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Alexander Wenger, *Le Médecin et le philosophe: Théophile de Bordeu selon Diderot*. Paris: Hermann-Essais, 2012. 131 pp. Abbreviations, bibliography. 17€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-7056-8333-7.

Review by Andrew H. Clark, Fordham University.

As disciplinary boundaries in academia become increasingly porous and interdisciplinary projects frequent, understanding how to negotiate and bridge those boundaries becomes all the more necessary. Alexandre Wenger's elegantly written and beautifully researched *Le Médecin et le philosophe* makes that attempt. As a Ph.D. in literature with a thesis on the medical discourse of reading who is professor and chair of Medicine and Society at the University of Fribourg's School of Science in the Department of Medicine, Wenger's daily research and teaching responsibilities involve increasing the dialogue between the humanities and the sciences. Such a commitment to demonstrating the imbricated nature between literature and medicine, and between content and form, informed his first book, *La Fibre littéraire: Le discours médical sur la lecture au XVIIIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2007) and also informs this one.

Proposing Diderot's model in the *Rêve de d'Alembert* as one that is critical of authority and *idées fixes*, Wenger argues for the *Rêve's* pertinence not just to eighteenth-century literary history but also to the history of science. Through an intricate analysis of the *Rêve*, Wenger wishes to reunite that which the nineteenth century separated with its increasing authoritative positivism and specialization. Too often historians of science have not included texts such as the *Rêve* in their corpus because they are considered too literary (p. 31). As a critical engagement in the *Rêve* with the construction of "grand hommes" and "grands médecins" and the role such men play in the acquisition of knowledge, Wenger emphasizes the dialogue between literature and the history of science necessary to unpack these reified myths and divisions. "Ils [ces parcours croisés] nous invitent à nous demander s'il ne faut pas remettre en cause nos partitions intellectuelles, qu'elles se situent entre l'esthétique et la médecine, la littérature et la philosophie, ou la fiction et la science" (p. 33).

In typical French academic fashion, Wenger's book is divided into three parts, although one sees immediately in this structure a gesture to the tripartite division of Diderot's *Rêve*. After an informative introduction that sketches the dialogic nature of Diderot's work, a quick biography of the real vitalist doctor and physiologist, Théophile de Bordeu, and reasons for Diderot's choice of him as the character "Bordeu," the book is divided into the following: 1. Diderot lecteur de Bordeu; II. Bordeu selon Diderot; III. Formes du savoir. These three parts are followed by a postface—Diderot biologist—in which Wenger provides the theoretical underpinnings and rationale for his book.

Why did Diderot choose Bordeu, the vitalist doctor from Montpellier who made his way to Paris, became physician to the king, contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, author of important works on the relative autonomy of organs, and participant in the social milieu of the literary salons which Diderot frequented as well? And what should one call the *Rêve*: novel? play? scientific treatise? philosophical dialogue? *éloge* to materialism? gallant conversation? These two questions underline the essential discussion of Wenger's Introduction. Wenger shows quickly that he will approach these questions and the heteroclitic nature of the *Rêve* with a multipronged approach, one that pivots between literary analysis, historical

documents, and a keen knowledge of eighteenth-century medical and physiological theories in order to separate fact from fiction. From historical renderings of Bordeu, we move to a history of the fictional representations of doctors in novels and plays at the time that takes us from the doctor figures in the *Commedia dell'arte* and Molière's plays to novels such as *Gil Blas*, to Sade, and even to fictive works written by doctors, a topic Wenger discussed extensively in his previous book.

All of these fictional works point to the distance between the doctors' image of themselves and their actual competencies, adumbrating Diderot's choice to represent a doctor in his work and his particular choice of Bordeu. Despite a long tradition of the doctor as a comic buffoon, an increasing diversification of the roles of doctors in French fiction became visible in the eighteenth century. [1] An analysis of such roles offers insights into the way in which people conceived of medicine at the time, and the way in which fictional and actual understandings overlapped. The jump from the fictional to the social is the kind of exemplary and ideological move Wenger, who wants to emphasize the dialogue between medicine and fiction more generally, attempts throughout this book.

