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DIDEROT: THE MASKS OF MORALITY.

The City University of New York, Ph.D., 1974
History, modern

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1974

DIDEROT: THE MASKS OF MORALITY

by

MARJORIE GOTTHEIMER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1974

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty
in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

DIDEROT: THE MASKS OF MORALITY

by

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Diderot's ambivalent philosophy, by which he steadfastly affirmed virtue and at the same time developed a radical philosophy of individuality which stressed the "integrity" of the self reflects an "esoteric/exoteric" strain in his thought. As traditional Enlightenment philosophe, he emphasized reason, nature, virtue, education--disseminated largely through his masterwork, the Encyclopedia--and a guarded optimism for the future well-being of an enlightened mankind. But as radical philosophe, the precursor of Romanticism and a new individuality, he articulated new relativistic attitudes towards social and sexual morality. In his quest for the self, he was critical of artificial, hypocritical social values that destroy the "natural man" and burden him with playing roles, "vile pantomimes," which mask his true nature.

Diderot's materialist philosophy led him to stress the uniqueness of each individual. His belief that human nature is physically and psychologically determined by chance and hereditary combinations of matter in each individual, permitted him to identify a wide range of human personality and conduct. It also led him to a logic of moral relativism that justified, philosophically, social and sexual behavior

that deviated from conventional norms. By linking human conduct to physical structure, psychic states, and an ethical standard that varied according to the nature of the individual, he divorced moral behavior from absolute standards of right or wrong.

Diderot's concept of the importance of individual identity led him to emphasize superior talent, particularly that of the genius, as above conventional mores. His consistent affirmation of the genius justified by his creative gift, was part of a serious philosophic effort to free the artist from the restrictions of conventional morality. By extension, he applied this standard to the philosopher whose superior intuitive judgment also elevated him above conventional morality. Because he despised mediocrity and was fascinated by unique individuality, he also explored the nature of the evil genius whose conduct, although morally reprehensible, commands an awesome respect for the sheer magnitude of "sublime" evil.

Diderot also expressed a grudging admiration for certain eccentrics, or "originals" as he dubbed them,--"bizarre" beings whose very amorality and self-awareness enabled them to pierce the artificial trappings of society and to strip away masks of false virtue. In Rameau's Nephew, Diderot created the prototype of the "original," society's "irreplaceable man" who "smokes out the truth," unmasks hypocrisy, and forces a confrontation with the self. Thus, even in amorality, Diderot found and expressed a principle of "integrity of being."

But Diderot was aware that the moral autonomy he claimed for superior individuality was dangerous for society. The possibility of this moral freedom filtering down to the ordinary man who would someday claim the same moral freedom for himself imperiled the very existence of

the social order.

Diderot's essential modernity thus can be identified in his anticipation of the modern moral dilemma--the tension between the ethic of virtue and the implications of a bohemian individualism and the morality appropriate to it.

Diderot tested his theories through a process of self-alienation, paradox, and deliberate obscurity in his radical thought. The chilling implications to be drawn from his vision of a world totally without moral standards acted as a restraint on his moral radical philosophy. His life-long advocacy of virtue remained his public or "exoteric" philosophy. It was a role he chose to play for posterity. But it was only one of many roles he assumed. His persistent emphasis on the exemption of certain elite individuals--notably the genius, the artist, and the philosopher--from traditional moral norms cast him in another role. His insight into the hidden truths of the absurdity of existence were left in a corpus of a radical "speculative philosophy, not for the multitude and not for practice." This closely guarded, "esoteric" philosophy masked a bitter kernel of moral uncertainty under the philosophy of "the true, the good, and the beautiful."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Professor William O. Shanahan go my grateful thanks for the original encouragement to proceed with this research and for his sure guidance, editorial corrections, general supervision and invaluable suggestions throughout this whole work. To Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb, who helped launch me in the field of intellectual history, I owe thanks for that and for many new insights into the history of ideas, some of which I hope are reflected in this work. Professor Donald Harvey's suggestions, clarifications, and helpful criticisms helped bring this work to a conclusion. His generous friendship is a gift above value. To all three of my mentors, I wish to express my deepest appreciation for their warm understanding and support beyond the call of scholarly supervision. Without their generous spiritual support, this work could not have come to fruition.

My friend and former student, Suzanne Carfora, not only typed this paper, but also undertook to handle many of the technical details which freed my time for writing. Her generous help made it possible to meet time schedules.

My friend and Department chairman, Dr. Lawrence Ritt, encouraged my work in every way and arranged my teaching schedules to permit the maximum time for study and research. I am grateful to him and to Dr. Robert Iosue, Assistant Academic Vice President of C.W.Post College, for arranging for a leave of absence to complete this dissertation. The C.W.Post Center Research Committee awarded me two financial grants that have helped toward research expenses. The staff of the C.W.Post Library, and particularly Mrs. Elizabeth Pooley and Mr. Conrad Schoeffling, were of unfailing help in helping me locate and obtain sources. Mrs. Margaret Larsen, Director of Campus Activities at C.W.Post College, generously arranged housing facilities for me on campus during a large part of this research and writing period.

The actual achievement of this work is due in no small part to my family who devoted themselves in every way to smoothing the obstacles of daily responsibilities so that I could write. To my husband, most of all, I owe the unfailing help and support necessary to complete this work.

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INTRODUCTION

A strong undercurrent in French Enlightenment thought was generated by the tensions and ambiguities inherent in eighteenth-century French society. The unresolved issues included a new awareness of the individual; the potential tensions and disharmony between the individual and society; the complexity of the relationship between enlightened self-interest and the social interest; the problem of individual self-fulfillment; new views of society and government; and new attitudes towards social and sexual morality. They were powerful elements breaking through the crust of a traditional society in a state of transition. The philosophes themselves were not immune from them. Hence, the generally accepted view of the Enlightenment as enshrining reason, nature, optimism, belief in progress, the utility of science, and materialism must be balanced by the recognitions of an "underside" of Enlightenment thought that bore out the uneasy equilibrium between a tension of opposites. This "underside" was marked by radical, unconventional views on the relationship between the individual and society, the nature of the self, and morality, particularly its sexual aspects.

The thought of Diderot is perhaps the most remarkable example of the mind of a philosophe reflecting on the tensions and ambiguities in the Enlightenment and struggling to hold those tensions in balance. Indeed, in Diderot's thought, tension is a key to his predominant

style: the use of paradox to arrive at truth. The resort to contrasting opposites implies a rational approach, yet the elements Diderot contrasted were often irrational so that he could not hold them in balance. The scales tipped in favor of the radical, the unusual, and not infrequently, the shocking.

Diderot has generally been considered the epitome of the secularist philosophe. Some aspects of his thought do indeed reflect conventional Enlightenment philosophy--his emphasis on reason, nature, virtue, education, and at least a guarded optimism. Yet Diderot's later, and most imaginative works, particularly Rameau's Nephew, the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, D'Alembert's Dream, and Jacques the Fatalist, display a radical, almost nihilistic and anarchistic philosophy that is clearly at odds with his more conventional thought. Diderot thus represents, in himself and in his work, the paradox of a traditional Enlightenment figure, and, at the same time, a key representative of anti-Enlightenment views in the ultimate implications of his thought. Ironically, it was Diderot's use of reason and remorseless logic, especially the logic of materialism, that led him to draw the amoral, nihilistic conclusions of his "devilish philosophy" that surfaced in a new morality.

In Diderot's philosophy we can contrast the conventional philosophe with the new man--the bohemian--whose character and morality would be developed more fully by nineteenth-century writers. The tensions in Diderot's thought are evident in the ambiguities of a bourgeois common sense pitted against a mind inclined to follow its thoughts no matter how "extravagant." On one side there is the rational, materialist philosopher, the editor of the Encyclopedia,

the admirer of industry and technology, as well as of enlightened self-interest and virtue, and the author of sentimental plays on bourgeois domestic themes. On the other side there is the radical bohemian philosophe, the precursor of Romanticism and a new individuality, the protagonist of the genius whose stature as "a gift of nature" raised him above social morality. That "opposite side" also includes the admirer of the "grand passions" and relativism in morality, the imaginative creator of revolutionary characters, and the caustic critic of artificial, narrow, hypocritical values in society that destroy "natural man."

As a keen observer, Diderot was attentive to society's emergent features. He was one of the first to note the importance of new social roles, new social functions, and relationships between social groups. As an intellectual, no role was more important to him than that of "le sage," the philosophe. His admiration for the philosophe as "honnête homme," devoted to social order, wise counsellor of society and advocate of virtue, stands in direct contrast to his view that "le sage" cannot be bound by society's rules but is capable of making his own ethical standards. As radical philosophe, he tested the notion that roles might be artificial masks, or even "pantomimes," that people are forced to accept in society--illusions, in short, that deceive others and destroy the natural self.

His materialist doctrine of the necessary physiological and psychological organization of individuals led him to struggle with a new paradox: If "I am what I am because I had to be so,"* what room is there for freedom? How can the individual be himself, be free and yet morally responsible? How can he realize the "moi tout pur," the

*Infra, Chapter II.

essence of "individualité" for Diderot? If all is determined, all is natural, and there is "neither vice, nor virtue; neither right or wrong." If there are "no absolutes in morality," what hope is there for a viable society, what meaning in education to teach virtue? If the ordinary man and the monster are equally natural, how shall society deal with criminals and homosexuals, or incest and sodomy? What shall we make of the "original," the eccentric or unconventional person like the amoral character, Rameau's Nephew, who sees that a society that preaches virtue but runs from it provides the license to break all social conventions? And of Jacques the Fatalist who perceives the "quiproquo" and the duel for domination in a society in which "everyone has his dog?" In Rameau's Nephew and Jacques, Diderot portrayed two revolutionary personalities whose moral outlook could imperil the stability and order of a society that the conventional Diderot was pledged to improve by a public ethic of virtue and orderly "modification."

Diderot's essential modernity can be identified in his anticipation of the modern moral dilemma. His modernity lies in the ambivalence of his thought--the tension between the philosophy of virtue, happiness, and progress and the underside of his philosophy which subjected all conventional social and moral values to penetrating criticism. That underside embraced radical, amoral, nihilistic ideas whose chilling lessons were to be more fully explicated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Diderot was lodged in two worlds, caught up in admiration for the ethic of virtue but philosophically fascinated by the implications of a bohemian individualism and a concept of morality appropriate to it. Diderot, aware of his fascination with

the genius, the "original," and the master criminal wrote that he was a "stranger" in this world. "I also know how to alienate myself, a talent without which one can do nothing worthwhile."* Diderot's "alienation" and the remorseless logic of his radical philosophy permitted him to contemplate a world devoid of absolute moral standards. But the chilling implications of such a world, in which amorality could filter down to everyone and the enormous problem that would pose for society, acted as a constraint. His esoteric philosophy largely remained a necessarily private view. As a philosophe pledged to promote the general welfare of society, his "devilish philosophy" could surface only as a "speculative philosophy," reserved for "le sage."

*Infra, Chapter II.

CHAPTER I

THE [^]HONNÊTE HOMME AND VIRTUE

The aim of an encyclopedia is to collect all knowledge scattered over the face of the earth . . . that our children, by becoming more educated, may at the same time become more virtuous and happier. . . .

Diderot, "Encyclopedia"

The tension in Diderot's philosophy arose from his ambivalent wavering between two poles of thought, the philosophic love of virtue and the insight into the fascinating but terrifying prospects of a new morality--the vision of a world totally without morality, neither vice nor virtue, a materialist world in which everything was natural. It was as a typical Enlightenment spokesman that Diderot expressed faith in reason, virtue, the progress and "perfection attainable by the whole human race,"¹ education, utility, and materialism that we have come to associate with Enlightenment thought. But it was directly from the materialist element in his philosophy that he developed bold new concepts of individuality and genius. It also gave rise to the problem of deriving ethical standards in a society without moral absolutes that could conceive of the widest possible sexual freedom as a natural part of the material order.

Diderot's vision of a radical new moral philosophy was most fully developed in his later novels and dialogues. It came in the latter stages of his career for the undercurrent was not present in

his earlier work. Its emergence did not suppress the original basis of his moral judgment: his philosophy of virtue remained to the end. Thus the moral dilemma (how to fashion an ethical standard in a natural order in which there was no proof of a rational basis for absolute moral standards of right and wrong) which was only a shadow in his article "Natural Right," emerged as a sinister monster in Rameau's Nephew, the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, D'Alembert's Dream, and Jacques the Fatalist. This is not to say that Diderot embraced the new morality, but rather that, ironically, his notion of the ideal philosophe as the relentless searcher for the path of truth led him down the tangled path of moral chaos.

Those aspects of Diderot's philosophy that develop the conventional enlightened outlook accentuate the extreme tension between his philosophy of virtue and full-blown moral nihilism. Love of virtue was the outstanding unifying principle of Diderot's Enlightenment thought. It is the theme repeated in much of his philosophy, his bourgeois dramas, the art criticism of his Salons and in the whole of the Encyclopedia. One of his earliest exhortations of virtue is found in the Eulogy of Richardson:

Richardson sows seeds of virtue in our hearts that lie there idle and dormant at first; they remain buried there until the opportunity arises for them to germinate and throw up shoots. Then they grow; we feel ourselves impelled toward good. . . . When we see injustice we feel an inexplicable feeling of revolt rise up inside us . . . what a service Richardson has rendered to mankind; on every line, he makes the fate of oppressed virtue appear preferable to the fate of vice triumphant. Who would wish to be Lovelace, with all his advantages? Who would not wish to be Clarissa, despite all her misfortunes?²

His two bourgeois tragedies, The Father of the Family and The Natural Son, were aimed at carrying out the utilitarian goal of inspiring men to "a love of virtue and a horror of vice."³ The hero of The Natural

Son is a model of virtue and self-sacrifice, "melancholy in his conversation and bearing unless he spoke of virtue or experienced the transports it causes in those who are strongly enamored of it."⁴ The plays were written in 1757 and 1758. In 1773, in his Paradox on Acting, Diderot treated the theatre as a school for teaching virtue. Despite his generally low opinion of actors' morals, he believed that actors were men of rare talent who could preach virtue from the stage. Significantly, among the complex reasons for the quarrel between Diderot and Rousseau was Rousseau's attack on D'Alembert for proposing a theatre at Geneva in his Encyclopedia article "Geneva." Rousseau's argument against the theatre was precisely the opposite of Diderot's--Rousseau believed the theatre could only corrupt morality.⁵

Painting was to bear the same moral message to the public as the theatre. This is why Diderot admired Greuze who painted sentimental, moral subjects and deplored the "depraved" Boucher:

Greuze is always moral and the crowds never fail to throng around his paintings. I would not scruple to say to Boucher, if your work is never intended for anyone but smutty eighteen-year olds, then you are right, my friend; continue to paint your bottoms and your breasts; but for honest people and me, that you are hung in the best light in the Salon means nothing. . . .⁶

Continuing in the same vein, Diderot proclaimed the artist's task to paint great, noble actions, to honor "unhappy virtue" and dishonor "happy vice."⁷ Unquestionably his own moral judgments influenced his opinion of Greuze and Boucher as artists:

Don't you think the painter's brush has been employed long enough, and too long, in the portrayal of debauchery and vice? Ought we not to be glad to see it competing at last with dramatic poetry in moving us, instructing us, correcting us and encouraging us to virtue? Courage, Greuze, my friend: you must go on teaching morality in your paintings . . .⁸

As for Boucher: "I don't know what to say about this painter. The

degradation of his taste, his colors, his composition, his figures, his expression and his drawing has kept exact pace with the increasing depravity of his morals."⁹

If the poet and painter were to inculcate the ideal of virtue, surely the philosopher was to be in the vanguard. In Diderot's major life work, the Encyclopedia, the ideal philosophe appears as the social ideal of the age, the "honnête homme," who loves society profoundly, and patterns his life on reason, reflection, order, honor, and probity.¹⁰ In his novel, The Nun, Diderot described the Marquis de Croismare with the ideal attributes of a philosophe--"sensibilité," "honneur," "probité," "originalité," "gaieté," and "lumières."¹¹ Diderot's article, "Eclecticism," assigned a major role to the philosopher:

The eclectic is a philosopher who by riding roughshod over prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal consent, authority, in a word, everything that subjugates the mass of minds, dares to think for himself . . .¹²

Dedicated to virtue, the philosophes would carry out the work of "general enlightenment" against all obstacles:

Thanks to our work, those who will come after us will be able to go further. . . . O fellow countrymen and contemporaries, however severe you are in judging this work, remember that it was undertaken, continued and finished by a small number of isolated men who were thwarted in their intentions, flaunted in the most odious manner, slandered and insulted in the most atrocious manner, and who had no other incentive than a love of what is good. . . .¹³

In both his additions to D'Alembert's "Preliminary Discourse" to the Encyclopedia and his own article, "Encyclopedia," Diderot affirmed the principle of virtue and his faith that education would spread virtue and happiness:

In truth, the aim of an encyclopedia is to collect all the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth, to present its general outlines to the men with whom we live, and to transmit this to those who come after us, so that the work of past centuries may be useful

for the following centuries, that our children, by becoming more educated, may at the same time become more virtuous and happier, and that we may not die without having deserved well of the human race.¹⁴

Examples of virtuous behavior were to be collected for the edification of mankind, since the Encyclopedia was freighted with a heavy burden--to "make men better" and to change "their common way of thinking."

