings on theater, painting, and philosophy. Unquestionably and excessively *visual*, Diderot’s conception of dramatic poetry is highly inflected by his reflections on painting. Just as Dubos, in his 1719 *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* championed the renaissance of pantomime, so, too, does Diderot call for the revival of pantomime, which “évoque le modèle des acteurs de l’ancienne Rome dont l’art consistait à exprimer sans le secours de la parole, puis, plus largement, à représenter des sentiments par des gestes.”¹⁹⁵ In this way, just as Mercier’s spectator-narrator engages in a practice of reading the city, so, too, does Moi engage in a practice of reading the body.

In fact, just as Mercier’s conception of *tableau* exceeds the possibilities of the theater, so, too, does Diderot’s conception of pantomime. As Frantz has suggested, “poussée à son terme, l’entreprise [de la pantomime] échappe au théâtre: *Le Neveu de Rameau* atteint une plénitude textuelle que Diderot n’atteint pas dans son *Père de famille*.”¹⁹⁶ As we have seen, Lui makes clear his frustration with the limits of language when in reply to Moi’s suggestion that he affix his reflections to the page, he declares that he does not concern himself “de méthode ni de précepte. Les génies se font eux-mêmes et n’ont pas besoin de protocole.” I suggested in our earlier discussion that this

¹⁹⁰ Stierle, *La Capitale des signes*, 78.

¹⁹¹ For more on the body as signifying system, see Michael Moriarty’s discussion of *La Princesse de Clèves*: “Discourse and the Body in *La Princesse de Clèves*” Paragraph 10 (1987): 65-86.

¹⁹² Pierre Frantz, *L’Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998), 121.

¹⁹³ As Frantz has argued, “précisément parce [que la pantomime] sortait du cadre des codages traditionnels, elle pouvait perturber la perception des différences entre les genres dramatiques, d’une si grande importance au XVIIIe siècle” (Frantz, *L’Esthétique du tableau*, 138).

¹⁹⁴ Andrew Clark, *Diderot’s Part* (Aldershot and Burlington: 2008), 9.

¹⁹⁵ Frantz, *L’Esthétique du tableau*, 121.

¹⁹⁶ Frantz, *L’Esthétique du tableau*, 150.

refusal to transcribe his reflections is a refusal to fix that which is pure movement. By extension, however, it also reveals a frustration with language, which is seen as inadequate in the expression of his thoughts.

At a certain point in their dialogue, Moi and Lui happen upon the topic of generic innovation (“la poésie lyrique est encore à naître”).¹⁹⁷ During their bantering on the question, Lui proposes that in order for “le nouveau style” to emerge, language must approximate music. One must be able to “musiquer les *Maximes de La Rouchefoucauld* ou les *Pensées de Pascal*,” in other words, language must become more vibrant, energetic, and expressive.¹⁹⁸ “Or n’allez pas croire que le jeu des acteurs de théâtre et leur déclamation puissent nous servir de modèle,” Lui cautions.¹⁹⁹ At this moment, remarkably, the text breaks into framed reported discourse (italicized), in which Moi relates the exhaustion of Lui’s tirade. In other words, Lui runs out of words in which to express his reflections on generic and artistic reform; Moi must narrate in his place:

Tandis qu’il me parlait ainsi, la foule qui nous
environnait, ou n’entendant rien ou prenant peu
d’intérêt à ce qu’il disait, parce qu’en général
l’enfant comme l’homme, et l’homme comme
l’enfant aime mieux s’amuser que s’instruire, s’était
retirée; chacun était à son jeu; et nous étions restés
seuls dans notre coin.²⁰⁰

The image of the crowd that disperses underscores the inability of language to captivate and to move the spectator; rather than an image of absorption, here, we have one of dispersion. La foule qui nous environnait becomes disinterested because what is observed is a surface spectacle only; this resonates with Mercier’s discussion, in his *Tableau de Paris*, of inattentive observation, according to which the modern urban subject is so easily distracted by the movement of surface things.

Conversely, in a biting critique of the social order – to which we shall return presently – Lui challenges the ethics of social taxonomy; upon intimating that social positions are arbitrary, he declares “je suis excellent pantomime; comme vous en allez juger.”²⁰¹ Suddenly, he breaks into pantomime, performing all the social types he had passed in review. “Voilà ma pantomime, à peu près la même que celle des flatteurs, des courtisans, des valets et deux gueux.”²⁰² In this instance, gestual language expresses more articulately than language (*discours*) could. What is interesting here is that at the very moment at which Lui articulates the insufficiency of language, the body picks up where language had left off. Unable to put into words that which words must do (move, express, make feel), the body expresses that which language cannot. The pantomime’s effect on Moi, spectator of the bodily scene, makes him “rêver profondément.”²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 108.

¹⁹⁸ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 108.

¹⁹⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 109.

²⁰⁰ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 110.

²⁰¹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 125.

²⁰² Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 126.

²⁰³ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 126.

The relationship between *parole* and *geste* is articulated most exhaustively by Diderot in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* and his *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*. In the former, he elaborates a sensualist and empirical theory of language and perception. Undertaking an explanation of the process by which we perceive the physical and moral world, Diderot expounds his conception of *la langue parlée* in contradistinction to *le langage par geste* in order to establish the distinction between a language of convention and a natural language. Far from working in competition with each other, these two systems of signification work in tandem.²⁰⁴ In the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Diderot defines pantomime in contrast to simple bodily action; in other words, pantomime is a bodily speech act.

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When Diderot queries that “il y a bien de la pédanterie dans notre poétique; il y a en a beaucoup dans nos compositions dramatiques: comment n’y en aurait-il pas dans la représentation?” what is underlined is that all levels of the creative process, genuine expression is impeded by (linguistic) convention.²⁰⁸ In *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* we read that syntax structures our perception of the world, and that this structuring syntax is,

²⁰⁴ This notion of simultaneity is expressed by Moi in his assertion that “Ce qu’il y a de plaisant, c’est que, **tandis que** je lui tenais ce discours, il en exécutait la pantomime” (*Le Neveu de Rameau*, 47).

²⁰⁵ Diderot, *Discours de la poésie dramatique*, 1336.

²⁰⁶ Interestingly, in the context of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, which plays on the points of intersection between speech and bodily gesture, Diderot states that “le dialogue est institué entre le discours et le geste” (*De la poésie dramatique*, 1338).

²⁰⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 108.

²⁰⁸ Diderot, *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, 1343.

itself arbitrary. Conditioned by convention, we both perceive and understand the world according to this syntax, and – in turn – communicate our understanding and experience of the world within the limited variables of this conventional system. Moi and Lui, in debating the imitative role of art, echo this problem; in response to Moi’s reflections on the imitative nature of art, Lui concludes that “nous n’avons dans la mémoire que des mots que nous croyons comprendre.”²⁰⁹ True communication between the spectator and the scene he observes can never happen solely through language, then. Pantomime, conversely, makes feeling and expression truly present to the spectator, for “la pantomime est le tableau qui existait dans l’imagination du poète, lorsqu’il écrivait; et qu’il voudrait que la scène montrât à chaque instant lorsqu’on le joue.”²¹⁰ Diderot’s conception of pantomime therefore relies on a notion of presence that engages the spectator in a new way. Speaking directly to the feeling spectator, the actor’s body communicates outside of the conventions of language. Indeed, the language of the body is “a discourse more authentic and natural than speech, unmediated by civilized constraints and hence closer to the flux of nature.”²¹¹

Lui, the self-termed “excellent pantomime,” by his gestual discourse, refuses the order of representation. Qualified as a multiple character, the modes by which he expresses his (disordered) experience of the social world are also multiple and disordered. Moi’s description of Lui in the incipit is determined by plurality and undefinability:

Rien ne dissemble plus de lui que lui-même. Quelquefois, il est maigre et hâve [...] Le mois suivant, il est gras et replet. [...] Aujourd’hui, en linge sale, en culotte déchirée, couvert de lambeaux, presque sans souliers, il va la tête basse, il se dérobe, on serait tenté de l’appeler pour lui donner de l’aumône. Demain, poudré, chaussé, frisé, bien vêtu, il marche la tête haute, il se montre, et vous le prendriez au peu près pour un honnête homme.²¹²

This plurality of character makes Lui something of a social anomaly; he is neither properly *indigent* nor *honnête homme*, but able to perform both alternately.²¹³ (This

²⁰⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 131.

²¹⁰ Diderot, *Discours de la poésie dramatique*, 1343.

²¹¹ Caplan, *Framed Narratives*, 38

²¹² Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 32.

²¹³ Starobinski reads this plurality of character in contrast to the “stability” of Moi: “la *stabilité* ‘bourgeoise’ du philosophe (Moi) est en radicale opposition avec la *mutabilité* sociale, morale, physiologique du Neveu (Lui).” I would argue, however, that reading Moi as “stable” is tenuous; for he himself inserts himself in the language and scene of variability. Just as he describes Lui and his daily routine in an either/or structure (as discussed above), he employs the same structure to describe himself: “Qu’il fasse beau, qu’il fasse laid, c’est mon habitude d’aller sur les cinq heures du soir me promener au Palais-Royal [...] Si le temps est trop froid, ou trop pluvieux, je me réfugie au café de la Régence.” The degree of movement both embodied and communicated by Moi and Lui varies, in function of their discursive modes. This in itself does not warrant a reading of stability/mutability, I argue. Jean Starobinski, “L’Incipit du *Neveu de Rameau*,” 43.

transgression of social taxonomies and the blurring of social markers that it entails will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.)²¹⁴ In a remarkably lengthy pantomime, Lui demonstrates through gestual language how and why one might answer the question of whether *L'Île des fous* is beautiful (*beau*). Over the three pages that constitute this pantomime, Lui experiences a wide range of emotions and, “faisant lui seul, les danseurs, les danseuses, les chanteurs, les chanteuses, tout un orchestre, tout un théâtre lyrique, et se divisant en vingt rôles divers, courant, avec l’air d’un énergumène, étincelant des yeux, écumant de la bouche.”²¹⁵ In all the variation of this *tableau*, however, Lui speaks through the body in a multiplicity of tonalities and modalities, “de manière à conserver les liaisons, et l’unité du tout.”²¹⁶ Not only does his pantomimed *tableau* communicate connectedness and cohesion, but it creates communicates to his interlocutor – his spectator – in an authentic way: “étais-je touché de pitié? j’étais touché de pitié,” Moi declares.²¹⁷ The unity of the scene, which *conserv[e] les liaisons*, establishes a connectedness between scene and spectator in a generative way; indeed, “connection and communication are at the heart of Diderot’s social program.”²¹⁸

Writing the Social From Within: The Moraliste and the Critique of Order

In our discussion of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, we have been concerned with the narrative and generic disruption of order. I proposed at the outset of this chapter, however, that for Diderot – as for Marivaux and Mercier – aesthetic choices are necessarily political actions. That is to say, to reiterate an earlier remark, that the disruption of narrative, generic, and linguistic order in *Le Neveu de Rameau* implies a social program. Indeed, “most notably in Diderot we encounter a fascination with paradox, transgressively connected categories, teasing interrelations among supposedly incommensurate objects.”²¹⁹ In what follows I will be interested in how the performative dynamics of *Le Neveu de Rameau* are at play in the expression of Moi and Lui’s moral reflections, and their *moraliste* observations of the social.

If Diderot reappropriates the conventions of the dialogue, promenade, and pantomime in order to translate *movement*, we can also conclude that “gestures provided Diderot with a way of expressing the mobility of nature.”²²⁰ In her compelling study of the Enlightenment notion of system, Hayes points to Diderot in order to challenge

²¹⁴ Just as *Le Neveu de Rameau* resists classification, and Lui refuses the work of (social) taxonomy, so, too, is the character of Lui uneasily classifiable. “Il appartient à une catégorie mais c’est la catégorie des hors catégories” (Starobinski, “L’incipit du *Neveu de Rameau*, 59).

²¹⁵ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 107.

²¹⁶ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 107.

²¹⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 107.

²¹⁸ Julie Candler Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment: System and Subversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 148.

²¹⁹ Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment*, 12.

²²⁰ Herbert Josephs, *Diderot’s Dialogue of Gesture and Language: Le Neveu de Rameau* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 168.

assumptions about “the whole theory of knowledge of the eighteenth century” as neatly ordered and systematized (a reading of the Enlightenment advanced by Foucault and Cassirer, most influentially). She argues that “the master narratives need to open a space for movement, inconsistency, and heterogeneity.”²²¹ Indeed, systematization can never be considered a monolithic model, but must rather be understood as potentially mutable.²²² This is particular evident in *Le Neveu de Rameau* – a text Hayes does not take up in her study – where the very possibilities of method, system, and classification are called into question on the basis that, as Moi declares, “il n’y a rien de stable dans ce monde.”²²³

Throughout *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Lui insists on the instability of social identity and defines this as essentially performative.²²⁴ This dynamics of performance is reinforced both by Moi’s initial description of Lui (already discussed) and by the pantomime, through which Lui’s social observations are most often expressed. As we have seen, what Lui’s pantomime communicates to Moi is, essentially, a sense of relation between parts. Lui’s way of understanding melody is transposed on his understanding of the social world. In a discussion of the father’s role in education his children – let us note here the gender reversal of Rousseau’s *Émile*, where primacy is accorded to the mother in education her children – Lui remarks that “ce sont des dissonances dans l’harmonie sociale qu’il faut savoir placer, préparer et sauver. Rien de si plat qu’une suite d’accords parfaits. Il faut quelque chose qui pique, qui sépare le faisceau, et qui en éparpille les rayons.” Moi replies, “à ne rien vous celer, je vous aime mieux musicien que moraliste.”²²⁵ The *musicien* is, however *moraliste*. The sinuosity of musical and gestural language by which he expresses his social observations as moralist communicate the variability and energy of the world he describes.

