

H-France Review Vol. 16 (October 2016), No. 242

James Hanrahan and Síofra Pierse, eds., *The Dark Side of Diderot / Le Diderot des ombres*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2016. 260 pp. \$64.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-1848-8.

Review by Kate E. Tunstall, University of Oxford, Worcester College.

This collection of ten essays emerged from a conference held in Dublin in June 2013, which provided an opportunity for a wide range of scholars at very different stages in their careers to engage with the work of Diderot in his tercentenary year. The volume includes contributions, some in French, some in English, from doctoral students at Irish and French universities (Marie-Anne Bohn, Hélène David, Edward O'Sullivan), as well as from established *dix-huitiémistes* in Ireland, France, and the U.K. (Síofra Pierse, Ann Lewis, Ionna Galleron, James Hanrahan, Russell Goulbourne, and Catriona Seth). There are some excellent pieces in the collection, to which I shall come in a moment, but let me first say something about the framing.

The volume's theme, which was also that of the conference, is “Diderot's dark side” or “Le Diderot des ombres.” The term “dark” seems to be in the air at the moment, particularly in relation to the cinematic treatment of disturbing or taboo subjects and the filmic genre of gothic fantasy.[1] Here the editors and contributors use it to describe a wide range of well-known aspects of Diderot's writing, ranging from his interest in blindness, dreams, and the imagination as well as convents, ruins, and the origins of knowledge; his textual practices of contradiction, ambiguity, omission, and reversal; and his sceptical, materialist, and atheist stances. In fact, so inclusively are the concepts, images, and vocabulary of the dark and the shadows employed here that nothing seems to be ruled out. As a “side,” then, it is oddly all encompassing. Moreover, with the exception of Russell Goulbourne's piece, which is focused on Diderot's use of the word *ombre* and its cognates, *fantôme* and *spectre*, the other contributions to the volume have relatively little use for either shadows or the dark. Ann Lewis obligingly concludes her essay on images of prostitution in *Le neveu de Rameau* with a reference to Diderot's claim in the *Encyclopédie* that the meaning of a work full of satirical side-swipes at contemporaries will be shrouded in “ténèbres” for future readers who may not get the jokes and jibes (p. 109), but such a reference does nothing to illuminate the (excellent) analysis of *Le neveu* that precedes it.

Other contributors decide themselves to employ a vocabulary of darkness and light to describe phenomena that Diderot does not himself describe in such terms: Síofra Pierse's wide-ranging essay uses the standard image of doubt as a shadow, but she also, and with rather less obvious motivation, describes the Nephew's claim that a good writer could be “a successful womaniser” as “a typically Diderotian, mischievous focus on matters dark” (p. 68). And Catriona Seth, channelling Nodier, brings the volume to a close on the following triumphalist note: “Diderot des ombres et des ruines, Diderot obscur, peut-être, mais Diderot obscur donc pour mieux ressortir sur fond de Ciel d'orage avec la fulgurance des grands génies” (p. 238).[2] So, while the volume provides ample evidence of the richly paradoxical meanings of darkness and light in Western culture, something Diderot had himself, of course, explored and exploited in *Lettre sur les aveugles*, it seems to me that neither the notion of “a dark side” to Diderot nor that of a Diderot of “the shadows” offers a particularly useful conceptual framework

for reading his work. That said, most of the contributions have something interesting to offer, and some are of very great interest.

The introduction by Síoira Pierse and James Hanrahan opens with the brilliantly baffling analogy for truth offered by Diderot in the *Encyclopédie* article, “Socratique,” namely “un fil qui part d'une extrémité des ténèbres et qui se perd de l'autre dans les ténèbres,” baffling because the brightest point on the line, “le point indivisible et lumineux” is not where truth lies, but is simply “le terme de notre faible raison” (quoted on p. 1). The editors then attempt the difficult task of accounting for the volume's three sections, entitled “Narrative Inversions,” “Uneasy Ambiguities,” and “Embracing the Dark Side,” and of making links between the contributions. In what follows, I attempt something rather easier, namely an assessment of each contribution on its own terms.

