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Andrew H. Clark, *Diderot's Part*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. ix + 205 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$99.95 U.S., £ 55.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0-7546-5438-4.

Review by Jay L. Caplan, Amherst College.

The vast and heterogeneous body of work produced by the encyclopedist Denis Diderot seems to elude all forms of systematic or synthetic presentation. His *oeuvre* straddles the borders of fields as diverse as philosophy, physiology, aesthetics, art criticism, music theory, poetic theory and (what one can anachronistically call) literature, as well as genres as varied as the philosophical dialogue, the novel, the short story, and the “serious” drama (that Diderot invented and theorized), while simultaneously questioning, if not blurring, the boundaries of all these fields and genres. Andrew Clark’s brilliant and wide-ranging study constitutes one of the most successful attempts at “framing” Diderot’s prodigiously broad, diverse and visibly contradictory production.

In *Diderot's Part* Clark argues that Diderot was primarily concerned with working out the relationship between part and whole. By “part” he means both (1) a portion or essential element of a whole (bee to swarm, organ to body, word to phrase, dissonant chord to harmonic progression, article to encyclopedia, and individual citizen to body politic) and (2) a portion assigned or given (as in a play or musical score): both relatively autonomous parts that interact with continuously changing wholes and characters in a theatrical presentation, the score for a particular voice or instrument or any of the voices or instruments in a concerted piece. This notion of the part as both a moving object and an element of a performance leads the author to begin his study with an examination of *Le Fils naturel* (1757) and the appended *Préface* and *Entretiens*, a set of works that is at once a theatrical production, a literary work, and a text on dramatic theory. Clark means to show that because all of Diderot’s texts display a similar heterogeneity, they cannot be identified with any consistent point of view (materialism, vitalism, rationalism, bourgeois ideology, etc.). He contends that *Le Fils naturel* exemplifies Diderot’s preoccupation with continual reconstitution of a changing whole, composed in this case of the play enacted on the stage, the spectator’s involvement with the play, and its proposed annual reenactment. The author uses Deleuze’s anti-Platonic view of difference and repetition to argue that as the “parts” (divisions, actors, roles, etc.) of *Le Fils naturel* impinge upon each other, no one part (such as the father or the *tableau*) ever arrests the movement long enough to lend more than a temporary identity to the entire set. [1]

Chapter One (“Autonomous Fibers and Secreting Organs”) examines the relationship between part and whole in Diderot’s scientific thought, while establishing suggestive relationships between these works and the *philosophe’s* aesthetic doctrines. For example, after remarking that physiological experiments conducted by scientists such as Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) and Théophile de Bordeu (1722-1776) led Diderot to conceive of muscles, glands and organs as endowed with a certain degree of autonomy with respect to the organism as a dynamic whole, Clark makes an apt connection between this position and Diderot’s negative judgment of Boucher’s *Le Triomphe de Vénus* (1740). Its parts are not sufficiently delineated: “What [Diderot] dislikes in Boucher is the representation of a continuity in which transitions are highly visible, blurring difference.” (p. 45) He also notes that in the eighteenth century the emerging discourses of physiology and aesthetics were both concerned with accounting for the ways

in which sensations were aroused and received by the observer, and with the extent to which reception was conditioned by objective or subjective factors. In his discussions of Diderot's place in contemporary debates on sensibility and irritability, the relative autonomy of muscle fibers, organicism and secretion, Andrew Clark not only displays an admirable mastery of the technical issues, but also an ability to relate them to broader aesthetic, philosophical, and even political questions. Thus he concludes Chapter One by suggesting that "Diderot creates a poetics of physiology: a poetics that [...] seeks to give new life to forms, and new forms to life, and it understands continuity and communication between the *part* and the *whole*... as a result of the assemblage, negotiation, and, at times, subordination of autonomous (discontinuous) individual entities." (p. 84)

Chapter Two concentrates on the importance of borrowing and reconfiguration in Diderot's poetics. Clark approaches the subject through a re-evaluation of Diderot's first published work, a translation of the earl of Shaftesbury's (1671-1713) *Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (authorized edition, 1711). He shows how the translation illustrates Diderot's practice of writing as rewriting, that is, a process whereby the embracing of the other "text" (writing, object, person) changes it and affects one's own. Diderot refashions Shaftesbury's ideas of order, natural virtue, social communication, and enthusiasm, just as the latter's ideas contribute to the formulation of his own views. In the central portion of this chapter, Clark describes how Diderot's resistance to Shaftesbury's conception of order as a hierarchical regime in which the parts are subordinated to the whole leads him to imagine a constantly changing "poetic order" on the model of *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (1773), where everything is at once completely determined and absolutely free. Chapter Three ("The Figure of Dissonance") contains what is perhaps the most original part of this book. Here, Clark's thorough knowledge of the cultural context and his understanding of contemporary theoretical debates on melody, harmony and dissonance enable him to show the many ways in which the metaphor of dissonance helps Diderot to rethink a wide variety of epistemological and aesthetic concerns. Clark's attentive reading of the *Leçons de clavecin et principes d'harmonie en dialogues* (1770), a pedagogical text to which Diderot scholars have paid relatively little attention, provides him with an original and persuasive way of approaching some of the most familiar Diderot texts (*La Religieuse* [1760], in which Suzanne functions as a figure of irresolvable dissonance; *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* (1769), which he reads as "a series of dissonances [...] that encourage greater understanding of a more complex, opening *whole*; and *Le Neveu de Rameau* (1760-1777), where dissonance can be shown to be a musical, poetic and physiological figure).

It is not always easy to make one's way through this provocative and thoroughly-researched book. In the end, however, the reader's efforts are richly rewarded. Andrew Clark evinces a profound understanding of Diderot's thought in its intellectual context, and his scholarship is impeccable. *Diderot's Part* does not avoid the temptation of conceiving of Diderot's prodigiously diverse work as a self-identical whole, but it gives that work a much more subtle and complex identity than is usually proposed.

#### NOTES

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Différence and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

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