“Aujourd’hui, au sommet; demain au bas de la roue,” Lui remarks.²²⁶ If the urban spectator is to read social space as he reads the body – to anticipate the metaphor of urban legibility that emerges not until the nineteenth century in France – on what markers of social differentiation can he rely? If “le mouvement est essentiel à la matière,” how does one define and taxonomize the social? If classical moralist discourse relied on a fixist view of the social world in order to establish characters and types, equating the surface of things with their essence (or rather extracting the essence from the surface mark), Lui points to the theatricality and unreliability of surfaces in his refusal of the very notion of essence. He argues that what is acquired through the study of Theophrastus, La Bruyère and Molière is not moral edification, but rather an understanding of social convention as performance:

Quand je lis le *Tartuffe*, je me dis: sois hypocrite, si tu veux; mais ne parle pas comme l’hypocrite. Garde des

²²¹ Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment*, 55.

²²² Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment*, 142.

²²³ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 131.

²²⁴ As in, for example, his assertion that “c’est ainsi que l’on te dirait le matin que es un grand homme; tu lirais dans l’histoire des *Trois Siècles* que tu es un grand homme; tu serai convaincu le soir que es un grand homme” (43).

²²⁵ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 116.

²²⁶ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 125.

vices qui te sont utiles; mais n'en aie ni le ton ni les apparences qui te rendraient ridicule. Pour se garantir de ce ton, de ces apparences, il faut les connaître. Or, ces auteurs ont fait des peintures excellentes. Je suis moi et je reste ce que je suis; mais j'agis et je parle comme il convient.²²⁷

Rather than praise “ceux qui ont mis la morale en action,” Lui insists on the artificiality of social convention.²²⁸

Out of Lui's reflections on musical and social dissonance, an ideal model of social complexity without subservience emerges. Just as Mercier undertakes to examine the relationship between *les lois générales* and *les lois particulières* in his *Tableau de Paris*, so, too, do Moi and Lui seek to determine the exceptions to “la conscience générale,” that which they term “idiotismes.”²²⁹ In elaborating a system of networks between various social conditions, Moi and Lui do not seek to taxonomize the social space they observe, but rather to understand the causes of points of dissonance between them; for indeed, “dans la nature, toutes les espèces se dévorent; toutes les conditions se dévorent dans la société.”²³⁰ In his illustration of these *idiotismes moraux*, Lui enumerates a series of social types. Rather than taxonomizing inventory, however, Lui suggests that it is not social conditions *per se* that segment the social whole, but rather it is behavior that isolates:

Et le souverain, le ministre, le financier, le magistrat, le militaire, l'homme de lettres, l'avocat, le procureur, le commerçant, le banquier, l'artisan, le maître à chanter, le maître à danser, sont de fort honnêtes gens, quoique leur conduite s'écarte en plusieurs points de la conscience générale, et soit remplie d'idiotismes moraux. Plus l'institution des choses est ancienne, plus il y a d'idiotismes; plus les temps sont malheureux, plus les idiotismes se multiplient.²³¹

What is proffered here is not a gallery of urban types but rather the dissonance between the whole (*la conscience générale*) and what becomes divided into individual parts (*idiotismes moraux*).

Social taxonomies are not only abandoned in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, but called into question; we have discussed above the narrative and aesthetic function of frame, but this questions extends to the social and political in Diderot's work. In other words, framed taxonomies are transgressed. “Stable” identities are undone in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, in which nothing and no one is considered in isolation – a notion that will become central to Mercier throughout his writing, in *Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* and

²²⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 84.

²²⁸ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 84. This is echoed several lines further when Lui declares that “si par hasard la vertu avait conduit à la fortune; ou j'aurais été vertueux, ou j'aurais simulé la vertu comme un autre” (Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 85).

²²⁹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 61.

²³⁰ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 63.

²³¹ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 61-62.

Tableau de Paris, in particular. As Hobson has noted, Diderot “is less concerned with the singular individual than with the individual as part of the species, whose infinite variation within resemblance means that classification will always be an unstable act, one that always has to be renewed.”²³² In response to Lui’s apparent refusal to answer Moi’s query, “qu’est-ce que des positions?” Lui affirms that his intention has not been to provide a gallery of types:

Je ne vois pas de cette hauteur où tout se confond, l’homme qui émonde un arbre avec des ciseaux, la chenille qui en fonge la feuille, et d’où ‘on ne voit que deux insectes différents, chacun à son devoir. Perchez-vous sur l’épicycle de Mercure, et de là, distribuez, si cela vous convient, et à l’imitation de Réaumur, lui la classe des mouches en couturières, arpenteuses, menuisiers, charpentiers, couvreurs, danseurs, chanteurs, c’est votre affaire. Je ne m’en mêle pas [...] c’est toujours à l’appétit que j’en reviens, à la sensation qui m’est toujours présente, je trouve qu’il n’est pas du bon ordre de n’avoir pas toujours de quoi manger.²³³

Lui questions both the ethics of taxonomy in the above passage, anticipating Mercier’s call to “retombons de ces sublimes projets à ce qui existe. Abandonnons nos beaux rêves, pour contempler notre indigence et notre pauvreté réelles. Voyons notre extrême indifférence pour tout ce qui intéresse de si près l’humanité.”²³⁴ Reading this passage about the work of the taxonomist (which is, according to Lui, to decontextualize, isolate, and abstract) alongside the previous list of social “types,” what emerges is that a taxonomic and classificatory reading and understanding of the city essentially abstracts the individuals who inhabit this space. To understand space scientifically and to represent this synoptically neglects the experience of individuals; this is brought to the fore in the contrast in the above passage between scientific, and experiential and empathetic understandings of the social world (the above shifts from scientific taxonomy to the question of hunger, engaging with the urgency of social welfare). This attention to the ethics of representation and understanding of the social world described by the urban *moraliste* will be radicalized by Mercier in both his *Du Théâtre* and *Tableau de Paris*, where the description of Paris communicates the unjust disparity in shared experiences of the city (embodied in the contrasting images of *le grand luxe* and *la grande misère*).²³⁵

The novelty of *Le Neveu de Rameau* as *moraliste* enterprise is that it is the first work, I argue, to anchor its spectator-narrators deeply in the urban fabric they observe

²³² Hobson is, in fact, summarizing Hegel’s reading of Diderot, here. Marian Hobson, “Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Physiognomy and the Dialectic” *A View in the Rear-Mirror: Romantic Aesthetics, Culture, and Science Seen from Today* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher, 2006), 104.

²³³ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 125.

²³⁴ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris* ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 1157.

²³⁵ Hayes discusses the ways in which, in Diderot, we can “see how within the framework of an ostensibly disciplinary discourse, *l’esprit systématique*, might arise ‘active, self-shaping, volitional’ subjectivities” (*Reading the French Enlightenment*, 156).

and describe, in such a way that “debate on intangible values joins with a strikingly material rendition of human life.”²³⁶ In contrast to the image of Buffon on stilts, Lui declares: “Pour moi je ne vois pas de cette hauteur où tout se confond [...] je suis dans ce monde et j’y reste.”²³⁷ Unlike the taxonomist who abstracts by synoptic views, and unlike the *moraliste classique* whose gaze falls upon the social world from above, Lui and Moi describe the social world from within.²³⁸ In critical scholarship, the figure of Lui is typically studied in terms of brute bodily desire, foregrounding his appetite and unpredictable bodily interruptions – “l’animalité de Lui (pulsions, déraison, instincts).”²³⁹ I would suggest, however, that the insistence on the material existence of Lui affords him a particular discursive authority as *moraliste* figure, an authority generated by his lived experience in and of the social world he describes. Moi reveals that “quand [Lui] n’a pas six sols dans sa poche, ce qui lui arrive quelquefois, il a recours soit à un fiacre de ses amis, soit au cocher d’un grand seigneur qui lui donne un lit sur de la paille, à côté de ses chevaux. Le matin, il a encore une partie de son matelas dans ses cheveux.”²⁴⁰ In our study of both Marivaux and Mercier, we discussed the conferral of authority from *les gens du métier* to a more open, judging public. For Marivaux and Mercier, as for Diderot, the ability to read and describe the social world – to participate in the *moraliste* discourse – depends not on a guarantee of moral, intellectual, or social authority. The sole qualification for the authors concerned in our study, as illustrated by the figures of Moi and Lui, is experiential: one must be part of the social fabric one observes and describes, and one must speak from a place of experience. Buffon must come down from his stilts, to the place occupied by Lui and Moi, the observational vantage point *dans ce monde*.²⁴¹

In this discussion of *Le Neveu de Rameau* we have been concerned with the ways in which this *moraliste* text presents a particular critique of order – narrative as well as

²³⁶ Angelica Goodden, *Diderot and the Body* (Oxford: Legenda, 2001), 106.

²³⁷ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 125-125.

²³⁸ We have discussed the synoptic gaze of the moralist in the Introduction of this study; for more on this, see Louis van Delft, *Les Spectateurs de la vie: généalogie du regard moraliste* (Montréal: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2005), 237-249. This will echo with our reading of Mercier’s project of describing the moral physiognomy of Paris and his assertion that “quand on a dit, c’est l’abrégé de l’univers, on n’a rien dit; il faut le voir, le parcourir, examiner ce qu’il renferme, étudier l’esprit et la sottise de ses habitants; contempler enfin l’assemblage de toutes ces petites coutumes du jour ou de la veille, qui font des lois particulières, mais qui sont en perpétuelle contradiction avec les lois générales” (Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 15).

²³⁹ Pujol, “L’Espace public dans *Le Neveu de Rameau*,” 673.

²⁴⁰ Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, 32-33.

²⁴¹ As Creech has suggested, “Lui nevertheless claims for himself an absolutely mundane reality as well: ‘je suis dans ce monde et j’y reste.’ He is abstract representationality, but he explicitly disclaims the very classificatory activity that Foucault saw at the heart of the contemporary episteme on representation.” James Creech, *Diderot: Thresholds of Representation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986), 165.

social. The discourse of authority is decentered, here, by a generically-hybrid narrative generated by the spectator-narrator.²⁴² We saw in both the Introduction and first Chapter of this dissertation that La Bruyère undertakes his description of the social world by relying on the authority of Theophrastus, first, and by guaranteeing his own authority as describer. The first-person pronoun in La Bruyère's *Caractères* is, however, relegated to the margins of the moralists' observations; that is to say, the describer's subjectivity is effaced from the *tableau* of representation. In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, however, *Moi* and *Lui* are both spectators of the social space they describe and spectators of each other; the performative dynamics that structure Diderot's text insist on the narrator as spectator. The impersonal observations of the naturalist are dismissed in order to privilege the experiential authority of *je*'s moralist discourse. Central to my discussions of *Le Spectateur français* and the *Tableau de Paris* was the relationship between the narrative generated by the spectator-narrator, and his reflections on the *way* one sees; in other words, Diderot's spectator-narrators, like those Marivaux and Mercier, present an observational methodology alongside their social observations. As we have seen, *Lui* is concerned as much with detailing the methodological and ethical implications of order as he is with actual social and moral description.

Frame – narrative, spatial, social – is transgressed in *Le Neveu de Rameau* in order to make of the spectator both a generative and organizing principle. That Diderot's reflections on the role of the spectator – so central to his theories of theater and painting in particular – should be transposed on the social so explicitly, here, suggests something about the urban spectator's potential for generative action. If for Diderot the *tableau* is always and already necessarily incomplete, pointing always outside of itself in order to subsume – absorb – the spectator (or in Fried's words, the beholder), then the spectator is always and already part of the scene. In social terms, this extends our discussion of Marivaux and anticipates that of Mercier; just as Marivaux suggests that we must be moved by the social scenes we spectate, Diderot suggests here that rather than isolating and segmenting through order, the urban spectator should seek to establish and understand the networks of relation between constituent social elements (not "parts"). Mercier, in both his *Du Théâtre* and *Tableau de Paris*, will radicalize this notion of aesthetic and socio-political inclusion, in his description of the moral physiognomy of Paris.

²⁴² I borrow the vocabulary of "decentering authority" from Suzanne Pucci, whose argument is quite different from mine here; she argues, in "The Art, Nature, and Fiction of Diderot's Beholder," that the "figures of the reader, beholder, spectator always serve to subvert the positions of centrality assumed by the various narrators in Diderot's texts." I, however, am concerned with the ways in which Diderot's narrators and spectators are one and the same. Suzanne Pucci, "The Art, Nature, and Fiction of Diderot's Beholder" *Stanford French Review* VIII (Fall, 1984): 274.

Chapter III

The *Tableau de Paris* and the Project of Moral Physiognomy

Comment est-il nécessaire d'écrire au jour le jour l'histoire mobile et changeante de cette pauvre humanité.

Jules Janin, *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* (1840)

Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* is studied most often in the context of studies on nineteenth-century urbanism. Appropriated by modern literary studies, this figure, whose ideals are anchored in the spirit of the French Enlightenment, has come to be understood – in literary and cultural studies – as the inaugurator of a mode of urban description. This is not without due cause, for Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, a twelve-volume work published over the course of eight years (1781-88), lends both name and shape to the genre it founded: the *tableaux de Paris*. Both an eighteenth-century bestseller (“forbidden bestseller” at that) and exponentially imitated throughout the nineteenth century, Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* gave rise to a new way of writing – and of observing – the city, determined by the urgency of the moment.

In this chapter, however, I will be concerned with realigning Mercier's text and with articulating it as an intervention with early modern literary traditions: *moraliste* literature generally and writings on the theater specifically. Reworking a tension between the eternal and the local already articulated by La Bruyère in the Preface to his *Caractères*, Mercier sets out to produce what he refers to as the “tableau de l'esprit et du caractère [des habitants de Paris].”²⁴³

I will be arguing that anchoring the *Tableau de Paris* within the context of eighteenth-century preoccupations with theatrical reform, in particular, enables us to read the *Tableau de Paris* as both the attention to and expression of the politics of form. While the *Tableau de Paris* is almost exclusively studied as the point of departure for a type of nineteenth-century “writing of the city” I will enlarge the focus and consider the antecedents in order to study the generic specificity – and its implication – of Mercier's work.