I have said that it could only belong to a philosophical age to attempt an Encyclopedia; and I say so because a work such as this demands more intellectual courage than is commonly to be found in ages of pusillanimous taste.¹⁵

If he was optimistic, he was not naive. He recognized the limits of human capability and the limits on the physical and intellectual powers of the philosophes who were to carry on the task of enlightenment. Despite the "strictly limited" understanding of most men, however, it was possible to foresee progress. "You will be able to form some notion of the greatest perfection attainable by the whole human race."¹⁶ And despite the limitations determinism imposed on the "necessary organization" of the individual and mankind, there was room for improvement or "modification" through education and experience. The article, "Modification," pointed this out:

Man, free or not, is a being subject to modification. . . . There is no cause which does not have its effect; there is no effect which does not modify the thing on which the cause acts. . . . The modifications that have been imposed upon us change us ineluctably, both at the very moment and for all the rest of life. . . .¹⁷

Although Diderot's belief in virtue remained a constant element in his thought, hints and allusions to his later radical philosophy were already subtly present in the Encyclopedia. In the article "Natural Right," Diderot argued the necessity of subordinating individual

interest to the "general will." From the premise of materialism,* however, Diderot was to raise the spectre that haunted his later work--the problem of finding a basis for social morality:

It is evident that if man is not free or if his instantaneous resolutions or even his indecisions arise from something material that is external to his soul, then his choice is not the pure act of incorporeal substance or of a simple faculty of that substance: there will therefore be neither rational benevolence nor rational malevolence . . . ; there will be neither right nor wrong, neither obligation nor privilege.¹⁸

How shall society answer the man tormented by violent passions, arising from his nature, who seeks to fulfill them even at the expense of others? What is dearer to each of us than our own self-interest?

O men! It is to you I appeal: which one among you who on the point of death would not buy back his life at the expense of the greater part of the human race if he could count on impunity and secrecy?¹⁹

Further, the violent man is willing to subscribe to "reason" and acknowledge that if his happiness demands that he destroy the lives of others, he must also be willing for others so driven by passions to destroy him. The full solipsism of this argument remained to be developed by Sade. Even for Diderot, this is the seedbed for the development of the moral radicalism of his later works. But the answer given here is that of Diderot as Enlightenment rationalist. Before the "violent reasoner" is "stifled," he is answered with the argument about the "general will" that became the inspiration for forms of politics based on electoral consent.

But if we take away from the individual the right of deciding about the nature of right and wrong, where shall we place this great question? Where? Before the entire human race; for only they may decide the issue, since the good of all is the only passion they have. Particular wills are suspect; they can be

*Infra, Chapter II.

good or evil, but the general will is always good: it is never wrong, it never will be wrong.²⁰

In the "Natural Right" article, however, Diderot had opened a Pandora's box. The "violent reasoner whom we have stifled" was to reappear in the amorality of Rameau's Nephew and the determinism of Jacques the Fatalist. And virtue, morality, and the "general will" were to be tested against the needs of a rampant new individuality.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW INDIVIDUALITÉ

I assure you that I can only be happy in the integrity of my soul, of being myself, completely myself.*

Diderot to Mme d'Épinay, 1767

The Renaissance "universal man" ushered in a new awareness of the importance of the individual apart from the corporate structure of society. But not until the eighteenth century was the true identity and nature of the individual personality and its potential for self-fulfillment fully appreciated. This concern with the individual as such is a powerful current in eighteenth-century fiction and enlightened thought. It appears in the earnest quest for self-identity, in the tedious struggle to get a better position in society, and in the notion of roles and masks people assume in society to camouflage their true nature and motivation.

The new stress on individualism involved several separate, if related, strands of thought. One is the more conventional notion of social mobility usually associated with the bourgeoisie--the upward movement in French society through talent, marriage, career or the purchase of an office or title.¹ Much of the French literature of this

*"Je ne suis nulle part heureux, qu'à la condition de jouir de mon âme, d'être moi, moi tout pur."

century, including Marivaux's Vie de Marianne, Beaumarchais' Marriage of Figaro, and Diderot's own bourgeois dramas, reflects this interest in the status and dignity of the individual commoner.² On a personal level, some of the philosophes benefitted from this social mobility; Voltaire, for example, purchased a title, and Diderot's intellectual talents, like those of other philosophes, opened social doors to him that were closed to his wife and mistress.³

The second strand of thought, one which the philosophes found more interesting, involves new insights into personality, self-awareness, and psychological states of inner being, what Diderot referred to as "individualité" or "being myself, completely myself" (moi tout pur).⁴ A similar emphasis on the self is found in Montesquieu's early work, The Persian Letters, and, of course, in almost everything written by Rousseau.

Diderot's special interest in materialism and in the biological, psychological, and social influences on the individual involved him deeply with the problem of self-awareness, and the psychological needs of the ego. This absorption with the self led him to masterly psychological studies of ethics and morality particularly because of the potential clash between self-interest and the needs of society. An early indication of Diderot's interest in the self is expressed in his admiration for "strong passions" and his linking of great passions with sublimity and dull passions with mediocrity. This romantic element in his thought was closely related to his search for the self and it led to his investigations of specific types of larger-than-life individuals, like the genius and the master criminal. It also sustained his interest in the lesser characters or eccentrics, like Rameau's Nephew,

whom Diderot called "originals." His interest in unusual amoral types was shared by contemporaries. Laclos' novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses, deals with totally amoral characters who have been compared to some of Diderot's fictional creations.⁵ Restif de la Bretonne revels in the scoundrel in Le paysan pervers and Monsieur Nicolas.⁶ What distinguishes Diderot from them is that his amoral characters spring directly from his Enlightenment philosophy.

Foreshadowings of Romanticism

An important facet of Diderot's stress on individuality is reflected in his constant emphasis on the importance of feeling and emotion, his love of strong passions and great souls, his references to sensibility and imagination, his love of wild beauty in nature, and the sublimity of terror. Highly emotional language and emphasis on free rein for the passions are characteristic of his Romantic leanings. One of his earliest works, Philosophic Thoughts, defended the value of the passions:

People are continually inveighing against the passions; we impute all man's troubles to them and forget they are also the source of all his pleasures. . . . But what makes me angry is that no one ever considers anything but their bad side, as though it would be an insult to reason to say a single word in defense of its rivals. And yet it is the passions, alone, great passions, that can raise the soul to great deeds. Without them, there would be an end of sublimity both in human actions and in art.⁷

In the same work, he expressed the belief that only great passions could be worthy: "Sober passions make commonplace men. . . . Extraordinary men lose their eminence when their passions become dulled. Restraint destroys the greatness and energy of nature." He regarded the attempt to destroy the passions as the height of folly. He castigated the role of religion in repressing passions by satirizing "the zealot who tortures

himself like a madman in order to desire nothing, love nothing, feel nothing, and who, if he succeeded would become a monster."⁸ His novel, The Nun, was an indictment of the destruction or perversion of the natural passions by the enforcement of celibacy.*

Even when the passions lead to immoral excess, it is preferable to the complacency that he identified with mediocrity. Diderot wrote in a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland:

Anything that passion inspires, I can forgive: only the consequences shock me. And then, you know, I have always been the apologist of strong passions; they alone move me. The arts of genius are born and extinguished with them; it is they who make the criminal and the enthusiast who paints him in his true colors. . . . The mediocre man lives and dies like a brute.⁹

Here Diderot's thought is not only close to Romanticism, it is not far from Sade. Despite his love of virtue, his preference for evil over mediocrity is clear, a theme he was to develop with that genius in evil, the master criminal.¹⁰ His association of terror with sublimity is closely related to this theme:

Everything that astonishes the soul, everything that impresses it with a sensation of terror, leads to the sublime. . . . Darkness adds to terror. . . . Temples are filled with darkness. . . . Priests, raise your altars, erect your temples in the hearts of forests. Let the cries of your victims pierce their shadows. Let your arcane, theurgic bloody scenes be lit only by the fateful glare of torches. Light is useful when you wish to persuade; it is worthless for emotional effect.¹¹

Diderot also transcended the classical revival of interest in nature in order to express that pure love of nature and its beauty that we associate with the Romantic movement. In the Conversations on the Natural Son, we find a description of wild natural beauty and its effect on the spirit of the beholder that presages the Romantic worship of nature

*Infra, Chapter VII.

most often associated with Rousseau. In the Conversations, Dorval is described in a "wild and solitary spot," totally absorbed in the "natural spectacle" before him. The observers' comment "He is under the spell," evokes Dorval's rapturous reply which not only conveys poetic imagery but also an early description of Diderot's concept of genius:

This is the sacred haunt of enthusiasm. If a man has been endowed with genius, then he will leave the city and its inhabitants. Following the impulses of his heart, he loves to mingle his tears with the crystal waters of a spring, . . . to tread with light feet upon the tender meadow grasses, to move with slow footsteps through fertile fields, . . . to escape into the depths of the woods. He loves their secret horror; he wanders, he seeks for a cave that will inspire him. Who mingles his voice with the torrent tumbling down the mountainside? Who senses the sublimity in some lonely spot? Who listens to himself in solitude and silence? The man of genius.¹²

In a description of creative genius that he was later to parody in Rameau's Nephew,* he described the "passions" and "enthusiasm" of the poet inspired by such a natural scene:

The poet feels the moment of enthusiasm coming upon him; it follows a period of meditation. Its onset is heralded by a quivering that begins in his breast, then flows deliciously and rapidly out to his extremities. Soon it is no longer a quivering, but an intense and lasting fire that sets him aflame, makes him pant, consumes him, kills him--but also endows whatever he touches with a soul and life. If this fire were to flame even higher, then phantoms would multiply before his eyes. His passion would be raised almost to the point of madness.¹³

Through the fire of Diderot's own language and style we can flavor the foreshadowings of Romanticism. It is not just Diderot's language--"genius," "imagination," "enthusiasm," "sublimity," the "fire . . . that consumes him, kills him"--but the attitude towards nature itself that portends the Romantic movement. The love of the wild and solitary spot, the fascination with the "secret horror" of the woods, the genius seeking inspira-

*Infra, Chapter III.

tion in a cave, the frequent references to the inspirational powers of water--the mountain torrents and lake shores, the "crystal waters of a spring"--these are the visions and images of Romanticism. It is also fascinating to compare Diderot's reference in the passage above to leaving the city and its inhabitants and "following the impulse of the heart" with Rousseau's rejection of the city and his call on the claims of the heart. Here also Diderot's allusions to solitude and silence and the "period of meditation" are reminiscent of Keats and Wordsworth.

Like the nineteenth-century Romantics, Diderot loved mystery, ruins, forests, and the wilderness. In the Discourse on Dramatic Poetry, in discussing the qualities of nature that a poet should evoke, he used typical Romantic imagery in his contrast between the serene and the turbulent:

What should a poet have? An uncultivated nature or a refined one? A tranquil one or an agitated one? Will he prefer the beauty of a pure and serene day or the horror of a dark night in which the intermittent whistling of the wind is mingled from time to time with the muffled and continuous rumble of distant thunder and in which he can see the lightning flashes lighting up the sky above his head? Will he prefer the spectacle of a calm sea or the sight of turbulent waves? The cold and silent aspect of a palace or a walk through some old ruin? A man-made edifice or the thickets of an ancient forest? A landscaped vista or a hidden hollow among deserted rocks? Pools, ponds, cascades or the prospect of a cataract being shattered into foam as it falls through a gorge of rocks . . . ?¹⁴

Diderot clearly preferred turbulence in literature: "Poetry must have something in it that is barbaric, vast and wild." His passions carried him further when he stated that poetry flourished when "the fury of civil war puts daggers in men's hands, at times when blood is stream- in great floods across the earth. . . ." Poetry withers away in times of peace and leisure. "It needs blood to feed upon." It is this admiration for the "vast, barbaric and savage" that probably led Diderot

to admire Shakespeare, a view contrary to the prevailing rules of classical criticism. Although Diderot shared Voltaire's feeling that Shakespeare did not have aesthetic values in the classic sense, he anticipated the Romantic era in seeing Shakespeare as an "extraordinary man . . . what swiftness, what verse."¹⁵

Curiously, we note the element of contradiction in this same Discourse on Dramatic Poetry. Diderot's Romantic imagery of violence contrasted strangely with his love of virtue and morality. Despite the passage describing the romantic soul of the poet and the need of poetry to "feed on blood," Diderot also called out for the imitative arts "to cooperate one day with the law to make us love virtue and hate vice! It is the philosopher who should urge them [the arts] to this task. It is for him to appeal to the poet, to the painter, to the musician. . . . 'Men of genius, why has heaven given you your gifts?'"¹⁶ If the philosopher is heard, debauchery and crime will lessen, and morality and taste will gain. In the "Essay on Painting" Diderot again proclaimed the moral function of art: "To make virtue desirable, vice odious . . . is the aim of every man who takes up the pen, the brush or the chisel."¹⁷ Yet in the same essay, the Romantic speaks out:

For my part, I care not a jot how well the artist has disposed his figures in order to achieve striking lighting effects, if the work as a whole does not speak to my heart. . . . Most of our paintings are so feeble in conception, so deficient in ideas that it is impossible for them to produce any violent disturbance or profound sensation in us.¹⁸

Diderot suggested that the artist should attempt to "strike as much terror into our hearts with his brush as the contemporary newspaper account of the suffocation of a group of people in a black pit on the

orders of an Indian nabob." What is the use of the resources of art, asked Diderot, if the result moves us less than a newspaper account?

Even when extolling virtue in his bourgeois dramas, the romantic note in Diderot emerged. In The Natural Son, which continued the theme of the role of art to teach morality, the "melancholy" Dorval is close to the idealization of the Romantic hero. Arthur Wilson has pointed out Diderot's influence on Goethe in the strong resemblance between Dorval and Goethe's Werther.¹⁹

Diderot's romantic imagination also appeared in his Utopian concept of the noble savage in the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage. There he describes an idealized Tahitian society that is unspoiled by civilization, Christianity or a repressive sexual code. This idealization of the freedom of a primitive society was not a predominant theme in Diderot's work, but it does demonstrate his readiness to inquire into the social conditions that permit freedom for the development of "individualité."^{*}

Inherent in these elements that locate Diderot in the pre-Romantic movement is his absolute conviction that men differ because of their biological differences. This is a conviction that leads, on the one hand to a scientific, deterministic concept of man and on the other to the romantic notion of the self. It is the subtle linkage between these two ideas that is the basis for a new morality connected with the concept of a powerful ego.

^{*}Infra, Chapters VI and VII.

Search for the Self

Diderot's concept of the individual, expressed by his term "individualité," and in his letter to Mme d'Epinaÿ as the "moi tout pur," is closely related to the modern notions of self-identity and authenticity. His very full correspondence, as well as his philosophical and imaginative writing, reveals his self-introspection in a constant effort to define his own personality. But Diderot transcended a purely personal concern, because he was also concerned with discovering the principles of self-identity that applied to all men. The quest was not easy. He was committed to changing society by changing the way men think, and equally committed to the materialist belief that men are formed by their physical organization. Thus, he had to grapple with the problem of how the individual with his own unique being, absolutely different from that of any other individual, could express his own individualité, his own "integrity of soul" within the framework of the needs of society. The intimate relationship between the problem of self-identity and society stems from the materialist premise: if what we are is necessarily determined, and necessity has determined a self that is not concerned with social virtue but only the pursuit of self-interest at whatever cost to society, how are the principles of "integrity of the soul" and of moral responsibility to be reconciled? The problem raised in the article "Natural Rights" with the "violent reasoner"* and in Diderot's connection of "strong passions" with greatness, even in evil,** become linked with the search for the self.

* Supra, Chapter I.

** Infra, Chapter IV.

Several major themes evolve from Diderot's exploration of self-identity principles in himself and in mankind. First there is a kind of Hegelian self-observing-the-self in his study of his own personality. This emerges in two ways: in terms of his own idealized self-portrait, as "philosophe," honnête homme, "man of genius," father and the like; and then in his notion of his inner being as out of ~~step~~ with society--in, for example, his expression that he was a "stranger" in this world. Closely connected with this insight is his treatment of the nature of the true self, what it means to have integrity and dignity. Finally, there is the concern with inner psychological influences and external social forces that mask the individual's true, inner nature, even to the point of repressing it.

