

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

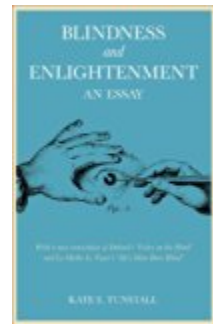


Kate E. Tunstall. *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay: With a new translation of Diderot's "Letter on the Blind" and La Mothe Le Vayer's "Of a Man Born Blind"*. New York: Continuum, 2011. xi + 238 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4411-5803-1; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4411-1932-2.

Reviewed by Howard Needler (Wesleyan University)

Published on H-Albion (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth



Needler on Tunstall

Although the new translation of Diderot's *Letter on the Blind*, which accompanies this essay, appears to have the status of an addendum, it is a most important feature of this book, long overdue—and the essay itself is intimately connected with the text of the *Letter* and has the form of an extended commentary upon it. In this way the book constitutes an unusual and original variant on the form of a critical edition, offering readers of English for the first time a text comparable to (and in some respects, to be noted below, surpassing) the critical editions of the original French text that have been available for years.

As the author notes in the introduction to her own translation (appendix 1, p. 167), hers is the first new English translation of Diderot's *Letter on the Blind* for many years (she writes, since the first English translation made in 1770; she does not mention a translation apparently made for the Boston Society for the Blind in 1853, although she correctly notes that Margaret Jourdain's translation of 1916—reprinted without modification by David Adams in his recent edition of Diderot's *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature*—was based upon that of 1770).[1] A new English translation of this important work was urgently needed, and this book competently fills that gap. The translation is accurate and largely true to Diderot's diction, but nonetheless is couched in a lively contemporary English prose that is only occasionally "clunky" or convoluted. The translator properly takes note of an error in the original text that, to

the knowledge of this reviewer, has escaped notice in all prior editions and translations, save his own (unpublished) translation of some ten years ago (see p. 189 and note 22, p. 225). She observes in her note, "Given Diderot's fondness for reversals and puzzles, it is not impossible that the mistake is deliberate, designed perhaps to test the limits of the reader's concentration"—and this may perhaps be the case. There is, however, another apparent error in the original text, of which the translator does not take note, a few pages before this (p. 185 of the translation), where both the ensuing text and the larger figure in plate 2 (p. 186) make it clear that the phrase "the small-headed ones were only ever placed on the sides, except in the case of the zero," should read, "... except in the case of the one."

The importance and utility of this translation notwithstanding, the essay is itself the core of the book and it merits the priority given it by the title. The essay is highly original in design and construction. It carefully follows the plan and arguments of the original text, placing them in the context of the extensive seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discussions of blindness, and enabling the reader to understand both the sources of the *Letter* and the contextual arguments to which it refers. The author displays an impressive mastery of the relevant primary texts, as well as of the extensive secondary literature, and her writing is consistently incisive and yet displays a light touch, avoiding pomposity and evincing

an engaging sense of humor and sensitivity to language. (Both are reflected in her chapter titles, e. g., “Optics and Tactics”; “Reading is Believing? ”; “The Blind Leading the Blind Leading the Blind Leading the Blind...”; “Point of View and *Point de Vue*”; “Groping Around in the Light.”) Her writing succeeds in uniting serious scholarship of high quality with the traditions of an almost extinct vein of learned and lightly satiric British wit. She has chosen to write about Diderot in a style that seeks to reflect Diderot’s own playfulness and penchant for challenging the reader, and her arguments that it is shortsighted of critics simply to identify the *Letter*’s narrative voice with Diderot, and that its text cannot be read as merely a veiled argument for materialistic atheism or as a straightforward panegyric of either the virtues or the vices of blindness, are persuasive. One of the most striking and novel features of this essay is its effective insistence, and (in this reviewer’s opinion) demonstration, that Diderot’s writing in the *Letter* is both strategic and tactical—and the imputation that such considerations are more significant than the establishment of, or argument for, a point of view (*point de vue*).

The author’s inclusion in an appendix of a translation of La Mothe le Vayer’s *Of a Man-Born-Blind* is a valuable addition to the volume. It is a pity that she did not see fit to incorporate also translations of Diderot’s 1782 *Additions to the Letter on the Blind*, and of his exchange of letters with Voltaire in connection with his sending him a copy of the *Letter* (both included in Robert Niklaus’s edition of the French text).[2] She does quote in her prologue (p. 2) an excerpt from the former, about the success of Jacques Daviel in the performance of cataract surgery, but in addition to the other aphorisms Diderot added in 1782, his eulogy of Mlle de Salignac (thought by some critics to have been added in order to palliate criticisms that the *Letter* was deficient in sympathy for the blind) would have been a welcome supplement to this volume. Diderot’s reply to Voltaire’s letter thanking him for the

gift of the book offers a significant extension of Nicholas Saunderson’s arguments in the *Letter*, and would offer its readers a firmer foundation for considering those arguments atheistic in character. The essay does make reference (pp. 19-20, 22 of the introduction) to Diderot’s *Letter on the Deaf and the Dumb*, which followed it two years later (1751), but only through the edition of both letters by Marian Hobson and Simon Harvey; a little further discussion of the relation between the two letters by the author would be a desirable addition to the book.[3]

Altogether, this volume meets a long-standing need and provides access to a highly significant work of Enlightenment thought for English-speaking readers unable to read the French original. Moreover, it clearly suggests some of the ways in which its thinking continues to be reflected in contemporary literary criticism and intellectual history (it is not for nothing that Dr. Tunstall begins her discussion with Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes* [1993], and were it not for a doubtless judicious concern not to stray too far from her period or topic, she might well have gone on to discuss such other relatively recent critical studies as Paul De Man’s *Blindness and Insight* [1972]). The book will be valuable to professional scholars as well as to undergraduate students, and it is as enjoyable to read as it is edifying. It deserves a place in the library of every person at all interested in Enlightenment thought and its central ideas.

Notes

[1]. Diderot, *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, annot. and introd. David Adams (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999).

[2]. Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles*, ed. Robert Niklaus (Geneva: Droz, 1951).

[3]. Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles. Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, ed. Marian Hobson and Simon Harvey (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Howard Needler. Review of Tunstall, Kate E., *Blindness and Enlightenment: An Essay: With a new translation of Diderot’s “Letter on the Blind” and La Mothe Le Vayer’s “Of a Man Born Blind”*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36470>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.