Recovering the Flesh and Blood of the European Enlightenment

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Philipp Blom’s *A Wicked Company: The Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment* (Basic Books, 2010) presents a lively and engaging history of two of the more radical figures of the French Enlightenment: Denis Diderot (1713-84) and Paul Henri Thiry d’Holbach (1723-89). While Diderot is mainly remembered as the editor of the *Encyclopédie* and Holbach, if remembered at all, is known by specialists as the center of an important salon hosting many of the most prominent intellectuals of the age, Blom argues for a reassessment of their place in the history of philosophy. In contrast to what Blom sees as the more pedestrian views of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Holbach and Diderot “saw it as their duty to convince their contemporaries that there is no life after death, no God and no Providence, no divine plan, but only a physical world of life and death and the struggle to survive—a work of ignorant necessity and without higher meaning, into which kindness and lust can inject fleeting beauty” (xi). Blom’s fundamental project is as polemical as it is modern: to recover Holbach’s and Diderot’s radicalism as an alternative foundation for twenty-first century intellectualism. *A Wicked Company* benefits from the focused narrative drive that sometimes accompanies such a polemic just as it suffers from the genre’s privileging of passionate thesis over complexity and multiple points of view. This history is an enjoyable read for the academic and layperson alike.

*A Wicked Company* relates the story of Diderot and Holbach’s origins, meeting, intellectual collaboration, and decline into obscurity. Neither Diderot nor Holbach originated in Paris, the center of eighteenth-century intellectual life in Europe. Rather, Diderot arrived from the provinces at age fifteen to be educated as a priest, and Holbach, who had been born in the German Palatinate, was brought to Paris at the age of five by his uncle, who adopted him as his heir after making his fortune and purchasing his baronetage from the imperial court in Vienna. Contrary to his father’s wishes, Diderot was drawn to a life in the
theater rather than the church, and, after finishing his education, he married a penniless, devoutly Catholic woman and embarked on a career as a linguist, author, and translator. His initial writing brought him to the attention of Rousseau and, based on his brilliant intellect, he was selected as co-editor of the *Encyclopédie* with well-known mathematician Jean-Baptiste d’Alembert. By the time the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* was published, Holbach’s salon, which featured lavish dinners and excellent wine, had begun attracting more radical-minded people, many of whom contributed to the *Encyclopédie*.

In Blom’s analysis, the key idea that united the eighteenth-century Enlightenment radicals in Paris was atheism. Members of this group readily agreed that religious feeling was too easily converted into political oppression. As Holbach argued in his first important philosophical statement, *Le Christianisme dévoilé, or Christianity Unveiled*, “Religion is not only logically inconsistent and morally perverse; it also diminishes and corrupts the minds of the faithful” (95). As Blom summarizes, “It creates sin and guilt, secrecy and deceitfulness, by condemning physical pleasure (even the mere thought of it), by making divorce impossible, and by imposing celibacy on its servants; it tortures and tyrannizes the consciousness of adults and children alike; it makes people cower in front of an illusion instead of living lives of informed choice and free morality” (95–96). Articulating a vision of morality apart from religion became the next step in the radicals’ thinking. As Diderot would write in a letter, once people accepted a scientific view of nature, morality became a relatively simple matter: “Do good, know the truth, that is what distinguishes one man from the next. The rest is nothing” (105). Based on this philosophy, members of the Diderot-Holbach coterie sought to build a new society free from oppression based on gender, politics, belief, or class.

This goal was not shared by all proponents of the Enlightenment, however. The villains of Blom’s tale are the moderates, Rousseau and Voltaire, whose egos and antagonism to the radicals’ atheism set them at odds with Diderot and Holbach. According to Blom, Voltaire’s response to the Diderot-Holbach circle was largely governed by his fear that they might someday eclipse him. Exiled in Switzerland, Voltaire was never more than an outsider to the radical coterie, frequently publishing criticisms of the group’s atheism, literary merits, and politics, all of which Blom interprets as products of his anxieties about Diderot challenging his position as the chief representative of Enlightenment thought. If Voltaire comes across as a petty father figure desperate to hold on to his reputation, Rousseau is cast as a paranoid narcissist who cannot tell his friends from his enemies. As Blom writes, “With every passing day he became more convinced that he was the victim of a sinister cabal dreamed up by his former friends, who had become jealous of his genius and his success” (115). He increasingly believed that “they wanted to destabilize him, sap his strength, and spread rumors about him, cause his downfall” (115). Having moved into the Hermitage at Louise d’Épinay’s estate of La Chevrette, for example, Rous-
seau eventually turned against his hostess, unjustly accusing her of revealing his erotic fixation on Madame d'Épinay’s sister-in-law and thereby sully ing his reputation. When the breach became irreparable, Rousseau moved out of the Hermitage and began attacking his former friends openly in his work.

