

## Ravalico on de Tholozany (2017)

Tholozany, Pauline de. *L'École de la maladresse: de J.-J. Rousseau à J. J. Grandville*. Champion, 2017, pp. 265, ISBN 978-2-7453-3552-4

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*L'École de la maladresse* examines the “protéiforme” presence of clumsiness in several literary and pictorial genres against the backdrop of codes of civility in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. A thorough etymological history in the introduction foregrounds the book’s primary claim: *maladresse* (roughly translated as “clumsiness” or “awkwardness”) is a shifty figure of in-betweenness, a sign of both physical and linguistic ineptness, the result of an unfortunate accident (faux-pas) or a latent characteristic (poor gross motor coordination). Tholozany’s analysis continually recalls the word’s linguistic relatives “droit/dresser/direct” to emphasize the ways in which instances of *maladresse* shed light on social and moral norms that informed practices of civility during the approximately one-hundred-year period under consideration.

The first chapter focuses on the overlapping significance of clumsiness in Rousseau’s *Confessions* and in the *Discours sur l’inégalité*. Tholozany guides readers through a thicket of Rousseauian blunders—especially those which underscore his lack of athleticism and propensity to fumble in the presence of attractive women—to argue that such embarrassing moments of missed marks and spilled water exemplify Rousseau’s status as a misfit *homme de lettres* stuck in a contradictory (disgust/desire) relationship with civilized society. Building on Avital Ronell’s psychoanalytic interpretation of Rousseau in *Stupidity* (2002), Tholozany connects the philosopher’s preoccupation with his own *maladresse* to the role of agility and language in his theory of human social evolution: man in a state of nature (aka the Noble Savage) was spontaneously nimble—all body—whereas civilized man, mired in the endless detours of cogitation and imprecise language, is all in his head. The term *mal-adresse* emphasizes its own identity as, in Tholozany’s terminology, a “postal” failure, and it thereby signposts the problem of language as a “supplement” (Derrida) to the natural spontaneity civilized man has never known in his inauthentic, socially-constructed life. Tholozany makes the compelling suggestion that Rousseau’s insistence on *maladresse* is, paradoxically, a direct way to address his readers because, in its authenticity and sincerity, it accesses their empathy for him.

The second chapter, which is the strongest one, emphasizes the ambivalent place of *maladresse* in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century child development, especially in the processes of acquiring gross motor skills and moral reasoning. Tholozany cleverly compares two related but distinct corpuses to investigate the cultural tension surrounding the epistemological value of falling down: books about child rearing (including Rousseau’s *Émile*) as well as books created for children and young adults. There was a thriving market for various devices of child protection and control during this period in France, many of which were created to hasten and perfect a toddler’s transition to walking without suffering the consequences of physical ineptitude. Swaddles for infants as well as various safety technologies aimed at toddlers (cloth and straw helmets called *bourrelets*, *paniers roulants*, and leash-harnesses called *lisières*) all suggest a widespread “ontological fear” of clumsiness, which was commonly interpreted as a sign of animality to be eliminated (85). Rousseau’s *Émile* advocates for allowing *maladresse* to be part of the child’s developmental process, and it thereby furnishes a countercultural response to the helicopter-parent trend. Madame Fabre d’Olivet’s *Conseils à mon amie sur l’éducation physique et morale des enfants* (1820) goes even further to advocate enthusiastically for the value of falling down to learn self-regulation and reliance. While Fabre d’Olivet’s *Conseils* generalizes about all children, texts for children (like the *Alphabet moral*) were separated into lessons for *petits garçons* and *petites demoiselles*, the latter of which contained no lessons about *maladresse* because girls, as supposedly better listeners, were apparently not at risk. For boys, however, *maladresse* was the corporeal consequence of the moral narrative of disobedience.

The impressive breadth and depth of Tholozany’s scholarship in this chapter gives weight to her initial insistence on the “protéiforme” character of *maladresse* and also demonstrates the consequential stakes of her entire study. Tholozany does not explicitly reflect on the contemporary relevance of her research, but further consideration of the epistemology of clumsiness would bring into focus the centrality of her topic for an interdisciplinary understanding of the modern conception of selfhood.

The third and fourth chapters study the social implications of awkwardness and blunders in Balzac’s *Comédie humaine* (especially *Le Père Goriot*) and in Grandville’s illustrated *sottisier*, *Petites misères de la vie humaine* (1843). They emphasize how eighteenth-century sincerity and empathy give way to nineteenth-century manipulation and power games. Tholozany contrasts the “erreurs postales” (gaffes, accidents, and blunders with women) of Rastignac with those of Rousseau to argue, with the help of Bourdieu’s “condescendence strategy,” that Rastignac draws attention to his *maladresses* because he enjoys the aristocratic privilege to use them to his advantage (133). Grandville is similarly unsentimental in his humorous

portrayal of the various bloopers, blunders, and missed connections of everyday life. His comic ironization of codes of civility in the *sottisier* and in his science fiction narrative, *Un autre monde* (1844), suggests that *maladresse* is at once embarrassingly banal and troublingly specific to the process of identity formation in a fast-paced world where postal technology supplements and supplants the face-to-face.

*L'École de la maladresse* indeed schools readers in the formative social and developmental role of a particular sort of mistake that most people would prefer to forget. The original research topic and the author's confident, straightforward writing are the strengths of this enlightening study. The book offers extensive and voluminous footnoted reviews of previous research on the primary sources and theoretical material in each chapter. These perpetual detours limit the book's innovative premise by caging it within a series of conventional and often reiterative close readings of canonical texts about male lives. Are we really to believe, as the children's *Alphabet* purports, that *maladresse* is only a part of masculine experience? They also segregate the excellent second chapter from the three traditional literary analysis chapters, when in fact productive connections could be teased out among them. Readers are ultimately left as they began, with the notion that "la maladresse en elle-même," like the metaphorical albatross flapping around in the book's conclusion, is impossible to seize (15).

**Volume:** 48.1–2

**Year:**

- 2019