The first piece by Marie-Anne Bohn on the *Supplément au 'Voyage' de Bougainville* is difficult to grasp, and the editors' presentation of it in their introduction (pp. 11-12) suggest they too had difficulty saying quite what it was getting at. The main difficulty resides, I think, in the fact that the author does not explain in any detail what “le travail du négatif” is, though we are told, in passing, that it “renvoie au refoulement en psychanalyse,” and that Hegel considered it to be “le moteur de la pensée” (p. 21). Nor does she situate her reading of the *Supplément* in its light in relation to the existing scholarship on the text and its contradictions. Admittedly, that scholarship is vast, but the essay's bibliography overlooks the major contributions.[3]

The overall argument of Héléne David's contribution on dreams and *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* is also rather elusive, and the bibliography rather minimal. (Where Bohn cites the preface to an edition of the *Supplément* by her supervisor, Michel Delon[4], Héléne David does not mention that of hers, Caroline Jacot-Grapa, whose *Dans le vif du sujet* (2009) shares some of her concerns.[5]) This aside, there are a number of fascinating observations and local demonstrations in David's piece. For instance, it opens with a very striking juxtaposition between d'Alembert and Diderot's views on the epistemological value of abstractions, which they both couch in the language of light and dark. D'Alembert asserts that: “les notions les plus abstraites, celles que le commun des hommes regarde comme les plus inaccessibles, sont souvent celles qui portent avec elles une plus grande lumière. L'obscurité s'empare de nos idées à mesure que nous examinons dans un objet des propriétés sensibles” (*Discours préliminaire*, quoted on p. 37); while Diderot claims: “Les grandes abstractions ne comportent qu'une lueur sombre. L'acte de généralisation tend à dépouiller les concepts de tout ce qu'ils ont de sensible. A mesure que cet acte s'avance, les spectres corporels s'évanouissent; les notions se retirent peu à peu de l'imagination vers l'entendement; et les idées deviennent purement intellectuelles” (*Pensées sur l'Interprétation de la nature*, quoted on p. 37). Diderot's claim merits more attention that David is able to give it, and it is a shame that these “spectres corporels” do not figure in Goulbourne's chapter on Diderot's ghosts. For David, this opposition between Diderot and d'Alembert on the question of the role of bodily experience in the acquisition of true knowledge accounts for Diderot's setting up of d'Alembert in the *Rêve*, in which, asleep, his body demonstrates the very propositions of which he was sceptical when awake. David focuses her analysis on the moment she refers to as “l'épisode febrile” (p. 45, p. 53), making interesting connections to the *Éléments de physiologie*, though they lead her to play down the comic and erotic nature of the episode, and to attribute it instead to “la réflexion excessive” (p. 53).

Síoira Pierse focuses her attention on what she calls “subversive scepticism” and “narrative doubt,” which she investigates by way of a comparison between two texts that scholars have rarely considered bringing together, namely *La Promenade du sceptique* and *Jacques le fataliste*. Her idea is, then, an original one, and her focus is on the way in which both these texts stage characters with philosophical commitments that make them behave in cruel or comic or absurd ways. However, while the examples are well chosen and interesting, the overall argument is rather difficult to follow, making it hard to sign up to her concluding injunction, namely that “Doubt must penetrate into our every moment of reading

and relaxation” (p. 83). And her very final assertion has itself, I thought, a touch of the comic about it: “Diderot embraces the bottomless well of doubt” (p. 83).

The second section of the volume opens with Ann Lewis's piece, which reads *Le neveu de Rameau* as what she calls “a prostitution narrative” (p. 88). Developing an observation made by the much regretted René Démoris, “*Le neveu de Rameau s'ouvre et se ferme sur une vue de derrière*” (quoted in note 7, p. 90), Ann Lewis explores the numerous references to prostitutes and prostitution, whoring and pimping, money and sex that pervade the text, tracing their links to freedom and *libertinage* as well as to servitude and alienation. As she points out: “barely a page goes past without an anecdote or reference to the literal act of prostitution” (p. 94), and prostitution “become[s] a metaphor for social relations more widely” (p. 95). In relation to that second point, Lewis might have made more of the figure of the courtier in *Le neveu*, but overall, this is a very stimulating essay, attuned to the complex patterns of echoes and reversals in Diderot's most challenging text. *Le neveu* is on the *agrégation* next year, and I hope the *agrégatifs* will read Lewis's essay.

