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Robert Zaretsky, *Catherine & Diderot: The Empress, the Philosopher, and the Fate of the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. 272 pp. Notes, acknowledgements, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-674-73790-7.

Review by Mary McAlpin, University of Tennessee.

The publication of Robert Zaretsky's account of the visit by Denis Diderot to the court of Empress Catherine II is well timed, for there appears to be something of a renaissance of interest in the French philosopher, at least in the United States. *Catherine & Diderot* has already been the subject of review essays in *The New Yorker*, by Adam Gopnik, and *The New York Review of Books*, by Lynn Hunt.[1] Both reviewers pair Zaretsky's work with Andrew S. Curran's *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*, and take the opportunity to promote Diderot's thought more generally.[2] These pieces have no doubt helped to bring *Catherine & Diderot* to the attention of its intended readership of educated non-specialists, but scholars in the field of eighteenth-century studies have much to learn from this work as well, and they will find this lively narrative by a respected public historian a pleasure to read. A professor at the University of Houston, Zaretsky is the author of works on such diverse figures as Albert Camus and James Boswell, and co-author of an account of the falling out between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume.[3]

Diderot's stay in Saint Petersburg lasted from October 1773 until March 1774. While passages on the visit are included in the many biographies of Catherine the Great, with even longer passages in works devoted to the life and writings of Diderot, Zaretsky notes in his prologue that "there are, remarkably, no historical narratives devoted exclusively to an event that had galvanized the attention of enlightened Europe" (p. 2). This visit was, in other words, a much-publicized and analyzed international affair, with far-reaching consequences for what Zaretsky refers to in his subtitle as the "fate of the Enlightenment." Mining Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine for references to the visit, for example, Zaretsky contrasts the Sage of Ferney's obsequious praise of the Empress to Diderot's straightforward approach to conversing with royalty, be it in epistolary exchanges or in person.

The most remarkable aspect of Diderot's sojourn in Saint Petersburg, as Zaretsky emphasizes, was the unexpected opportunity to converse in private with Catherine on a regular basis. During their first meeting, Catherine pointed to the door leading to her apartments and informed the philosopher that it would be open for him from 3 to 5 p.m. every day. Zaretsky examines the quite different expectations that the philosopher and the ruler brought to these conversations by incorporating what are essentially side-by-side biographies into his account of

Diderot's Russian adventure. A central consideration is why the 60-year-old Parisian, who practically never traveled, would undertake such an onerous journey, leaving behind his books, his friends, and above all his beloved daughter, who was expecting her first child. Zaretsky concludes that Diderot had no choice, for without Catherine's continuing financial assistance, he faced ruin. He nevertheless seized upon the opportunity to encourage the Empress to take her Enlightenment principles to a new level, particularly with regard to freeing the serfs—a goal that had no chance of success, as Zaretsky demonstrates. He also explains Catherine's motivations for inviting Diderot: in addition to the glory of counting this intellectual luminary among her courtiers, she had long been a serious student of French political and philosophical works. She was a subscriber to Friedrich Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* to the generous tune of 1,500 rubles a year (Grimm allowed subscribers to set their own prices), thus figuring among those "happy few" who received this forward-looking periodical (p. 120). That Grimm was present at the court during Diderot's visit, and the damage done to their friendship by the former's rivalry over access to the Empress, is one of the more interesting side stories to the main narrative.

While Diderot was disappointed by Catherine's seeming inability to put into practice the ideals she espoused, Catherine was, we learn, equally frustrated by the philosopher's lack of appreciation for the difficulties attendant upon running a far-flung kingdom. Her tenuous hold on power, given that she had gained her crown by a coup aimed at her incompetent husband, was a constant worry. She nevertheless greatly enjoyed her conversations with Diderot, placing him among the most extraordinary men who had ever lived. And he did not disappoint in terms of his radical behavior. He wore a simple black costume, in purposeful contrast to courtly norms, and he openly espoused materialist atheism. The episode that brought him the most anxiety, however, involved an order by the French ambassador, François-Michel Durand de Distroff, to pressure Catherine to change her foreign policy (Durand actually provided a written list of demands). Should Diderot refuse, it was strongly implied, he might well face a *lettre de cachet* and imprisonment in the Bastille upon his return.

Zaretsky's account of this and other, fascinating episodes from Diderot's stay in Saint Petersburg makes for an easy and informative read. As for the fate of the Enlightenment, Zaretsky seems to locate it, poignantly, as much in the continuing enslavement of the serfs as in the wrenching disappointment of Diderot, said to return to Paris "a diffident and dramatically aged man" (p. 193). There is nevertheless an element of hope in how, once home, Diderot continued to write critically on the topic of Catherine's rule and to push for social reform. Zaretsky is a great admirer, with reason, of "the subversive power" of Diderot's works, said to leave the reader of today "stunned to find an eighteenth-century writer whose technique and talent seem rooted in our own century" (p. 3). Unfortunately, the integration of these literary texts into the historical account of Diderot's trip is the weakest aspect of *Catherine & Diderot*. While the conversation between Orou and the Almoner in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* is certainly amusing, it at no point reads like "a literary collaboration between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Abbott and Costello" (p. 160). Far worse is the qualification of the *Bijoux indiscrets* as an "ancestor to Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*" (p. 44). However in awe of Diderot's mind and daring one might be, he was by no means a proto-feminist. His attitude toward women—Catherine and a few other exceptions aside—was condescending, at best.

Scholarly readers will also be put off by Zaretsky's occasional lapses into literariness of the historical-fiction variety, as when he has Catherine "smile" while inviting Voltaire to throw the

letter she is writing into the flames, “knowing full well” that her correspondent “would sooner throw his wig in the fire” (p. 32). But such moments are few and far between. The reader, academic or otherwise, should be confident in the author’s command of his materials and will certainly be drawn in by the many illuminating episodes that Zaretsky presents concerning Catherine, Diderot, and the Enlightenment more generally.

NOTES

[1] Adam Gopnik, “Diderot Dicta,” *The New Yorker*, Mar. 4, 2019; Lynn Hunt, “The Man Who Questioned Everything,” *The New York Review of Books*, Mar. 7, 2019.

[2] Andrew S. Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* (New York: Other Press, 2019).

[3] Robert Zaretsky, *A Life Worth Living: Albert Camus and the Quest for Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) and *Boswell’s Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Robert Zaretsky and John T. Scott, *The Philosophers’ Quarrel: Rousseau, Hume and the Limits of Human Understanding* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

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