

## Book Review

*Le discours de vérité dans les mémoires du duc de Saint-Simon.* By Marc Hersant. Paris: Honoré Champion. 2009. 938 pp. €145.00. ISBN: 978 2 7453 1784 1.

Described by Hersant as an 'oeuvre océanique', the *Mémoires* of the duke of Saint-Simon—7000 pages in the Pléiade edition—is, by far, the longest French classic text. The aim of Hersant is to prove that this colossal work must be considered as the work of an historian. The task is difficult. The *Mémoires* are usually seen as exclusively literary—written by an extraordinary gifted man who can reach the sublime summits of the French language, but who is unable to give a relevant analysis of the events he describes. That leads Hersant to deal with the question of truth within the *Mémoires*. According to him, Saint-Simon (1675–1755) must be taken seriously when he claims that the setting up of the truth and not the search for the beautiful is his only purpose. So, Hersant invites us to read the lines before we read between the lines. He tempts us to follow ingenuously this strange writer who faithfully try to describe the court of the king of France through his own peculiar analysis grid. The reliability of Saint-Simon is therefore not essential. What really matters is his conception of the truth. For Saint-Simon, the truth is not linked with the impartiality of the speaker but with his inner qualities and his rank. Some people are true and are therefore an unconscious vehicle for the truth. This truth rises suddenly, for instance within the witticisms of the true speakers. This conception, connected with the Augustinian background of Saint-Simon, leads the duke to watch for signs. He pays special attention to anecdotes. Those little facts that Saint-Simon is never tired of relating were precisely the cause of the suspicion about the inability of this gifted author to write history. Hersant, in order to apprehend the discourse of truth of Saint-Simon, analyse the portrait gallery contained in the *Mémoires*, the interest of Saint-Simon in erudition and his use of historical sources. Even if the work's habits of the duke are far from our scientific proceedings or, even, from the erudite customs of his contemporaries, his aim is definitely the search for the truth. For instance, the portraits he makes of the great courtiers, unlike those made by the cardinal of Retz, are not the literary evocations of abstract patterns but the careful description of real persons. The result of the unflagging efforts of Saint-Simon is an acute evocation of a social microcosm. Therefore, Hersant, like Leroy-Ladurie before him, praises Saint-Simon for his sociological view. Along the 900 pages of his book, Hersant questions the interpretation of the gigantic work of Saint-Simon that prevails in the 20th Century. Especially, he blames our current deconstructive propensity to search for a hidden strategy or an unconscious inclination behind any work and, in that way, he contributes to our reading of the ancient texts.

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