After underlying the relevance of the medical representations in fiction, Wenger finishes the introduction by briefly analyzing the other medical characters in Diderot's *œuvre* and the actual genesis of the *Rêve* from a dialogue between Démocrite, Hippocrate and Leucippe to the modernized form it eventually took. Wenger finds this modernization fundamental as it allowed Diderot to embody and situate his philosophical reflections and incorporate the latest scientific research into his theory of materialism (p. 27). Rather than rehearsing the old debates of antiquity, Diderot put his reflections in the present with the actual actors of current science in eighteenth-century France. As such, Diderot also created characters and genres that spoke to contemporaries. As a personal acquaintance of Diderot's, one who had a similar belief in theories of sensibility and organicism, was adept at narrating the body's signs, was familiar with natural history, and was also caught up in his own scandals and potentially compromised positions, Bordeu presented a perfect *character* to place on stage.

In his first chapter, "Diderot lecteur de Bordeu," focusing on three texts of Bordeu's in particular (the article "Crise" in the *Encyclopédie*, his radically interesting *Recherches anatomiques sur la position des glandes*, and his *Recherches de l'histoire de la médecine*) Wenger attempts to bring together the figure of the great doctor and the great actor rehearsing the physiological theories exposed in Bordeu and performed in the *Rêve* and attempting to situate some of Diderot's theories, like the theory of genius and the great actor, in Bordeu's writing. For those who haven't read the work of Roselyn Rey or Anne Vila, Wenger provides clear summaries of the theories of vitalism, active and inert sensibilities, and organicism that are so fundamental in Diderot's works. [2] Both the great actor and the great doctor are observers and interpreters who know how to transform their observations, "à travers un geste actif de représentation, une dramaturgie expressive," into something powerful and meaningful through the art of composition (p. 46).

While Wenger demonstrates throughout this chapter that Diderot was a careful reader of Bordeu, pointing to many passages of the two that are incredibly similar, I would have liked to know more about Bordeu as a reader of Diderot. How did Diderot's ideas inform Bordeu's representations and compositions, his analogies and metaphors? One cannot help thinking that much of what Bordeu wrote had already been articulated by Diderot in one form or another in *De l'interprétation de la nature* and other early texts. In Wenger's careful analysis, perhaps more interesting than pinpointing what specifically Bordeu wrote that Diderot borrowed, is the extent to which he shows the various ideas, metaphors, and structures circulating at the time. [3] Wenger is particularly effective at showing how Bordeu's own scientific texts borrowed from fictional devices in order to communicate his theories more effectively. The use of language and structures was a way for the doctor to insert himself in the intellectual milieu, to take part in Enlightened discourse.

Despite the referentiality that occurs in the *Rêve* which Wenger reveals convincingly—Bordeu's seductive medical visits, his preference for checking the pulse, his colic, even his cuffs—Wenger notes that Diderot's Bordeu relied primarily on the exigencies of the text. As such, Wenger's interpretative model is similar to the theory of organicism in Diderot and Bordeu that he explains. The references create a series of autonomous parts (i.e., other texts written by Bordeu, anecdotes recounted in letters and the press), but Wenger is always interested in reconnecting these parts to the dynamics of the whole—the text—that far exceeds these individual moments. Thus, Bordeu's mention of colic can be read as a reference to his *Recherches sur la colique du Poitou* (1762-3), but more important is its function in the economy of Diderot's text. The mention of colic with its scatological humor returns the text to its comical theatrical register that levels the otherwise too self-possessing and authoritative medical discourse. Moreover, Wenger argues that this displacement plays an important role in the systematic debunking of authority in Diderot's text: "La référence à la colique introduit du jeu dans le discours d'autorité du « grand homme ». A ce titre, elle est révélatrice d'un procédé partout à l'œuvre dans le *Rêve*: en effet, si l'autorité épistémique de Bordeu est légitime, l'argument d'autorité est quant à lui rejeté. Autrement dit, le personnage de Bordeu n'est pas un simple prétexte à l'énonciation dogmatique. Au contraire, Diderot contrebalance l'autorité scientifique par le contexte de comédie au sein duquel elle s'énonce" (pp. 64-5). This textual dynamic, which undermines and repositions utterances of authority, marks Diderot's brilliance.