Fixing the Form of the City: Eighteenth-Century Urban Description as Textual Topography

The *Tableau de Paris* opens with a vociferous rejection of established forms of eighteenth-century urban description:

²⁴³ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 34.

si quelqu'un s'attendait à trouver dans cet ouvrage une description *topographique* des places et des rues, ou une histoire de faits antérieurs, il serait trompé dans son attente. Je me suis attaché au moral et à ses nuances fugitives; mais il existe chez Moutard, imprimeur-libraire de la reine, un dictionnaire en quatre énormes volumes, avec approbation du censeur et privilège du roi, où l'on n'a pas oublié l'historique des châteaux, des collèges et du moindre cul-de-sac. S'il prenait un jour fantaisie au monarque de vendre sa capitale, ce gros dictionnaire pourrait tenir lieu, je crois, de catalogue ou d'inventaire.²⁴⁴

Neither topography nor history, neither catalogue nor inventory, the *Tableau* announces, from the outset, a rupture with both contemporary genres of eighteenth-century urban description and, by implication, with the “kinds” of knowledge these (re)produce. Making reference here to Hurtaut and Magny’s *Dictionnaire historique de la ville de Paris et de ses environs en quatre volumes* (1779) by allusion alone, Mercier defines his project and its descriptive aims in contradistinction to established genres of description – topographies, monumental inventories, catalogues of curiosities, histories. In the above passage, the absence of the proper name of both the work and the authors (identified by the impersonal pronoun *on*) underscores what Mercier judges to be the generic quality of the *Dictionnaire* and of the mode of urban writing to which it belongs (conversely, Mercier affirms the unique quality of his description of the capital by employing the first-person pronoun *je* – twice in the above passage alone – to identify himself as author of the *Tableau de Paris*). Here, Mercier insists not on *what* the *Dictionnaire* seeks to describe but rather on the weighty materiality of the work “en quatre énormes volumes” and its official status as the discourse of “authority” (*avec approbation du censeur et privilège du roi*). The insistence on the dictionary’s material weight and its reproduction of the historical discourse of Paris (Mercier writes that Hurtaut and Magny provide not a description of the *châteaux*, *collèges* and every *cul-de-sac* themselves, but rather of *l'historique* of these) implies an accumulation and sedimentation of knowledge of the capital. The four enormous volumes reproduce the discourse of Paris rather than engaging with the changing capital itself; it is precisely herein that lies the divergence between existing forms of urban discourse and Mercier’s descriptive project in the *Tableau de Paris*. While the *Dictionnaire* and the genre it typifies transform the city into an artifact, Mercier seeks to give shape to Paris in all its movement and variation – in other words, to its *moral et à ses nuances fugitives*. The historical (*l'on n'a pas oublié l'historique des châteaux, des collèges et du moindre cul-de-sac*) and exhaustive nature (*le moindre cul de sac*) of endeavors such as Hurtaut and Magny’s produce static knowledge of the capital by engaging less with the city itself as an object of knowledge than with circulating discourses on Paris (*l'historique*). As such, in Mercier’s assertion that “s’il prenait un jour fantaisie au monarque de vendre sa capitale, ce gros dictionnaire pourrait tenir lieu, je crois, de catalogue ou d’inventaire,” he qualifies Paris and its

²⁴⁴ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 14.

monuments as both artifact and commodity.²⁴⁵ To be sure, however, Paris is for Mercier a living organism rather than artifact. Declaring that he is interested in something *other* than what has (exhaustively) been written about Paris, Mercier introduces a tension that will not only underlie but define the aesthetic and political aims of the *Tableau de Paris*: the tension between the monumental and the moral.

As I will illustrate in this chapter, Mercier is acutely aware of the politics of form. Anticipating twentieth-century critiques of Enlightenment, the Mercierian oeuvre challenges what it might mean – not just aesthetically, but ethically and politically – to order knowledge. Mercier’s refusal of the monumental in the name of the moral has been interpreted by Vidler as an aesthetic innovation: “Rejecting the most common genres of description – topographies, inventories of monuments, catalogs of curiosities, histories – where the city was fragmented into many individual and static objects, he consciously pursues the path of totalizing observation.”²⁴⁶ As we shall see presently, this move from fragmented to totalizing observation and description extends far beyond aesthetic considerations alone. Turning from both the generic constraints and social exclusivity imposed by topographies of the capital, Mercier engages with the moral physiognomy of Paris. That is to say, in the *Tableau de Paris*, the monumental – the face of Paris – reveals something about its moral character. Mercier describes and represents Paris not as a monumental museum or as a gallery of types, but rather as the lived experience of the people, places and things of the capital – of everyday life.

Indeed, the static, isolated things that populate not just Paris but the countless descriptions of the capital are of no interest to Mercier here, and the admission of a temporal element (*nuances fugitives*) gives rise to a conception of Paris as dynamic organism. The project of moral physiognomy outlined by Mercier in his Preface requires a new representational and descriptive model, however – one as expansive and dynamic as the object to which it seeks to give shape. I will suggest in this chapter that Mercier has recourse to contemporary writings on theater as a theoretical – and even generic – frame for his *Tableau de Paris*. As such, Mercier disrupts the authority of urban description in his commitment to and refusal of the monumental in order to privilege the moral. Indeed, as Vidler has suggested, “Mercier asserted the primary value of moral character over monumental curiosity,” as evidenced by his declaration that he will “parler de Paris, non de ses édifices, de ses temples, de ses monuments, de ses curiosités, etc. Assez d’autres ont écrit là-dessus.”²⁴⁷ Before we follow Mercier in dismissing that which

²⁴⁵The relationship established between the *Dictionnaire*, the monarch and *sa capitale* articulates Paris, its discourses and representations as belonging to (and generated, because authorized, by) the monarch. As such, Hurtaut and Magny’s assertion that “il est impossible de voir à fond et de bien voir si l’on ne fait que passer comme dans une galerie, sans avoir l’interprète à côté de soi ou le livre à la main” underscores the guidebook as provider of an already-digested knowledge of the city. The interpretive role of the guidebook, however, protects the interests of royal authority, in securing descriptions of the capital that map a particular topography of power.

²⁴⁶ Anthony Vidler, “Reading the City: The Urban Book from Mercier to Mitterand,” *PMLA* 122:1 (January, 2007): 241.

²⁴⁷ Vidler, “Reading the City,” 241.

has already been written about Paris, let us pass in review the forms of urban description in contradistinction to which he defines his *Tableau de Paris*.

Under the Ancien Régime, urban description – in its diverse forms – played a chiefly functional role in constructing a particular mythology of Paris by magnifying the past glory of the urban center and its monarchs, cataloguing the topography of the city and its ornaments (*ses édifices, ses temples, ses monuments, ses curiosités*), and – in so doing – mapping a topography of power. In short, writing Paris had always meant writing the glory of the monarchy. Imagined through the centralizing lens of royal and religious authority – through this single perspective – descriptions of the capital narrated and sustained the magnificent myth of Paris, but also stamped the seal of authority upon the city and its composite parts. As Vidler has noted,

traditionally, the spatial identity of Paris was constituted by the two paradigmatic realms of classical representation: spaces of religious ritual and institution (from the church to the cemetery and hospice) and monuments of royal display. These objects formed [...] a map of authority embedded in the general map of Paris.²⁴⁸

Indeed, in making royal and religious authority the textual organizational nucleus, various forms of early urban description ensured that both the city and its text belonged to the King, which in turn constructed and preserved a symbolics of power. This is further evidenced, as Ferguson has argued, by the fact that the first Parisian guidebook – Gilles Corrozet’s 1532 *La Fleur des antiquitez de Paris* – appeared but four years following the arrival of François I to the capital, and but two years after the publication of the first map of Paris.²⁴⁹

Corrozet’s description of the capital lends its name to the form of urban description it founds – *les antiquitez* – and which flourishes over the course of the following two centuries.²⁵⁰ More than a topographical description of Paris, Corrozet’s text reads as the mythologizing narrative of the past glories of the French monarchy. Writing of Paris, he declares: “Je décrirai sans nulle fiction/ Son origine et sa fondation.”²⁵¹ The second edition of Corrozet’s work (1533) sees the addition of topographical descriptions of the city, lists of street names (categorized by *quartier*), churches, and colleges. While still largely concerned with propagating the image of a glorious Paris through historical narrative and topographical description, the third edition

²⁴⁸ Vidler, “Reading the City,” 237.

²⁴⁹ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: UC Press, 1994), 40.

²⁵⁰ The importance of Corrozet’s *Fleur des antiquitez de Paris* as a founding text of urban description cannot be overstated. The guidebook proper emerges at the intersection of the *voyages de France* and the *antiquitez de Paris*, two modes of urban description whose primary aims were to glorify the capital and magnify the monarchy. On the evolution of the many strains of urban description, and their eventual convergence, see Laurent Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

²⁵¹ Corrozet, in Elisabeth Hodges, *Urban Poetics in the French Renaissance* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 56. I have modernized the spelling.

(1550), renamed *Les Antiquitez, histoires et singularités de Paris*, provides more substantial monumental description, and reflects recent urban developments (included in the list of streets). The most notable modification from the second to the third editions is the reconfiguration of the classification scheme by which it is ordered; as Turcot has noted, the 1550 edition is ordered in function of a “répartition plus logique des matières, événements classés par année jusqu’en 1550.”²⁵² The evolution of Corrozet’s own work, reflected in the additions and amendments made to each edition subsequent to the initial 1532 text, is representative of larger mutations undergone by the guidebook as a genre. More specifically, descriptions of the capital accrued a progressively functional purpose; as evidenced by the inclusion of topographical lists in *Les Antiquitez*, for instance, the guidebook evolved from instrument of monarchical self-aggrandizement (what I have referred to above as the myth of Paris) to instrument of informational dissemination. While still dedicated to a great extent to describing the foundations of official monuments in order to reveal the glory of Paris and its monarchs, the guidebook progressively became – from the mid-seventeenth century onward – an informational key to the city.

In response to the increasingly functional focus and aims of the guidebook, a new mode of urban description emerges in the mid-seventeenth century: that of the *nomenclatures de rues*. Dechuyes’ *La [sic] Guide de Paris*, published in 1647, reflects an explicit “désir de repérage et de décryptage de l’espace urbain” which will heretofore mark all forms of urban description.²⁵³ While part of the novelty of the third edition of the *Fleur des antiquitez* lay in its itemization of streets, colleges and churches, Dechuyes orders the street names of Paris alphabetically, facilitating the reader’s use of both the guidebook and the city. Similarly, Abraham du Pradel (Nicolas de Blégny)’s 1692 *Adresses de la ville de Paris* demonstrates the extent to which the guidebook – previously a mythologizing tool of the monarchy – becomes an interpretive key to the city, “une sorte de manuel journalier.”²⁵⁴ This is, in fact, the precise term used by du Pradel to define his *Adresses de la ville*, which formalize “une nouvelle tendance utilitaire.”²⁵⁵ His *Adresses*, “rédigé [sic] par ordre alphabétique [et] pour la commodité des étrangers et de ceux qui ont des procez et des affaires,” explicitly articulates the role of the guidebook as utilitarian.²⁵⁶ Indeed, du Pradel’s text “transforme les descriptions de Paris dorénavant ouvertes à d’autres fondements que le passé glorieux de la ville.”²⁵⁷ In other words, we witness a shift towards the instrumentalization of the guidebook as navigational tool to facilitate the *use* and decoding of the city.

This increasingly functional focus on the dissemination of useful information ordered alphabetically reflects a desire to orient the reader, as I have suggested, both within the text and the city. This is consolidated in Germain Brice’s 1684 *Description de la ville de Paris*, the most important guidebook of the late seventeenth century. Since Corrozet’s *Antiquitez de Paris*, no Parisian guidebook had redefined and reformulated the

²⁵² Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 278.

²⁵³ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 280.

²⁵⁴ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 280.

²⁵⁵ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 282.

²⁵⁶ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 282.

²⁵⁷ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 280.

genre to the extent that Brice's *Description* succeeded in doing.²⁵⁸ Specifically, the reduced format of the guidebook (in-16) made it particularly portable, and it therefore constituted a newly useful tool to guide (not only orient) its reader within the city. Brice's guidebook is necessarily portable, for his *Description* is organized according to an itinerary which the reader is to follow. Divided according to quartiers, the *Description* has the reader start at the Louvre – the central symbol of the monarchy – and continue on: “pour voir de suite toutes les parties de cette fameuse ville, selon le dessein que l'on s'est proposé, on ira d'abord à l'endroit le plus remarquable qui en fait le principal ornement.” To be sure, the act of walking the city streets will remain of central concern to us throughout our discussion of the *Tableau de Paris*; what is important to note with respect to Brice's *Description* is the image of the reader retracing the steps outlined for her/him by the author. Not only does s/he read the official discourse of the city on the page but reproduces it by retracing the steps across the streets of the capital. The act of ambulatory observation is, in this way, particularly depersonalized. Conversely, Mercier will insist on the hypersubjectivity of the concomitant acts of walking and observation – as we shall see presently. While Brice's description of the capital is, no doubt, remarkable in its insistence on walking the city in order to see the city, the itinerary proposed herein is always and already undertaken in function of centralizing power: the Louvre. While this symbolics of power is articulated in aesthetic terms (*l'endroit le plus remarquable, le plus vaste ornement*), it reveals the persistent ways of imagining the city, always through the lens of authority. Moreover, the itinerary maps out “toutes les parties de cette fameuse ville,” segmenting the city into consumable parts.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the guidebook gradually supplants mythologizing and emblematic descriptions of the capital – though never completely effacing these – in the service of more practical descriptions of Paris, privileging what Milliot has termed “des lectures fonctionnalistes de la ville.”²⁵⁹ To a great extent, this generic shift is a response to the demands engendered by the perpetual flux of the capital. Indeed,

le genre des guides se développe en réponse à la croissance de la ville et à l'essor des voyages européens pour lesquels Paris est une étape privilégiée. Les accroissements urbains rendent plus nécessaire le recours à ce genre d'ouvrage qui peut aider à déchiffrer la topographie de la ville, à démêler l'écheveau des fonctions administratives qui s'y concentrent et, plus généralement, à détailler la diversité des activités citadines, à éclaircir enfin l'opacité sociale que crée un anonymat croissant.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 282.

²⁵⁹ Vincent Milliot, “L'Espace parisien dans les imprimés de large circulation (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles): une archéologie de la lecture des guides urbains?” *Les Guides imprimés du XVIe au XXIe siècle: villes, paysages, voyages* eds. Gilles Chabaud, Évelyne Cohen, Natacha Coquery, Jérôme Penez (Paris: Belin, 2000), 60.

