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Andrew S. Curran, *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely*. New York: Other Press, 2019. 528pp. \$28.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1590516706; \$19.99 U.S. (pb.). ISBN 9-78-1635420395.

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It takes a rare talent to write a biography of a genius. Andrew Curran's *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* does not disappoint, painting a picture of the *philosophe* that is sure to reinvigorate interest in this crucial thinker of the eighteenth century and fascinate a new generation of scholars and readers to engage with his work. It had been over half a century since Arthur Wilson's *Diderot*, one of the most important English-language biographies of the Burgundian thinker.[1] Curran's work builds upon and supersedes the work in important ways. Curran's Diderot is firmly placed in the intellectual, political, and social context of his time, introducing the reader to the intricacies of life in the *ancien régime*. The Jansenist revolt, the economic reforms of Turgot, the disagreements between Diderot and Rousseau or those between Denis and his father Didier, whose expectations reflect the rising *bourgeoisie*, Diderot's relationships with his wife and Sophie Volland are all portrayed in an accessible and articulate manner. The genius of Diderot is exposed for what it was: a troubled, difficult, arduous path that led the man from a childhood in Langres in the provinces, to an impoverished yet fulfilled life in the capital and to travelling the world, both in spirit and in body. It will enchant those who have read Diderot at length, but also those who discover him through Curran's work. The biography's prose is eloquent and accessible, the arguments clear and well-defended, and the subtleties of Diderot's thought never glossed over. It is an enchanting read because Curran manages to make a difficult thinker accessible and to condense his thought without simplification. This is one of the biographies of great philosophers one must read, on a par with Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* or David Macey's *The Lives of Michel Foucault*. [2]

The book's twelve chapters conveniently group Diderot's thought into themes that follow a chronological order, without missing the subtleties in Diderot's *oeuvre* that come from his writings spanning four decades. In the chapter "Leaving God," the trajectory of the young Diderot's religious meanderings form part of his most important influences when it comes to thinking about the nature of determinism and the consequences of having a politically-active church. The philosophical and the political are married from the beginning, showing Diderot's intellectual yet practical concerns. If Diderot sides with English deists in his early days and favours Voltaire's fight against *l'infâme*, he moves further than most by embracing atheism in his *Letter on the blind*. Nevertheless, Curran manages to leave the door open to Diderot's religious ambiguity—an approach I also prefer. By focusing on his *Philosophical Thoughts*, where various voices are in dialogue competing over the reader's attention, Curran conveys an important lesson

about Diderot and religion: his thought is never fixed and constantly in flux, oscillating between outright atheism and a spiritual possibility. As always with Diderot, his philosophy is one of movement and ambiguity, and Curran does a fantastic job illustrating this.

Diderot's time in prison, following the publication of his early irreligious works, shows the danger of having unorthodox opinions in the mid-eighteenth century. Once again, Curran sets the scene beautifully, demonstrating how the political and international context affected the severity of the authorities' reaction to Diderot's works. France's withdrawal from the Austrian Netherlands (present-day Belgium) following the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 created widespread disillusionment and turmoil in the country, leading Louis XV to push the authorities to reassert control over the previously tolerated acts of religious speculation in the Kingdom. The entire episode tells the story of an arbitrary power, at times permitting the lucrative book market to explore contentious ideas and at times punishing those who transgress to create examples. The *lettre de cachet* that put Diderot behind bars was signed by the King himself, and Diderot's incarceration had no end date and did not have to follow a due legal process. It was an exemplar of the arbitrariness of the *régime*. If Diderot was not a card-carrying republican before this episode, he certainly was one after his release three months later: republican freedom from domination shows its importance in this defining episode of Diderot's life. If Diderot kept his word to the authorities, as Curran notes, by stopping the publication of his most radical works, he nonetheless continued writing them throughout his life, often left as a manuscript for posterity to discover but at times snuck into his later publications.

