

MADEMOISELLE DE LESPINASSE'S HAND

After the death of the author, what remains? For Roland Barthes, who pronounced him dead in 1968, there was a hand: the faceless, voiceless hand of the anonymous *scripteur*. This hand performs the task of burying the author and then, “détachée de toute voix, portée par un pur geste d’inscription (et non d’expression), trace un champ sans origine.”¹ Like the hands from the *Encyclopédie* plates (also analyzed by Barthes), the hand of the *scripteur* is not connected to any particular body, to any voice or mind.² It does not come from anywhere, is not preceded by anything, but simply comes into being through the act of inscribing a text.

What would Denis Diderot have thought about this hand? And how useful is Barthes’s essay “La Mort de l’auteur” today for thinking about authorship in eighteenth-century France? If we accept Barthes’s historical framework (as thin as it may be), the eighteenth century belongs to a period marked by the prestige of the individual and the reign of the *Auteur-Dieu*. This period (from the close of the Middle Ages to the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé) was a product of English empiricism, French rationalism, and the personal faith of the Reformation.³ It ended with Mallarmé, who, “sans doute le premier, a vu et prévu dans toute son ampleur la nécessité de substituer le langage lui-même à celui qui jusque-là était censé en être le propriétaire; pour lui, comme pour nous, c’est le langage qui parle, ce n’est pas l’auteur.”⁴ What Mallarmé freed us from, according to Barthes, was the illusion that authors possess their words. But as Michel Foucault pointed out the following year in “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?,” those critics who heralded the death of the author had perhaps not fully measured the consequences of his disappearance. For they continued to rely on the equally problematic category of the work, failing to grasp that the logic of this category disintegrates once we have done away with the author.⁵

1. Roland Barthes, “La Mort de l’auteur,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 43.

2. Roland Barthes, “Les Planches de l’*Encyclopédie*,” in *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture, suivi de Nouveaux Essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 89–105.

3. Barthes, “Mort,” 41.

4. Barthes, “Mort,” 41.

5. Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?,” in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 793–95.

Indeed, the lingering hand in Barthes's essay seemed to symbolize the difficulty of banishing all vestiges of the author from our understanding of literature. Language cannot quite seem to write itself, for it still needs a hand, however disconnected from any particular body that hand may be.

For Diderot, too, writing *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* two centuries before Barthes's essay, there was a hand. This was not the hand of the anonymous *scripteur* but the hand of a living, breathing, desiring woman: Mlle de Lespinasse. She certainly does not think of herself as an isolated hand (even if she and the doctor Bordeu fancifully imagine people evolving into isolated heads because of excessive intellectual activity, along with other more risqué scenarios along the same lines). On the contrary, if there is one thing she is convinced of, it is the unity of her self. To Bordeu, who asks which philosophical questions seem to her in need of no further examination, she answers confidently: "Celle de mon unité, de mon moi, par exemple. Pardi, il me semble qu'il ne faut pas tant verbiager pour savoir que je suis moi, que j'ai toujours été moi, et que je ne serai jamais une autre."⁶ And when further asked to account for how isolated molecules can come to constitute a unified self, she answers that mere contact suffices, taking the example of her hand resting on her thigh to illustrate her point: "Lorsque je pose ma main sur ma cuisse, je sens bien d'abord que ma main n'est pas ma cuisse, mais quelque temps après, lorsque la chaleur est égale dans l'une et l'autre, je ne les distingue plus. Les limites de deux parties se confondent, et elles n'en font plus qu'une" (100). Although this argument is quickly refuted by Bordeu—a single pinprick and she will realize her hand is separate from her thigh—it is more important philosophically than it might initially appear. For it begs the question—crucial to the dialogue as a whole—of how the contact (sexual or otherwise) between the various interlocutors in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* affects the unity of their selves. When Mlle de Lespinasse moves closer to d'Alembert to take his pulse (but cannot find his hand hidden under the bedclothes), his unexplained convulsion suddenly provokes in her sensations she purports not to understand (even if the symptoms of d'Alembert's orgasm and her excitement are perfectly clear to the reader): "Je le regardais avec attention, et j'étais tout émue sans savoir pourquoi. Le coeur me battait, et ce n'était pas de peur" (94). Yet even if Mlle de Lespinasse is being coy here, there may still be something going on that she (like Diderot) cannot fully explain: she is separate from d'Alembert (their bodies are not even touching), yet his sensations are communicated directly to her. It is as if their bodies existed on a continuum that allowed for the sympathetic response of one desiring body to another. Sexual feelings circulate in mysterious ways in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, in