Perhaps the most interesting discovery in the book is Wenger's close analysis of Diderot's rarely discussed work, *Mystification* (1768), written at the same time as the *Rêve*, which Wenger reads as a kind of comic foil to the *Rêve*'s representation of the medical doctor, one that actively seeks to dialogue with the *Rêve* and undo the authoritative figure of Bordeu. The play recounts the story of Desbrosses, a charlatan disguised as a Turkish doctor, who treats Mlle. Dornet for vapors. He has also come to recover portraits for M. le prince de Gallitzin that were left there with Gallitzin's previous mistress. As in Molière's plays, Desbrosses uses the authority of the doctor's costume to pronounce ridiculous discourses that make a mockery of the often pretentious and sycophantic language of doctors during the period. We see Diderot's critical debunking of this supposed medical authority through caricature. As in other medical comedies, the role of the doctor is at once to seduce his patient and to make us laugh, and the seduction scenes represented are quite explicit and comic with Desbrosses reaching up Mlle. Dornet's skirt to feel her emaciated hip.

We thus see literalized here what is only suggested in the flirtatious exchanges between Espinasse and Bordeu in the *Rêve*. As in the *Rêve*, the effectiveness and intrigue of the plot come in large part from the denotative slippage that occurs between the fictive characters and the real persons they double. Desbrosses points to the historic Desbrosses who ends up committing suicide, giving a potential dénouement to the fictional work. The other characters are all known to Diderot and figured in his correspondence during the time of the work's composition. Even the scenario for the play itself is supposedly based on Diderot being called by Catherine the Great's minister, Dmitri Golitsyn, to secure portraits of a former mistress left in Falconet's *petite maison*. Wenger shows effectively that Desbrosses and Bordeu share a number of traits and that Diderot makes use of the active comparison between the two works and elements of the real as means to critique and unfix the more authoritative claims and posturing by Bordeu in the *Rêve*. Through these intertextual readings, Diderot cautions us to be suspicious of our constructions of the "grand homme."

In his third part, "Formes du Savoir," Wenger argues against the idea that the *Rêve* is a work of "vulgarization," a layman's version of a physiological treatise. He hopes to recuperate the *Rêve* for the history of science. To do so he returns us again to *Mystification*, this time to show us that Desbrosses is actually based on an anecdote of the real doctor Antoine Petit, another acquaintance of Diderot's, recounted in the *Mémoires secrets* in which Petit uses a farce to cure a man who has been attacked by a convulsive spell. Petit is characterized as a kind of medical Neveu de Rameau—mime, actor, and doctor—as he performs a miraculous cure through pantomime. Through this example Wenger argues

that the manner in which an authoritative discourse is produced and received becomes an essential question to each work. Just as we cannot read a single character in Diderot's works without repositioning all of his utterances and just as Diderot is continually rethinking the theories and ideas of those who surround him, so too must we read his works as actively communicating with each other as they attempt to work out various thought experiments and problems.