The vast majority of Diderot's work and effort in life went towards the publication of the *Encyclopédie*, to which Curran devotes two chapters of his work. The massive undertaking required the dedication and genius of a selfless planner, writer, and editor. A "systematic and critical treatment of the era's knowledge and its trades" (p. 102) could not have happened without Diderot and the help of a few others. Going much further than its predecessors, Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* or Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Diderot's *Encyclopedia* testify to the relentless and tireless dedication to an ideal that is the apotheosis of the Enlightenment. As Kant noted later, the "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred immaturity," and nowhere is this project clearer than in Diderot's articles on the monastic orders of the Cordeliers. The "humourless entry," Curran notes, cross-references the reader "to the article 'Hood,' a comical entry where Diderot explains that several religious orders, including the Cordeliers, have hotly debated the type and shape of hood that their order should wear." The century-long war between various hood factions, Diderot continues, "was just barely put to an end by the papal bulls of four popes" (p. 120). Diderot's censors missed the cross-reference, accepted the humourless Cordeliers article, and forgot to go back to other volumes of the work. Diderot may have promised the authorities to keep his work serious, but he cheekily inserted critique where he could get away with it. The backlash followed, however, once again motivated by political developments in the country. An attempt on Louis XV's life in 1757 saw the authorities once again crack down on dissent. The execution of Damiens, the want-to-be assassin, is described at length by Curran, setting the scene for the brutality of the *ancien régime*. He was drawn and quartered on the public square. Thirty-six times the four horses pulled to dismember the man before his executioners had to slice the limbs so they would finally be torn off. Helvétius, author of *De l'esprit*, suffered an easier fate. In 1758, this friend of the King's mistress was saved from an uncertain fate by his political connections, following his materialist speculations on the soul. He had to publicly retract some of his statements, which angered the religious dauphin who "reportedly stormed out of his apartment after reading it, screaming that he was going to show the queen some of the "beautiful

things that her maître d'hôtel had printed" (pp. 162-163). The King soon cracked down on the *Encyclopedia*, revoking the right to print the work in early 1759. As Curran notes, Diderot had by then made friends in high places: the chief censor Malesherbes himself alerted Diderot of an impending raid on the printers. This warning gave Diderot time to physically relocate his works, which he volunteered to safeguard at his own house. D'Alembert dropped the project after this, but thanks to the dedication of others, notably the baron d'Holbach and Louis de Jaucourt, Diderot was able to pursue the work and publish it outside of France. Diderot's genius is glaring once the completed work saw its last volumes published twenty-five years after the project started. "Although he rarely said a positive word about the *Encyclopédie* after the final volumes appeared, his labor had given him a panoramic understanding of knowledge that few people have ever achieved" (p. 176).

Diderot's systematising endeavour is supplemented by more literary, creative, and ultimately ambiguous messages in his other works. By choosing to discuss Diderot's thoughts on ethics through the prism of *Rameau's Nephew*, Curran manages to show just how complex and fascinating Diderot is. Unlike his friend d'Holbach, who systematised his ethics into a form of proto-utilitarianism, Diderot never quite believes that vice and virtue are simple concepts one can define once and for all. The two characters of the novel, *Moi* and *Lui*, show the alterity of one's own argument in the form of a dialogue. Whereas Curran thinks we can attribute the *Moi* to Diderot himself, it is not clear that this is the case. *Moi* and *Lui*, Me and Him, are literary figures that can just as well show the inner dialogue in Diderot's mind. The alterity of *Lui* is precisely a form of dialectic thinking that Diderot himself follows throughout his life. *Moi* is the idealised I, the one that Diderot would want to be. However, *Lui* is always there to remind that the self, one's identity, is more fragmented than one might think. As Curran himself notes, Freud's discovery of the unconscious has echoes in Diderot's work more than a hundred years before the discovery of psychoanalysis. What Curran does well here, despite my above critique, is to show the complexity of Diderot's thinking. One is always challenged to think outside one's comfort zone, even if that comfort zone is that of the author himself. "*Rameau's Nephew* came into being because its author was willing to subject his own beliefs to the same brutal method of interrogation that he had used when cross-examining religion" (p. 198). A similar method of critical dialogue with oneself is also evident in Diderot's meanderings about art, as Curran shows.

