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James Fowler, ed., *New Essays on Diderot*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xiv + 266 pp. Notes, bibliographies, and index. \$101.00 U.S. (hb) ISBN 978-0-521-76956-3. \$29.99 (pb) ISBN 978-1-107-64960-6. \$81.00 (eb) ISBN 978-1-139-06511-5.

Review by Cecilia Feilla, Marymount Manhattan College.

This collected volume brings together sixteen new essays by leading scholars of French Enlightenment *philosophe* Denis Diderot. Covering the major works and the “most characteristic aspects” (p. 1) of his thought, the essays reflect the range and variety of scholarship that has emerged on Diderot in recent decades, much of it by the specialists included here. One of the great strengths of the volume is the way in which less frequently read and researched texts in Diderot’s *oeuvre* are given equal treatment to the better known works. Chapters on *Les Bijoux indiscrets* and Diderot’s writings on music, for example—areas usually reserved for specialists—are presented in analyses that offer illuminating material on their own and also provide interesting connections to other, more familiar areas of the *philosophe*’s thought.

The essays are organized into five parts by topic and genre: Diderot the *philosophe*; Novels; Dialogues; Plays and Dramatic Theory; and Music, Performance, Aesthetics. One could imagine other configurations, such as themes or concepts, but as Fowler notes in the introduction, with reference to Van Loo’s portrait of Diderot (which adorns the cover), “it is very hard to take the likeness” (p. 1) of this mobile and changeable thinker. Ultimately, the current order is clear and logical, and allows for *rappports* to emerge across the various chapters and sections, making this a remarkably cohesive and engaging collection.

The first and largest section of the book consists of six chapters which provide an overview of Diderot’s extraordinarily diverse career, from his passion for the ancients and early philosophical writings, to his work on the *Encyclopédie* and *Histoire des Deux Indes*, to his private writings in the letters to Sophie Volland. These informative essays comprise a useful introduction, preparing the way for the more specific studies in the subsequent parts. In chapter one Russell Goulbourne offers a clear outline of Diderot’s enduring engagement with the ancients to argue that “Diderot looks back in order to move forward” (p. 13). That is, Diderot’s thinking “through/with” (p. 16) the ancients is the key to his modernity. Marian Hobson turns to Diderot’s early philosophical writings in chapter two, with emphasis on comparisons to the thought of Rousseau (also the subject of her most recent book, *Diderot and Rousseau: networks of Enlightenment*), in order to suggest that Diderot’s unwavering atheism and materialism are more tools for thinking through morals and science—the ideas he returns to most—than hard and fast philosophical systems. [1]

Daniel Brewer’s detailed and complex presentation of the radical formal strategies of the *Encyclopédie*, the monumental enterprise with which Diderot is most associated, emphasizes the way in which its organization self-reflexively presents “the fundamentally interdiscursive nature of knowledge” (p. 54). From definitions of concepts to the elaborate cross-referencing system, Brewer highlights the ways in which duplicity, irony, and context allow the means for critique in the *Encyclopédie*, and ultimately demand a mode of reading that posits the reader as producer of knowledge. Rousseau appears again as one of Diderot’s main interlocutors in Angelica Goodden’s original contribution on the affinities and

divergences in the two *philosophes'* ideas regarding "craft" (*les métiers* as opposed to *les arts*) in chapter four. In chapter five, Anthony Strugnell offers a nuanced corrective to views regarding Diderot's radical anti-colonialism in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*. Responding in particular to Yves Benot's pioneering work in this area, Strugnell focuses on the sections in which Diderot discusses Asia, usefully contextualizing the *philosophe's* ideas on India in particular, in order to show that his idealism gives way to more imperialist views in the East Indian context.<sup>[2]</sup> Part one concludes with Pierre Saint-Amand's charming discussion of the correspondence Diderot maintained with his lover, Sophie Volland (Louise-Henriette). Diderot's letters comprise a "one-voice dialogue" (p. 86) (Sophie's are lost) that reveal the *philosophe* contemplating the incommensurability of the world of the lover and the world of labor. Saint-Amand evokes the heart of this cerebral and mercurial wit to reveal the thinker wrestling with contradictions, and the epistolary form, as he longs for an elusive permanence and presence in love.

The second part of the volume consists of three literary studies dealing with the major novels, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, *Jacques le Fataliste*, and *La Religieuse*. Though diverse in their approaches, the three contributions hang together remarkably well, offering tantalizing correspondences that illuminate Diderot's larger fictional project and purpose. At the heart of each essay lies an intertextual dialogue between Diderot and a British interlocutor/novelist, whether Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, or Samuel Richardson. In chapter seven, Anne Deneys-Tunney focuses on the precariousness of translation and meaning in the *Bijoux*, Diderot's first novel, through the scene in which Mangogul directs his magic ring to the genitals of a mare whose discourse he cannot understand. The translator he finds for the horse's speech is none other than Swift's Gulliver (who famously spent time among the Houyhnhnms) leading Deneys-Tunney to observe that "[f]iction, here, comes to the aid of the failed or impossible interpretation of the discourse" (p. 105). The scene, she argues, is symbolic not only of the untranslatability of sexuality into human discourse, but of Diderot's fictional enterprise *en gros* in which "meaning always depends on a construction; meaning is a form which the novelist confers" (p. 109). Joseph Breines offers an inventive reading of identity and "the self-other relationship" (p. 116) in *Jacques le fataliste* through Diderot's "plagiarism" of a scene from Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. James Fowler rebuts the view that Diderot critiques the conventual system, but not Christianity, in his novel, *La Religieuse*. Fowler argues instead that Diderot's novel subtly repudiates Catholic theology, and that this critique of moral and religious orthodoxy makes *La Religieuse* "at once Diderot's most and least Richardsonian novel" (p. 135) (which is also a fresh take on Richardson).