Before exploring these themes, it would be well to state Diderot's theory of materialism. For Diderot the external realities determined the individual's essential nature, and, ironically set limits to the very possibility of reforming society. We must not forget that reform was Diderot's goal as a characteristic philosophe. Diderot's recognition of this problem entered into his formulating a concept of human nature, admittedly materialistically determined, and yet offering some scope for self-determination. This, of course, was the essential paradox of his life and work--how to reconcile materialist determinism with some degree of self-willing for moral ends. The problem emerges most clearly and receives the fullest treatment in his novels, Rameau's Nephew and Jacques the Fatalist and His Master.

The doctrine of materialism stemming from Lucretius' De Rerum Naturam has a long history. It matured slowly in the seventeenth century and it began to flourish in the eighteenth century. The work of

Condillac, La Mettrie, Helvétius, D'Holbach, and Hume in England all contributed to materialist theory. Diderot's theory of psychology of the developing mind (i.e., children) was influenced by Condillac. Diderot probably worked with D'Holbach on the System of Nature, the complete materialist position, and Diderot's Refutation of Helvétius was triggered by Helvétius' own materialist views expressed in On Man. Diderot particularly objected to Helvétius' views on the similarity of men and the power of education to narrow the intellectual gap between the genius and the ordinary man. Diderot's materialist position was also influenced by the biological studies of Buffon and Maupertius on the origins and change of bird and animal species. What especially distinguishes the thought of Diderot is his effort to work out the implications of materialism for the freedom and moral nature of man.

As early as 1746, in the Philosophic Thoughts, Diderot proposed that matter had been in motion throughout eternity.²⁰ The moral implications awaited his Letter on the Blind (1749). Here he first dealt with the concept of the senses in forming our ideas of morality, the possibility of changing life forms, and the idea of the "monster" determined by some deficiency or disturbance in genetic makeup. The Letter on the Blind considered the psychological distinctions between the blind and those who can see. What is the blind man to make, for example, of the phrases "'facial expression'," "'dull eyes'," "'lively eyes'," and other such commonly used expressions? How does he feel towards vice and virtue? Diderot perceived that the blind man could have a "prodigious aversion to theft" because he is such an easy victim. On the other hand, he observed that modesty meant nothing to the blind man since clothing could only be useful for protection from the elements.

Diderot's psychological perceptiveness is apparent in his development of these comments. He described the relativism of compassion, if, like the blind man, one cannot see suffering:

Do we ourselves not cease to feel compassion when distance or the smallness of an object produces the same effect on us as the lack of sight does on the blind? . . . I feel quite sure that were it not for fear of punishment, many people would have fewer qualms at killing a man who was far enough away to appear no larger than a swallow than in butchering a steer with their own hands.²¹

The blind man (Saunderson)²² can denigrate the notion of the beauty and perfection of the universe. On analogous terms if we went back to matter as it first began to move and chaos started to take form, we should discover a multitude of "monstrous, unformed shapes" along with every form that was properly organized--some with no stomachs, no intestines, no palates or defects in the heart or lungs. These "monsters" had ceased to exist because of their defects. What would have become of the human race if these monsters had been our progenitors or if they had combined with another species than their own? And are not monstrous beings still produced--what are their notions of God's beautiful universe and its traditional morality? "Look well at me, Mr. Holmes. I have no eyes. What did we do to God, you and I, that one of us should possess those organs and the other be deprived of them?"²³ This attempt to relate moral ideas to the physical senses, and to the chance difference between the organization of matter in the so-called normal individual and the "monster," was to remain a fixture in Diderot's material thought. If the physical "monster," as he indicated in the Letter on the Blind, is as natural as the ordinary man, then the implication is that the moral monster is also natural. But that theme remained to be developed in D'Alembert's Dream and Rameau's Nephew.

The Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature (1753-1754) contained the first full statement on the transformation of matter from the innate to the live state, and with it the conception of perpetual change in all matter in the world, including the individual:

And even supposing that all phenomena are in fact linked, the state of each individuality might not be permanent. But if the state of this world of phenomena is one of perpetual change, if nature is still at work on it, then despite the chain that links all phenomena, there can still be no philosophy. All our natural sciences becomes as ephemeral as words. What we take to be the history of nature, is merely a very incomplete account of a single moment.²⁴

All is in flux and transition; nothing is stable. The human being, like an animal or vegetable, begins, grows, exists, degenerates, and finally exists no more. Might not this kind of life cycle apply to entire species as well as individuals? Should not the philosopher suspect that the particular elements necessary for animal life had existed for all eternity, in a scattered state? These elements, coming together by chance, and combining because it was possible to do so, then formed an embryo which passed through an infinite number of structural changes and developments. In this course of development, the embryo acquired, successively, motion, sensation, ideas, thought, reflection and conscience, feelings and passions, signs, gestures, sounds, language and finally laws, science, and the arts. We cannot know whether the process is completed-- there may be further changes in store, or a period of stability, followed by a long decline in which all the faculties acquired will disappear. But they will continue to exist in some other forms of matter in nature, with other faculties than those we observe at the present moment.²⁵

D'Alembert's Dream (1769), the work that Diderot described as "the most profound and the most crazy,"²⁶ is an imaginary dialogue in

which Diderot worked out a fully formed philosophy of materialism which embraced the implications of the total uniqueness of each individual and the ethical implications of a world in which there is nothing that is unnatural. From this materialist position, Diderot also developed sexual views that conceived of homosexuality and sodomy as compatible with the natural order, and therefore not immoral.*

D'Alembert's Dream restated the idea of eternal matter in a constant state of change. It went on to propose that the transition from inorganic matter to organic matter had been achieved by attributing "sensibility" or energy, in a latent form, to inorganic matter.²⁷ Thus, inert, inorganic matter was capable of being transformed into organic matter, since motion is an essential quality of matter. Diderot used the example of the transition of a pulverized marble statue from inorganic dust to humus in which vegetables are grown and then become part of living flesh by being consumed, and ultimately return to dust again. Each molecule, therefore, is capable not only of becoming organic, but each molecule also has the potential for change. The way, then, in which molecules come to be organized, determined the ultimate form of matter.²⁸

In the case of organization of human matter, Diderot described by a purely materialist, mechanical theory, how D'Alembert was conceived and the principle of the hereditary "molecule" that determined his nature:

. . . Before his mother, the naughty and beautiful canoness Tencin had reached the age of puberty, and before the soldier La Touche had reached adolescence, the molecules that were to make up the first rudimentary beginnings of my mathematician

*Infra, Chapter VII.

[D'Alembert] were dispersed through the delicate young bodies of his future parents, were being filtered by the lymph through their organs, were circulating in their blood streams, until the molecules were finally collected in certain reservoirs in preparation for their final meeting--I mean the sex glands of his mother and father. Now we can observe the germination of this rare seed. See how it is carried . . . through the Fallopian tubes into the womb; see how it attaches itself by a long stem to the womb; see how it grows and develops by stages into a foetus. At last the moment arrives when it is to leave its dark prison. Behold the newborn child, abandoned on the steps of St. Jean-le-Rond from which he will take his baptismal name . . . now he is put out to nurse at the breast of a good glazier's wife, Madame Rousseau. On her milk he grows strong both in body and mind and becomes a man of letters, a physicist and a mathematician. And how did all this come about? As the result of eating and of other purely mechanical operations. I will give you the general recipe in a few words--eat, digest, distill in a closed vessel, and you have the whole art of making a man . . . [with the] use of nothing but physical agencies, for these can produce the successive effects required--an inert object, a conscious being, a thinking creature, a being who can solve the problem of the precession of the equinoxes--a sublime and marvelous being, but one that is still going to grow old, fall sick, die and finally return to humus.²⁹

All change in matter has come about without a Creator. All forms of matter are linked together in nature, by subtle gradations. "The canary is made of flesh, the musician is made of flesh that is differently organized, but both have a single origin, were formed in the same way, have the same functions and serve the same end."³⁰ The difference lies in the degree of organization. Man is unique, not because of the act of a Creator, but because his more complex organization has endowed him with a specific kind of memory by which he can tie together his sense impressions and construct a history of his own life. Together they enable him to acquire self-awareness.³¹

From this materialist statement, Diderot drew conclusions that permitted him to identify a wide range of human personality. First, man differs from all other creatures because of his self-awareness, and second, one man differs from all other men because no two individuals can be

exactly alike. No two organisms are alike because of the infinite number of possibilities of hereditary and chance combinations of matter. Not only are no two organisms alike, but no two single molecules are alike: "In this immense ocean of matter there is not one molecule that is just like another, not one that is exactly like itself from one instant to the next."³² The element of change caused by time, decay, disintegrations and recombinations of matter, means that no single molecule can be the same from one moment to the next. Nor can a single individual be the same from moment to moment. Individual organisms in a species resemble each other, but each is uniquely different. And so with men, no two are exactly alike. Nature has made men with enough in common to define the species, but enough of differences to distinguish each individual.³³ He had expressed the same idea in the Encyclopedia: "For all individuals who exist and have existed and will exist, it is impossible that there would be two who perfectly resemble each other."³⁴ And in Jacques the Fatalist, Jacques expressed the same idea: "Hasn't a man his own character, his interests, his tastes and passions . . . ?"³⁵

Every distinction and gradation of difference within an individual and between individuals is determined by purely physical combinations of matter. Thus, absolutely nothing is unnatural or outside the scope of nature. There are not only different degrees of individuality among men, but both the ordinary man and the "monster" are equally natural phenomena:

So then, I am what I am because it was necessary that I should be what I am. Change the entire universe, and you change me; but the universe is always changing. . . . Man is merely a common phenomenon, while a monster is only a rare phenomenon, but both are equally natural, equally necessary, equally subject to the general order of the universe.³⁶

It was this notion that everything is natural that Diderot then linked with individuality, the self, and sexual and social morality. This materialist philosophy led Diderot on his journey into the quest for the self, and into the exploration of the creativity of the rare phenomenon of the genius and the equally natural, if not as rare, phenomenon of the criminal.

In Diderot's materialist philosophy, the notion of constant change and flux added the qualifying factor that as the individual is undergoing change as the universe changes, there are bewildering possibilities of variety among individuals. And as he discovered in himself, there are perplexing possibilities for a wide range of "bizarre" roles within each individual. The concept Diderot introduced in D'Alembert's Dream of the conscious being developing self-awareness adds a further reach to the subtle psychological factors shaping individual consciousness. But amid flux he also found permanency. There was a single constant element in human nature. Diderot was convinced that it was the desire for happiness. "I wish to be happy. This inclination is the eternal, permanent source of all our works, even the smallest."³⁷ It is this pursuit of happiness, then, that motivates the individual's actions and stresses the importance of the "moi."

In D'Alembert's Dream, Diderot had found self-awareness to be a unique characteristic of man. His awareness of his own nature displayed the eighteenth-century interest in the personality. But he transcended that general interest to point out that self-awareness was two-dimensional. On one level, it involved his awareness of an idealized notion of himself that could take many forms. His projection of himself as the ideal philosophe and honnête homme has already been noted. There he conceived

himself as being dedicated to "changing the way men think," to riding "roughshod over prejudice" and to transmitting knowledge to make men virtuous and happier.* As part of this self-image he was quite capable of anticipating the thanks of a grateful posterity. At several places in the Encyclopedia Diderot looked for posterity to acknowledge the "intellectual courage" required by the philosophes to carry on their work in the face of many obstacles. "Our enemies will have earned quite a rare and grand honor for the obstacles created for us." Despite the obstacles and "the sacrifice of the better part of ourselves," however, Diderot had faith in the future: "But we shall have obtained the reward that we desire of our contemporaries and our grandchildren if we have given them cause to say one day that we have not lived a completely useless life."³⁸ In the event of a revolution that might germinate even in "the very center of civilized states" and "plunge the hemisphere into darkness," Diderot prophesied that the survivors would raise a monument to the men of letters whose labors on the Encyclopedia had preserved a knowledge of the past.³⁹ And in a letter to Sophie Volland, he advised her to tell her mother that he was certain that he would have a great reputation with posterity.⁴⁰

Another image of himself that gave Diderot much pride was his role as father. The careful education, including musical lessons, he had prescribed for his daughter, Angelique, was set forth in Rameau's Nephew. The bohemian element in his nature that led him to explore the widest latitude in sexual matters and to point out the crippling psychological effects of sexual repression had not been extended to his daughter. He

*Supra, Chapter I.

undertook to teach her about sex primarily by warning her of the disgrace of lost virginity. He constantly preached virtue to her and explained "the necessity of covering those parts of the body the sight of which would incite men to vice." At another time he warned her against the seductive, "pretty speeches" of men: "They mean 'Madameoiselle, will you dishonor yourself, lose your position in society, shut yourself up in a convent for life and be the death of your father and mother, just to please me?'"⁴¹ Even after her marriage he counseled her about preserving her chastity. He warned her that any infidelity on her part would destroy him. "I should die to have to blush for it."⁴²

Besides these personal revelations, Diderot's self-awareness may be probed throughout the body of his literary work. Although there is always a problem identifying an author's personality with his literary creation, it is generally conceded that the romantic Dorval of the play The Natural Son and the Discourse on Dramatic Poetry that accompanied it, is consistent with Diderot's image of his own personality. Arthur Wilson believes that in one of Diderot's last works on virtue, the Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero, Diderot identified himself with Seneca.⁴³ He used the term "orginaux" to describe bohemian, eccentric characters like Rameau's Nephew and although he disclaimed any admiration for them, there appear to be parallels between some aspects of Diderot's early life and that of the Nephew.⁴⁴ It is unmistakable that he did admire the capacity of these "originals" to savor life. He displayed that favor in writing to Sophie Volland:

I realize there are men happily born for the sole purpose of existing, constantly and because of their temperament, something I could only achieve through periods of reflection and mental anguish.⁴⁵

Rameau's Nephew offers other interesting speculative opportunities for attempting to decide how Diderot saw his ideal self. Although it is debatable whether Moi, the philosophe, or Lui, the scapegrace Rameau's Nephew, wins the debate on virtue and morality, Diderot identified one aspect of the philosophe that he considered a virtue: his independence from wants. The philosophe is the one individual who is exempt from playing the "vile pantomime" of society because he has nothing and wants nothing. But even here, the force of the dialogue seems to favor Rameau's Nephew, since the philosophe ends up rather stuffily defending the virtue of going hungry.* And the portrait of Lui as an "original" who breaks up the "tedious uniformity" of society, "smokes out the truth" and "unmasks the rascals" would seem in agreement with Diderot's aspirations to change the way men think.

Another aspect of Diderot's idealized self-image as philosophe is related to his changed attitude towards Rousseau, especially after their quarrel, which began in 1756 and peaked with Rousseau's withdrawal from society. The very great importance that Diderot attached to the work of the philosophes has been seen (p. 9). Diderot understood the philosophe as a man who loved society; the task of the Encyclopedia was to change society by enlightenment. And for the whole circle of philosophes, the lively debate and exchange of ideas depended on the social role of the salon and the meeting place at d'Holbach's homes in Paris and later, at Grandval. For Diderot, society was the reality within which the individual structures his life. Thus, Rousseau's desertion of society to live at the Hermitage was not only a rejection of the

*Infra, Chapter VI.

company of the philosophes, but a rejection of society itself. For Diderot, to reject society was to reject the monumental task of enlightenment.

Despite Diderot's rhapsodic admiration for nature and solitude (p. 17), his distaste for the "solitary being" had already appeared in the Encyclopedia article "Natural Rights." In The Natural Son (1757), he aimed a direct barb at Rousseau: "The good man lives in society; the bad man lives alone."⁴⁶ Rousseau was stung and what had at first been a momentary quarrel eventually became a permanent break. Without tracing all its ramifications, the Diderot-Rousseau quarrel serves as an interesting reflection on Diderot's image of himself and his one-time friend. Each man felt betrayed. Years after the breach, and even after Rousseau's death, Diderot still felt the need to justify himself. In his Essay on Claudius and Nero (1782), he referred directly to Rousseau as a "crafty hypocrite" who had duped him for seventeen years.⁴⁷ Over the years, Diderot also continually referred to Rousseau as a "fanatic" and a "monster." The psychological implications of this language are considerable in view of Diderot's preoccupation with "monsters," both physical and moral.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in the novel, Jacques the Fatalist, Diderot related the story of two soldiers who were boon friends and companions, but who regularly fought bloody duels. Diderot explained this eccentric dueling in purely psychological terms--the secret jealousy of friends who are rivals in excellence. As Diderot expressed it: "Nothing is harder to forgive than merit."⁴⁹

A further dimension of a secret rivalry threatening to the ideal self-image appeared in the different views of the theatre expressed by Diderot and Rousseau. Diderot had stressed the function of the theatre

as a medium for teaching virtue (p. 7). Rousseau, in the Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre, had taken exactly the opposite view--the theatre was depraved and corrupted morals.⁵⁰ True virtue existed in the state of nature before society had corrupted man. Thus, Rousseau's criticism, an important element in the quarrel with Diderot, can be viewed as a psychological threat to Diderot's image of himself as the philosopher of virtue. The implications are even more interesting when we consider that Diderot's ambivalence was to show up in his own radical, anarchistic notions that society could be corrupt and repressive.*

Diderot's view of his ideal self reflects only one level of his self-awareness. On another level, one that reveals a deeper search for self-identity, Diderot was engrossed with the notion of the interior self, the state of innermost being; what we perhaps would term authenticity.