Marc Hersant's essay tackles what he calls the “aspects obscurs” (p. 121) of *La Religieuse*, arguing that the novel's famous “incohérences,” its contradictions, the fact that the narrator seems not to know things that the reader knows she must know, and in particular, its use of the first person, which he finds “particulièrement trouble” (p. 121), are best explained by way of “l'idée d'un inconscient de l'œuvre” (p. 127). The argument, articulated in dialogue and dispute with Christophe Martin's work on the novel, is that there are too many moments when the first-person narrator sounds not so much like a nun as the author “*lui-même*” (Hersant's italics, p. 123), that the narrator's portrait of Croismare makes him sound like “*Diderot lui-même*” (Hersant's italics, p. 122), and that the temporal logic is undone by another logic that he terms “quasi onirique” (p. 127).^[6] In short, Hersant imagines Diderot in a state of semi-trance, writing the novel to himself with: “un sentiment 'existentiel' de vérité comparable, dans son intensité fulgurante, à celui du rêve, et s'accommodant comme lui de bien des 'scories' que son élan créateur d'une formidable énergie charrie sans les remarquer” (p. 128). Whether or not the reader is persuaded by the argument, there can be little doubt that the expression of it would have benefitted from some firm editorial intervention, notably the single sentence that runs from p. 112 to p. 114, and which is preceded by one beginning: “Ce n'est pas ici le lieu de revenir longuement” (p. 112)! Is the rogue presence of a capital letter, following a semi-colon on p. 114, the sign of an abortive attempt by one of the editors to intervene?

Ioana Galleron explores the numerous references to ghosts in *Le Fils naturel* and the melancholic, haunted temperament of its central character, Dorval. She argues that such features of the play work to unsettle generic classification, making it more tragic than comic or bourgeois and domestic: “Les malheurs qui menacent le personnage diderotien apparaissent [...] souvent moins comme le résultat d'une errance de l'humanité des hommes, susceptibles de se dissiper grâce à la philosophie ou à la refondation sociale dans un espace utopique, que comme le résultat d'une conjoncture où les responsabilités individuelles ne sont pas nettes, voire d'une force mystérieuse et incontrôlable. La réflexion sur la société est concurrencée, dans le théâtre diderotien, par la nostalgie du *fatum* grec, qui le peuple d'ombres venues d'en haut ou du plus intime du personnage” (p. 133). The argument is convincing, though it is a shame that Galleron seems not to know Caroline Weber's 2003 article on *Le Fils naturel*^[7], with which it might have been placed in fruitful dialogue: Weber attends to many of the same passages as Galleron but reads them in a wholly different manner, emphasising the bourgeois over the tragic, and arguing that it is Dorval's knowledge that his father is a plantation-owner in Martinique and that his own fortune is thus inextricably bound up with slavery that accounts for his melancholy and his constant references to ghosts.

Images of the unknown and unknowable in the context of the question of the origin of life are the subject of James Hanrahan's contribution. He attends to the place of analogy and conjecture in Diderot's natural philosophy, and, more originally, to the ways in which a text such as *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* either

elides the question or dissolves it by means of an emphasis on constant change. His readings are persuasive, and he is right to suggest (p. 165, note 78) that a fruitful area of further enquiry would involve comparing the image of the origin in Diderot's scientific and political works. This could, I thought, be compared to Rousseau's political works, not mentioned, but in which moments of origin are also so insistently present and so often elided. I look forward to the next instalment.

Edward O'Sullivan's contribution is focussed on a selection of articles from the first two volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, ranging from "Adorer, honorer, révéler" to "Célibat" via "Arabes," "Aschariouns," "Asiatiques," "Autorité politique," "Bramines," "Canon," and "Casuiste," in which Diderot is critical of Christianity and, more generally, religious belief. There is much of interest here, though the analyses would have benefitted from being situated in relation to Bayle's *Dictionnaire critique*, which Diderot quotes in both "Asiatiques" and "Bramines,"[8] as well as the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, with which, as many scholars have shown, the *Encyclopédie* has such close and polemical ties.[9] A methodological quibble of a different sort is that, on some occasions, O'Sullivan seems not so much to analyse the views expressed by Diderot as to express them himself; witness, for instance, the slippery "the inherent vagaries and uncertainties of Christianity as exposed by Diderot" (pp. 183-4).