²⁶⁰ Gilles Chabaud, “Le Genre des guides de Paris, 17e-18e siècles,” *Les Guides imprimés du XVIe au XXIe siècle: villes, paysages, voyages* eds. Gilles Chabaud, Évelyne Cohen Natacha Coquery, Jérôme Penez (Paris: Belin, 2000), 329.

According to Chabaud, then, the guidebook became the tool by which Parisians and *étrangers* alike could decode the face of the city and the new social semiotic play engendered by an increasingly anonymous population. The guidebook was therefore both a topographical and social lexicon, which glossed monumental Paris – a space that could be interpreted only with difficulty and with the help of a guide.²⁶¹

If the guidebook responded to a particular need for the city to be decoded and ordered – a need generated by semiotic social confusion – it also responded to readers' need to be guided through “new” Paris. For eventually, the guidebook reflected the changing face of Paris, which was reconfigured by the 1702 *arrêt royal* that transformed the Medieval tripartite capital (*Cité, Université, Ville*) into twenty-four quartiers, placed under the authority of forty-eight *commissaires de police*.²⁶² Just as the eighteenth-century guidebook registers this redefinition of urban boundaries, so, too, does it give shape to an increasingly secular Parisian topography. The churches, convents, and religious hospitals that had populated earlier guidebooks, for instance, lose their prominence as “les académies, les corps administratifs, les commerces, etc” gain new visibility.²⁶³ The evolution of the guidebook registers topographical and social urban transformations, to be sure; however, what also shifts – most importantly to our focus here – is the ways in which the city and its discourse are ordered. As Milliot has noted, “le contenu se transforme en fonction des évolutions matérielles de l'espace visé par le guide et aussi en fonction des critères de mise en ordre, de ‘représentation’ de cet espace.”²⁶⁴ We have traced a particular trajectory of early-modern descriptions of Paris which results in the generic adoption of an alphabetical classification system; ultimately, this shift towards alphabetization orders Paris and its discourse in terms “more analytical than erudite.”²⁶⁵ Indeed, “l'ordre du dictionnaire se rattache aux catégories du savoir et procède d'une approche philosophique de la ville.”²⁶⁶ It is this idea of categorical knowledge that Mercier will challenge consistently throughout his *oeuvre*, and in *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris* most vociferously. Overcoming the segmentation of the city – both textual and social – that results from reading and representing Paris in function of categories of knowledge represents Mercier's greatest ambition in the *Tableau de Paris*. The increasingly “philosophical approach to the city” referred to

²⁶¹ Let us recall, here, Hurtaut and Magny's assertion, in their *Dictionnaire*, that “il est impossible de voir à fond et de bien voir si l'on ne fait que passer comme dans une galerie, sans avoir l'interprète à côté de soi ou le livre à la main.”

²⁶² For more on this, see Daniel Roche, *La France des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), chapter 20, “Paris, capitale des Lumières.”

²⁶³ Lise Andries, “Paris et l'imaginaire de la ville dans les almanachs français du XVIIIe siècle,” *Les Guides imprimés du XVIe au XXe siècle: villes, paysages, voyages* eds. Gilles Chabaud, Évelyne Cohen Natacha Coquery, Jérôme Penez (Paris: Belin, 2000), 18.

²⁶⁴ Milliot, “L'Espace parisien dans les imprimés de large circulation,” 67.

²⁶⁵ Loraine J. Daston, “Classifications of Knowledge in the Age of Louis XIV,” *The Ascendancy of French Culture in the Age of the Sun King* ed. David Rubin (Washington, London, and Toronto: Folger Shakespeare Library and Associated University Presses, 1992), 218.

²⁶⁶ Andries, “Paris et l'imaginaire de la ville,” 18.

above, the move from a quantitative reading of the city to a more qualitative one, is propelled by what Darnton has termed a “diagrammatic impulse – a tendency to map, outline, spatialize segments of knowledge,” an impulse that defines eighteenth-century encyclopedism.²⁶⁷ Even in the encyclopedic aim toward exhaustivity, the order of things is a practice of segmentation. As d’Alembert asserts in his “Discours préliminaire,” the dictionary arbitrarily segments knowledge by defining each composite element that, together, constitute “un système qui soit un.” The encyclopedia reveals the dynamic relationship between parts, “l’enchaînement des connaissances.” Indeed, the *Encyclopédie’s arbre des connaissances* represents both these static and dynamic orders, providing, by means of the analytic table, a particular topography of knowledge. What Foucault referred to in *Les Mots et les choses* as the Enlightenment aim to “faire tableau” is reflected in the mid and late eighteenth-century guidebook’s inclusion of the analytic table. As Chabaud has noted, toward the end of the eighteenth century, it was common for maps to appear in guidebooks, but these were rarely intended to orient the reader specifically; rather, they were a visual overview of the city. While it was not uncommon for earlier guidebooks to include fold-out maps of the capital, what was now being graphically represented – mapped – was ordered knowledge of the capital.²⁶⁸

In this regard, Charles-Etienne Jèze’s 1759 *Tableau de Paris, formé d’après les antiquités, l’histoire, la description de cette ville, etc.* provides us with an example – as its name will suggest – of the tradition against which Mercier writes his *Tableau de Paris*. Jèze’s work is not, for instance, an observer’s account of the capital, but rather the reproduction of various urban discourses.²⁶⁹ The insistence on “formé d’après” in the title suggests an engagement not with the object (Paris) itself, but with the discourses which surround it, the representations which have already created it as an object of knowledge. Jèze’s *Tableau* therefore establishes a doubly mediated relationship between text and city, since the author’s observations are always and already second-hand, placing the reader at at least two degrees of remove. The representational mode of Jèze’s text favors the exhaustive list, ordered alphabetically (“l’ordre qui nous a paru le plus favorable à la clarté”).²⁷⁰ Echoing the taxonomic fervor of the moment, Jèze segments both Paris and his *Tableau* according to four major rubrics, which are then subdivided; these rubrics do not refer to topographical elements of the capital, but rather reflect a certain value ascribed to these: *le nécessaire, l’utile, l’agréable, l’administration*. Jèze’s *Tableau* opens with a catalogue, an inventory (let us recall here, in contrast, the opening lines of Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*):

Contenant: Un calendrier civil; le précis de l’histoire de

²⁶⁷ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 278.

²⁶⁸ Chabaud, “Le Genre des guides de Paris, 17e-18e siècles,” 330.

²⁶⁹ This representation of knowledge of the capital, rather than a transcription of Parisian topography, echoes d’Alembert’s claim that the role of the *Encyclopédie’s* editors is “de mettre en ordre des matériaux dont la partie la plus considérable [leur] a été entièrement fournie” (d’Alembert, “Discours préliminaire”).

²⁷⁰ Charles-Etienne Jèze, *État ou Tableau de la ville de Paris, considérée relativement au nécessaire, à l’utile, à l’agréable et à l’administration* (Paris: Prault père, 1760), “Avertissement.”

cette ville, un état abrégé du ministère: les noms, les demeures et les districts de tous les premiers commis des quatre secrétaires d'état, du lieutenant général de police, du prévôt des marchands, du contrôleur général et des intendants des finances. Le gouvernement, les divers établissements pour les sciences et les arts libéraux: la demeure des maîtres dans les langues, sciences, etc. les spectacles, les cabinets de tableaux, d'histoire naturelle et autres curiosités: les manufactures, la compagnie des Indes, la bourse et la définition des principaux effets qui s'y négocient, etc.

The urban nomenclature proffered in the prefatory remarks is represented, in the 1760 edition (*État ou Tableau de Paris [...]*) by an analytic table, the “Idée générale de la ville de Paris” which provides the reader with a bird’s eye view of a particularly ordered Paris. As we have seen, the organization of the guidebook reflected the increasingly secular nature of the capital; while earlier forms of urban description sought to magnify the glory of the monarchy, Jèze’s work maps *l’état de la ville de Paris* under the aegis of “the administration,” attributing Paris’ preeminence to “the wisdom of its government and its police,” revealing the discipline and control function of his description.”²⁷¹ Indeed,

chaque guide impose par son découpage un regard particulier de la ville, non un regard subjectif qui dépendrait des caprices de l’auteur mais plutôt une interprétation inscrite dans l’Histoire: les guides et les almanachs construisent en quelque sorte la vision officielle de la ville, vision figée à un moment donné, et en même temps soumise à variation.²⁷²

As we have seen, it is precisely against such claims to objectivity (*non un regard subjectif*), authority (*la vision officielle de la ville*), and immutability (*vision figée à un moment donné*) of established forms of urban description that Mercier articulates his descriptive project; for in their reproduction of tabular forms of knowledge, descriptions of the capital segment the city into composite parts, driven by the ideal of “décrypter et maîtriser un espace et une société.”²⁷³ Modern critiques of Enlightenment, however – let us recall Adorno and Horkheimer, Lyotard, Foucault, Tomaselli – brought to the fore questions about the implications of the totalizing power and disciplining function of the synoptic table, the move toward abstraction, and the systematization of knowledge. In what follows, however, I will account for the ways in which these questions are already self-consciously articulated by Mercier – both in his *Tableau de Paris* and in his writing on the theater.

For if the various forms of urban description and the discourses they sought to produce and preserve were anchored in the powers of church and state, it is the very possibility of a single perspective and of a predetermined order of knowledge that Mercier challenges. Indeed, Ferguson suggests that

²⁷¹ Ferguson, *Paris As Revolution*, 46.

²⁷² Andries, “Paris et l’imaginaire,” 18.

²⁷³ Turcot, *Le Promeneur à Paris*, 329.

Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* parts company from contemporary urban discourse in its elimination of the anchor that stabilized the city text since at least Henri IV in the beginning of the seventeenth century, namely the monarchy. Thus, even before the destruction of the Bastille actually altered the cityscape, Mercier undertook to remap Paris²⁷⁴

and as such “represented a fundamental transformation in the spatial representation of the modern city.”²⁷⁵ Mercier's remapping of Paris transforms more than just spatial representation, however; the refusal of a single authoritative and organizing principle transforms – more importantly – the urban imaginary. That is to say, Mercier's ideal of abandoning such classificatory grids as had ordered previous descriptions of the capital is above all else an ethical and political choice; if, as we have discussed above, the identity of Paris had been constituted by the paradigmatic realms of church and state, Mercier aims to dislodge the capital, I would argue, from the particular “map of authority” in which it had been embedded.²⁷⁶

Convinced that “les mémoires historiques qu'on écrit [à Paris] sont fautifs, et ne contiennent que des faits isolés, sans principes et sans liaison,” Mercier challenges the ways in which contemporary forms of urban description segmented the city by presenting a series of isolated, framed portraits of the city's composite parts. As we have seen, previous guidebooks had read the city through the lens of authority, imposing both a chronological and spatial hierarchy on both the city and its discourse. Jèze's “Idée générale de la ville de Paris,” for instance, presents a nomenclature of the categories of knowledge of the city: “Dans cet *Etat ou Tableau de Paris*, on a considéré cette ville par rapport/ à son état actuel, envisagé relativement aux choses/ nécessaires, utiles, agréables, l'administration, etc.” The drive to categorize is, of course, an ideological one which imposes not just order but hierarchical value upon the objects of knowledge: *nécessaire, agréable, utile..* but to whom? It is the very process of determining the value of the city's constituent “parts” that Mercier challenges, as we shall see presently.

To be sure, “instead of claiming a hierarchical focus as an ordering control – king, country, or other symbols of authority – Mercier takes on the whole range of the city around him and makes himself the control.”²⁷⁷ As he declares:

Je n'ai fait ni *inventaire*, ni *catalogue*; j'ai crayonné
d'après mes vues; j'ai **varié** mon *Tableau* autant qu'il
m'a été possible; je l'ai peint **sous plusieurs faces**; et le
voici, tracé tel qu'il est sorti de dessous ma plume, à
mesure que mes yeux et mon entendement en ont
rassemblé les parties.²⁷⁸

Generated *d'après [ses] vues*, the *Tableau de Paris* is presented here as the result of spontaneous observation rather than of a preordained project. Insisting on the

²⁷⁴ Ferguson, *Paris As Revolution*, 53.

²⁷⁵ Vidler “Reading the City,” 241.

²⁷⁶ Vidler “Reading the City,” 241.

²⁷⁷ Ferguson, *Paris As Revolution*, 48.

²⁷⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 14.

composition of his description (*j'ai crayonné, je l'ai peint, tracé tel qu'il est sorti de dessous ma plume*), Mercier points to the subjectivity and variation in perspectives (*je l'ai peint sous plusieurs faces*) that produce the description proffered to the reader. Indeed, the Preface to the *Tableau* asserts that each observer will produce a different text, a different description of the capital: “supposez mille hommes faisant le même voyage: si chacun était observateur, chacun écrirait un livre différent sur ce sujet.”

In his insistence on the composition of his urban description and on the observations that generate it, Mercier transfers the focus from the object of knowledge (Paris) to the observer who constructs Paris as an object of knowledge. Outlining the project of his *Tableau*, Mercier writes,

Je passerai sous silence [la position topographique de Paris], ainsi que la description de ses édifices, de ses monuments, de ses curiosités en tout genre; parce que je fais plus de cas du tableau de l'esprit et du caractère de ses habitants, que de toutes ces nomenclatures qu'on trouvera dans les *Étrennes mignonnes*. C'est au moral que je me suis attaché; il ne faut que des yeux pour voir le reste.²⁷⁹

While topographical descriptions represent that which is readily available to the undiscerning eye, Mercier's project of urban description maps the moral rather than the monumental. To read the moral topography of the city – its moral physiognomy – requires more than keen observation; the above suggests that it requires a particular sensibility. The *Tableau* is, therefore, the “tableau de l'esprit et du caractère de ses habitants,” revealed by establishing a network of relations between the face of the city and its character – or in other words, the moral revealed through the monumental. As we have seen, Mercier declares that he will not “parler de Paris, non de ses édifices, de ses temples, de ses monuments, de ses curiosités, etc. Assez d'autres ont écrit là-dessus.” To be sure, however, new ideas require new forms. In order to define both the specificity of Mercier's descriptive aims in the *Tableau de Paris* and the novelty of the genre it founds, let us first define, as does Mercier, what his project is *not*.