Diderot's stylistic use of paradox to develop both sides of an argument characterizes much of his writing, particularly the imaginative works like the novels and the contes. Ernst Cassirer and Arthur Wilson consider this "dialectical" style as one of Diderot's most significant intellectual contributions.⁵¹ That Diderot perceived dichotomous thought as a useful investigative tool is pointed out by Wilson who quotes Diderot's statement on alienation: "I also know how to alienate myself, a talent without which one can do nothing worthwhile."⁵² In D'Alembert's Dream, there are several references which perhaps reflect this type of conscious self-alienation, and, incidentally, Diderot's

*Infra, Chapter VI.

psychological insights. He described the "process of self-alienation" of St. Augustine's priest of Calamo who made himself insensitive to live coals. In the same work, he described the ability of "a certain philosopher" (Diderot) to ignore the pain of an earache for two weeks by consciously immersing himself in mental work, a remedy upheld in modern pain studies.⁵³

Diderot was also remarkably perceptive about the psychological self-alienation that can occur in an individual undergoing extreme mental stress. In discussing the nature of a "creature" (l'animal), Diderot, lacking the scientific language of the present, attempted to describe the "center of the bundle of fibers," that is, the vital center of all living beings. He went on to identify the problem for the individual if the "center becomes dominated by the threads." Diderot used the concept of a master-servant struggle for domination between the "center and the subjects" in emotional illness. He aptly described the characteristics of a nervous breakdown in a woman who feared her lover had tired of her:

In this way, there began a sort of civil war inside her own consciousness. Sometimes this war would turn to the advantage of the master; sometimes the subjects would get the upper hand. Whenever the two sides were equal, so that the force exerted by the fibers exactly counterbalanced that of the center of the bundle, she would fall to the ground as though dead . . . [and] would lie for hours on end, entirely motionless and almost lifeless. For six months she kept up the struggle. Whenever the rebellion began in her fibers she was able to feel it coming on. She would stand up, run about . . . exercise, saw wood or shovel dirt. . . . She would make the center of her network, the organ of will power, as rigid as possible by saying to herself: You must conquer or die. At the end of a long succession of victories and defeats the head finally won out, and the conquered "subjects" had been so thoroughly reduced to submission that . . . she has never had the least tendency to vapors since that time.⁵⁴

Despite a deliberate resort to the techniques of paradox and

"self-alienation" by Diderot, there is always a strong element of ambivalence in his thought. It is very evident in Rameau's Nephew in which a certain amount of admiration for Rameau's Nephew as an 'briginal' has been shown in the dialogue itself (p. 83). And as his letter to Sophie affirmed, he admired those men who had the capacity for sheer existence (p.31).

That he at times felt completely alienated from the world was expressed in a letter to Sophie in which he remarked that his friend, Grimm, had often said that Diderot had been made for another world:

But this much is certain, that for nearly fifty years I have been a stranger in this one, that I aim at an imitative life that is not my own, that I bend to the ways of others, and that I am like a dog that marches on two paws.⁵⁵

Although the fragment is undated, "nearly fifty years" would place it around 1762-1763, a period when, according to Georges May, Diderot was still undergoing a "crisis of pessimism."⁵⁶ It had many sources: his personal relationships, the problems of editing and printing the Encyclopedia, and the attack of Palissot on the circle of the Encyclopedists.

A despairing letter of 1762 revealed a whole catalog of self-reproach mixed in with the fear of revealing it:

. . . All is vanity, all is illusion, and it is all hardly worth living for, I had better stop there rather than following the train of thought which might seem in some way offensive to those I love best.

But do I have to restrain myself for fear of hurting them? And if I do restrain myself, will they be more offended by what I say or by what I have at the bottom of my heart . . . ? I ask no better than to be happy, is it my fault if I am not? Is it my fault if I see in everything the defects which are there and which grieve me; if all our life is no more than a lie, a succession of deceiving hopes? We learn all this too late. We tell our children and they don't believe a word of it. They have gray hair before they learn the truth. . . . And here I am, possibly making everyone around me miserable and poisoning the

lives of the ones I love. . . . If everyone else was as bad-tempered, unfair, difficult, sensitive, touchy, jealous, crazy, silly, stupid and monstrous as I am, things would be quite insufferable.⁵⁷

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Rameau's Nephew, in which Diderot created a new social type, the bohemian, which expressed cynical, nihilistic views about society, was begun while Diderot was in a psychologically alienated frame of mind.⁵⁸ But pessimism had merely contributed to his quest for self-awareness. By 1767, when the pessimistic crisis was over, his longing to be completely himself still was present: it was at that time that he expressed this in a letter to Mme d'Epinau:

I assure you that I can only achieve happiness in the integrity of my spirit, of being myself, completely myself (moi tout pur).⁵⁹

There are two important and interrelated ideas that derive from Diderot's materialist thought that bear on the concept of the self. One is the belief that the self is organic and constantly changing, rather than static. This belief can be traced to the notion in many of his materialist works that all is in motion, all changing. In regard to the individual it is perhaps best expressed in D'Alembert's Dream--"Change the universe and you change me (p. 28)." Thus, the individual is subject to physical and physiological changes which in turn change his inner psychological self.* The process is one of constant action and interaction--the individual is never the same, from one moment to the next. Goethe showed a similar interest in this development of personality and character in Wilhelm Meister, a possible influence of his knowledge of some of Diderot's work.⁶⁰

*Infra, Chapter IV on Diderot's interest in psychology and personality.

Another dimension affecting change in the self extends to the environment, the social ambience. This element appears in Diderot's interest in "roles," "masks," and "pantomimes" as responses affording relief from the pressures generated between the inner self and exterior society. He was also intrigued by the role that dreams could play in revealing the subconscious self. And he took an interest in illness, especially prolonged illness, which could free the individual from conscious self-restraints.* Diderot was to bring discerning and disturbing psychological insights to these aspects of the self in The Nun, Rameau's Nephew, Jacques the Fatalist, D'Alembert's Dream, and the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage.

The notion of the changing self was also a key to his approach to determinism as it related to an individual's character. How morally responsible is the individual if his inheritance determines his physical and psychological character? This concern with individuality and integrity of being had a direct bearing on his studies of morality which he carried out by examining specific types represented among individual natures. The search bore fruit in his exploration of the character, particularly the ethics, of genius. It also explored the subtle problem of relating society and its morality to the "superior man" (le sage), the "master criminal" (le grand criminel),** and the "original." Underlying the probing exploration was a key issue that emerged from his materialist theory--what is the implication for society if the "fiber" or "paternal molecule" leads not to the creative genius, but to the genius in evil?

*Infra, Chapters IV and VI.

**Sometimes he substituted the phrase "un grand vaurien" for "le grand criminel."

CHAPTER III

THE GENIUS AND MORALITY

Nature makes the superior man.

Diderot, Rameau's Nephew

The world needs men, but men of genius, no; I say no! No need of them. They are the ones who change the face of the earth.

Diderot, Rameau's Nephew

Individuality held a central importance for Diderot. The most unusual type of individual he identified as the genius, whose artistic or intellectual creation represented the highest possible achievement of the human mind. Genius personified the pure form of that essence of individuality with which Diderot was so much concerned--the ultimate in the subjective search for self and the correlated feelings of self-alienation and alienation from society that he had perceived in his own nature. Diderot's exploration of the nature of genius is one of the elements that link him to the later Romantic "cult of genius." His study of the genius reflects not only a facet of his quest for self-identity, but also a breakthrough of entirely new attempts to identify and understand those qualities that set the genius apart. His concepts of the morality of genius mark an area where his Enlightenment thought varies explicitly from his radical thought. His concern for the genius placed him in a stance of double morality, one for the ordinary man and

another for the genius and the superior man.

Generally, the philosophes thought that everyone had the same basic interests and needs making everyone dependent on the same guarantees for the civil freedom necessary to realize or attain them. Within this framework, Diderot's conventional ideas about enlightening society through the spread of knowledge and education, and his readiness to subordinate the individual will to the "general will," harmonized with Enlightenment thought. But his concern with the genius far outstripped the thought of most philosophes, and, in the Refutation of Helvétius, that concern became an outright attack on Helvetius' belief that the genius can be produced by good education.

Every age has been fascinated by the genius and the qualities of mind and character that distinguish him from other men. The outlook of classical antiquity which made genius either a super-human endowment or a pathological state was still current in the eighteenth-century. Even Diderot, who explored genius more deeply than most of the thinkers of his time, was somewhat influenced by the belief that genius had close ties with madness. As Daniel Mornet has pointed out, the eighteenth-century thinkers, in general, observed but did not analyze.¹ For the most part, they looked on genius as only a vaguely defined power. Voltaire, in his definition of "Genius" in the Philosophic Dictionary, spoke of genius as being comparable to talent: "But, basically is the genius anything other than talent?"² Helvetius accepted genius as an extraordinary human faculty resulting from chance and education. Neither of these definitions would do for Diderot. For him, the genius was an absolutely unique person, unlike any other, whose special attributes were a gift of nature.

Diderot's thought on genius developed two interwoven strands: one concerning the special characteristics of genius; and the other pertaining to the moral standards appropriate to the genius. Both strands derive in the main from his materialist premises. If everything, including man, is reducible to matter, what "fibers" or "threads" in the genius have marked him off from other men? And if every living being and all matter lies within nature, including the monster and the genius (sometimes perceived as a "monster" by Diderot), then questions of morality must also embrace what has arisen in nature. Nothing can be considered unnatural. Now the genius living according to his own ways, his own style, has been observed in all ages. In fact, this evidence had often been cited to support the view that the genius was irrational. Diderot became intensely concerned not only with the inherent nature of genius, but also in accounting for the genius, whose conduct was often bizarre by society's ordinary standards. Does the conventional morality which requires the subordination of the individual to the "general will," Diderot's line of thought in "Natural Right," apply to the genius? Or is the genius because of his extraordinary attributes subject only to his own moral standards and to his own distinct nature? If so, do personal moral standards also apply to the intellectual or artist--to the superior man? Is he also above society's conventions? Finally, what are the implications for a viable society if these standards become the general frame of reference? In seeking answers to these questions Diderot moved beyond the limits of his time in his exploration of genius and in identifying the dizzying implications of genius for social morality.

The Nature of Genius

Diderot's interest in the nature of genius stemmed from his awareness of the difference between the intellectual or artist and the ordinary man. Both were manifestations of nature; but genius was its rare expression. Diderot's attitude towards genius was much closer to Shelley's poet as "legislator of the world," than to conventional Enlightenment individualism. There can be no doubt that Diderot admired and preferred the genius. To Diderot, the self-centered individuality of a Racine, justified by his creative genius, was preferable to the intellectual mediocrity and commonplace virtue of the wealthiest bourgeois.

The key to Diderot's concept of genius was his absolute conviction that the genius was a unique person, that he had an inborn gift, not mere talent, that this gift came from nature and was not attainable through education. Imagination used as a creative force was an essential quality of the genius, a type also marked by strong emotions, the power of observation and cool reflection. Diderot's attempt to analyze the nature of genius was neither static nor confined to a single artistic field. He looked for outstanding achievement in painting, music, theatre, and science as well as philosophy and literature, the forms of expression best known to himself. But his quest sought to identify the general or shared features of all geniuses. Over a period of many years and after much observation and reflection, he came to see the genius as combining passions, imagination, and mastery of technique. He believed that strong emotions and vibrant enthusiasm were essential to creative expression in all the arts. "I have observed in passing," he noted in the Encyclopedia,

"that it is impossible to produce anything sublime in poetry, in painting, in eloquence or in music without enthusiasm."³ In describing poetic genius, Diderot said that enthusiasm is born in the individual through the stimulus of some natural object that fires the imagination and passions. The poet feels the moment of enthusiasm coming on him as a "quivering" which soon becomes an intense fire that "sets him aflame, . . . makes him pant, consumes him, kills him . . . but also endows whatever he touches with soul and life."^{*} Strong passions make great men and weak passions produce mediocrity. With strong passions "the arts of genius are born . . . they make the criminal and the enthusiast who paints him in his true colors. . . . The mediocre man lives and dies like a brute."⁴

Nature inspires, but it is genius that responds. The genius transforms nature and creates the prototype or ideal. This insight, usually associated with nineteenth-century critics, was expressed by Diderot as early as 1755. In distinguishing between a particular and a universal type of genius, he believed that the genius was not bound by artistic rules:

For let there be no mistake, there is a world of difference between those who by force of genius give birth to works that secure the plaudits of a single nation (which has its momentary greatness, its taste, its ideas, and its prejudices), and those who trace out the fundamental principles of creative art as they arise from real, mature knowledge of the human spirit, of the nature of things and right reason, which are the same in all ages. The genius acknowledges no rules; yet he never strays far from them when his efforts succeed.⁵

In the Salon of 1767, he explained the fundamental difference between the third-rate portraitist and the great artist, the man of genius. The

^{*}Supra, Chapter II.

portraiture only imitates nature faithfully, while the genius seeks the "ideal model of beauty, the true line, untrammelled by convention," which actually forms or sets the standard for the spirit of an age.⁶ The art of genius is so unique that it cannot follow ordinary rules. Nor is such art acquired:

And such an art is no more a product of conventions and rules than the effects of a rainbow: it is not acquired, it cannot be communicated, it can only be perfected. It is inspired by natural taste, by a certain mobility of the soul, by sensibility.⁷

Although these examples relate to painting, Diderot conceived of the correlated manifestations of genius in all the arts. In his Salon, for example, he compared his own writing to painting in that he constantly observed people and their expressions, attitudes, and movements as he would visualize them in a painting. Significantly, also, in Rameau's Nephew, the parody of musical genius appears as a pantomime. In fact, Diderot portrayed the Nephew acting out his thoughts in pantomime at least a dozen times.

Since paradox marked so much of Diderot's thought, it is not surprising to find an apparent contradiction in his thought on genius. Having lauded the rule of sensibility in molding the genius, Diderot also perceived that sensibility, if carried too far, could overwhelm the artist. In the Essay on Painting (1765), he developed this view of extreme sensibility marring the creative strain:

When a man is in the grip of an excessive sensibility, he loses the power of discernment: everything excites him indiscriminately. He will begin to stammer; he will be unable to find words to express what he is feeling.⁸

It is exactly this element that Diderot developed in the character of Rameau's Nephew whose creative emotions run wild, in a kind of frenzy

of excess, in which nothing is created, genius is only imitated.

The caution on extreme sensibility in the Essay on Painting, was further developed in D'Alembert's Dream (1769), the Paradox on Acting (1773), and the fragment, On the Genius. In D'Alembert's Dream, Dr. Bordeu differentiates between the genius or great man and the sensible person ("l'être sensible") who is dominated by his "diaphragm" and whose nervous system consequently is agitated and torn in all directions. If the great man inherits that type of disposition, he must work to overcome it, to dominate his sensibility and to master his impulses.⁹ In the Paradox on Acting, Diderot developed the role of thought in the creation of the artist or genius. He posed the theory that the really great actor controls his emotions, observes the emotional state of others, and draws on it for his ideal model. Extreme sensibility makes mediocre actors, whose performances vary in quality; they alternate between the commonplace and the sublime. The great actor's performance is dominated by cool, studied control:

It is extreme sensibility that makes mediocre actors; . . . The actor's tears come down from his brain; the emotional man's tears well up from the heart . . . [the actor's] tears are like those of an agnostic priest preaching the Passion, a seducer at the feet of a woman he does not love but wants to deceive. . . . Reflect for a moment on what is called "being true" in the theatre. Does it mean presenting things as they are in nature? Not at all. The true, in that sense, would be merely the commonplace. What is truth on the stage, then? It is the conformity of action, speech, facial expression, voice, movements, and gestures with an ideal model imagined by the author and often exaggerated by the actor. And there lies the miracle. This model does not merely influence the actor's voice; it even modifies his gait, his bearing.¹⁰

These reflections on the limits of the passions, and the concept of the genius as cool and reflective would appear to be almost irreconcilable with Diderot's connection of creative genius with passion and emotion.