Russell Goulbourne's essay on Diderot's ghosts is, as mentioned earlier, perhaps the most obviously engaged with the terminology of the volume. It very convincingly demonstrates the claim that "*Fantômes* and *spectres* figure more significantly in Diderot's thought than has hitherto been recognized" (p. 196).[10] Goulbourne opens and closes his demonstration with Diderot's 1767 commentary on Lagrénée's *Le Dauphin mourant, environné de sa famille*, which shows, as the accompanying high-quality reproduction confirms, the dying Dauphin, his two sons at the foot of his bed and his wife to his side, about to receive the crown of stars from a hovering angelic figure also wearing a blue sash, which identifies him as the ghost of the Dauphin's own son who had died four years earlier, aged nine. Diderot did not think much of the painting, observing, among many other things: "tous ces bambins avec leur cordon bleu, sans en excepter le revenant de l'autre monde avec son cordon bleu; l'inadvertance de la mère et des frères, pour le revenant; le parti qu'on pouvait tirer de ce revenant pour donner à la scène un peu d'intérêt et de mouvement" (quoted on p. 194). For Goulbourne, this means that the "presence of the ghost is a problem" in the painting because it is "an intrusion of the imaginary into the real [...] and lacks the kind of *vraisemblance* needed if a work of art is properly to move the spectator" (p. 195), and he argues, taking his cue from what Diderot's says of Deshayes's *La Vision de Saint Jérôme* (quoted on p. 213), that, in order to please Diderot, Lagrénée should have painted not the ghost but the Dauphin seeing his first-born appear to him in his mind's eye (p. 213). I don't think this is quite right, not because such a thing would be hard to convey visually—Diderot is forever making difficult suggestions—but because Lagrénée's painted ghost is presented, rather, as a missed opportunity ("le parti qu'on pouvait tirer de ce revenant"), and later in the same *Salon*, it is clear that the problem lies in the relative importance of the blue-sashed apparition and the deathbed scene, which Lagrénée has made the mistake of inverting: "Oh! oui, il faut en convenir, ce tableau du Dauphin est d'un beau faire; mais l'accessoire est devenu le principal; et le principal, l'accessoire; c'est une bagatelle. [...] Je veux dire que la vraie scène, c'était la scène de séparation du père, de la mère et des enfants; scène de désolation, au milieu de laquelle je n'aurais pas désapprouvé que ce petit revenant descendît du ciel par un angle de la toile, apportant la couronne immortelle à son père." [11] So I think Diderot's ghost corpus is, in fact, even richer than Goulbourne suggests, for this is one ghost that Diderot imagines could appear as "an objective irreality" (p. 212) on canvas to persuasive effect.

The final contribution is that of Catriona Seth on ruins, a topical intervention, given the magnificent Hubert Robert exhibition currently on show at the Louvre and transferring to Washington later in the year [12], which offers ample demonstration that Robert was not, as Seth suggests, merely attuned to "la simple qualité pittoresque" of ruins in contrast to Diderot whose "grand mérite est d'avoir perçu dans la ruine une dimension philosophique" (p. 232). Quite the contrary, Robert's paintings make powerful visual arguments about, for instance, the nature of the present, and "*lire les ruines*" (Seth's emphasis, p.

220) is far from being the particular practice of the man of letters—Robert easily rivals Diderot in the invention of Latin inscriptions.[13] The main point of Seth's essay is to demonstrate, which she convincingly does, the three-fold importance of ruins in Diderot's work (historical, æsthetic, and metaphysical), though in the course of her demonstration, a fourth aspect of ruins emerges, much the most interesting, I thought, namely their self-reflexive value, the way Diderot has ruins figure the uncertainties of literary posterity (p. 233-5). In evidence, Seth quotes Diderot's letter to Voltaire of 19 February 1758: “Il vient un temps où toutes les cendres sont mêlées. Alors, que m'importera d'avoir été Voltaire ou Diderot, et que ce soient vos trois syllabes ou les trois miennes qui restent?” (quoted on p. 235). Robert, it might be noted, had no less an interest in the material uncertainties of posterity and, as Charlotte Guichard has shown,[14] he inscribed his name not only on the crumbling ruins of his paintings,[15] but also on the actual walls of the Villa Farnese in Rome.[16] A topical and stimulating essay then, inviting further reflection on the instabilities of art objects of many kinds.

It is perhaps surprising to find nothing in the volume on *clair-obscur*, a phenomenon Diderot wrote about in the *Essais sur la peinture*,[17] nor any reference to Mark Darlow and Marion Lafouge's recent special issue of the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* devoted to it.[18] That aside, the volume offers readers a good deal of material in terms of both range and depth to engage with, albeit, perhaps, not most productively in relation to shadows and the dark. A couple of non-negligible errors should be signalled here: “Puisieux” (p. 65) should read “Puisseaux”, and “amollissé” (p. 162) is not the past participle of “amollir.”