Inventory of a Form: The *Tableau* in Context

From 1600 onwards there is great variation in the conception and usage of the term *tableau*. Foremost a pictorial term, the notion of *tableau* is central, in eighteenth-century France, to three “fields” of knowledge in particular: science, painting, and theater. The *Encyclopédie* lists ten sub-entries under the rubric “*tableau*,” the most

²⁷⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, “Voulez-vous juger de Paris physiquement.” The *étrennes* were a type of small-format (in-32) almanac that would be available on the first of the year, with the inclusion of a calendar. The *Étrennes mignonnes* to which Mercier makes reference here was published between 1716 and 1845 (its title becomes, in 1728, *Étrennes mignonnes, curieuses et utiles*). Both the content and organization of the almanac varied from year to year, and the inclusion of maps – of Paris, France, or the world – was frequent.

extensive of which are those of painting and literature – though the latter is considerably less exhaustive than the former – which define *tableau* in terms of representation and of description, respectively. In his article, “Tableau,” Jaucourt expounds a conception of *tableau* articulated in relation to the real: “tout se présente dans un tableau comme dans la nature sous la même forme que nous la voyons réellement.” The *tableau* is judged in function of the three unities: “par rapport au temps, à la vue et à l’espace;” that is to say, that which could have taken place in a single instant, that which might easily be apprehended in a single glance, and that which is enclosed within the space occupied by the canvas. In this way, the *Encyclopédie* advances a conception of *tableau* as a temporally and spatially confined representation of the real. As is the case with the painterly *tableau*, Jaucourt’s article configures the literary *tableau* as a framed segment within a larger whole: “ce sont des descriptions répandues dans le poème.” In both pictorial and literary terms, then, the *tableau* is a representational or descriptive form – respectively – which stands as the isolated (framed) segment of a larger whole. Similarly, the scientific conception of *tableau* foregrounds the systematic and analytic presentation of phenomena in a synoptic table, chart or list. Contemporary examples of this include, for example, Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1749-1804) and Condorcet’s *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (1795). As these examples suggest, the scientific *tableau* represents a system and order of knowledge in taxonomic form. Like the synoptic table, the *tableau* is ascertained by means of a single point of view, which underscores both the fixity of its representational/descriptive form and the (perceived) immutability of the knowledge it seeks to represent and transmit. Tabular representation segments and isolates; indeed, the *tableau* as scientific representational model structures elements of a whole that have become detached from their larger context (for example, a butterfly pinned to a table, a monument classified in Jèze’s urban nomenclature). The scientific table is symptomatic of the Enlightenment’s propensity for spatialization and segmentation of knowledge – the diagrammatic impulse – as we have already seen.

A more dynamic model of *tableau* – and one more central to our purposes here – is expounded in the context of writing on the theater specific to eighteenth-century France, and to *drame* theory in particular. Indeed, it is most particularly the theatrical notion of *tableau* that both supports and propels Mercier’s ambitious descriptive aims in the *Tableau de Paris*. In what follows, I argue that Mercier’s reflections on the *drame* – which represent a significant contribution to the debate on eighteenth-century theatrical reform – serve as theoretical frame to his *Tableau de Paris*. I turn to the *drame* because it is in his 1773 *Du Théâtre, ou nouvel essai sur l’art dramatique*, that Mercier first conceives of his project of writing “un livre sur Paris.”²⁸⁰

Part of a larger movement of theatrical reform that flourished throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, *drame* theory sought to bring the experience of everyday life to the stage by championing the representation of bourgeois life.²⁸¹ Arguing for the *drame* as the emerging theatrical genre, located at an interval between

²⁸⁰ “Il n’y a aucun livre plus nouveau, plus moral, plus instructif, plus intéressant, plus curieux à faire, en tous sens, qu’un livre sur Paris” (Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1142).

²⁸¹ “Bourgeois,” in this sense, refers not to a category of social class but rather to private life.

comedy and tragedy, Diderot is the first to theorize the *drame*, initially in his *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* (1757) and then in his *Discours de la poésie dramatique* (1758); the theorization of the *drame* is furthered by Mercier in his *Du Théâtre* and by Beaumarchais in his *Essai sur le genre dramatique sérieux*.²⁸² Seeking to establish a visual coherence onstage, theorists and proponents of the *drame* make of the *tableau* the cornerstone of this emerging genre, according primacy to the harmony, naturalness, and expressivity of the dramatic scene. Here, *tableau* is defined in contradistinction to the *coup de théâtre* – that too theatrical dramatic turn of events. Borrowing from the anti-theatrical nature of genre painting, dramatic theory focuses on the *tableau* as the natural disposition of characters onstage, as in a painting – foregrounding the logic of composition, and the continuous and natural relationship between parts. In particular, it is Diderot’s idea of *tableau* as the expression of the relationship between composite elements that will become central to Mercier’s reflections on the *drame*.

However, in his *Du Théâtre*, Mercier parts company from Diderot in four crucial respects, which will provide the basis of our reading of the *Tableau de Paris*. Firstly, Mercier does not oppose *coup de théâtre* and *tableau*; rather, he opposes *portrait* to *tableau*. In this opposition Mercier is recalling a literary tradition of portraiture which, in its representation of the “essence” of a character, reduced it to this principle. If the portrait is a reductive model, the *tableau* is expansive. Secondly, Diderot defines the *drame* as the interval between comedy and tragedy, while Mercier imagines it as pre-generic; that is to say, as a genre free of the constraints of generic distinctions. Thirdly, Mercier radically politicizes the potential of the theater as inclusionary space – both on and off stage. Lastly, like Diderot, Mercier champions the representation of bourgeois, everyday life. Mercier goes further, however, in his call for the indiscriminate representation of all facets of social life.

For both Diderot and Mercier, the *tableau* figures as the cornerstone of the genre.²⁸³ As stated above, for Diderot, the *tableau* stands in contradistinction to the *coup de théâtre*, the “dramatic turn of events” which he defines as “un incident imprévu qui se passe en action, et qui change subitement l’état des personnages.”²⁸⁴ The *coup de théâtre* is so termed “precisely because it is perceived as untrue, as merely theatrical, that is to say, created exclusively in response to the needs of the theatre;”²⁸⁵ conversely, borrowing from the anti-theatrical nature of genre painting, dramatic theory focuses on the *tableau* as “une disposition des personnages sur la scène, si naturelle et si vraie, que rendue

²⁸² Diderot publishes his *Fils naturel* alongside *Dorval et moi*, *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, and *Le Père de famille* alongside the *Discours de la poésie dramatique*. Mercier’s *Brouette du vinaigrier* and Sedaine’s *Philosophe sans le savoir* stand as well-known examples of the genre from the French stage; from the German stage, Lessing’s *Miss Sara Sampson* is perhaps the greatest example of the genre.

²⁸³ Pierre Frantz, *L’Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 7.

²⁸⁴ Denis Diderot, *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1996), 1136.

²⁸⁵ Peter Szondi and Harvey Mendelsohn, “Tableau and Coup de Théâtre: On the Social Psychology of Diderot’s Bourgeois Tragedy,” *New Literary History* 11:2 (Winter, 1980): 328.

fidèlement par un peintre, elle me plairait sur la toile.”²⁸⁶ Diderot’s articulation of *tableau* in terms of harmony and naturalness is borrowed from his conception of painting, and *la scène* and *la toile* figure throughout his work as analogous. The very vocabulary he uses to put forth his conception of *drame* is echoed in his *Essais sur la peinture* (1765), which places primary importance on the compositional unity and harmony of the (pictorial) *tableau*. As Goodden has suggested, “Diderot realized that drama is a hybrid genre, able to combine the action that words describe with the direct presentation of visual images.”²⁸⁷ As elaborated in the *Entretiens*, the *tableau* – that saturated moment of dramatic climax in which all characters are disposed as in a painting foregrounds the *drame*’s logic of composition and continuity; that is to say, it makes visible to the spectator the relationship between parts.

Diderot’s insistence on the *tableau*’s incomplete nature suggests that it is a representational model always pointing to something outside of itself; as Hayes has suggested, “the *tableau* itself functions as a partial object, a fragment of the progressive experience that is the play’s performance. In that sense, the transparency of the plot conveys an imperfect knowledge; a single *tableau*, part of an evolving picture.” As Diderot writes, “le spectateur ne sait tout et n’a tout vu que quand la toile tombe.” This deferral of completeness suggests a “revision of Enlightenment systematicity” – discussed previously in this chapter – which, through its insistence on harmony, posits a more dynamic representational model.²⁸⁸ Harmony, a persistent problem throughout Diderot’s aesthetic, philosophical, and political writings, is anchored in a theory of *enchaînement* and *rappports*: unity, coherence, necessary links.²⁸⁹ The *drame*, then, is essentially about system, about reconfiguring the relationship between parts and whole. Yet if Diderot defines the *tableau* as one saturated moment of the *drame*, as a fragment of the whole, I would suggest that Mercier articulates the *drame* as *tableau*; that is to say, for Mercier the *tableau* is a means of both reimagining and representing the whole in new ways. It is specifically Diderot’s reflection on the internal compositional logic of the *tableau* – attention to the relationship between composite elements – that will become central to Mercier’s reflections on the *drame*. For Mercier, however, the implications of this insistence on *les rapports* extend far beyond aesthetic considerations of how characters are disposed onstage. As we shall see presently, in both *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris*, the compositional principle of harmony in unity is, above all else, a projection of (idealized) social organization. It is this notion of *les rapports entre les éléments* – both aesthetic and social – that will become the very basis of the Mercierien notion of *tableau*, and will serve as theoretical frame to his *Tableau de Paris*.

Like that of Diderot, Mercier’s dramatic theory articulates the *drame* as (potentially) the space of inclusionary politics, in contradistinction to the contemporary state of theater, which he perceives as an exclusionary space and model:

²⁸⁶ Diderot, *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, 1134.

²⁸⁷ Angelica Goodden, “‘Une Peinture parlante’: The Tableau and the Drame,” *French Studies* 38:4 (1984): 397-413.

²⁸⁸ Julie Candler Hayes, “Sequence and Simultaneity in Diderot’s *Promenade Vernet* and *Leçons de clavecin*” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.3 (1996) 292.

²⁸⁹ Julie Candler Hayes, *Identity and Ideology: Diderot, Sade, and the Serious Genre* (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1991), 70.

Nous n'avons point en France de spectacle proprement dit, mais des assemblées particulières, où quelques hommes réunis, après s'être formé un goût délicat, mais composé, mais factice, ont donné une valeur exorbitante à des ouvrages qui, quoique beaux, ont dans leur structure et dans leur idiome quelque chose d'étranger et d'inaccessible au reste de la nation.²⁹⁰

In other words, theater is neither of the public nor for the public.

To be sure, Diderot's reconfiguration of the relationship between the spectator and the scene reformed not only aesthetic dramaturgical conventions, but also reimagined the socio-political potential of the space of the theater; hinged on the notion of sympathetic identification, the *drame* in a sense brought to the fore the question, "Comment la salle de théâtre peut-elle alors se structurer en corps politique?"²⁹¹ However, while the *drame* sought to facilitate the (illusion of the) cohesion of "un corps social sans unité réelle" by reforming the three classical tenets, in particular, Mercier argues that it was ultimately unable to do so because it failed in its inclusive aims, confining the theater to *les assemblées particulières* and representing that which remained *étranger et inaccessible au reste de la nation*.²⁹² Indeed, "une salle de spectacle est parmi nous le seul point de réunion qui rassemble les hommes et où leur voix puisse s'élever de concert."²⁹³ Mercier makes explicit – first in his *Du Théâtre* and later in his *Tableau de Paris* – the danger of the assembly of particulars (individuals), and in response to this he imagines a space – at once poetic and political – in which all spectators participate equally (*juger en citoyen*) and in which all characters on-stage figure equally:

Il ne s'agit point dans la comédie de faire des portraits, mais des tableaux. Ce n'est pas tant l'individu qu'il faut s'attacher à peindre, que l'espèce. Il faut dessiner plusieurs figures, les grouper, les mettre en mouvement, leur donner à toutes également la parole et la vie. Une figure trop détachée paraîtra bientôt isolée; ce n'est point une statue sur un piédestal que je demande, c'est un tableau à divers personnages. Je veux voir de grandes masses, des goûts opposés, des travers mêlés, et surtout le résultat de nos mœurs actuelles. Que le poète m'ouvre

²⁹⁰ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du Théâtre, ou Nouvel essai sur l'art dramatique* ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1999), 1143. Mesnil itemizes the three major theatrical reforms instantiated by the *drame* as follows: 1. Substitution du réel au vraisemblable; 2. Substitution des conditions aux caractères; 3. Substitution du rapport interrogatif à la délectation classique (*Diderot et le drame*, 49).

²⁹¹ Alain Ménil, *Diderot et le drame: Théâtre et politique* (Paris: PUF), 19. On the political project of the *drame*, see in particular 7-20.

²⁹² Alain Ménil, *Diderot et le drame*, 19.