Part three pairs two essays on Diderot's dialogues *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* and *Le Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*. Kate E. Tunstall's brilliant reading of *Le Rêve* (chapter ten) explores the tension in the dialogue between materialism and the radical scepticism associated with Berkeley (p. 142). Starting from the observation that "in staging a dream, Diderot is making use of a sceptical commonplace" but "uses it in a highly original way" (p. 142), Turnstall shows that by positioning the dream outside the dreamer, Diderot is able, formally and comically, to overthrow the solipsism and doubt of radical scepticism. In chapter eleven, Andrew Curran addresses the *Supplément's* connection to Enlightenment notions of race, religion, miscegenation, and "natural man" in order to place Diderot's Tahitian society and its practices within the "wider set of ... natural histories of humankind that Diderot develops" in the dialogue (p. 160).

The virtue of the two essays that comprise part four, on Diderot's plays and dramatic theory, is the scope of works addressed. In addition to the usual attention to his bourgeois dramas, *Le Fils Naturel* and *Le Père de famille*, both chapters also discuss Diderot's late comedy *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* (1781) among other less-treated theatrical writings. Carol L. Sherman's perceptive chapter on the legacy of Diderot's plays on the work of revolutionary figure Olympe de Gouges elucidates the latter's expansion of the form to emphasize the role of women and transform the central conflict and conversion to virtue. Derek Cannon meanwhile revives Diderot's interest in classic comedy in order to reveal the development in his thinking about the *drame* as well as to balance the (over)emphasis by scholars on the early works. Cannon reads *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* in particular for its references to the plays of Destouches and other playwrights as a clue to Diderot's valuation of the comic.

In the final section on music, performance, and aesthetics, the first two essays by Mark Darlow and Béatrice Didier lay out Diderot's participation in the *Querelle des Bouffons* over the relative merit of French and Italian music—opera in particular—from the different perspectives of musicologist and librettist respectively. The essays offer many points of overlap to reveal how Diderot's progressive views point the way towards the comic opera and melodrama. Tom Baldwin's essay on ekphrasis in the *Salons* charts a path between the polemical views of Diderot's writings on paintings—as either “faithful transpositions” (p. 235) or “radical displacements” (p. 236) of the art objects they ostensibly describe—offering a subtle reading of Diderot's sophisticated and self-referential writings on the work of Doyen. A chapter on the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* would have rounded out the section—and the collection—nicely.

Together, the sixteen contributors represent the way Diderot's iconoclasm and innovations arose out of his passionate engagement with the main ideas, debates, and thinkers of his age. Erudite, changeable, inventive, and elusive, Diderot's sustained dialogue with his contemporaries and his irrepressible originality make him a *philosophe par excellence* as well as a modern thinker. Valuable both as a resource and a collection of new perspectives, this volume is a welcome and significant contribution to scholarship on this important figure of the French Enlightenment, and on the eighteenth century more generally.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

James Fowler, “Introduction”

Part I. Diderot the *Philosophe*:

Russell Goulbourne, “Diderot and the ancients”

Marian Hobson, “Diderot's earlier philosophical writings”

Daniel Brewer, “The *Encyclopédie*: innovation and legacy”

Angelica Goodden, “Diderot, Rousseau and the art of craft”

Anthony Strugnell, “Diderot's anti-colonialism: a problematic notion”

Pierre Saint-Amand, “Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland”

Part II. Novels:

Anne Deneys-Tunney, “*Les Bijoux indiscrets*: transition or translation?”

Joseph Breines, “*Jacques le fataliste et son maître*: finding myself in the work of another”

James Fowler, “*La Religieuse*: Diderot's ‘Richardsonian’ novel”

Part III. Dialogues:

Kate E. Tunstall, “Eyes wide shut: *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*”

Andrew Curran, “Logics of the human in Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*.”

## Part IV. Plays and Dramatic Theory:

Carol L. Sherman, "Diderot and Olympe de Gouges convert the tyrant and transform the family"

Derek Connon, "Diderot and Destouches: *Le Philosophe marié* in *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?*"

## Part V. Music, Performance, Aesthetics:

Mark Darlow, "Diderot's voice(s): music and reform, from the *Querelle des Bouffons* to *Le Neveu de Rameau*"

Béatrice Didier, "Diderot and the aesthetics of the libretto"

Tom Baldwin, "Ekphrasis and related issues in Diderot's *Salons*"

## NOTES

[1] Marian Hobson, *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment* (Oxford: SVEC, 2011).

[2] Yves Benot, *Diderot, de l'athéisme à l'anticolonialisme* (Paris: Maspero, 1970); "Diderot, Pechmeja, Raynal et l'anticolonialisme," *Europe* (Jan-Feb, 1963), republished in Yves Benot, *Les Lumières, l'escalavage, la colonisation*, ed. Roland Desné and Marcel Dorigny (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 107-23; "Diderot, Raynal et le mot 'colonie'" in Peter France and Anthony Strugnell, eds., *Diderot: Les dernières années, 1770-1784* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 140-52.

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