6. Denis Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, ed. Colas Duflo (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 99. Hereafter cited in the text.

ways that cannot be fully explained and that undermine the distinctness of individual selves.

Something similar can be said about the way philosophical ideas circulate in the dialogue. It is impossible to say to whom these ideas belong, just as for Barthes one cannot pinpoint who is speaking in a sentence from Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*.⁷ There is d'Alembert, the dreamer (and the title tells us clearly it is *his* dream), but does a dreamer fully possess his dreams? Upon waking, he seems not to know exactly what has transpired, even asking the others, "Est-ce que j'ai rêvé?" (136). There is Mlle de Lespinasse, the scribe who has penned the words of the dream, but like Barthes's *scripteur* she traces words she does not fully possess or understand (at a certain point she cannot even read the words she has too hastily scribbled). There is Bordeu, the doctor, who somehow manages to recite the words of the dream without having witnessed it or seen Mlle de Lespinasse's pages. And there is the looming but shadowy figure of Diderot, whose philosophical questioning provoked the dream, but in a previous dialogue that is proximate albeit somehow disconnected from the text titled *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. Although he lies at its origins, Diderot cannot properly be said to possess the dream: d'Alembert dreams it, Mlle de Lespinasse writes it, and Bordeu recites it as if from memory.⁸ Dreams, like sexual feelings, like philosophical ideas, circulate in mysterious ways in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, making it impossible to identify a single author or point of origin.

So what would Diderot have thought of Barthes's death of the author and Foucault's author-function? In his last published work, the *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, Diderot suggested that the eventual disappearance of an author's name mattered very little: "L'on ne pense pas qu'au bout d'un nombre d'années assez courtes, et qui s'écoulent avec rapidité, il sera très indifférent qu'il y ait au frontispice de la PÉTRÉIDE, *Thomas*, ou un autre nom."⁹ Of course, with hindsight, one may be tempted to see a certain irony in Diderot's choice of Antoine-Léonard Thomas to illustrate his point (Thomas is remembered above all as a friend of Suzanne Necker and author of the *Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs et l'esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles*, but few readers will be familiar with his *Pétréide* today). In any case, Diderot's resigned observation that in the end, it is the work that matters, not

7. Barthes, "Mort," 40.

8. On the philosophical implications of this "communal dream" in the context of skepticism, see Kate E. Tunstall, "Eyes Wide Shut: *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*," in *New Essays on Diderot*, ed. James Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 141–57.

9. Denis Diderot, *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 25, ed. Herbert Dieckmann and Jean Varloot (Paris: Hermann, 1986), 363.

the author, is a far cry from his anxious dialogue about posterity with the sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet.¹⁰