²⁹³ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1143-1144.

la scène du monde, et non le sanctuaire d'un seul homme.²⁹⁴

In an effort to democratize the space of the theater – both on and offstage – Mercier radicalizes the conception of *drame*, pointing to it as a liminal space between the (conventions of) comedy and tragedy, as that which “désigne moins un nouveau genre mixte qu'un état antérieur à la distinction générique” – making it an apt form for his project of urban democratic description.²⁹⁵ The *drame*, “la représentation, le tableau de la vie bourgeoise en toutes ses situations, soit gaieté, soit douleur, soit sentiment, soit morale” – the indiscriminate representation of bourgeois life includes, equally, what had been previously dismissed from the space of representation, in the name of verisimilitude and *bon goût*.²⁹⁶ Opening the everyday as a legitimate field of investigation, he argues for the representation of “le cours ordinaire des choses.”²⁹⁷ Indeed, in order to collapse the vertical hierarchies preserved by classical theater, Mercier calls for a radical rupture with previous poetics in foregrounding the notion that new ideas require new forms. What is proposed in *Du Théâtre*, and what will later be carried out in the *Tableau de Paris*, is what I would term the democratization of the dramatic scene. Mercier radicalizes the notion of theater as an inclusionary space – both on and off-stage – in his admission of that which had been previously excluded on the basis of *mauvais goût*, dictated by the *doctrine classique*. The role of the dramatic poet, we read, will be to reveal, “en parcourant les rues de Paris [...] ce qu'on ignore ou ce qu'on oublie.”²⁹⁸ The eye of the dramatic poet, therefore, will go where it has never gone before: “qu'il s'enquière de ce qui n'est pas permis de voir.”²⁹⁹ However, the dramatic poet does not accumulate notes and knowledge of the Parisian *bas-fonds* in order for it to figure as any sort of foil; for what marks the singularity of Mercier's notion of the *drame* is that it grants equal admission and equal representation to “les conditions les plus basses et les plus rampantes” as well as to the most noble of stations. In both *Du Théâtre* and the

²⁹⁴ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1205. Let us note here, as we will presently in the context of the *Tableau de Paris*, that Mercier appears to be challenging here not only the aesthetic, but most importantly the social, implications of social taxonomy. Employing in this passage the taxonomic vocabulary of *tableaux*, *individu*, *espèce*, *grouper*, *figure*, *moeurs*, he imagines the *tableau* as an inclusive – not divisive – representational model.

²⁹⁵ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1746.

²⁹⁶ D'Aubignac writes, for instance (though not in the context of the representation of bourgeois life): “C'est une maxime générale que le vrai n'est pas le sujet du théâtre, parce qu'il y a bien des choses véritables qui ne doivent pas être vues, et beaucoup qui n'y peuvent pas être représentées.” D'Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre*, ed. Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer (Geneva: Slatkine-Reprints, 1971), 66.

²⁹⁷ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1237.

²⁹⁸ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1265. We might point out, here, the contrast between Mercier's notion of Parisian observatory ambulation as the means to uncovering that which has never been seen (*ce qu'on ignore ou ce qu'on oublie*), and the itinerary proffered in Brice's *Description de la ville de Paris* which outlines the observatory and ambulatory plan for the reader: “pour voir de suite toutes les parties de cette fameuse ville, selon le dessein que l'on s'est proposé, on ira d'abord à l'endroit le plus remarquable qui en fait le principal ornement par sa vaste étendue et par la quantité d'édifices qui le composent.”

²⁹⁹ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1313.

Tableau de Paris, what is achieved is not simply a reversal of the coordinates of aesthetic and social hierarchies, but a veritable redistribution of these elements across a horizontal plane. For instance, Mercier argues that all characters must be developed in equal proportion onstage and therefore the notion of main character(s) done away with – for he conceives of a more comprehensive *tableau du siècle*, one that does not segment social space into high and low; the ideal *tableau du siècle* is one that represents Paris in its most diverse form, depicting no person, place, or thing in isolation. Rather, the *drame* must “dessiner plusieurs figures, les grouper, les mettre en mouvement, leur donner à toutes également la parole et la vie. Je veux voir de grandes masses, des goûts opposés, des travers mêlés.”

For in leveling the representational space of the theater, Mercier is not only putting forth “de Nouveaux sujets dramatiques que l’on pourrait traiter” – outlined in the tenth chapter of his *Du Théâtre*, of the same name. As a result of his conception of the inextricability of poetics and politics, he is also formulating a project which would reform “un des grands défauts de nos gouvernements modernes (et surtout en France) [qui] est d’avoir marqué une distance humiliante entre les hommes.”³⁰⁰ The undoing of vertical hierarchies in terms of both generic convention and subject matter (the conditions of representability) in *Du Théâtre* lays the theoretical groundwork for his way of proceeding in the *Tableau de Paris*.³⁰¹ Mercier’s dramatic theory, expounded in his *Du Théâtre*, articulates the *tableau* as a dynamic model which allows for the possibility of representation and description of the *innombrables rapports* which constitute any given scene. Standing in contradistinction to the “nomenclature sèche” of other representational models, the Mercierien notion of *tableau* foregrounds the logic of order. Mercier advances in his *Du Théâtre* a program of aesthetic reform (with political implications) that he will put into action in his *Tableau de Paris*, according to which no object must be “peint de manière détachée.”³⁰² Rather:

Saisir un personnage dans sa condition c’est le saisir
dans l’ensemble des relations qu’il entretient avec les
autres personnages et avec le monde qui l’entoure; le
montrer dans sa vie privée et familiale, dans son activité
sociale, dans son rapport aux choses, aux lieux, au temps,
dans son cadre quotidien, dans ses activités familiales.
C’est le situer dans un tableau et non seulement en donner
un portrait.³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1265.

³⁰¹ While Diderot first imagines the relationship between aesthetic and political regimes, Mercier radicalizes the inclusive aims of the *drame* in his conception of a horizontal representational model and space of spectatorial congregation as *égalité* (cf. *Du Théâtre*, 1278). As Mesnil asserts, “Diderot se livre au chapitre 18 du *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* à un véritable diagnostic esthétique et politique du classicisme: non seulement il réfère les genres théâtraux à une division politique, en termes de régimes, mais son analyse réinterroge l’interprétation classique de la division en tragédie et comédie” (Mesnil, *Diderot et le drame*, 43).

³⁰² Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1204.

³⁰³ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1260.

The Mercierien notion of *tableau* is elaborated here in its most dynamic form; however, I would argue that the scope of his ambitions for the *drame* as *tableau* exceed by far the representational possibilities of the theater. This inadequacy of the space of theater to give shape to the Mercierien ambition of a *vrai tableau du siècle* gives rise to an altogether novel conception of *tableau*. The program of aesthetic and social reform advanced in *Du Théâtre* takes literary shape in Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, a 12-volume description of Paris written over the course of eight years (between 1781 and 1788). The 1050 chapters which make up the *Tableau* bring into sharp focus very diverse elements of the urban landscape, and give shape, precisely, to “le cours ordinaire des choses” observed by a narrator-observer who “s’enquière de ce qui n’est pas permis de voir.” Indeed, it is *les grandes masses, le mouvement des divers personnages, les travers mêlés* which constitute the *drame* of everyday urban life described and represented in the *Tableau*.

Paris and the *Drame* of the Everyday

Remarkably, it is in his *Du Théâtre* that Mercier conceives of the project for what he terms *un livre sur Paris, un tableau du siècle*: there is, he declares, “aucun livre plus nouveau, plus moral, plus instructif, plus intéressant, plus curieux à faire, en tous sens, qu’un livre sur Paris.”³⁰⁴ As I have suggested, the main charge leveled by Mercier against contemporary genres of urban description is that in their topographical and textual segmentation of the city, they translate a false sense of stasis. Neither will he speak of static, isolated elements which ornament the city (*ses édifices, ses temples, ses monuments, ses curiosités*), nor will his “livre sur Paris” reflect this static order (topographical, historical description, synoptic view, analytic table). As in his dramatic conception of all characters being developed in equal proportion, Mercier conceives of the urban totality in new ways.³⁰⁵ Having declared that “rien ne doit être peint de manière détachée,” his description of Paris is developed, rather as a *Tableau*, a single work which gives shape to the city in all its diversity and its movement. While “les mémoires historiques qu’on écrit [à Paris] sont fautifs, et ne contiennent que des faits isolés, sans principes et sans liaison,” Mercier conceives of the capital as a singular, dynamic organism in which “tout se touche, tout se correspond” – that is, as a cohesive whole. The democratic disposition of the dramatic scene is *mise en scène* in the *Tableau de Paris*, a descriptive project in which the king and the *marchande de mode* figure equally, in which equal proportion is granted to the city’s great monuments and to its prisons. Democratizing the possibilities for urban description, Mercier declares that he has “fait des recherches dans toutes les classes de citoyens, et [qu’il n’a] pas dédaigné les objets les plus éloignés de l’orgueilleuse opulence, afin de mieux établir par ces oppositions la physionomie morale de cette gigantesque capitale.”³⁰⁶ In this way, the extremes of *le grand luxe* and *la misère monstrueuse* are not only brought into newly

³⁰⁴ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1142.

³⁰⁵ Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2010) 172.

³⁰⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 25.

close proximity, but they touch – they cohabit the capital. The author of the *Tableau* undoes the notion of frame and abandons classificatory principles of textual organization, in order to bring into close proximity that which had previously been segmented into “high” and “low,” and compartmentalized into the “representable” and the “unrepresentable.” For “les contrastes sont rendus plus saillants par leur rapprochement.”³⁰⁷ In both *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris*, Mercier advances the claim that the aesthetic must reflect the social. The *Tableau de Paris*, advancing by a principle of contrast, reveals the social disparities evident in the social fabric of everyday life in eighteenth-century Paris. For instance, chapter 49, “Porteurs d’Eau” describes the insalubrity of the capital, and exposes the lack of access to fresh water. Denied basic tools of survival (such as clean water), Parisians of the lower social classes find themselves stagnating, like the undrinkable water of the Seine. In sharp contrast, the following chapter, “Le Pont-Neuf” describes the details of the commercial activities that take place on the bridge, characterized as the healthy heart of the body which pumps money out through the arteries of this marketplace. The circulation of money and goods reveals itself to be restricted, however, to the privileged few. The circulation of wealth among a select few is in this way brought into focus alongside the stagnation of many; the paradox of circulation is therefore represented in the *Tableau de Paris* as not two distinct social realities but as a singular reality of lived experience in Paris. Mercier does not isolate either these chapters nor the social experiences to which they give shape; the effect produced by the proximity of these apparently contrasting views of Paris generates a sense of ethical urgency in its reader (ideally). In other words, what is revealed by the concomitance of these contrasting lived experiences of everyday Paris is that to undertake a segmented description of Paris would be, as in the context of the *drame*, to reinforce the capital’s social segmentation, to preserve the humiliating distance between its citizens.

Challenging more than generic conventions, the *Tableau de Paris* reveals the ways in which textual and topographical segmentation reinforce a very real segmentation, preserving polarized social conditions of *luxe* and *misère*. We have in the *Tableau* a description of the capital in which the city’s great monuments and its *prisons*, *égoûts*, *tueries* figure in equal proportion. As we have seen, previous modes of urban description presented the capital in fixed tabular form; Jèze’s *Idée générale de la ville de Paris*, for instance, orders the capital categorically, presenting a closed representational system. Conversely, Mercier’s *Tableau* is everywhere punctuated by textual apertures. If contemporary genres of urban description strive towards comprehensiveness, the *Tableau de Paris* refuses the very possibility of fixing an exhaustive survey of the city: “il restera encore beaucoup plus de choses à dire que je n’en ai dites, et beaucoup plus d’observations à faire que je n’en ai faites; mais il n’y a qu’un fou et un méchant qui se permettent d’écrire tout ce qu’ils ont appris.”³⁰⁸ To be sure, Mercier’s ambition is not towards static completeness, which would be the aim of the “petit esprit de classification.”³⁰⁹ What Bonnet has termed Mercier’s “poétique de l’inachevé” might

³⁰⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 26.

³⁰⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 15.

³⁰⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 118.

more accurately be thought of as that of the aperture.³¹⁰ On a first level, Mercier's claim that "le lecteur fait le livre" and his invitation to the reader to compare the *Tableau* with his/her own observations includes a narrative aperture; that is, there is an open space included in the text for the additions and revisions introduced by the reader. On another (narrative) level, Mercier's use of ellipses, *renvois*, and self-reflexive narration point to his refusal to present an exhaustive representation and description of an ever-changing object of knowledge. His refusal to fix his object, Paris, according to a static model (topography) attests to the temporal and spatial dynamism of the city and of the demands these place on his narrative.

The chapter, "Le Pré-Saint-Gervais" (IX:DCCXLII) illustrates Mercier's dynamic technique. This chapter opens with a physical description of the "spectacle charmant" that is the Pré-Saint-Gervais. The physical disposition of the scene is laid out, followed by an account of the types of products found in this space: "fruits, racines, légumes, herbes, graines de toutes espèces." Yet the itemization of all that this space encompasses leads into a remark on "l'assiduité locale et patiente des familles libres, pour attirer ainsi les fruits de la terre." In other words, the physical opens on to the moral; the physical face of Paris(ians) reveals its moral physiognomy, allows the discerning observer to lay his eyes on its *nuances fugitives*. The description of the *things* that constitute the scene of the Pré-Saint-Gervais culminates in a disdainful dismissal of the too-indulgent *moeurs françaises*, "ce hideux spectacle." The chapter's concluding ellipsis "etc. etc. etc.," echoes a more general attempt to disrupt a feeling of urban "knowability": the frame of the chapter, the representational frame of "Le Pré-Saint-Gervais" is dismantled. The "etc" of the chapter's "conclusion" as narrative and descriptive aperture attests to a refusal to fix the object of knowledge, to pin it to the representational table.³¹¹

The *Tableau de Paris* is always and already an open system, as it accounts for the place of the reader; indeed, "c'est le lecteur qui fait le livre."³¹² Unlike Jèze's *Tableau*, for example, Mercier addresses the reader both within and outside of the frame of the Preface, suggesting that the reader is never *just* a spectator of the urban scene. For if topography is textuality, as Ferguson has suggested, Mercier imagines the urban landscape – and his description of this – as that upon which work is performed in order to produce text.³¹³ While the metaphor of the legible city (city as text) does not dominate urban discourse until later into the nineteenth century, it is everywhere presciently evident in Mercier's *Tableau*. In his insistence on the move from work to text, Mercier foregrounds the notion that each individual's encounter with the city produces a new text, that each reader/observer gives new meaning to the city upon each confrontation with it. As we have discussed elsewhere in this chapter: "supposez mille hommes faisant le même voyage: si chacun était observateur, chacun écrirait un livre différent sur ce sujet,

³¹⁰ Jean-Claude Bonnet, introduction to *Tableau de Paris* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), xvi.

³¹¹ By extension, "Le Pré-Saint-Gervais" illustrates very clearly Mercier's notion of moral physiognomy; the things and people that populate the space of the market open onto a discussion of cultural character, of moral practice. In other words, the topographical is interpreted in order to reveal the moral.

³¹² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 15.

