

Walter E. Rex, *Diderot's Counterpoints: The Dynamics of Contrariety in his Major Works*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998. xvi + 318. Illustrations, notes, and index. £355 UK; 550FF. ISBN 0 7294 0620 2.

Review by Richard Lebrun, University of Manitoba, for H-France, May 1999

Although Walter Rex's study of Diderot must be characterized as a work of literary criticism, there are a number of reasons why his book should appeal to almost anyone interested in the intellectual history of the French Enlightenment. In the first place, given Diderot's stature as a major figure in the Enlightenment, any new and competent study of his writings is worth reading. Secondly, considering the complexities of Diderot's personality, philosophy, and literary style, a work focused precisely on his "contrarieties" is especially welcome. Thirdly, since Diderot was, in so many ways, such a central and representative figure in the Enlightenment, this demonstration of the complexity and ambiguity of his attitudes and views can help us appreciate the richness of this intellectual movement and the internal tensions within it. Lastly, the quality of the author's scholarship is an unequivocal delight. Now Emeritus Professor of French literature at the University of California, Berkeley, Walter Rex's published works include monographs on Pierre Bayle and Pascal, collaboration on Richard Schwab's seven-volume *Inventory of Diderot's Encyclopédie* (1971-84) and, most recently, *The Attraction of the Contrary: Essays on the Literature of the French Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), a volume that introduced some of the themes which are developed in this most recent study. Rex writes of Diderot and the Enlightenment with the depth of knowledge and the sureness of judgment of someone who has spent a lifetime studying the literature of a period that he obviously loves and appreciates.

The key to understanding and appreciating Diderot's major works, Rex argues, lies in admitting that "his ideas travel via illogic and disjunctions" (p. xiv). Reviewing the literature on Diderot, especially that produced in the last half century, which has seen Diderot's works textually revised, analysed, and researched in considerable depth, Rex notes how so many questions about this author still remain "open and unexplained" (p. xii). These disagreements, Rex believes, lie less in the "perversity of scholars" than "in certain uniquely curious qualities in the way Diderot thought and wrote" (ibid). We must recognize, Rex suggests, that with respect to almost all Diderot's writings (apart from his "scientific" writings and his "bourgeois dramas") "not only is it generally impossible to say the final word about them, sometimes it is even hard to pick out the main theme(s) or to be sure of Diderot's intent in creating them" (p. xiii). His writings, Rex continues, "are apt to do without the objectively given structures that are typical of neo-Classicism and that one might have expected from someone pleased to think of himself as a philosopher, not to say, encyclopediste" (Ibid). Diderot's interpreters, Rex argues, have erred in assuming that Diderot's arguments are

coherent, that they "make sense," that when he states a position passionately that it represents his considered position, and that his ideas add up to form a doctrine. Rex's study deliberately challenges all these notions.

In contrast to the general postulate that Diderot's ideas are not comprehensible unless they are coherent, Rex's reading of Diderot highlights "the most blatant kind of logical disjunction: the contradiction--or contrariety" (p. xiv). In justification of his approach, Rex argues as follows: "in Diderot, the positive enunciation of a concept frequently (though by no means always) leads to the denial of that concept. The mere proposal with approval may bring Diderot to see, in counterpoint, the other side of the argument, the negative, which can then become the main element of his discourse--often without even the slightest warning to the reader that he has reversed himself or turned things upside down" (Ibid.). Rex believes that this phenomenon in Diderot is frequent and important, and quite often dominates the way his ideas are linked together. And rather than regarding this contrapuntal structure of Diderot's discourse as a grave fault, Rex believes that "these intricate and immediate impulses ... trigger the conception of Diderot's ideas" and "are among the most precious qualities of Diderot's art as a writer, since they are, in the most literal and essential sense, the vitality of the text (pp. xiv-xv). Perhaps the point is clearer in a note in which Rex compares his own approach with that of another scholar who stressed the importance of contrariety in Diderot, but who ended up characterizing the philosophical result for Diderot as "emptiness". According to Rex's more literary approach, "the opposing elements forming the contrarieties of Diderot's thought should not be brought together so that they cancel each other out; rather each side of the contrariety is viewed as an active principle whose energy brings on its opposite, thus creating the vitality and forcefulness of the text" (p. 134, n. 21).

The bulk of Rex's study is devoted to exploring in considerable detail the most dramatic and interesting contrapuntal responses in Diderot's major works. Successive chapters expose and examine the phenomenon of contrariety in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, the *Lettres sur les sourds et muets*, the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, *Jacques le fataliste*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and some of Diderot's *Salon* articles. Only *La Religieuse* is omitted from consideration, since Rex had already analysed this work from this perspective in his previous volume, *The Attraction of the Contrary*, mentioned above. Rex's "radical" readings (to use his own characterization) are witty, fascinating, and persuasive.

One problem that Rex chooses not to address directly is that of Diderot's influence. Almost all the works discussed here remained unpublished and unknown during Diderot's lifetime, when he was known primarily as the editor of the famous *Encyclopédie*. As Rex himself points out right at the beginning of his introduction, Diderot's reputation as "the most audacious, intriguing and probably also

the most beloved of the *philosophes*" dates mostly from the late 1940s (p. xi). It may well be the case, as Rex suggests, that Diderot's insights "sexually, morally, aesthetically and in terms of the dynamics of human thought and behaviour speak to us today with an intensity unlike anyone else's in Diderot's time" (p. xii). Nevertheless, it seems that the Diderot who emerges from this study was scarcely known to his contemporaries. For us today Diderot may be taken as representative of the *philosophes*; for an opponent of the Enlightenment like Joseph de Maistre (in the next generation), the culprits were Voltaire and Rousseau.

While Rex believes that Diderot's mental operations in respect to contrariety were unique among the *philosophes*, he also acknowledges that one encounters other authors in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "whose literary creations were informed by a sort of contrariety" (p. xv). In his introduction to this volume Rex identifies the phenomenon in La Fontaine, Molière, and Voltaire, and in his previous book, *The Attraction of the Contrary*, Rex had explored how the principles of contrariety and opposition had worked in philosophy, in the theatre, in music, and in a number of other eighteenth-century authors. The image of the Enlightenment that emerges from all this is, to be sure, much more complicated than the traditional portrait of a straightforward Age of Reason. In fact, as Rex himself suggests in his *Attraction of the Contrary*, the Age of Enlightenment ends up in "a blur of contradictions" (p. 15). Still, the effort to identify and sort out these contradictions challenges us to strive for a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the Enlightenment and its reverberations into the period of the Revolution and beyond.

The one disappointing feature of the book is that all the numerous and well chosen quotations from Diderot and other French authors remain in the original language, which will limit its readership. That this is probably the result of a decision by the publisher rather than the author is suggested by the fact that in Rex's previous study, *The Attraction of the Contrary*, excellent English translations of the French citations are provided in the end notes. This failure to provide translations means that one cannot recommend this important and useful study to ordinary North American undergraduate students.

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