So I rather think that Diderot would have been surprised by Barthes's assumption that his age belonged so unequivocally to the reign of the *Auteur-Dieu*. After all, it was the age of the Republic of Letters, marked by great collective publishing projects such as the *Encyclopédie*, the *Histoire naturelle*, and the *Histoire des deux Indes*, but also by institutions such as the salons where neither ideas nor texts could be said to belong to any single individual (indeed, Mlle de Lespinasse may be Diderot's way of rendering women's hidden contribution to the philosophy of his day). Diderot not only participated in these projects and institutions in a concrete way but also developed a philosophical outlook in which the distinction between part and whole (and between individuals and collectivities) was of great philosophical interest but was always shifting.¹¹ Central to this philosophy was a view of death quite different from our own. And here again I think Diderot might have been surprised by the air of finality with which Barthes pronounced the author dead and buried. One does not get the sense, reading Barthes, that the author will ever come back, for the myth that sustained him has been overthrown, only to be replaced by the new myth of the reader: "Nous savons que, pour rendre l'écriture à son avenir, il faut en renverser le mythe: la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur."¹² Just as suddenly as Mallarmé appears ("sans doute le premier") as an absolute point of origin for modernity, the author disappears.

But for Diderot, along with many of his contemporaries, death was not a singular, irrevocable event. Rather, it was a process involving the gradual separation of parts that once worked together as a whole (Mlle de Lespinasse's *moi*), but that over time regained their original separateness. The hand is removed from the thigh, the warmth of sensation dissipates, and what was one becomes two. Still, life and sensitivity persist, for death stops at the level of the molecule.¹³ So with the death of d'Alembert, the sensitive, living molecules that once formed his self take their place in nature, ready to be integrated into future selves. In this sense, d'Alembert does not really die, he simply changes form; as he puts it at the climax of his dream, "Vivant, j'agis et je réagis en masse [. . .] mort, j'agis et je réagis en molécules. [. . .] Je ne meurs donc point.

10. See Elena Russo, "Slander and Glory in the Republic of Letters: Diderot and Seneca Confront Rousseau," *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*, no. 1 (May 1, 2009), <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/40>.

11. See Andrew Clark, *Diderot's Part* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

12. Barthes, "Mort," 45.

13. Denis Diderot, *Éléments de physiologie*, ed. Paolo Quintili (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), 127.

[. . .] Non, sans doute, je ne meurs point en ce sens, ni moi, ni quoi que ce soit. [. . .] Naître, vivre et passer, c'est changer de formes" (104). Who is speaking here? We know that Diderot himself went so far as to imagine, in a beautiful, erotic letter to Sophie Volland, his own matter mixing with hers to form a new self centuries after their deaths, in a sort of morbid act of procreation:

Ô ma Sophie, il me resterait donc un espoir de vous toucher, de vous sentir, de vous aimer, de vous chercher, de m'unir, de me confondre avec vous, quand nous ne serons plus! S'il y avait pour nos principes une loi d'affinité, s'il nous était réservé de composer un être commun; si je devais dans la suite des siècles refaire un tout avec vous; si les molécules de votre amant dissous venaient à s'agiter, à se mouvoir et à rechercher les vôtres éparses dans la nature. Laissez-moi cette chimère. Elle m'est douce. Elle m'assurerait l'éternité en vous et avec vous.¹⁴

So what does this have to do with authorship? It is no accident, I think, that Diderot's philosophical exploration of the life and death of an individual is framed within the collectively authored dream-text of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. What does it mean to be the author of a text, he seems to ask, and what does it mean to possess a self? Still, the notion that the boundaries between selves are porous and shifting (in sex, in dreams, in life and death) does not eliminate the self, or the author. On the contrary, Mlle de Lespinasse is there to assert the unity of her self and her conviction that she will always be herself and never another. She is also there to remind us that every hand that writes words on a page—whether that hand fully possesses those words or not—is connected to a body that dreams, desires, lives, and dies. And the words of the dream are inseparable from the body that dreams, even if the point of contact between them is just as mysterious as the circulation of desire and the recycling of living matter from one person to another. Like d'Alembert, the author has not died: he has simply changed form. Perhaps he has even changed from he to she.