³¹³ Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution*, 38.

et il resterait encore des choses vraies et intéressantes à dire, pour celui qui viendrait après eux.”³¹⁴

Seeing the City: From *simple spectateur* to *observateur attentif*

Mercier accounts for the spectator of the dramatic stage and for the urban observer in new ways. As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, both *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris* insist upon the fact that one needs only eyes to read the topography of the city, but its moral physiognomy is revealed only to the discerning eye.³¹⁵ Mercier’s practice of writing *l’aléatoire* not only inaugurates a new way of writing the city, but necessarily, also, a new way of looking at the city. It is in *Du Théâtre* that this new observational practice is first outlined by Mercier. Insofar as the *drame* as envisioned by Mercier champions the indiscriminate representation of bourgeois life, what is prioritized above all else is the indiscriminate eye of the *observateur attentif*. Indeed, what sets *Du Théâtre* apart from contemporary reflections on the theater is that it details a method, not so much of poetic composition, as of social observation. In this way, it might be qualified as a poetics of observation. I have suggested elsewhere in this chapter that Mercier’s privileging of the moral over the monumental is symptomatic of a new sensibility. I would also argue that in both *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris*, what is foregrounded is a new mode of urban attention. The figure of the *simple spectateur* is contrasted to that of the *observateur attentif*, to whom the moral physiognomy of contemporary Paris is visible, since “l’enchaînement est imperceptible; mais elle existe aux yeux de l’observateur attentif.”

The move from simple spectator to attentive observer entails a studied practice which requires a process of de-disciplining the eye, underscored by the frequent repetition throughout the *Tableau* of the expression, “pour qui sait voir” – as in, for example, “quelle galerie d’images, pleine de contrastes frappants pour qui sait voir.”³¹⁶ Unlike previous urban descriptions which, in their ambitions of exhaustivity, sought to serve as substitute for Paris, the *Tableau* challenges the reader to become an observer, to go out into the streets of Paris in order to compare Mercier’s account of the city to his/her own; indeed, “finis les guides.”³¹⁷ In his *Néologie, ou vocabulaire de mots à renouveler ou pris dans des acceptions nouvelles* (1801) Mercier defines “autopsie” as the act of seeing with one’s own eyes; and everywhere throughout both *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris* the reader is called upon to perform a social autopsy upon the fabric of Paris. The empirical project of social observation put forth in chapters 16 and 17 of *Du Théâtre*, in

³¹⁴ Mercier, *Tableau*, 26. It is interesting to note Mercier’s recourse to the analogy of the voyage, employed also by the authors of the *Encyclopédie* [...] in describing their aims and defining their project as the *mappemonde*.

³¹⁵ “C’est au moral que je me suis attaché; il ne faut que des yeux pour voir le reste” (Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, “Voulez-vous juger de Paris physiquement”).

³¹⁶ I borrow the term “de-disciplining the eye” from Mieke Bal, though out of its original context here. Mieke Bal, “De-Disciplining the Eye,” *Critical Inquiry* 16:3 (Spring, 1990): 506-531.

³¹⁷ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1430.

particular, and subsequently performed in the *Tableau de Paris*, marks a revalorization of the source; the imperative “fermez les livres!” points to the necessity of “connaître autrement que par le récit,” that we close our books and confront the object of knowledge directly.³¹⁸ Mercier writes that,

Quand on a dit, c’est l’abrégé de l’univers, on n’a rien dit; il faut le voir, le parcourir, examiner ce qu’il renferme, étudier l’esprit et la sottise de ses habitants; contempler enfin l’assemblage de toutes ces petites coutumes du jour ou de la veille, qui font des lois particulières, mais qui sont en perpétuelle contradiction avec les lois générales.³¹⁹

The four-part observational model here expounded – voir, parcourir, examiner, contempler – is contingent upon indiscriminate perception. Chapter 17 of *Du Théâtre* (“Développement du chapitre précédent, vu du côté des voyages”) establishes an affinity between the attentive observer and the *étranger*, who are both situated outside of culture – that is to say, the figures of the attentive observer and the *étranger* embody the potential for the pure gaze, for “il faut rejeter la vue habituelle sur un objet, car de là les idées les plus fausses et les plus ridicules.”³²⁰ In this way, the *étranger* possesses and demonstrates the ideal of disinterested looking. Throughout the *Tableau de Paris*, the metaphor of travel is turned upon Paris, to which the figure of the *étranger* travels: “le voyageur, dont le premier coup d’oeil juge beaucoup mieux que le nôtre corrompu par l’habitude.”³²¹

I suggested above that *Du Théâtre* and the *Tableau de Paris* articulate a “new” mode of urban attention, embodied in the figure of the *observateur attentif*. Throughout

³¹⁸ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1310. Indeed, the notion of syntactically-structured perception is discussed widely throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, most notably by Diderot in his *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*. By extension, Mercier’s formulation of “connaître autrement que par le récit” recalls Diderot’s reflections on the *coup d’oeil*. As Daniel Brewer has suggested, “The visual supplement [coup d’oeil] is distinct from the kind of epistemological discourse that seeks to comprehend its object, to succeed in representing it as an object of knowledge; yet simultaneously and paradoxically this supplement of vision completes the work of epistemological discourse. If anything is revealed by the kind of viewing Diderot refers to, it is that the seen cannot be displayed for knowledge (fait tableau) except by being phrased (faire récit).” Daniel Brewer, *Discourses of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 149.

³¹⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 15.

³²⁰ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, “Les Fous.” While the figure of the *étranger* saturates eighteenth-century French literature – from Rica and Usbek to Voltaire’s *ingénu*, from la Péruvienne to Diderot’s Tahitiens – Mercier has recourse to the figure of the *étranger* in order to champion a practice of disinterested looking. Unlike the characters to which I have just made reference, Mercier’s *étranger* is in fact a domestic observer, “comme étranger.” If Rica, for example, is qualified by his regard étonné, Mercier’s *étranger* practices a studied gaze (free of the ironic and curious surprise that qualifies other literary *étrangers*).

³²¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 673.

the *Tableau*, Mercier calls attention to two divergent modes of spectatorship. The first is a studied, concentrated gaze; the second, the consuming and distracted glance. These practices of “looking” are exemplified by two contrasting figures: the physiognomist and the *lorgneur*. Like Marivaux and Diderot, Mercier argues that the poet’s sole qualification and authority is to have undertaken “un examen rigoureux” from a position in the world: “c’est au grand air qu’il doit commencer et suivre ses observations.”³²² It is from this position and from studied looking that the attentive observer – akin to the *étranger* and physiognomist – develops a practice of reading signs which discerns relations: “Chaque homme que je rencontre dans les rues me parle, sans me dire mot,” Mercier writes. “Je lis sur toutes ces physionomies quel intérêt secret les agite.”³²³ In “Des études du poète,” Molière, Richardson, and Newton figure as models of this observational poetics, since their social, literary, and scientific endeavors were undertaken from a participatory vantage point. More specifically, the particularity of these figures is that they were able to discern *l’enchaînement*, that is the network of relations between the visible and the invisible. Molière, Richardson, and Newton are qualified as exceptional in their observational practices, since generally speaking, “on ne consulte que l’écorce, et l’intérieur échappe.”³²⁴ The eye of the simple spectator “s’arrête aux surfaces” and is characterized by its distracted and curious nature.³²⁵ Conversely, the attentive observer – like Molière, Richardson and Newton – is able to perceive *l’enchaînement*. These literary and scientific figures serve as models for Mercier precisely because they look not simply for surface details but seek out, rather, causality; to borrow Mercier’s urban vocabulary, these figures establish a relationship between the monumental and the moral – a relationship between *les lois particulières* and *les lois générales* (the tension established, as we have seen, in the Preface to the *Tableau de Paris*).

The two modes of “looking” discussed above – that of distracted *divertissement* and, conversely, the studied gaze – are contrasted and therefore brought into sharp relief in the chapter, “Les Lorgneurs.” The perceptual act of the *lorgneur* is framed contextually: this social practice is permissible within the demarcated space of the theater and *aux promenades*. Conversely, the gaze of the attentive observer – the physiognomist – points to a way of being in the world, for it is not only objects of curiosity and consumption which attract the attentive observer: as we have already discussed, “tout a droit d’intéresser l’observateur attentif.” Yet this chapter also reveals a problematic tension in Mercier’s thinking: he at once advocates the democratization of poetic and

³²² Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1313-14.

³²³ Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1300-08.

³²⁴ Mercier laments that “tout le monde ne porte pas, comme Molière des tablettes en poche.” Similarly, “l’immortel Richardson” is hailed as having lived twelve years in the world without having once opened his mouth, “tant il était occupé à saisir ce qui se passait autour de lui” (Mercier, *Du Théâtre*, 1314).

³²⁵ More generally, Mercier characterizes the urban spectator as easily attracted by the novelty of any given scene, as “il s’arrête sur son chemin au moindre objet nouveau [...]. La plupart des passants donnent une minute d’attention, et filent en levant les épaules” (*Tableau de Paris*, “Mélange des individus”). This anticipates Benjamin’s analysis of the overwhelmed, distracted, alienated modern (urban) subject.

political space, conceiving of all elements as equal on a horizontal plane, and describes the gaze of the *lorgneur* as unwilling to penetrate the surface of the object upon which it falls. How might we reconcile this idea of horizontality to the above notion of the gaze which “s’arrête aux surfaces”? For is a surface/depth structure in alignment with a horizontal model? This problem of the stratification of meaning (surface/depth) is apparent in Mercier’s praise of Lavater, the physiognomist with whom he studied in Switzerland as he composed his *Tableau de Paris*: “O que M. Lavater, docteur zurichois, qui a tant écrit sur la science de la physionomie, n’est-il au Palais-Royal le vendredi, pour lire **sur** les visages tout ce qu’on cache **dans** l’abîme des coeurs!”³²⁶ Might there be another way of understanding Mercier’s relationship to physiognomy other than in terms of surface/depth structure? Throughout the *Tableau de Paris*, Mercier’s reflections on physiognomy seem to be aligned to a great extent with those on architecture and anatomy, on two different levels. Each may suggest something about this problematic figure of the physiognomist in the *Tableau*.

However, Mercier also states (“Les Lorgneurs”) that physiognomists “observent toute l’habitude du corps encore plus que la physionomie.” *L’habitude du corps* suggests an interest in the movements of the body, in its operation as a whole made up of constituent parts. This is echoed in the chapter, “Anatomie”:

L’anatomie n’a fait aucun progrès depuis 40 ans, ni aucune découverte conséquente. Le corps humain est aujourd’hui connu parfaitement dans toutes ses parties; et il sera difficile d’ajouter à ce qu’on sait, tant les recherches ont été profondes. Mais l’anatomie n’est cependant encore qu’une vraie nomenclature, et rien de plus. Il reste à connaître le jeu de la machine, à apprécier ses rapports, et les principes des forces vitales. Hic labor, hoc opus. La patience mécanique de l’anatomiste doit céder la place au génie qui généralise, qui scrute, qui se trompe en cherchant à deviner; mais qui, à force de tourmenter plusieurs systèmes, découvrira peut-être une seule et importante vérité, d’où jailliront toutes les autres.³²⁷

The dissection of the whole into segmented parts therefore reveals but a limited amount about the object, in a static mode of representation. *Le génie qui généralise*, he who is able to imagine the whole in its operational (dynamic) integrality is therefore aligned with the figure of the attentive observer. In this context, the physiognomist is not engaged in a practice of reading surfaces in order to reveal what is hidden beneath, but rather in studied observation of *l’enchaînement des éléments* – to discern systems of signs that reveal relations.

While Foucault articulates an epistemic shift away from the Classical Age as occurring in the nineteenth-century, the *Tableau de Paris* establishes a network of relations between the visible and invisible that not only anticipates this epistemic shift but

³²⁶ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 930.

³²⁷ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 72.

would require revising Foucault's historical boundaries. As we have been discussing throughout this chapter, the descriptive aim of the *Tableau de Paris* is to give shape not to topographical Paris, but to its moral physiognomy, that is to say, the invisible expressed in the visible; as Mercier declares, "le moral de l'homme par un lien inconnu tient au physique de l'homme."³²⁸ It is for this reason that architecture and physiognomy accrue particular significance in the *Tableau* and become models for the transparent expression, and the perception, respectively, of moral character. In the (epistemic) shift from the classical age to that of history,

to classify will now mean to relate the visible to the invisible, to its deeper cause, then to rise from the hidden architecture to the more obvious signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies. Henceforth, character resumes its former role as a visible sign directing us towards a buried depth; but what it indicates is not a secret text; it is the coherent totality of an organic structure that weaves back into the unique fabric of its sovereignty both the invisible and the visible.³²⁹

Notions foregrounded here by Foucault are already self-consciously articulated by Mercier; *to relate the visible to the invisible, architecture, signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies, totality*. The dramatic poet and attentive observer are the figures endowed not with "la patience mécanique de l'anatomiste" but rather the "génie qui généralise, qui scrute, qui se trompe en cherchant à deviner." From "une vraie nomenclature" which has remained immutable over forty years, Mercier imagines a multiplicity of complex systems ("plusieurs systèmes") which remain to be uncovered. If "natural history in the Classical age covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations," Mercier might be said, by his inclusion of a temporal dimension in what had previously been a "constant order," to be signaling the epistemic shift uncovered by Foucault.³³⁰

City Walking: The Ambulatory Observer

In examining the Mercierien poetics of observation, I have so far accounted for space (physical Paris and its discursive representations) and for a subject position in the world. In addition, I would suggest that the observational and descriptive project theorized in *Du Théâtre* and undertaken in the *Tableau de Paris* must also take into consideration a third variable: time. That which the attentive observer aims to discern and describe – *la physionomie de cette gigantesque capitale* – is of course embedded in the temporal fabric of the urban landscape; for it is not simply the capital's moral physiognomy that is of interest to Mercier, here: it is its *nuances fugitives*. The conception of a descriptive object – Paris, specifically its moral physiognomy – as fugitive, qualifies it as ever-elusive, always and already at a degree of remove. For of

³²⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 18.

³²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books Editions: 1994), 229.