Diderot's polyphonic, continually borrowing, non-static style is thus not merely a literary repositioning of scientific discourse. Rather, Wenger argues that it is an inquiry into the very nature of thought itself, and as such essential for our understanding of science in the eighteenth century. Diderot's works are not interested in reifying the individual who developed an important theory, but rather in thinking scientific innovation and its conditions: "Chez Diderot, l'invention du personnage dit quelque chose de la forme même de la production de la pensée et, en l'occurrence, des conditions du progrès des savoirs" (p. 81). The creation of characters is for Diderot a way to reconnect the part to the whole. Like the embodied metaphors of the bees in the aggregate or the spider on its web, thought and scientific thought in particular are always in the process of being reassembled. As such, there is never a neutral or transparent scientific discourse: "Ce récit de la science, ou ce texte de la médecine, n'est pas axiologiquement transparent ou objectivement neutre, il est le résultat d'une construction, il est rattachable à une source de production, il possède un énonciateur" (p. 88). Scientific discourse cannot be disembodied. We must reinsert its "situation." All voices are part of a vast network of exchanges, interactions, and conversations that are constantly in movement and being restated.

Wenger is quite successful in resituating the Bordeu line in the text. His historical, literary, and scientific analysis of the texts offers great insight not only into the various intertexts, anecdotes, and characters that shape the medical and scientific theories in the *Rêve*, but also into the modality and contingency of thought at play in Diderot's organicist writing. The *Rêve* is not only a staging of the medical theories, but a staging of thought itself and of how we pronounce scientific truths. The spider web metaphor is of particular interest in this context as it is at once a literary creation and a method of scientific investigation. Literature and medicine are linked by their content and form: "Les métaphores de l'essaim d'abeilles ou de l'araignée ne sont pas illustratives, elles sont constitutives d'une vérité en train de se faire" (p.90). Diderot's text thus provides insight on how to resuture the divide that took place in the nineteenth century.

The reception of Diderot and Bordeu tells another story, however. From the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, Wenger argues, Diderot and Bordeu were coopted and marginalized with inaccurate teleological readings that removed the playful dynamic and dialogical character of the original texts in their attempts to erect and promote their own hagiographies or theories. Such readings did damage to their literary texts, but even more so to their scientific ones. Against such positivism, Wenger demands that we be better readers. Clearly Wenger's multidisciplinary approach gives him unique access to a better reading of Diderot.

It is surprising given his interest in the combination of the literary and medical and the book's tripartite structure that Wenger did not explore in more detail the theories of the "Suite de l'Entretien," that fanciful, mythical, and at moments science fiction-like conclusion in which the recombinatory impulses of the first two parts of the *Rêve* perform in all their complexity and ambiguity Diderot's theory of the recombination of autonomous parts and the importance of the speculative and imaginary in the scientific method that he articulated many years earlier in the *De l'interprétation de la nature*. In this final section of Diderot's we see the beauties and dangers of hybridity particularly if discourses such as the medical one were to gain too much authority over the literary and begin to instrumentalize its metaphors and speculations.[4] Nonetheless, Wenger's careful, thoroughly researched approach certainly provides us with a productive model to maintain the constructive and imaginative dialogue between various disciplines while preserving the autonomy of each. As such, he not only captures in this wonderful book Diderot's thought in all its nuance and complexity, but also suggests how Diderot could inform future

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discussions of the intersection between the humanities and sciences, and between other disciplines for that matter, so that we can all work more effectively together.

## NOTES

[1] See Andrew H. Clark, "Where have all the doctors gone? Making French Doctors Respectable: The Doctor-Philosophe, Bordeu in Diderot's *Rêve de d'Alembert*," *Portrayals of Medicine, Physician, Patients, and Illnesses in French Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present: A Collection of Essays*, eds., Lison Baselis-Bitoun and Ji-Hyum Philippa Kim (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), pp. 237-271.

[2] Roselyn Rey, *Naissance et développement du vitalisme en France de la deuxième moitié du dix-huitième siècle à la fin du Premier Empire* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000), Anne Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[3] At other moments in the book, Wenger cautions us explicitly from seeing Bordeu as a model for Diderot, "Il ne s'agit pas ici de présenter Bordeu comme un modèle de Diderot, mais de souligner une même manière pour les deux hommes de se mettre en jeu à travers les textes afin de défendre une vision de leur rôle de savant ou de lettré dans les débats contemporains" (p. 54).

[4] On this point see Clark, "Where have all the doctors gone?" pp. 262-263.

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