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The essays gathered in this volume do not subscribe to any dogma about authorship, the death or rebirth of the author. But all of them, in various ways, take up the challenge laid out in Daniel Brewer's opening essay to develop an approach to authorship that is both historically grounded and sensitive to the

14. My thanks to Kate Tunstall for making this connection and directing me to the letter. See Denis Diderot, *Lettres à Sophie Volland, 1759–1774*, ed. Marc Buffat and Odile Richard-Pauchet (Paris: Non Lieu, 2010), 78–79. The letter is from 1759.

nuances of textual interpretation. Brewer underlines the risks of the recent cultural turn in the study of authorship, however salutary it has been: if we favor historical contextualization at the expense of nuanced readings, he suggests, we may lose sight of what becoming an author meant in the first place. Some of the essays in this volume are grounded in the study of institutions, such as the Académie Française or the salons; others are more interested in textual instantiations of authorial postures. But all of them are attentive to the difficulty—foregrounded in Geoffrey Turnovsky’s recent book *The Literary Market*—of separating the “real life” conditions of authorship from its complex and multiple textual representations.¹⁵

The volume as a whole offers a rich and complex picture of eighteenth-century notions of collaboration and their implications for our understanding of authorship. As Thomas Wynn observes, eighteenth-century writers often linked theatrical collaboration with death (whether the death of the author or that of the artwork); at the same time, playwrights such as Voltaire strategically used collaboration to their advantage to gain social recognition and legitimacy. Kathleen Loysen demonstrates that even the boldest assertions of authorial identity and singularity—such as Mme Galien’s “Je suis Auteur”—may turn out to be gestures generated collectively in salon culture. For Lucien Nouis, the use of proper names in the *Encyclopédie*—combined with identifying marks and anonymous contributions—bespoke tensions surrounding authorial responsibility, originality, and collaboration. And even for the most canonical of eighteenth-century authors, Voltaire, the multiplication of apocryphal works (encouraged by the author himself) led to the creation of what Nicholas Cronk calls a Voltairean style or “brand,” whose performative effect came to matter more than its point of origin. This does not mean that the names of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—along with the less familiar names of Mme d’Arconville and Mme Galien—do not matter. But it does mean, as Daniel Rosenberg observes in the conclusion to his essay, that eighteenth-century authors were questioning the structures of literary authority in ways that mirror the critical gestures of Barthes and Foucault two centuries later.

Like Barthes, but in a very different way, several contributors to this volume turn their attention to the reader as a way to better understand the author. (Where, by the way, is the reader’s hand in all of this? The placement of Mlle de Lespinasse’s hand on her thigh may bring to mind “ces livres qu’on ne lit que d’une main.”)¹⁶ For Ourida Mostefai, we must interpret Rousseau through three refracting lenses: documentary evidence about the man himself,

15. Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

16. See Jean Marie Goulemot, *Ces livres qu’on ne lit que d’une main: Lecture et lecteurs de livres pornographiques au XVIIIe siècle* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1991).

the textual construction of the author in his works, and images of the author held and disseminated by his reading public. Dorothea von Mücke argues that Rousseau's self-conception as an author was intimately bound up with the various kinds of audiences he conceived for his work; by focusing part of her analysis on the live performance of Rousseau's musical works—and the a posteriori reconstruction of them in his autobiographical works—von Mücke complicates our picture of Rousseau's self-positioning as an author. Turnovsky also places the reader at the center of his argument, suggesting that the trope of authorial poverty that culminated in Alfred de Vigny's play *Chatterton* was linked to the emergence of a new ideal of the reader, as someone seeking autonomy from the social sphere rather than integration into it.