One of Curran's most original contributions to Diderot scholarship is surely his treatment of *D'Alembert's Dream* as a piece of science fiction. This attempt to put into story form a set of debates held at d'Holbach's dinner parties demonstrates the versatility of Diderot as an author. When it comes to speculating about the future, Diderot knew that it was not in the form of abstract philosophical treatises that it was best to write. Combining the Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* with the latest speculations about the nature of the universe, Diderot muses over the nature of the spontaneous generation of life and matter and the place that humanity occupies in this entirely materialist universe. The book ultimately "mocks humanity's supposedly special place in the universe and invites us in the process to reconsider the eternal categories that supposedly define us, be they man and woman, animal and human, and even monstrous and normal" (p. 258). In the age of the Anthropocene, critical gender theory, and post-structuralist deconstruction, Diderot seems strangely comfortable with our contemporary debates and controversies.

Sex and love are important parts of human life, which Diderot did not shy away from analysing in detail. Elements of autobiography are spread throughout his work. *The Nun* says as much

about Diderot's anguish following his sister's descent into insanity in a convent in his native Langres as about his attitude to religion. The book, which portrays scenes of lesbian love and onanism, was so controversial that when adapted to the cinema in 1966, it was censored under Charles de Gaulle's government (p. 266). When commenting on Bougainville's voyage to Tahiti, Diderot similarly makes us think about human sexuality by exploring themes of human hermaphroditism. Diderot's love for Sophie Volland has struck generations of readers by the sheer volume of their correspondence. Out of the 553 letters Diderot wrote to his mistress, 187 survived and painted a picture of love going much beyond their physical encounters. True to his materialist outlook, Diderot conceives of his eternal love for Sophie as the continuation of a molecular attraction between their decaying bodies after their death. "This search culminates in the highest tribute one could make to a lover: fusing together to create 'a whole' or 'common being'" (p. 314) Whoever said materialists could not be spiritual has clearly never read Diderot.

The voyage to Russia forms the last and most exciting voyage of the philosophe. Though he had travelled many times through his books, to ancient Greece in the *Philosophical Thoughts*, to the future in *D'Alembert's Dream*, to Tahiti in his *Supplement*, Diderot had never physically known the world outside of the road linking Burgundy to the capital. Diderot, who was imprisoned by his own King, found a patron and financier in the Empress of Russia, Catherine the Great. Catherine repeatedly reached out to Diderot and provided him with a generous income in exchange for being the curator of his own library and works, which she bought from him and shipped to St Petersburg after his death. Diderot, indebted to her generosity, finally accepted her invitation to travel to see her and made the trip in 1773-4, spending months in the Dutch city of The Hague on the way before staying five months in the Russian capital. They conversed for hours together, the Russian monarch generously giving the French philosopher much of her time. Few, if any of the reforms Diderot pushed for her to implement came to fruition, but a body of work on politics by the *philosophe* was left for posterity to admire. His attempts to create a parliament in the Empire (the permanent *Nakaz*), secularise the *régime*, or have the capital moved closer to the centre of the Empire all fell on deaf ears. The trip did little to change Diderot's attitudes towards monarchs. On the return trip, he snubbed Frederick the Great's attempts to lure him to Potsdam on the way back. Bitter over Frederick's attack on the baron d'Holbach's works, "Diderot wrote a response (unpublished) in which he sounds more like Danton than Diderot: 'I will no longer patiently put up with a highborn wretch who insults me because he is the last of his race--me, who am perhaps the first of mine'" (p. 341). Friendly with Catherine but hostile to monarchs, Diderot did not suddenly think that enlightened despotism was a good political path to follow. The radical Enlightenment remained fiercely republican in Diderot's thought.

Curran's remarkable painting of Diderot concludes with a portrait of which Diderot himself would have been proud. The American, French, and Haitian revolutions of the eighteenth century owe much to the radicalism of Diderot's late works, notably his contribution to Raynal's *History of the Two Indies*. Curran's *Diderot and the Art of Thinking Freely* is a testament to the relevance of this genius to posterity, to future generations, and an attempt to pay back this debt to the one who gave us so much through his hard work, dedication, and unusual insights. This debt can never be repaid. Curran's book is simply our generation's tribute to the unending gratefulness humanity will owe to Denis Diderot. One could not have hoped for a better prayer and a more articulate funeral oration for the materialist thinker who took the continuation of spirit so seriously.

NOTES

[1] Arthur Wilson, *Diderot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[2] Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991); David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993).

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