When we remember, however, that he was struggling with an entirely new approach to genius, with an attempt to understand the innermost working of the creative mind, the apparent contradiction can be resolved. Over the years, Diderot had apparently come to regard the faculty of observation as one endowment of genius. The thought is present as early as 1753 in Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature. In considering the scientific genius, Diderot reflected that "creative geniuses are not common" because we rarely see observation, profound reflection, and experimentation combined. The fragmentary work, On the Genius, adds to the concept of the "spirit of the observer" present in the genius, the spirit that permits him to gather, almost unconsciously, all the observations and details which he will draw on for his creation.¹¹ But this is not the only characteristic of genius. Diderot spoke also, in the same work, of the "prophetic spirit" of genius--they are both essential faculties. Diderot had thereby enlarged his concept of genius. He had not eliminated the role of emotion; instead he had included the additional factor of constant, deep observation and calm reflection as essential attributes of genius. We are reminded of Wordsworth in Diderot's statement in the Paradox on Acting: "It is for tranquil reflection to temper the frenzy of enthusiasm."¹² Thus genius is a combination of heightened emotion, imagination, and tranquil reflection:

And why should the actor differ from the poet, the painter, the orator, the musician? It is not in the first furious impulse of inspiration that characteristic traits present themselves; it is in cool and tranquil moments, in entirely unexpected moments. We do not know where these flashes come from: they are a matter of inspiration.¹³

If these are the characteristics of genius, according to Diderot,

how are they developed? In Rameau's Nephew, Diderot answered with a simple statement: "Nature creates the superior man."¹⁴ In D'Alembert's Dream, genius is conceived as an hereditary structure based on the organization of matter peculiar to the exceptional individual. By the mutilation of some of the "threads," or snarling them in the embryo, the potential genius could be reduced to an unorganized mass of pulp; conversely, the man of genius could be recovered by pulling the threads back together again. Just as a monster is determined by mutilation of one or more of the threads, so the genius appeared to him to be determined by the over-development of one part of his physical being so that the predominance of one faculty over another could produce D'Alembert as a mathematical genius and Voltaire as a poetic genius.¹⁵

Diderot's belief in genius as a gift of nature, something that could not be acquired by effort, was stated most emphatically in the Refutation of Helvétius. Helvétius, although a materialist like Diderot, differed with him on the nature of genius. In his posthumous work, On Man, Helvétius had emphasized men's equal intellectual capacities.¹⁶ The conclusions of a genius like Newton could be understood, when properly taught, by children. Thus, Helvétius held that the genius strode only a little ahead of his time; in the communality of men there were no real differences in mental or other faculties that could not be compensated by a good education. Diderot completely rejected this notion. He accused Helvétius of being like a blind man trying to describe colors when he failed to understand the "tyrannical impulse of genius." Nature and organization, the purely physical causes, make the genius. As for Helvétius' notion that education could make a genius, the schools are full of children who apply themselves, torment themselves and cry at

their lack of progress, but who never become geniuses.¹⁷ Diderot's view that the genius is an extraordinary being, a creature of nature, not nurture, set the limit on his own belief in the powers of education for society, proclaimed in the Encyclopedia.

The Morality of the Genius

Although Diderot's preoccupation with genius appears in many works, his most profound and imaginative inquiry into genius is found in his masterpiece, Rameau's Nephew. In the dialogue between Moi (the philosophe) and Lui (the parasitic Rameau's Nephew), Diderot tested the characteristics of true genius against the warped or failed genius of the Nephew. He posed pseudo-creativity against the sublimity of genius, and the ethical standards of the genius against the morality of ordinary men. In this work Diderot's self-analysis has occupied the attention of critics and literary historians. Does Rameau's Nephew represent a duality in Diderot's own nature, the man he might have been? or should the Nephew be viewed as a real figure, the second-rate musician, nephew of the famous eighteenth-century musician, Rameau? Ronald Grimsley has treated Rameau's Nephew as a projection of Diderot's personality onto a real figure--a personality other than himself, but shaped and modified in accord with subconscious impulses in his own nature.¹⁸

There is little doubt that there are aspects of Rameau's Nephew which can be identified with Diderot's own personality. It reflects certain disappointments and even some opinions that Diderot had expressed in other works. That Diderot began Rameau's Nephew in a period of dejection has been established by Georges May.¹⁹ That may be the case, but Diderot's mood did not set the work's limits. Diderot's dissection of

genius transcended the merely personal and autobiographical to realize an authentic vision of the universal nature and problem of genius. The dialogue rambles over a fascinating variety of subjects pitting established moral principles against amoral views of society. Yet it never strays far from the theme of the genius, examined through the interplay of two minds--or two levels of the same mind. The great subtlety of the dialogue lies in the apparent spontaneity of the conversation and the way in which the roles are reversed occasionally so that there is not an absolute opposition of views and the reader is forced to judge the arguments.

The temperaments of the two protagonists are set forth immediately at the beginning of the dialogue. Moi, the philosophe, matches Diderot's ideal self-image as philosophe. The regularity of his life is set out in his daily five o'clock walk and his reflective, philosophic bent is established by his speculations on politics, love, taste or philosophy. He permits his mind to rove "wantonly" after ideas that are his "trollops," picking up one and dropping another. His order and regularity are further stressed as he takes shelter from the weather in the Café Régence where chess, the most rational and orderly of games, is played by some of the most skilled players in the world. Against this setting, the philosophe is accosted by Lui, the "bizarre," ragamuffin, amoral musician, Rameau's Nephew. "He has no greater opposite than himself." He is a combination of elevation and baseness, good sense and lunacy, and a scrambling of decency and depravity. He is a parasite in society, a musician without much talent who could never attain the reputation of his uncle, the famous musician, Rameau. The philosophe dismisses the Nephew as an eccentric for whom he has no great esteem

but who has some value as one of those "originals" who shakes us up, "smokes out the truth" and generally restores our individuality.²⁰ This description, so off-handedly thrown out, is the key to the character of the Nephew.

The two men fall immediately into a conversation on genius because Lui expresses contempt for the mediocrity of some of the chess players, "woodpushers," as he calls them. He only respects "genius:" "In chess, checkers, poetry, eloquence, music and other nonsense of the kind, what's the use of mediocrity?" Moi agrees, but adds that the genius emerges only rarely among the vast number of ordinary men. A passing inquiry about his uncle brings forth the surprising reversal of position by Lui that men of genius are unnecessary in the world; like his uncle, they are totally self-centered troublemakers:

The world needs men, but men of genius no; I say, no! They are the ones who change the face of the earth. . . . If I knew history, I could prove to you that evil has always come down here below through a few men of genius.²¹

Lui is sardonic in this estimate of genius, for it is he who recognizes that the genius is beyond ordinary moral standards and potentially troublesome for society. Thus he cynically suggests that the child marked at birth with this "dangerous gift of nature" should be smothered or thrown to the dogs. As Moi probes this thought, we discover the first clue to Lui's desire for genius: he has developed an undying hatred for genius because he is afraid to admit he thinks he has some. Moi sharply presses Lui for being so vacillating in his judgments and not making up his mind and sticking to it. Moi agrees that geniuses are odd or "to madness near allied." Nevertheless all ages and nations have honored genius. Racine, for example, like Lui's uncle, had a bad

reputation as a man but was a great poetic genius. Which is preferable, Racine, disloyal, deceitful, ambitious, envious, and mean but the creator of Phèdre and other great works, or the good bourgeois with his ledger or yardstick--a good husband, father, neighbor and honest merchant, but nothing more? Here Lui interjects a social comment on the position of the genius in society--Racine would have been better off as a silk merchant, grocer or apothecary because he would have made a fortune. The contempt for a society that valued the bourgeois over the artist is indicative of Diderot's own attitude.²²

The argument returns to Racine as a genius as Moi expresses the opinion that the great genius is justified by his work, even if he is not virtuous. He compares Racine to a great tree which, in the inevitable course of its development, smothers surrounding plants but whose shade is beneficial to past, present, and future generations.²³ In this concept of the genius justified by his work, the philosopher attempted to give an ultimate moral sanction to the amoral genius on utilitarian grounds--on the basis of his contribution to culture. It is important that it is the philosopher who attempted to free the genius from conventional ethics. Moi is aware that the price of genius may be the recognition that there is no law that binds him, so he grounds his argument in the ultimate sanction of the superior gifts of genius. The ethical standard of the genius has entered the argument almost from the beginning and Moi is quite pleased with his projection that unborn generations will benefit from the contributions of genius. The amoral Lui, however, will have none of this argument. It is he who sees that the genius, because he is above society's laws, is potentially anti-social. He is without illusions as to virtue, thus his earlier

remark that the gift of genius is "dangerous" is not a criticism of the genius but rather a cynical appraisal of the danger that would overtake moral standards if this view were to pervade society. Not that he cares--since his whole philosophy is based purely on the material comforts of "good board, good company, pretty women"--but he will not permit the philosopher to take a pompous moral position in order to justify immorality.

Lui has also "smoked out" the real problem. If the genius is justified by his superior gifts, even if he is immoral, what can be made of the pseudo-genius like Rameau's Nephew who also sees in himself an authenticity that permits him to be above moral conventions? Now the argument takes a new turn. Lui's earlier hint about his jealousy of genius appears now in his open admission that he would have liked to be a genius. Because he is mediocre, he cannot bear to hear genius praised; he is full of envy and jealousy. For a moment he takes pride in his keyboard pieces, which nobody plays, but then he falls into a dejected state. In two remarkable musical pantomimes he proceeds to create an imitation of the genius in a frenzy of creation, a near parody of Diderot's description of creative genius in the Conversation on the Natural Son.^{*} He displays many of the characteristic signs of genius, described by Diderot elsewhere--enthusiasm, heightened emotion, musical talent--but the mix is wrong. He is not a genius, merely an imitator of genius. Yet he claims for himself the authenticity of the genius and its rights: freedom from moral standards. His authenticity has enabled him to be one of the few to see through society's falseness.

^{*}Supra, Chapter II.

He is also able to appreciate true genius. Thus, the exception from ethical standards that Moi allows the genius also opens the door to moral freedom for the pseudo-genius.

Because Moi has pinned his defense of moral freedom for the genius precisely on the fact that he is a genius, he again returns to the question of whether Rameau's Nephew is somehow a genius gone wrong and therefore entitled to determine his own moral standards. These, Lui has amply demonstrated, are totally amoral and anti-social. Moi, therefore, brings Lui gently back to the subject of genius: "Dear Rameau, let us talk music." He queries him as to why, with his remarkable talent for remembering and rendering the great musical masters, he has never accomplished anything worthwhile. Diderot thereby raised the question of the flawed genius. What is missing in Rameau that distinguishes him from the true genius? At first Lui blames fate; it was not in his stars. Nature grimaced when she made him. He had once been convinced that he had genius, but when he tried to write, he discovered that he was only a fool:

He sighed, wept, seemed in despair, raised his eyes and hands to heaven, struck his forehead with his fist with a violence fit to break his knuckles or his skull, then added: 'It seems to me nevertheless that I have something there, but I knock in vain, I worry it but nothing comes out.'²⁴

Lui next blames poverty for destroying his creativity:

Ah, Master Philosopher, poverty is a dreadful thing. I can see her squatting, openmouthed to catch a few drops of the icy water that flows out of the sieve of the Danaids. I don't know whether she sharpens the wits of a philosopher, but she surely chills the brain of a poet.²⁵

This was an argument that Diderot could hearken to. In the Encyclopedia article, "Eclecticism," he had lamented the poverty that forces the man of genius out of his natural calling. He had also deplored the neglect

of the government which permitted the man of genius to die with his projects undeveloped.²⁶

But though an indifferent society and poverty could be real problems for the artist, this was not the real reason why the Nephew's creative expression had not materialized. The explanation lies rather in Diderot's materialist philosophy--Lui's physical and mental organization was not properly that of the genius. His heredity had not given him the right "threads." "La fibre m'a manquée," he admits sadly. His "accursed paternal molecule" was "hard and obtuse" and has affected all the rest.²⁷ Nor can the "natural bent of the molecule" be changed by education, the Nephew insists, for it can only work against the grain of the individual's true nature and result in the lowest form of mediocrity. Moreover, not only does Lui lack the inner structure of genius, but his "fibre" has been "accursed" in such a way that, although it has determined him for a musical career, his creative urge is destined to end in disorganized efforts. His frenzied musical pantomimes of creative genius reflect that excessive, unstable emotion--the imagination run wild--which Diderot believed could actually overwhelm the artist and flaw his work. The Nephew's pantomimes demonstrate the destructive force of "excessive sensibility."* Ironically, the pantomimes demonstrate another kind of talent: it is possible the Nephew has missed his calling as an actor. But, even if we read this interpretation into the pantomime, the Nephew would still not meet the test of genius as actor. He loses control; the pantomime runs away from him. It is an example of the erratic performance of the over-emotional actor, scorned by Diderot.

*Supra, p. 44.

Lui's pantomimes leave him drained and exhausted, much as the genius is left exhausted by creative effort. But the Nephew's efforts are only pantomimes, only pale imitations of genius because no tangible, creative work has emerged from them. Diderot had rejected the "imitator" or pseudo-genius in another work: "The genius attracts to himself those who are exalted by him without measure. The imitator never attracts, he is attracted. . . ." ²⁸ In his Salon of 1767, he clearly scorned the imitator of nature who lacked creativity of genius (p. 43).

Thus, for Diderot as philosopher, the true genius must be original and creative and not merely have an imitative talent. By force of his creativity, the true genius can live unrestrained by society's ethical standards. He is the only one who can do so. But through the eyes of Lui, we see this conventional logic weaken and crack as Rameau's Nephew, the imitator or pseudo-genius, claims the right to break society's moral conventions. Diderot's enlightened outlook, his logic, and his readiness to appeal to reason as the basis of social morality simply dissolve in the corrosive acid of the Nephew's philosophy. If all morality is relative and transient, as the Nephew argues, why is anyone bound to observe it? If the pseudo-genius is entitled to take on the freedom and license allowed to the genius, then everything is permissible. Eventually every man will claim the same moral autonomy for himself.

That Diderot was not unaware of the social danger is demonstrated by Moi's effort throughout the dialogue to peg the authenticity of the genius to his work. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Diderot had made a serious philosophical effort to free the artistic genius from the

moral restraints of society and that, by extension, he envisioned the same moral freedom for the wise or superior man. In A Conversation of a Father with His Children,²⁹ Diderot suggested the necessity for individual determination of moral standards whenever the laws fail to meet human needs. Although the Conversation indicates the danger of this principle, Diderot's eventual assertion that "there are no laws for the wise man" clearly validates the superior man's intuitive judgment. The Conversation deals basically with the problem of honesty and respect for the law weighed against compassion. Diderot's father relates how he was once called upon to settle the estate of a priest. In the course of rummaging through old documents, he discovered an old will by which the priest had disinherited all his poor relatives and left his fortune to a wealthy relation. Diderot's father faced a dilemma: whether to burn the will which was unjust and had apparently been forgotten by the priest; or to act on the face of its instructions. Diderot's father, as a law-abiding citizen, decided not to destroy the will although the decision violated his humane instincts. The ultimate injustice occurred when the heir, under the terms of the will, refused to give a penny to the disinherited and impoverished relatives. Diderot took the position in the Conversation that his father should have destroyed the will. But his father clearly posed the moral issue: "You would have valued your own reason more highly than that of the general public; that is, you'd have let one man's decision override the law?" Diderot's answer was unhesitatingly affirmative:

Precisely. Doesn't man, as man, take precedence over man in his legal capacity? Isn't the natural wisdom of humanity many times more sacred than that of some lawgiver? . . . Pure instinct, unhindered, would have led us straight to our goal.³⁰

Diderot then cited examples of justice meted out by individuals without recourse to the law: the gravedigger who tosses the still-living, plague-ridden murderer onto a pile of corpses; and the Sicilian cobbler who acts as prosecutor, judge, and executioner of atrocious criminals when the law has failed to take action. In each case, Diderot, as participant in the conversation, defended the vigilante justice which rids society of dangerous elements. He conceded the danger to society of the individual taking the law into his own hands but held to the exceptions:

There are no laws for the wise man. . . . Every law has its exceptions, and it takes wisdom to decide which cases come under the rule and which are to be dealt with as exceptions.³¹

His father sensed the potential anarchy in a morality left to individual decisions: "I wouldn't be too sorry if there were one or two fellows like you in town; but if everybody thought as you do, I'd move somewhere else."³²

The ultimate justification for autonomous morality lies for the genius in his creativity and for the wise man in his superior judgment. Diderot apparently was advocating a double moral standard, one morality for the genius and sage, and another for the people. Certainly he did not believe that moral freedom was for everyone: "It is a speculative doctrine which is not for the multitude and not for practice."³³ It seems entirely probable that Diderot was aware of the possibility that ~~amoral~~ amoral ity is an attribute of the artistic gift itself. The genius or artist, to fulfill his gift, may have to ignore all conventional standards. The "moi tout pur" of the artist may require a singular devotion to the self that ignores all others in ruthless pursuit of development of the gift of genius. That would appear to be central to

his emphasis of the moral standards of the genius. But this exalted notion of the freedom of the genius opened up the philosophical issues that flow from a nihilistic challenge to established moral conventions.