In many respects, A Wicked Company is a popularized narrative version of Peter Gay’s classic text, The Enlightenment—Blom’s characterizations of Voltaire and Rousseau are similar to Gay’s—but it privileges the antagonists’ personalities over their intellectual commitments, which are delineated over the course of the narrative but nevertheless pale in comparison to Blom’s sketches of their egotism, paranoia, and vindictiveness. As Gay acknowledges, Voltaire was “fondest of those who did not threaten him with their talent,” and, while “Diderot thought well of Voltaire’s writings and Voltaire’s humane generosity, . . . he somehow never quite trusted him” (5). Gay likewise recognizes Rousseau’s difficult personality, stating that he, “at first indulged by all, came to reject and to be rejected by all” (5). Blom’s translation of Gay’s more objective accounts into vivid biography contributes to the book’s dynamic and engaging style of storytelling with clearly defined heroes and foes, but it also demonstrates the limits of Blom’s polemic: Rousseau and Voltaire are reduced to stock characters in an eighteenth-century drama rather than taken seriously as proponents of Enlightenment thought.

Of more serious threat to the radicals was the state-sponsored Catholic Church, which Blom personifies, as when he recounts the events surrounding the execution of a nineteen-year-old nobleman, the Chevalier de la Barre, who was accused of refusing to take his hat off before a passing religious procession and of singing blasphemous songs. As Blom writes, “The young chevalier had, in fact, not committed any crime, but in the wake of the publication of the Encyclopédie the church obviously felt that it was time to crack down on religious heterodoxy” (258). Again, this personification makes the narrative more gripping, but it also diminishes complexity. When his rooms were searched, authorities found only a copy of Voltaire’s Philosophical Dictionary and two erotic novels. De la Barre was arrested, interrogated, and condemned to a public penance that included having his tongue and one hand cut off before being burned at the stake with Voltaire’s book. The circumstances of his punishment clearly support Blom’s narrative of the church’s excessive oppression of dissent, but the overall argument here seems reduced to its most narrow terms: this incident is really all about Diderot, Holbach, and Enlightenment radicalism despite the fact that it is Voltaire’s work that lies at the heart of this tragic scene. Rather than use this episode as a means of exploring Voltaire’s similarity to Holbach, Diderot, and other radical thinkers in the minds of censors and the clergy, Blom provides only a brief account of Voltaire’s response to this tragedy:

Voltaire wrote about the trial and the horrific execution in an open letter to Cesare Beccaria, the young Milanese reformer who had only recently been a guest at
Holbach’s table. Indignantly, he lamented that such barbaric executions were taking place in Enlightened times. His Enlightened readers nodded their approval, but his eloquence did not save the unlucky condemned man from being put to the sword. (260)

This scene is followed with an account of Diderot’s journey to Russia, where he was the guest of Empress Catherine, who had purchased his entire library and given him a pension to continue as its curator. The recounting of the execution of de la Barre and Diderot’s subsequent trip to Russia begins the final portion of Blom’s narrative, the triumph of authority over Enlightenment radicalism. By 1780, most of the radicals were either dead or in poor health. As Blom writes, “The wicked company had grown old. Several early deaths had ripped holes in the fabric of their friendships and alliances, their own powers seemed all but spent, and the salon had become an attraction for foreign visitors and had lost the fizz and excitement of the early years” (299–300). By the advent of the French Revolution on July 14, 1789, both Holbach and Diderot were dead. In this moment of the world-shattering reshaping of the French government and society, the ideas espoused by men like Holbach and Diderot, argues Blom, turned out to be “too revolutionary for the Revolutionaries themselves, who were not interested in ushering in a philosophical society of equals in which all citizens were encouraged to live happily and peacefully in harmony with nature” (306). Instead, writes Blom, they wanted power. By the time the revolutionary fervor had died out, nineteenth-century Imperialist capitalism had identified Voltaire as the Enlightenment reflection of “bourgeois values” (315). Diderot, Holbach, and their circle were largely forgotten.

All in all, A Wicked Company is a lively and enlightening history of these two men, their circle, and their enemies. While academics will enjoy its pages as much as lay readers, the lack of substantial notes and the sometimes-sensational writing style suggest that the latter are the primary audience for this book. Clearly, Blom aims at more than a simple recovery of these authors’ works. As he writes in the introduction:

Diderot and Holbach may appear to have lost the battle for posterity, but they have not yet lost the war, still raging, for our civilization and its dreams, which could be so much more generous, more lucid, and more humane than they are now. Their works still richly repay rereading, and their careers can serve as both an inspiration and a warning to us. They demonstrate both what we have gained since their day and what we are in danger of losing once again, as we are faced not only with threats from the outside but also by our own laziness, indifference, and muddled thinking. (xx)

If Holbach and Diderot are to serve as the foundation for a new “morality of mutual solidarity” as Blom hopes (xx), much more scholarly work will have to
be done to achieve it. But *A Wicked Company* is a solid, enjoyable introduction to the forgotten radicalism of the European Enlightenment.

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