LIST OF ESSAYS

Marie-Anne Bohn, “Travailler les ombres, travailler le négatif : l'exemple du *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*”

Hélène David, “Le *Rêve de d'Alembert*: les lumières de d'Alembert à l'ombre du songe, ou comment d'Alembert perdit la raison et conquiert le *cosmos*”

Síofra Pierse, “Subversive Scepticism: Diderot and Narrative Doubt”

Ann Lewis, “Venality, Theatricality and Sociability: *Le Neveu de Rameau* as a Prostitution Narrative”

Marc Hersant, “Vertiges de *La Religieuse*”

Ioana Galleron, “La Mélancolie de Dorval”

James Hanrahan, “Diderot on Origins, a *zone d'ombre* of Enlightenment Thought”

Edward O'Sullivan, “The Shadows Around the Light: Diderot's Play on Obscurity for the Purposes of Subversion in the *Encyclopédie*”

Russell Goulbourne, “Diderot's Ghosts”

Catriona Seth, “Le Goût des ruines”

NOTES

[1] In December 2012, *The Guardian* ran a series called “Darkness in Literature”: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/darkness-in-literature>; I understand that John Lyons (University of Virginia) is currently working on a project entitled “The Dark Thread,” the corpus for which ranges from d'Aubigné's *Histoires tragiques* to the gothic novel.

[2] The bibliographical references for Nodier's essay are missing from the volume; see Charles Nodier, "De la prose française et de Diderot," *Revue de Paris* XV (June, 1830): 226-38.

[3] I am thinking of, for instance, of Georges Benrekassa, *Le Concentrique et l'excentrique : marges des Lumières* (Paris: Payot, 1980).

[4] Michel Delon, "Préface," in Denis Diderot, *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

[5] Caroline Jacot-Grapa, *Dans le vif du sujet. Diderot, corps et âme* (Paris: Garnier, 2009).

[6] Christophe Martin, *Christophe Martin commente 'La Religieuse' de Diderot* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

[7] Caroline Weber, "The Sins of the Father: Colonialism and Family History in Diderot's *Le fils naturel*," *PMLA* (May, 2003): pp. 488-501.

[8] See, for instance, Isabelle Moreau, "L'araignée dans sa toile: Mises en image de l'âme du monde de François Bernier et Bayle à l'*Encyclopédie*," in Isabelle Moreau ed., *Les Lumières en mouvement: La circulation des idées au 18e siècle* (Lyon: ENS, 2009), pp. 199-228.

[9] See, for instance, Robert Morin, "Diderot, l'*Encyclopédie* et le *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*," *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie* 7 (1989): 71-122; Marie Leca-Tsiomis, *Écrire l'Encyclopédie. Diderot : de l'usage des dictionnaires à la grammaire philosophique* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, *SVEC* 375, 1999).

[10] In addition to Jean-Paul Sermain's article (cited in note 47, p. 210), it would have been good to see reference made to Marian Hobson's work on *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien*, in which she carefully tracks the shifts in meaning and value of the term *fantôme* (Marian Hobson, "The Paradoxe sur le comédien is a Paradox", in Kate E. Tunstall and Caroline Warman, eds. and trans., *Diderot and Rousseau: Networks of Enlightenment* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, *SVEC* 2011:04), pp. 33-63, esp. 42-48).

[11] Denis Diderot, *Salons III: Ruines et paysages*, eds. Else Marie Bukdahl, Michel Delon, Annette Lorenceau (Paris: Hermann, 1995), p. 161. The words are attributed to Naigeon in the text.

[12] *Hubert Robert (1733-1808), un peintre visionnaire*, Musée du Louvre, Paris (9 March–30 May 2016) and National Gallery of Art, Washington (26 June–2 October 2016).

[13] See, for instance, the inscription, "Et EGO PASTOR IN ARCADIA", in *Paysage de cascade avec les bergers d'Arcadie* (1789), and "Dum spiro spero" and "Carcer socratis/Domus Honoris" in *L'artiste dans sa cellule* (1794).

[14] Charlotte Guichard, *Graffitis. Inscrive son nom à Rome (XVIe-XIXe siècles)* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

[15] See, for instance, *L'arc de triomphe et le théâtre d'Orange* (1787), and *Obélisque brisé autour duquel dansent des jeunes filles* (1798).

[16] The graffiti is reproduced here: <http://www.journal18.org/issue1/scratched-surfaces-artists-graffiti-in-eighteenth-century-rome/>

[17] Denis Diderot, "Tout ce que j'ai compris de ma vie du clair-obscur" and "Examen du clair-obscur," in *Essais sur la peinture pour faire suite au Salon de 1765*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini, 5 vols (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993-99), IV (1996), pp. 477-486.

[18] *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 37/4 (2014).

Kate E. Tunstall
University of Oxford, Worcester College
kate.tunstall@worc.ox.ac.uk

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172