CHAPTER IV

THE MASTER CRIMINAL: THE GENIUS IN EVIL

If there's one realm in which it is essential to be sublime it is in wickedness. You spit on ordinary scum, but you can't deny a kind of respect to the great criminal.

Diderot, Rameau's Nephew

Diderot justified the exemption of the genius and superior man from conventional morality in terms derived from his concern for the freedom of the exceptional individual. However, because he was equally concerned with society and its general level of virtue, his effort to define a moral standard usually sought to integrate self-interest with social interests. Thus, even his statement that "there is no law for the wise man" hinged on the wise man's superior judgment in determining justice whenever the laws had failed. In essence, Diderot justified his independent decision because a ponderous society could not always deal justly with human needs. In either case, he found a moral warranty for conduct that did not conform to traditional ethical standards by measuring it against a utilitarian scale of values tipped in the direction of society. The outcome he was prepared to call justice.

Another dimension of Diderot's thought revealed his fascination with the individual acting without regard to either traditional morality or the law, with individuals who appeared to be unconcerned with any moral justifications. His fascination gave rise to considerable philosophic speculation about the nature of the evil genius or the

master criminal. Diderot's admiration of individuality, strong passions, and achievement combined with his materialist philosophy to open entirely new aspects of morality not connected in any way with social or individual utility. In a masterful reversal of the concept of genius, Diderot ventured into a new and morally uncharted realm--the conception of great genius in evil. His admiration for the unique individual, almost of logical necessity, led him to flirt with the notion of grandeur, or "sublimity" in the truly evil genius. At the same time, because he linked his biological materialist philosophy to morality, the proposition that everything in nature is natural had serious moral implications.

The first corollary of this proposition was that there is no "natural" morality or immorality. Right or wrong, good or evil, vice or virtue, are not "natural laws" but purely social conventions. A second corollary follows: if morality is artificial, that is only social, how binding is it? A third corollary is related to the actual nature of society. If social morality is only a hypocritical facade, in which only some people follow the rules, is the evil genius worthy of emulation because he dupes society instead of being duped by it? The weighing and testing of these moral questions was to lead Diderot to the contradiction between his acknowledgment of a need for general virtue and his involvement with nihilistic thinking. Therein lay the philosophical trap. Virtue and vice could be defended by reason; each could be "proved" by experiential observation of human nature. But they could not be reconciled by reason. The moral problem again was reducible to "ni vice, ni vertu" in nature.

The hint of fascination with evil genius appeared in Diderot's romantic emphasis on passions related to greatness. This has been noted

in his early statements equating mediocrity with weak passions, and superiority, even in evildoing, with strong passions.* He also had written that the same "energy" characterized sublime actions and great crimes.¹

Another aspect of his attraction to the criminal mind involved his interest in the psychological undercurrents of human behavior. He had once noted that he might someday write an apology for criminal behavior.² He felt an awesome respect for the risk taking element involved in criminality. In a period when breaking on the wheel was still a penalty for theft, he was amazed at the daring of petty thieves. He believed human nature to be admirable even in moments of atrocity. "Even at the moment of execution, there are thieves at work in the crowd, risking the very same fate. What contempt of death and life."³ And he was fascinated by the varied and often contradictory convolutions of the human heart, capable of jealousy, rage, revenge, domination, and even the sheer will to evil.

His preoccupation with evil was also partly a result of his materialist theory from which he traced a biological and psychological determinism of physical as well as moral make-up. He conceived of physical as well as moral monsters as nothing more than different forms of organizing matter.** Biological monstrosities are only those developments within a species which die out, unsuited by their organization to survive. The notion of "monstrosity" is therefore relative, determined by the form and nature of species that have survived. In one of his last materialist works, the Elements of Physiology, Diderot described

*Supra, Chapter II.

**Supra, Chapter II.

the human race and all existing species of animals as simply more enduring kinds of monsters. He had concluded that a monster is a being whose duration is incompatible with the existing order of nature. But since nature is always changing we cannot conclude that what we consider normal now will continue to be normal in the future. All gives way to change without our being able to say whether the whole process is for the better or worse.⁴ As he pointed out in D'Alembert's Dream, if the Cyclops had survived as a species, it would be considered normal and two-eyed men would be abnormal. Within a species, imperfections or variations from what is considered normal, makes the concept of "monster." As far as nature is concerned, however, the "monster" is as natural as the ordinary being.⁵ The word "monster" fascinated Diderot and he used it in many ways: he referred to Rousseau, and sometimes even himself, as a "monster."⁶ But basically, his ordinary usage of the word implied physical or mental abnormalities in nature. Following the logic of his thought, he believed that since physical monsters exist and are "natural," then moral monsters are an equally natural possibility. If the "threads" or fibers making up an individual's brain were in some way distorted, the result could be the aberration or "monster" called "genius." But equally possible was the aberration of the moral monster whose "molecules" could determine him for another kind of genius, or creativity, in evil.

The Psychology of Evil

To the physical or biological component in the organization of an individual must be added the psychological influences which Diderot considered influential in the determination of character. Diderot's interest in psychological phenomena stemmed directly from his own

materialism and generally from the broader enlightened effort to study and probe the psychology of human nature. Condillac's Treatise on Sensations, starting with Locke's theory on the development of knowledge from sensations and reflections, stressed the ways in which perceptions, ideas, and passions are constantly combined and recombined into new forms of knowledge. Condillac was interested in the analysis of language as revealing human nature and permitting a deeper psychological understanding of man's inner being. This probing of the psychology of language was to have an important influence on Diderot.*⁷ Hartley and Priestley's theory of the association of ideas in the human psyche added substantially to the conceptions of the psychology of human nature. The intense interest of the philosophes in finding an integrating factor to harmonize social and individual needs was strongly influenced by these psychological theories.

Diderot, always keenly interested in scientific developments and influenced by his association with Condillac, introduced a psychological element into his materialist theory. His belief that all organisms are determined by their material organization has been discussed. To this Diderot had added the psychological factor that man is different from other creatures because of his ability to associate his sense impressions into a history and self-awareness of his own life. Because of nature's infinite variety, in this complex interplay of physical and psychological elements, no two individuals are exactly alike.** This possibility of an infinite number of

*Infra, Chapters VI and VII.

**Supra, Chapter II.

combinations of human personality types fascinated Diderot. But Diderot was no simple determinist. The individual inherits a particular temperament. But this temperament is affected by a complicated and constant interaction between the individual and his environment. There is a close relationship between the mind and its reflection of the outside world.⁸ But the physical and mental structure that basically determines character and inheritance is more important than the environment. Nevertheless, within the framework of an individual's given physical and mental organization, his response to the outside stimuli of the environment will vary. As an additional complexity of human nature, Diderot saw that man's physical nature would also play a role in determining his psychological outlook. A fine example is Saunderson, the blind man in Letter on the Blind, who in order to believe in God, would have to touch Him.⁹

Diderot was particularly absorbed in the ethical problems involved in this materialist conception of man's nature, so inexorably linked to his determined heredity. The ethical problem turns on the means for justifying concepts of vice and virtue, and good or evil for individuals whose nature is basically determined by their structure. The connection between materialism and morality appears repeatedly in Diderot's thought. Moral categories become meaningless in a world where everything is determined by nature and is therefore natural. There is neither vice nor virtue. "Our virtues and vices are closely related to our organs."¹⁰ Men cannot be called virtuous or vicious, only "fortunately or unfortunately born."¹¹ They have either "bienfaisance" or "malfaisance." If they have the former, it is only good luck, not virtue; if they have "malfaisance," it is bad luck for them, and

especially for society.¹²

This ethical dilemma, remorselessly drawn out in his philosophical works, is revealed with cogent psychological insights and ramifications in Diderot's fiction. In his novels, his psychological character studies reflect the most significant new development in the eighteenth-century French novel. Choderlos de Laclos and Restif de la Bretonne both created characters who are psychological studies in evil. Both Laclos and Restif wrote at the end of the century, later than Diderot, and Restif was himself influenced by Diderot's work. Laclos' novel, Les Liaisons dangereuses (1782), deals with two libertines, Valmont and Mme de Merteuil, who compare with Diderot's Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson in ruthless, diabolical destruction of other people to satisfy their own egos. Laclos' treatise, On the Education of Women (1783), reflects the psychological insights he developed in the character of Mme de Merteuil. He believed that women were forced to develop ruse and cunning to overcome their disabling status in eighteenth-century society. Only by dissimulation could they dominate men.¹³ Restif's villain, Gaudet d'Arras, bears a great similarity to Diderot's Father Hudson. He is an ex-priest, totally corrupt, and devoted to his own passions and the corruption of others.

For Diderot, the moral monster in fiction was a device that permitted him to elaborate on ethical and moral problems through the psychological exploration of different types of individuals, particularly those who display what he called "greatness in evil." Because of the psychological ramifications of his thought, Diderot's fictional characters are never solely vehicles for entertainment or moralizing. They are, rather, a rich and complex exploration into the hidden recesses of the

human heart and mind. Ironically it is the novels, which he did not consider as important as his serious philosophical writing, which most fully illuminate the infinite variety of human nature.¹⁴ The fictional moral monsters reveal the human capacity for evil. They bare all the discrepancies between human nature as it is and the enlightened hope, expressed in the Encyclopedia, of making men better and happier.

The Eulogy to Richardson eloquently testified that Diderot believed the purpose of the novel, as of other art, was to make virtue admirable and vice loathesome.* It is all the more remarkable then, and a tribute to the artist rather than the moralizer, that despite his attitude towards virtue, his most memorable characterizations are not of virtuous characters but of the villains and scoundrels, like Rameau's Nephew, Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson in Jacques the Fatalist.

The "Sublimity" of Evil: Rameau's Nephew

The philosophe who loved virtue found it linked, alas, to mediocrity. And in evil, there is a certain "sublime" genius, as Rameau's Nephew affirmed. The Nephew himself represents a psychological study in the frustration that accompanies missing genius. He is the product of a materialist inheritance from his forebearers--the "accursed paternal molecule" which bars him for musical genius, but, as he believes, has determined his character for baseness. In a brilliant parody of genius, the Nephew sets out to prove that the paternal molecule has determined him for another destiny, genius in evil. His talent for pantomimes, with which he imitates musical genius, is also a superbly

*Supra, Chapter I.

useful instrument for deceit and falsity. No one has surpassed him in the mastery of abject flattery, as he demonstrates by simultaneously describing and acting out the way he flexes and twists his spine, shrugs, nods, and shuts his eyes as if thunderstruck by a voice from heaven. He grants that he may not have invented flattery, but no one surpasses him in it.

The philosophe (Moi) questions whether this is genius, since it is not original. The Nephew proudly refutes this charge: "Pardon me. For example, that spinal expression of admiration I mentioned to you. I consider it mine." No one else has conceived of the hundred ways in which it can be used to outwit and mock others and to seduce young girls. In truth, if a record were kept, "a touch of genius" could not be denied to him.¹⁵ Moi's sarcastic comment that these attitudes should be written down for preservation is countered by the Nephew's reply that he relies very little on methods and rules. The genius does not read, he experiments. He does not need lessons, for "nature creates the superior man."¹⁶ The whole thrust of Rameau's Nephew's defense is a parody of Diderot's theory that the true genius is born, not made by education.*

Rameau's Nephew readily admits that there are masters, "rare geniuses," who forge ahead of others in novelty. He is a willing pupil of such "sublime" geniuses. For example, Bouret's¹⁷ talent with "the lap dog trick" is unsurpassed. Bouret, in order to flatter the Keeper of the Seals, wanted to give him his own lap dog, but the dog loved Bouret and feared the Keeper of the Seals. Bouret's "elegant" solution

*Supra, Chapter III.

was to have a mask made to look like the Keeper of the Seals and to borrow his official gown. In this outfit, he calls the dog and gives him a tidbit. Then, as Bouret, he calls the dog and whips him. Three days of this precedent in Pavlov's conditioning and the dog shuns and cringes from Bouret and is ready to be turned over to the Keeper of the Seals. The sublimity of the whole deception for Rameau's Nephew is the mask: "The mask! The mask! I'd give a finger of my right hand to have thought of the mask."¹⁸

In many other works, Diderot used the concept of masks, veils, and the use of language as a mask to illuminate how people hide true motivations under counterfeit expressions.* Indeed, the pantomimes of Rameau's Nephew are a kind of mask or body language with which he gives numerous demonstrations of his debasing flattery. And while he admires Bouret's genius in thinking of the mask, in his own pride in his originality in inventing the "spinal" pantomime and its variations, he really claims for himself the "sublimity" of Bouret. It is also noteworthy that, although the philosophe has mocked the Nephew's pantomime, and is disgusted by his use of this talent for debasing purposes, he grudgingly admires it.¹⁹

Throughout the discussion of the Nephew's baseness, his saving grace lies in his lack of hypocrisy, although he too uses masks and mimicry to hide his villainy. And he admits it. He never denies, indeed he freely concedes, that he is a rogue. He is content to be regarded as a scoundrel by the philosophe, but never as a fool. In fact, he belittles the attempt of education to mold the individual born with the "molecule"

*Infra, Chapter VI.

for villainy because it makes him neither good nor bad, but only "clumsy" in good or evil deeds. Education thus creates a "type," the mediocrity, the most contemptible kind of individual. "A scoundrel is a great scoundrel, he isn't a type."²⁰

The point-counterpoint of the theme is constantly repeated with nuances and variations. The Nephew is determined to convince the philosophe of his genius in villainy. He sees the philosophe's contempt, but he craves his admiration. Thus, the Nephew passes from the portrayal of his own abject and contemptible flattery to the narration of several stories of pure malevolence and evil. The rationalization for his admiration of these villains is the sheer magnitude of their evil:

If there's one realm in which it is essential to be sublime, it is wickedness. You spit on ordinary scum, but you can't deny a kind of respect to a great criminal: his courage amazes, his ferocity overawes. People especially admire integrity of character.²¹

The Nephew gleefully relates the tale of the Jew and the renegade from Avignon who betrays him. The renegade is, for the Nephew, the villain par excellence. Sheltered and protected by the Jew, he masks his real intentions, and wins the Jew's complete confidence. "Marvel at the circumspection," says the Nephew. The renegade does not hurry, does not spoil his plan to ruin the Jew by springing his trap too soon. When he deems the fruit is ripe, he tells the Jew that they have been betrayed to the Inquisition. He undertakes to sell all the Jew's goods and charter a ship so they can both sail to a safer place. While the Jew sleeps trustfully, the renegade steals the money and sails off alone. The Nephew can hardly contain himself. "You think that's the end," he taunts the philosopher. "You did well to be an honest man; you would have made but half a scamp."²² Up to this point,

the renegade is only a "contemptible cur," not worthy of emulation. But there is a "stroke of genius" to be unmasked. The informer to the Inquisition was the renegade himself. And while he sails off to sunnier climes, the Jew is seized and served up as a "bonfire" for the Inquisition.

The philosopher recoils in horror and loathing at the Nephew's obvious delight in the story. The Nephew is not offended. He has made his point. The renegade's deed is so atrocious that it is beyond contempt: he is the sublime master criminal. As for himself, the Nephew claims his originality in vileness in telling the story: "I wanted you to know how far I excelled in my art; to make you admit . . . that I am at least original in my vileness."²³

By relating the story, without shame, Rameau's Nephew claims for himself the mantle of sublime genius in evil: "I want you to consider me in the tradition of great scoundrels."²⁴ His absolutely open, cynical self-awareness and his desire to be considered great in evil, if not in music, then lead him to reveal his own misdeeds. He cheats in giving music lessons; he seduces young bourgeois virgins under their mothers' noses; he would prostitute his wife if she were not dead.

Like Moi, the philosophe, we are both appalled and amused at his candid revelation of evil. And yet, Diderot has so balanced the theme of the master criminal against the theme of the genius, that we realize that the Nephew, despite his protestations, is only a second-rate rogue. As he was only a pseudo-genius in music, so he is only a pseudo-genius in villainy. His crimes are contemptible but he is not a moral monster on the grand scale. There is a discrepancy between his aspirations to villainy and his actual accomplishments. By his own standards of greatness in evil, his achievements are only mediocre. The

fibre "manquée" for genius has missed him also in evil.