It has often been observed that the death of the author came (conveniently enough) at a time when the canon was being intensely questioned and authors traditionally considered marginal or secondary were receiving renewed attention. What is the place of such figures in the study of authorship today? Julie Candler Hayes observes that women's authorship is made up of "solo flights," making it difficult to draw broad conclusions about eighteenth-century authorship on the basis of individual women's experiences. In her essay on Mme d'Arconville, Hayes underlines the historical and personal contingency of the author's turn from anonymity to autobiography: after a lifetime of anonymous publishing, d'Arconville spent her last years composing a series of autobiographical essays that recorded the personal losses she and her family suffered during the French Revolution. Jeremy Popkin makes a claim for the new authorial figure of the colonial exile, focusing on a little-known manuscript about a white colonist's experience of the Haitian Revolution. Both essays underline a contingency that is not just historical but also personal, made up of traumatic historical events but also of the personal experiences of individuals struggling to write and develop an authorial identity in diverse circumstances. Like Popkin, Jenny Mander asks how we can locate the "voices of colonial authorship," and in her analysis of a lesser-known novel by Alain-René Lesage, she once again complicates our understanding of collaboration by raising the possibility that Lesage built his novel from sources written by a colonial-born son of French emigrants to New France. In a fruitful way, the essays on noncanonical authors and texts thus rejoin the essays on Voltaire, Rousseau, and the *Encyclopédie*, where the traditional dichotomy between individually and collectively authored texts is put into question.

The volume is also rich in implications for our own historical moment. The eighteenth-century fantasies of destroying libraries discussed by Rosenberg shed new light on our anxious relationship to libraries today, in an age where Google Books is perceived at once as threatening libraries and making them superfluous. And the anxieties and tensions surrounding the status of literature and men of letters within the Académie Française, analyzed by Alain Viala, have much to tell us about the so-called crisis in the humanities today. The

anonymous, satirical songs tracked by Henri Duranton gain fresh relevance at a time when textual recycling is the norm and the Internet offers endless possibilities for anonymous social and political critique.

The virulent, scurrilous critique that is the stuff of such songs remained anonymous in many cases because of the genuine risks surrounding authorship in eighteenth-century France. Elena Russo poses the question of *parrêsia*—so central to Foucault's late work—and the philosophes' ambivalent attitude toward the risks entailed by writing the truth.¹⁷ Her reflections on Voltaire's strangely falsified depiction of the atheist Giulio Cesare Vanini demonstrate that the ideal of *parrêsia* upheld by Diderot was one that the philosophes found both seductive and unsettling. Russo concludes her essay with a reference to Rousseau's disturbed and disturbing *Dialogues*, a work in which falsified works attributed to an author have the power to destroy his reputation for posterity. Raising the question of authorial falsification and truth telling from a different angle, Jean Sgard explores how Prévost created an "émotion autobiographique" among readers of *Manon Lescaut*, artfully orchestrating the persistent yet unverifiable myth that the novel contains a secret confession of his youthful escapades. As in the case of Voltaire's apocrypha, we see that expressions of authorial identity participate in the construction of fictional worlds whose truth value must constantly be interrogated.

When the doctor Bordeu takes his leave of Mlle de Lespinasse at the end of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, she teasingly threatens to spread his radical ideas (on masturbation, sodomy, and bestiality, among others) beyond the private sphere of their tête-à-tête: "Je n'écoute que pour le plaisir de redire" (182). It is surely not a coincidence that Diderot entrusts Mlle de Lespinasse with both writing the dream and making it public. Without her, d'Alembert's dream would have gone the way of most dreams, and Bordeu's most daring philosophical ideas would have remained under wraps. Thus Diderot, like the authors of this collective volume, offers a subtly nuanced view of authorship: Mlle de Lespinasse's hand is omnipresent in the dialogue, yet she cannot be said to have authored the work herself. While it remains impossible to say exactly to whom this dream belongs, Diderot, unlike Barthes, insists on the various bodies connected to Mlle de Lespinasse's writing hand. It may not be possible to say where that hand ends and her thigh begins, or where her body ends and d'Alembert's begins, but both of their bodies, along with those of Bordeu and Diderot, inhabit the dialogue and impel us as readers to keep

17. See Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France (1981–1982)*, ed. François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, and Frédéric Gros (Paris: Seuil-Gallimard, 2001).

seeking answers about eighteenth-century authors, in whatever forms we may find them. The essays in this volume are a good place to start.

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