³³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 158.

course, Mercier is not just writing space – that is, physical Paris – he is writing time. More specifically, he is writing Paris in and across time. How does one give shape to an object defined by perpetual movement and relentless change? For as Daniel Roche has observed, “Paris au dix-huitième siècle, c’est le brassage, la mobilité, la fourmilière.”³³¹ This confrontation with an urban space whose surface forms shift so quickly that the present is always almost past reveals the dense temporality with which Mercier struggles. The attentive observer must follow and adapt to his fugitive object. Indeed, Mercier writes,

J’ai tant couru pour faire le *Tableau de Paris*, que je puisse dire l’avoir fait avec mes jambes; aussi ai-je appris à marcher sur le pavé de la capitale, d’une manière leste, vive et prompte. C’est un secret qu’il faut posséder pour tout voir. L’exercice le donne; on ne peut rien faire lentement à Paris.³³²

Indeed, while we might inscribe the *Tableau de Paris* within a tradition of literary promenades, we are far beyond the rêverie-inducing stroll or the gallant spectacle of high society. Just as Mercier abandons the *plan méthodique* of earlier urban guidebooks, so too does he abandon the principle of the itinerary: he walks the city’s streets, describing that which he finds as it presents itself to him. It is important to note here that while the *Tableau* is written over the course of eight years, these are not eight years spent rewriting previous chapters, but rather revisiting the city, writing each person, place, and thing, as it is found in the specificity of a random moment: as Mercier avows in *Le Censeur des journaux*, “J’ai la pensée de chaque jour, car chaque jour a son point de vue différent.” This aim to follow the forms of the present, to give shape to the moral physiognomy of the moment produces what Shelley Charles refers to as “l’effet du toujours nouveau.”³³³

Just as the object he seeks to trace produces the effect of perpetual novelty, so, too, must the observer-describer seek a perpetually new position in order to trace the object he struggles to follow. Thus, the attentive observer must become mobile within the city, as he is always in pursuit of a shifting, fugitive object. *Chaque jour a son point de vue différent*, but so, too, does Mercier further undo the concepts of frame and *unité de point de vue* by proliferating the narrator-observer’s point of view and perspective within both Paris and the *Tableau*. Something of a multiple narrator, Mercier provides descriptions gleaned from various vantage points: from atop Notre-Dame, a balcony, a chair, from inside a moving carriage or a cave-like cabaret. This observational – and subsequently narrative – mobility underscores the empirical nature of his descriptive project and further underscores the ways in which he lifts the object (or rather its composite parts) from the analytic table; for if the coherence of the synoptic table is guaranteed by uniformity of point of view, the fixity of this representational model is evidently resisted by Mercier.

The urban walk is the most individual of ways to observe and understand the city; as Turcot has illustrated, the urban promenade becomes increasingly individualized toward the end of the eighteenth century. Walking is, as Certeau has famously suggested,

³³¹ Daniel Roche, *Le Peuple de Paris* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), 23.

³³² Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1309.

³³³ Shelley Charles, “L’Écrivain journaliste,” *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: Un hérétique en littérature* ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 93.

a personal practice; yet above all, it is “the random, incalculable steps of the walker” that echo Mercier’s writerly aims.³³⁴ For indeed, the practice of urban walking is qualified by the author of the *Tableau* in terms not solely of necessity but also – and perhaps more importantly – of urgency. There is a corporeality to Mercier’s conception both of observation and writing which points to the seeing subject making his way – in a non-linear, non-chronological manner – through time and place. As Sheringham has suggested, “the attributes of walking match the aptitudes of the body, a practice of living rhythm, repetition, non-accumulation, an activity that is concrete, open-ended, private as well as social, limited to the here and now but capable of embracing distant horizons.”³³⁵

The equation established between walking through the city and writing across the page evoke the Mercierien ideal of trace. For the description of an ever-changing Paris is contingent upon a practice of writing able to capture the physiognomy of a moment which, as it is glimpsed, is already disappearing. Faced with the persistent challenge of writing a present which figures as such rapid change that it is always already past, Mercier exclaims,

la moitié de mon livre, je le répète, aura perdu de ses couleurs
avant qu’il soit imprimé. Hâtons les chapitres et rattrapons,
s’il est possible, la physionomie du moment! ah! que Boileau
a bien dit: le moment où je parle est déjà bien loin de moi.

Indeed, there is, throughout the 1050 chapters that constitute the *Tableau de Paris*, a pervasive sense that writing will never be able to keep pace with the object it tackles, as though the hand could never transcribe quite fast enough what the eye sees and follows. The act of writing is there qualified as one of urgency. For instance, “Les Marchandes de modes” is preoccupied chiefly neither with the *marchandes* themselves nor with the dresses, hats, wigs – “ces futilités” – that ornament the Parisian streets; rather, the narrator-observer foregrounds the accelerated rate at which these things are consumed and then turned over. Indeed, “toutes les semaines vous voyez naître une forme nouvelle dans l’édifice des bonnets.” Just as “le pauvre mari” cannot keep pace with “les caprices de son épouse [qui] ne revient point d’une promenade sans avoir une fantaisie nouvelle,” so, too, does the narrator-observer struggle write as quickly as that which he attempts to describe. Slipping, in this chapter, into the past tense – on one of the rare occasions in the *Tableau* – Mercier reveals that he **had** intended to provide a dictionary of Parisian fashions, but “tandis [qu’il] écrivait, la langue des boutiques changeait.” The use of the imperfect tense here communicates and indeed insists upon a process of change – a durative rather than punctual past. The “it was changing while he was writing” points to both a simultaneity in the processes of the object’s change and of writing, and to a persistent temporal disjuncture between the object and the writerly act. This chapter, and this passage in particular, point to the ways in which Mercier grapples with the graphic fixity of the written word. Indeed, the very idiosyncratic terms used in the realm of fashion disappear almost as quickly as Mercier is able to give shape on the page to the

³³⁴ Michel de Certeau, “Marcher dans la ville” in *L’Invention du quotidien I: arts de faire* (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1980). Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 224.

³³⁵ Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, 57.

objects they signify, suggesting that even as the pen traces across the page, the object has always and already changed forms. And here we might recall – tangentially – the ways in which Mercier refers to the act of writing – as *peinture* – evoking the quick, broad, strokes of the brush across the canvas. On one occasion he even refers to the chapters of his *Tableau* as “des esquisses rapides.”

What emerges from the discourse on rapidly evolving fashions in this chapter on “Les Marchandes de mode” is, as I have suggested, not the curious *things* of fashion, nor even the *marchandes* themselves, but rather an articulation of the relationship between the hand that writes and the eye that sees. Ultimately what is foregrounded in this chapter, but also more generally throughout the *Tableau de Paris*, is a reflection on the act of describing Paris as highly precarious, time sensitive, and historically-contingent. Cultural historians such as Daniel Roche, Arlette Farge, and Chantal Thomas have pointed to textual accounts of the sphere of fashion as particularly rich historical documents, for they gauge the quantifiable (because surface) change of a historical moment. What Thomas terms “la sphère mouvante” reveals itself as an urban element of particular fascination to Mercier because it is most outwardly signs of accelerated change.³³⁶ Fashion, Stierle claims, is “la sémiotique de l’actualité pure” and “un médium du temps accéléré.”³³⁷ The task of describing an object – Paris – defined by an overwhelming rhythm of change gives rise to a persistent and perplexing challenge for Mercier, for indeed, one cannot write Paris fast enough it would seem: “Comment peindre,” Mercier asks, “ce qui, dans son extrême mobilité, échappe au pinceau?”³³⁸

The Urgency of Writing the Moment, and the Paradox of Progress

Up to this point I have been concerned with underscoring the ways in which Mercier’s project in the *Tableau de Paris* is one dictated by the contingency of a historical moment, for as Mercier writes, “il ne s’agit à cette époque que de bouleversements.”³³⁹ The Mercierien notion of *tableau* is one whose descriptive modalities reflect – indeed mimic – its object. I have underscored the persistent sense of urgency that belies the act of writing an object which is in perpetual flux, and the urgency of catching the writing hand up to the seeing eye. As Mercier exhorts, “rembrunissons nos pinceaux, il en est temps. Tout change, tout passe avec une effrayante rapidité.” Yet the urgency of writing the moral physiognomy of the moment is, of course, not propelled by aesthetic aims alone; for as is everywhere evident in the Mercierien oeuvre, the aesthetic remains inextricable from the social and political.

As I have already suggested, Mercier’s dismantling of the poetic and the aesthetic categories of what is “representable” and what is “unrepresentable” accords not only new

³³⁶ Chantal Thomas, “La Sphère mouvante des modes” *Louis-Sébastien Mercier: un hérétique en littérature* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994), 118-136.

³³⁷ Karlheinz Stierle, *La Capitale des signes: Paris et son discours*, trans. Marianne Rocher-Jacquin. (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2001), 48 and 60.

³³⁸ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1509.

³³⁹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 1157.

dignity to the low, but insists on the urgency of the low.³⁴⁰ The *prisons, filous, porteurs d'eau, servantes mal pendues, charlatans, décrotteurs* that populate this text are not included as figures of alterity or as objects of curiosity; rather, what they serve to foreground is the act of writing as an ethical imperative. “Retombons de ces sublimes projets à ce qui existe” we read. “Abandonnons nos beaux rêves, pour contempler notre indigence et notre pauvreté réelles. Voyons notre extrême indifférence pour tout ce qui intéresse de si près l’humanité.” As the *Tableau* reveals, perpetual literary production is propelled by a conception of the writerly act as motor for and of social reform. Indeed, we might propose that the *Tableau de Paris* is a project in writing **TO** reform. The chapter “Fosses vétérinaires,” for instance, which details the way in which horses are killed, dismembered and discarded along the outskirts of the capital, concludes with an insistence on the role of writing as means of affecting real, tangible social change: “Nous nous empresseons à publier [ce spectacle dégoûtant], nous voyons qu’on s’occupe plus que jamais du soin de remédier aux abus; et cela nous donne plus de courage pour achever ce tableau, où, comme dans ceux de Rembrandt, les couleurs noires dominent: mais ce n’est pas notre faute, c’est celle du sujet.” The writerly act is here accorded new value, measured in function of its social and practical *utilité*. “J’ai pesé plusieurs abus” Mercier writes. “L’on s’occupe aujourd’hui plus que jamais de leur réforme. Les dénoncer c’est préparer leur ruine. Quelques-uns même, tandis que je tenais la plume, sont tombés.”³⁴¹

The *Tableau* is not, to be sure, hinged upon a monolithic model of time. As Joanna Stalnaker has suggested, the *Tableau*, in fact, unfolds across two temporal planes – slow, lagging time and hyper-accelerated time – in order to “heighten the contrast between the ephemeral nature of certain phenomena, and the unfortunate staying power of others.”³⁴² I would go even further to refer to this “tension” as the paradox of progress; for the ethical imperative lies not in the fact that the description of Paris’ moral physiognomy unfolds across two temporal planes, but that these never intersect. The narrator-observer at once reflects upon the almost-fleeting form of the city’s surface,

³⁴⁰ We might recall Eric Auerbach’s assertion that this “mixing” of styles is in fact characteristic of this literary moment, a point in which the “realistic mixes with the serious,” in which “characters from all classes” populate the novel. The difference here, however, is that while Auerbach claims that in the eighteenth century “individuals [were] not detached from the context of everyday life,” Mercier attributes a *real* urgency to the realm of the everyday – not simply as aesthetic domain but as social and political lived experience. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* trans. Willard R. Trask New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953 (in particular, pp. 401-411).

³⁴¹ Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, 15.

³⁴² Joanna Stalnaker, “In Visible Words: Epistemology and Poetics of Description in Enlightenment France” (Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, 2002), p.259. Elsewhere in her discussion of Mercier’s *Tableau* Stalnaker points, also, to the fact that while Mercier is writing for his contemporaries, he is writing also for posterity. As he declares in the Preface to the *Tableau*, Mercier “ose croire que dans cent ans on reviendra à [son] *Tableau*.” In this way, in his description of the capital Mercier is both “calling for change and seeking to preserve” (Stalnaker, 259).

while lamenting the lagging pace of social progress and even slower rate of social reform. For we have on the one hand a conception of the rhythm of urban change as hyper-accelerated, as in the example of the “Marchandes de mode” which I evoked earlier. Here, the pen struggles to keep pace with the object it describes. On the other hand, we are confronted with the persistence of *les abus*, “*les monstrueuses turpitudes de l’humanité*” (“Prisons”). The attempt to describe the moral physiognomy of the capital aims to dislodge the persistence of what Mercier refers to throughout as *les abus* – the insalubrity of the city, its undrinkable water, the unequal distribution of wealth, the overpopulation of prisons and hospitals, the proximity of cemeteries to the urban center. Paradoxical, then, to say the least, is the acknowledgment that though it may be that “tout change, tout passe avec une effrayante rapidité,” it is also the case that that “le bien se fasse si lentement.” The image evoked throughout the work is that of social inequity and injustice as *cimenté[es]*, and of *l’écrit* as that which is endowed with the potential to dislodge, to mobilize the social world towards progress. “Écrivons, et ne lassons pas de plaider.”

It will now be evident that Mercier seeks to uncover the politics of form both in his writings on the theater and in the genre he invents in the *Tableau de Paris*. Reformulating the relationship between part and whole, Mercier gives rise to a novel form of urban description and of moralist writing that accounts for the lived experience of everyday Paris. Writing from a position in the world, Mercier inflects moralist discourse with a temporal preoccupation; writing a social space in a state of hyper-accelerated change, he much negotiate new literary and observational practices in order to give shape to Paris in and across time. Unlike contemporary urban describers, Mercier seeks to trace the moral physiognomy of the moment, revealing a network of relations between the visible and invisible elements of the urban fabric. Perhaps in reaction to La Bruyère’s formulation in the Preface to the *Caractères* that “tout est dit,” Mercier articulates that in his *Tableau de Paris* that “on n’aura jamais tout dit.” It is this urgency of the moment that gives rise to the genre of the *tableaux de Paris* – the genre which Mercier founds – and which is echoed in Jules Janin’s assertion (in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* of 1841): “comment est-il nécessaire d’écrire au jour le jour l’histoire mobile et changeante de cette pauvre humanité.”

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