The portrayal of Rameau's Nephew has a profound psychological insight. As depicted by Diderot, his determination to admire evil and his insistence on his own superiority in evil reflect an existential self-awareness rooted in physical and psychological determinism. He wholly accepts his amoral character. He is what he has to be and he will always remain so. He embraces an identity that is repulsive to the philosophe and to conventional morality, but which he recognizes as authentically his own. Moreover, in the story-within-the-story of the Jew of Avignon, we sense that it is not only the prospect of material gain that prompted the betrayal. The "stroke of genius" reveals a streak of sadistic cruelty in the betrayer and also in the Nephew who becomes practically ecstatic over it. But there is yet a further depth to Diderot's insight into human nature. We are appalled by the sadistic glee of the Nephew, but we are also reluctant accomplices. The ferocity that overawes, as described by the Nephew, does indeed attract us at the same time that we are horrified. We become voyeurs in evil, and, like Diderot as philosophe, we are appalled at the range of possibilities in human nature.

Diderot was to explore these psychological levels of evil more deeply in Jacques the Fatalist and His Master. There he probed the darkest impulses of the subconscious. In the tales of Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson, Diderot created a pair, villainous though they may be, who rank among the great characters of the eighteenth-century French novel. They fit the dictum of Rameau's Nephew that one cannot help admiring truly monstrous evil. Through them, Diderot again tested the nature of morality and ethics and the relationship between genius and

evil. In the process, he plumbed the hidden depths of the human sub-conscious with perceptive pre-Freudian insights. He exposed the terrifying implication that fascination with spectacular evil may be part of human nature, an implication that Sade was to take for granted. That Diderot was not naive about human goodness is apparent from his statement in the Encyclopedia: "Man is the most ferocious animal and the only cruel one."²⁵ He was to explore cruelty before Sade in themes of sexual domination and revenge.

Domination and Revenge: Mme de la Pommeraye
and Father Hudson

In the tales of Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson, individuality, in its anti-social form of criminality and evil, is pitted against accepted social morality. These stories are not simply tales of petty criminals seeking material gain. They deal with larger-than-life villains, moral monsters on the grand scale, who seek power and domination over others. They are engaged in a Hegelian "master-servant" struggle for superiority and domination. This psychological theme of the ego struggle for revenge and domination is best represented in the Pommeraye-Hudson characterization of mastery in evil. Like Jacques, and Diderot himself, we are awed by their genius for evil. We identify with Jacques' involuntary admiration for Mme de la Pommeraye: "What a devil of a woman."²⁶ The "sublimity" in crime, a key premise in Rameau's Nephew, is also a key to the behavior of Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson.

The two are linked in the "sublimity" of evil by the way in which they pursue revenge. They both take the risks which Diderot identified as one of the awesome characteristics of the criminal. They both use their superior reason for unethical ends. Diderot, the

philosophe of reason and enlightenment, in a tour de force of evil, here wholly divorced reason from any will to moral purpose. The power of reason for ethical purpose, education, happiness, and enlightenment is totally mocked in the process. Reason here is triggered by the great passions, which Diderot so admired, to serve the will to power and domination. Virtue appears pale and mediocre indeed against the splendid evil of these two moral monsters. They are perverse examples of that integrity of being which Diderot wanted for himself.* Here, that integrity involves the totality of ruthless egotism and pride. Both must seek more than revenge: they want and they get total satisfaction, complete triumph over their opponents. Mme de la Pommeraye risks losing the whole game rather than accepting half measures. Father Hudson, when threatened with ruin, could settle for saving himself. Instead, he too risks defeat and exposure because he must have total vengeance. If either accepted less, they would be only mediocre scoundrels. Both of them maneuver, plot, plan, and manipulate people. Their final "stroke of genius," as Rameau's Nephew would say, consists in having achieved vengeance by outward appearances which belie their true natures.

The study of Mme de la Pommeraye is the most absorbing from several points of view. Diderot accorded her the fullest treatment; her character is more completely explored, and the motivation for her revenge is more fully explained. Moreover, the reason for her vengeance, her lover's infidelity, has social implications that shed light on women's status in eighteenth-century French society. A love affair was socially

*Supra, Chapter II.

acceptable, even considered a necessity for the ego, in upper-class French society. Montesquieu, in the Persian Letters, indicated a low esteem for chastity in upper-class Parisian society where a man was a fool if cuckolded by his wife but even more scorned if she held no attraction for other men.²⁷ Nonetheless, a certain loss of reputation was still incurred by the woman. Diderot's treatment of this theme in the story of Mme de la Pommeraye indicates the ambiguous status of sexual virtue for women. It is clear that the Marquis des Arcis is a rake who enjoys sexual conquest. He has very little regard for women because they are attained so easily. That virtue was still prized, at least superficially, becomes apparent in des Arcis' attitude. One of the attributes of Mme de la Pommeraye that attracted the Marquis was precisely her moral virtue. Before she gave in to the Marquis, Diderot specifically indicated that she struggled with herself because of her moral standards.

Thus, Mme de la Pommeraye, in accepting a lover, risks a certain damage to her reputation. But for the Marquis there is no such dilemma or social stigma. As a man, he is quite free to pursue love as a game, without loss of reputation. Thus, Diderot's portrait of Mme de la Pommeraye has overtones of social criticism. As a matter of fact, Diderot intervened as moralist in the story and offered a defense of Mme de la Pommeraye as a woman driven to villainy by a double betrayal. First, she is betrayed as a woman who had given her love and trust, and thereafter is rejected. On another level, she risks the loss of social reputation by the liaison. This interplay of the emotional and social implications of the story thus furnishes the necessary element of reality, both in terms of social history and psychological analysis.

Mme de la Pommeraye, a conventionally moral woman, is transformed into a demon of vengeance, because the infidelity of her lover strikes at her deepest instincts--her pride and her ego. The portrait of Mme de la Pommeraye has the stamp of authenticity because in it Diderot unmasked the deep passion and the undercurrents of pride and ego that lie under the outward facade or mask of morality. The very fact that she had been virtuous is part of the wound to her pride that must be salved by vengeance. Because she considered surrender to her lover a sacrifice of virtue, her vengeance must be in terms analogous to her own defeat. No duelist on the field of honor ever chose weapons with more care. Mme de la Pommeraye's vengeance is planned in sexual terms. She seeks to betray her former lover into marrying a prostitute masquerading, under Mme de la Pommeraye's direction, as a modest, virtuous young woman. The seducer is to be seduced by a social outcast so as to be ruined in the strata of society which condones promiscuity, but never marriage to a prostitute.

Another element in the vendetta is revealed in an aside by the innkeeper's wife who tells the story. The Marquis des Arcis had "very little faith in the virtue of women." His initial attraction to Mme de la Pommeraye, was because she was "different." She was a widow of "morals, birth, fortune and position."²⁸ She was a new game for him, a new type of "conquest," the best kind for the seducer--the woman who resists. Once the game had been won, the Marquis tired of her. The landlady points out that he would have been happy if he had been able to preserve his original feelings of love. But he could not because, as the landlady philosophizes, only women know how to love, men don't understand love at all. For the Marquis, very much like Valmont in Laclos'

Les Liaisons dangereuses, the thrill of love is in the conquest of chastity.

Certainly the Marquis completely underestimates the elemental forces of Mme de la Pommeraye's nature. Once betrayed, all of her intellectual superiority, subtlety, ingeniousness, and acting ability are utilized in her scheme of revenge. She must successfully hide her hatred and outrage behind the mask of friendship. She must also maneuver the Marquis' emotions and dominate the two women chosen for her scheme. By the sheer force of her will, she maintains a delicate balance of all the elements of human ego, lust, and greed until the play is over and her vengeance secured.

The first indication of her superiority in deceit is developed in the acting by which she draws from des Arcis the fatal admission that he has tired of her. In a superb vignette, which also demonstrates Diderot's theory that the great actor does not lose himself in emotion,* Mme de la Pommeraye extorts the confession by pretending that it is she who has lost her interest in love. The Marquis is easily gulled into accepting this pseudo-confession because it gives him the opportunity to slip out of the bondage of fidelity to one mistress. He never suspects Mme de la Pommeraye's duplicity, because his own ego and will do not permit it. He readily believes that they can change roles from lovers to good friends and that she can be his adviser in new love affairs. Every word cuts her pride and heart. But she sustains the mask of friendship and continues to entertain him at her home and listen to his new conquests while she baits the trap to snare him by his own passions.

*Supra, Chapter III.

The contrast between des Arcis and Mme de la Pommeraye is, in itself, a skillful comparison between superiority and mediocrity in evil. Des Arcis is himself a scoundrel in his immorality and seductions; but he is really only an ordinary eighteenth-century roué. Even his credulity in believing Mme de la Pommeraye's protestations of friendship betrays an ego that cannot consider the possibility that this woman can, or will even want to, destroy him. He lacks the power to understand anything more than sexual conquest as an egotistical game. It is beyond his power to recognize that in Mme de la Pommeraye there are unplumbed depths of sadistic possibilities for retaliation. We pity his ingenuousness and at the same time we despise his mediocrity in the contest with this woman. He cannot even recognize it as a contest, because his vanity and self-centeredness have never permitted him to discern or suspect depth of feeling in others.

Mme de la Pommeraye, on the other hand, plays out the game of revenge with total control and daring. She lays the trap by arousing his interest in a beautiful woman, who has been a prostitute, but who is now presented, through Mme de la Pommeraye's artifice, as a respectable, modest, religious woman. The trap is baited with exactly the appeal she had herself once held for the Marquis--unavailability. She draws out his agony by feeding his passion, by talking about it, and by pretending to advise him how to proceed with the conquest. In the meantime, the young woman and her mother are lured into total submission by their alternate hope of gain and their fear of exposure of their past. Twice they are tempted to accept the Marquis' offers, first of money, then of half his entire estate. Mme de la Pommeraye scornfully threatens them with exposure and ruin if they accept. She enjoys her domination

over them and indicates that they are only objects, stepping-stones in her path:

No, no. That will not suffice for my wounded heart. . . . Do you imagine I do all this for you? Who are you? What do I owe you?²⁹

Her true greatness in evil lies in her own refusal to compromise. If she permits the acceptance of either of these offers, she will have a measure of revenge. The Marquis will still have been duped, and she has brought him to the point of nervous exhaustion because of his unrequited passion. But this revenge is only partial. Full justice demands the full satisfaction of her wounded ego. She risks the whole scheme falling into ruin by holding out for his offer of marriage to the girl. Therein lies the supreme risk taking Diderot admired in the criminal mind. Failure would be preferable to moderate success. So sure is she of her power and superiority, moreover, that she even deliberately risks spoiling her own plan. She tries to persuade him not to marry the girl. There is a double diabolic element here. The exquisiteness of the revenge is heightened by subjecting it to this risk. The pretense of discouraging the Marquis from undertaking the marriage, really is aimed at strengthening his resolve to go ahead with the plan. But it is utterly dependent on her correct reading of his temperament. She wins the gamble. The marriage is performed and Mme de la Pommeraye then reveals the notorious background of his new wife. Her vengeance is complete.

In a coda to the story, the Marquis, in time, forgives his wife because he really loves her. He decides that Mme de la Pommeraye has even really rendered him a great service. It is an ending that in no way diminishes our admiration for the skill, the genius, with which

Mme de la Pommeraye has maneuvered in order to get her vengeance. But one wonders why Diderot permitted the conventional happy ending. Is it because Diderot, despite his fascination with evil, drew back from letting it succeed completely? This seems unlikely, because evil triumphs completely in the case of Father Hudson. Another possibility is that the coda adds the ultimate irony--the element of the absurd. The story is set within the larger framework of Jacques the Fatalist, in which determinism and chance alternate in human affairs. In this light, Diderot's final point appears to be that nothing is stable, neither evil nor good. Cause and effect have no necessary relationship to each other in the world of reality. Virtue may not triumph, but vice also may fail, not because it is vice, but only because everything is uncertain. Chance, which Diderot believed could thwart the man of genius,³⁰ might also thwart the genius in evil.

In the story of Father Hudson, Diderot's other famous genius in evil, pure malevolence triumphs. Father Hudson destroys his opponents and continues wielding a position of power and authority. Like Mme de la Pommeraye, he too seeks vengeance for what he deems betrayal. But unlike her, his hidden depths of evil are not brought out by a betrayal of trust. Indeed, he is a villain from the outset. He is in charge of a religious order in which he enforces the severest discipline and morality. Beyond reproach in his outward life, he too masks another personality. In his own private life he is the essence of hypocrisy, demanding one morality from his subordinates and living by another for himself. Like Diderot's wise man, he holds himself above the laws of convention. He maintains a "seraglio" in the abbot's house connected to the monastery. There he entertains women of all classes. He hears

confessions and "corrupts all those among the women penitents who are worth the trouble."³¹ When his vices are suspected, he diverts suspicion by his pious demeanor.

Finally, his downfall seems at hand. Two commissioners are sent by the bishop to spy on him in response to secret complaints by members of the order. Father Hudson discovers their mission. Is he frightened or abashed? Not in the least. His prime objective becomes, not the avoidance of his own ruin, but how to destroy his would-be-persecutors. He shares Mme de la Pommeraye's motive: the revenge he savors is essential to his superior ego. And like her, his revenge must be analogous to the Biblical "an eye for an eye." By deft planning, his adversaries are trapped in the very charge of sexual misconduct that they seek to bring against him.

Roger Kempf has called attention to Diderot's familiar use of paradox in a new way in his fictions, in the "synchronisation satanique." The villain evens the score with those who try to stop him by snaring them in the trap designed for himself.³² By this technique, the scoundrel not only escapes justice, but the innocent are crushed. In the case of Father Hudson, through the maneuvering of accomplices, the would-be-spies are lured to a rendezvous in which they hope to catch Hudson in flagrante delicto. Instead, they are the victims, caught by the police who have been tipped off by Father Hudson. The revenge is perfect. "The stroke of genius" is that they are totally innocent, caught in a web of intrigue in their pursuit of duty. The ironic twist is heightened by Father Hudson's plea for clemency for the two apparent delinquents. He is rewarded with a richer abbey because his iron hand has improved morality in the order he ruled. There is no punishment, no remorse. All further attempts to

unmask him, as he continues to pursue his former promiscuous life, are blocked forever. His success in revenge has frightened everyone, including his superiors. The only moral appears to be that those who cannot compete in the ruthless arena of the master scoundrel had best leave him alone. As a final commentary on his two superior villains, Diderot returned to the theme of heredity, determinism, and chance. The reader is asked to speculate on what kind of a child would be born of a union between Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson: "Perhaps a good man (honnête homme). Perhaps a great scoundrel" (un sublime coquin).³³

Diderot's characters who are superior in evil are fascinating because of their satanic quality of evil. But Diderot was very much aware of their potential danger for society. The genius and the superior man might disregard society's conventions and function according to their own moral standards. The genius is justified by his work, and the wise man by his superior judgment which, at least theoretically, will be matched by his devotion to the "general will." But the master criminal functions only for his own interest. If he has superior intelligence, it is merely an additional weapon with which to assert his domination. But whether it is the genius, the wise man, or the evil genius who functions outside the law, the ultimate threat to society is that this private code of morality will filter down to the ordinary man. This possibility of widespread amorality added another dimension to the problem of evil and social morality. In his concept of "originals," minor moral monsters like Rameau's Nephew, Diderot explored the ethical implications of this breed of scoundrels for society.

Minor Moral Monsters: The "Originals"

Diderot broadened the perspective of the problem of evil for society by paradoxically reducing the scale of villainy. We move from the level of genius in evil to the minor scoundrels, men like Gousse and Saint-Ouin in Jacques. These characters Diderot termed "originals" (originaux),³⁴ like Rameau's Nephew. They do not excel in crime, but within their limitations, they are also unprincipled and rejoice in it. They too are driven by hidden ego impulses. In their own way they are everyman, with the cloak or mask of morality thrown off. They point to the amoral possibilities in everyone. If there is "no vice or virtue, nothing to praise or to blame," there is no peg on which to attach moral absolutes. It is this perception that is overwhelming in its implications for society.

Rameau's Nephew remains the prototype of the "original." It is he who best reflects Diderot's conception of the mediocre villain who is a parasite in society, wholly amoral and therefore subversive of the public morality. He does not have the greatness in integrity of being that is characteristic of the master scoundrel. And as we have seen, even his villainies consist largely of second-hand accounts of the evil of the master criminals. It is basically his total sense of amorality that is so striking. He can contemplate the greatest evil with relish and enjoy his own minor triumphs in pandering to or cheating his patrons. In his cynical mockery of virtue as "ice cold" (gele de froid) and impossible for everyone to attain, and in his belief that only good food, a warm bed, and women are important, "all the rest, vanity," Diderot pictured the total amoral philosophy that can emerge from materialism.³⁵

But in the case of Rameau's Nephew, mediocrity, not greatness in evil, is the result. He lives in the shadow of evil. As he could only mimic the genius, so he can only mirror the "grand criminals" in petty versions of their misdeeds. Even his plan for revenge, if he gets the chance, is conceived on a lesser scale than theirs. Where Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson required total vengeance, the Nephew will be satisfied with hiring and then kicking around his underlings. He will pay back the slights by bossing people, and insulting everyone, especially the philosophes, like Moi, the ones he believes to be the worst hypocrites:

. . . we'll kick behind and before all the little stoics like you who despise us from sour grapes, whose modesty is the cloak of arrogance, and whose good conduct springs from lack of means.³⁶

But even a minor monster like Rameau's Nephew, reveals certain characteristics that were attractive for Diderot despite the element of mediocrity. The key lies in Diderot's conception of the term "original" which he used to describe Rameau's Nephew. In the initial meeting with the Nephew, it will be recalled that the philosophe (Moi) scorns the Nephew as an eccentric (je n'estime pas ces originaux-là).³⁷ But he then attributes a very positive trait to the Nephew--he is one of those "originals" whose character stand out because they shatter the "tedious uniformity" resulting from education, social conventions, and manners. But more than that, an "original" like Rameau's Nephew, has a positive social role--he "smokes out the truth . . . and unmasks the rascals."³⁸ His very amorality, his cynicism about virtue, and his willingness to assume the role of fool acts like a tonic that restores to each of us our "native individuality." Thus, although the "original" does not have "sublime" genius in either creativity or in evil, he has some small

fragment of that integrity of being, a certain unity of character, that Diderot admired.*

It is true that the Nephew's disheveled appearance, eccentricity, his failure as a genius, and his unstable emotion, all indicate disorganization and lack of unity of character. Nonetheless, there is an area in which the Nephew never changes. In the conclusion of the dialogue, Rameau's Nephew challenges Moi with a parting shot: "Farewell, Master Philosopher, isn't it true that I am ever the same?"³⁹ And Moi concedes the truth of this proposition. Because in the Nephew's very reduction of life to a purely materialist, existential level, in his refusal to pretend a virtue he does not have or want, and his self-awareness of his own baseness, it is indeed true that he never changes. We are confronted in the portrait of Rameau's Nephew with yet another of Diderot's paradoxes: the more the Nephew changes, the more he remains the same. He is base, lazy, greedy, dishonest, vile--as he is the first to admit. He cannot compete with the genius in creativity, nor with the master criminal in "sublime" evil. But even in his minor villainy, even in his amorphous, inconstant nature, he has a constancy which most people do not have. Thus the irony--his protean nature actually enables him to have a considerable degree of inner unity or integrity of being.** As an intellectual and as a philosophe, Diderot saw the basic mediocrity of the "original," like Rameau's Nephew, lacking in the creative greatness of either a genius, like Racine, or a superior villain like Mme de la Pommeraye. But he also admired, if grudgingly, the merit of the

*Supra, Chapter II.

**Infra, Chapter VI.

"original" in being what he is, living by it, and unmasking the pretense in others. For Diderot, the "original" was the prototype of those "men happily born for the sole purpose of existing" (p. 31).

Diderot's moral ambivalence about these "originals" appeared in his hesitation about condemning them. In Rameau's Nephew, we are left in doubt as to whether the philosophe or the Nephew wins the argument. Significantly, however, the Nephew walks off with the last line: "He laughs best who laughs last." This apparent reluctance to judge the "original" too harshly appears also in the character, Gousse, in Jacques the Fatalist. Diderot also used the term "original" to describe him, as he had Rameau's Nephew. Gousse is "an original without principles,"⁴⁰ whose conduct is totally unpredictable. He sells all his possessions to finance two lovers, helps them to elope and returns to Paris a penniless beggar.

Diderot, a participant in the novel as interlocutor, warns the reader not to mistake Gousse for an "exceptionally moral man" because of this good deed. "He had no more sense of morality than a fish head."⁴¹ Diderot describes how Gousse altered the amount on a check "with a pen scratch" from 80 to 800 francs to help himself to the additional amount. Yet at another time, he supplied Diderot with a number of rare books for which he refused payment. The books had been taken from the library of a Sorbonne professor without his permission. Gousse reasons that he has only exercised "distributive justice." Why ask permission in making a fair redistribution? He has only transferred the books from a useless resting place to another place where they would be put to use. Gousse's argument resembles that of Rameau's Nephew, who in cheating his clients claimed that he was only helping to make restitution of

ill-gotten gains. "After that try to make pronouncements on the conduct of men," Diderot concluded.⁴² In a further episode, Gousse maneuvers himself into prison, betrayed by the serving girl who is his accomplice in a complicated plan to cheat his wife and run off with the property. In the end, the serving girl turns the tables on him. He is clapped into prison while she runs off with his property. The swindler is swindled, outsmarted by a more skillful cheat.

Another such scoundrel also appears in Jacques. The Chevalier Saint-Ouin, under the guise of friendship and advice, urges Jacques' Master to borrow from loan sharks to finance his courtship of Agathe, who is secretly Saint-Ouin's mistress. The Master gets hopelessly into debt, from which Saint-Ouin gets a percentage from the loan sharks. Meanwhile Saint-Ouin enjoys the girls favors, while the Master is put off. Saint-Ouin finally reveals the extent of his plot and, pretending remorse for his betrayal, helps the Master plan a revenge which is really a double betrayal. Under the pretense of vengeance, Saint-Ouin slips the Master into Agathe's house and into her bed, and then alerts her family to the rendezvous. The "stroke of genius" is that the Master, without enjoying any of the fruits of the plan, is trapped into supporting the child Agathe is already bearing--the child of Saint-Ouin.⁴³ This plot resembles the Father Hudson scheme, in that the Chevalier succeeds in having the Master caught in a compromising position in which he is really the innocent victim. Saint-Ouin, unlike Father Hudson, seems to act out of pure amorality. He has no grudge against the Master; it is merely that he finds him a convenient dupe who has unwittingly financed his own escapades.

In the catalog of Diderot's rogues, both the geniuses in evil and

the minor scoundrels, two important, common threads run through the stories. One is the note of vengeance, sometimes for injury, real or imagined, sometimes out of sheer perversity, as in the case of Saint-Ouin. Human nature is not naturally virtuous; the power and attraction of evil is enormous. The other thread, is the insoluble problem of good or evil in a universe where morality is related to materialism. There are good men and bad women, and good women and bad men, as the landlady in Jacques observed. Good or bad, vice or virtue, are linked, not to moral free will, but to the accident of inheritance--whether one is "fortunately or unfortunately born" (p. 64). Diderot, drawing the nihilistic implications of a morality of "neither vice, nor virtue" and believing that "bienfaisance" was not virtue, but only good luck, had earlier concluded that the only solution to the problem of the evil-doer was not to punish but to destroy him. (Le malfaisant est un homme qu'il faut détruire et non punir).⁴⁴ In the Elements of Physiology, one of his last works, written about the same time he wrote the Refutation of Helvétius affirming virtue, Diderot concluded on another pessimistic note:

The world is the House of the strong. . . . There is only one virtue: justice; only one duty: to achieve happiness; only one corollary: not to expect too much of life. . . .⁴⁵

The search for individuality, in all its forms, revealed the genius, and the integrity of the self. But it also revealed that the pursuit of the self could mean the limitless power of the human ego to satisfy itself at all costs. As Rameau's Nephew had observed: "Everything that lives, man included, seeks its well-being at the expense of whoever withholds it."⁴⁶

CHAPTER V

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Man is born for society.

Diderot, The Nun

Men were made to live in society.

"Société," Encyclopédie

The good man lives in society, the bad man lives alone.

Diderot, The Natural Son

Eighteenth-century French society was in flux. It was still hierarchical in form, characterized by social distinctions and gradations of legal rights associated with them. But an increasing degree of social mobility and economic change was diminishing the traditional social rigidities and slowly eroding distinctions of estate and rank. A growing awareness of membership in a single community, the nation, had begun to decrease the significance of a long-established social organization based on the traditional estates--the clergy, the aristocracy, and the third estate. Social classification, because of the ever-increasing importance of trade, finance, industry, and civil bureaucracy, tended more and more to be based on occupation and income. This is not to minimize the still powerful importance of social ranks and distinctions. Indeed, because of the erosion of old social barriers, instability had begun to threaten the French social and political system.

The public effects of that instability came mainly from aristocratic efforts to preserve and reassert the old privileges and distinctions, efforts which quickened in the decades prior to the revolution.

Although rates of population growth tended to be uneven, there was a general though slow population increase throughout Western Europe from the middle decades of the eighteenth-century. In France, the relatively good years of the 1730's made possible the recovery of population gaps left by the demographic catastrophe of the famine years in the first decade of the century. By 1755 population had begun to grow slowly and until 1770 both population growth and a better life expectancy with regard to age, food, habitation, and the like were ascendant. Between 1771-1773 a prolonged crisis of subsistence spread through the provinces and the last decade before the revolution (1779-1780) were years of suffering, food shortage and diminished rate of population growth. Despite this general picture of demographic change in France, the general, if slow, population growth of the middle decades was also marked by general economic advance in the French economy. This advance tended to hasten social change and along with it the formation of new concepts of society. Despite the persistence of the old hierarchy of estates and the rigidity of well-established economic forms, like the guild and mercantilism, economic growth fostered many social changes as well as new theories of society.¹

Between 1750-1770 there was unprecedented prosperity in rural as well as urban areas. The increase in the Atlantic foreign trade and a limited agricultural revolution, particularly in the wine trade, marked the entry of peasants into the world of commerce and increased the volume of their trade with townsmen. Although landholding, rather

than industry and commerce, was still the chief form of investment. the prosperity of large landholders added to the demand for consumer goods. Urban comfort and luxury characterized the period and considerably enhanced urban prosperity. The boom in construction of wealthy town-houses spurred the demand for furniture and decorations. The demand for rugs, textiles, porcelains and bronzes, silver, fine wines, and elegant dress all contributed to the increased well-being of artisans as well as of upper segments of the bourgeoisie. Even smaller items, formerly considered luxuries, like tobacco, sugar, cocoa, and coffee had become a marked necessity by the mid-eighteenth century. The taste for these products was not limited to the salons of the well-to-do or coffee houses.² The increase in the volume and complexity of business life is also attested to by the development of the legal profession at all levels. The volume of legal business, litigation, and notarization multiplied. Lawyers, judges, and notaries all prospered and were increasingly indispensable to commercial life.

An undeniable increase in living standards, even for the ordinary man, in both towns and villages, testified to the quickening of the economy. There were few in France, even among the poor, who longed for the old days. Increased economic well-being was reflected in the debate over luxury among the philosophes. The debate was sparked by Bernard Mandeville's Fable of the Bees with its provocative theme that luxury, even vice, was necessary for the social well-being.³ The Encyclopedia article, "Luxury," generally held that luxury is a quality in human nature that develops when man lives in society. The Encyclopedia article "Lacedaemon," commended Spartan moderation as a virtue. Mably

and Morelly, both of whom proposed plans for Utopian societies,* frowned on luxury. Diderot's position that luxury corrupted morals appeared in his "Satire Against Luxury in the Manner of Perseus," part of his Salon of 1767. In the "Satire," Diderot vehemently asserted that luxury ruined the rich, redoubled the misery of the poor, condemned merit to obscurity, and destroyed virtue.⁴ Rousseau's condemnation of luxury as a corrupting influence was part of his general theory that all society was corrupt. The philosophical controversy whether luxury corrupted society or was necessary for happiness could only flourish in an age that was experiencing visible economic growth.

In effect, the reality of a better material life added to the increased demand for a government that would effectively serve the needs and aspirations of its subjects. Eighteenth-century French monarchs continued the centuries-long process of state-building in which they tried to secure more control over their subjects. But in turn, as they built bureaucracies to tax and to administer they were forced into the position of Frederick II as "the first servant of the state." In eighteenth-century France higher expectations, political thought, and the steady enlargement of the government's sphere all gave rise to a concept of an ideal state. It would be able to meet the demands of a civil society more politically aware of mankind's potential for happiness inspired by the vision of a better material and intellectual life.

The Encyclopedia testified to the changing nature of economic and social interests. It was suffused with the spirit of material

*Infra, Chapter VI.

progress with many articles on agricultural improvement, trade, manufacturing, and technological processes. The painstaking and artistic treatment of the plates illustrating mechanical processes bears witness to the immense interest of the reading public in the mechanical arts and in technology. The famous series of plates exemplifying the division of labor in pin-making forecast the development of industrial society. The Encyclopedia aimed not only at an intellectual revolution in the realm of rational thought but also in the practical areas of life--farming, trade, and manufacturing. Although the philosophes were much more than spokesmen for the bourgeoisie, there is little doubt that the Encyclopedia reflected a point of view sympathetic to bourgeois interests by dignifying trade and commerce. Since it became an indispensable reference work for contemporaries, its point of view began to permeate French society.⁵

The philosophes' social background is evidence of the breakdown of old hierarchical patterns and the spread of a philosophy that embraced utility, empirical knowledge, a free economic system, and a reform of government to synchronize it with the demands of political and economic modernization. Although some of the most famous philosophes--notably Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot--had bourgeois origins, the Enlightenment was not a bourgeois monopoly. Montesquieu, Morelly, Mably, Holbach, Vauvenargues, Jaucourt, Turgot, Condorcet, and Sade came from the nobility.⁶ A radical dynamism in Enlightenment thought enabled it to permeate all educated levels of society. In the interaction of ideas and society, the Enlightenment represents an area where thought was well in the forefront of actual political and social change. The philosophes played a double role--in the elaboration

and synthesis of information as well as in the shaping of ideas, thus effectively creating a new "climate of opinion." Although most of the philosophes did not consciously preach revolution, their general convictions about political and legal equality resulted in a libertarian and egalitarian thrust in Enlightenment thought. The increasing radicalism of the Enlightenment in the 1770's and 1780's is apparent in the intense focus on individual freedom and the increasing opposition of Enlightenment social and political ideas to the contemporary social and political ideas to the contemporary social and political scene. In Diderot's thought, conservative ideas about reforming the existing society alternated with radical ideas about society and property, and even a flirtation with an Utopian society.

The impact of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie as a revolutionary class in French society is still debated.⁷ Nonetheless, partly through the social structure of the bourgeoisie, we can observe the enormous pressures leveled against the older notions of a static, hierarchic society. Although the French monarchy had no social policy as such, a certain amount of encouragement of social mobility did tend to meet the state's need for resources from the commercial and financial sectors of the economy. If, as it appeared to the bourgeoisie, the government seemed to favor the status quo of the social hierarchy, it was due not so much to policy as to legal tradition and social inertia. Both action and inertia helped create a tension between social groups that served in turn to focus attention on the concept of society in general and on French society in particular. Both the tension and dynamism of eighteenth-century French society were reflected in the thought of the philosophes and, historically, in the emergent role of

the bourgeoisie, the group in which both effort and sentiment favorable to social mobility and civil egalitarianism were most pronounced prior to 1789.

Eighteenth-century French society still largely reflected the centuries-old disdain of the aristocracy for the bourgeoisie. The middle class grew up inside the medieval third estate and had long been attempting to climb the social ladder into the aristocracy itself. Huizinga has traced this contemptuous attitude of the aristocracy back to the Middle Ages, in the literature that reflected the values of the dominant aristocratic warrior class.⁸ The aristocratic scorn for the bourgeois was largely due to the regularity of the bourgeois life style--it was staid, unheroic, and lacking in great purpose. The bourgeois was neither the noble warrior defending society, nor the simple man of the soil. Aristocratic contempt can be identified clearly in seventeenth-century literature. We find, for example, that even the title of Molière's play, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme, projected the image of a bourgeois as a ridiculous upstart trying to cut a figure in society. How could one be both a bourgeois and a gentleman? The terms were self-contradictory.

In the eighteenth-century world of Diderot, the aristocratic attitudes toward the middle class had become contradictory. Although there was still a great deal of aristocratic disdain for the bourgeois, there was also a grudging, if hostile, respect for bourgeois financial success. In the middle class itself, the old aspiration to a place in the nobility had begun to contrast with a growing bourgeois sense of self-esteem and respect for its own life style. Many of the French middle class still consciously sought prestige and status and expected

to move upward through the acquisition of wealth, preferably into the nobility. An important and typical channel of mobility led through the purchase of offices, particularly those that brought either lifetime or hereditary noble status. Recent research by David Bien on the office of secrétaire du roi shows that by the eighteenth century, the office was devoid of function and yet it was one of the most expensive to purchase. There was a tremendous turnover in the sale of this office because it conferred heredity in one generation, the only venal office that carried this perquisite.⁹

Purchase of robe and other offices, and of patents of nobility, the pursuit of careers in the army or clergy, and alliances through marriage were all ways in which a fluid bourgeoisie sought more elevated social status. Marriage between a bourgeois and an aristocrat was still regarded in polite society as a "mésalliance," but the wealth of many of the upper bourgeoisie was sufficient to make such marriages common enough to call forth comments in contemporary letters and memoirs. The attitude of the nobility was that, in case of financial embarrassment, such an alliance, although socially distasteful, was sometimes necessary " 'to fertilize one's soil.' " ¹⁰ The aristocracy still looked down on the nouveau riche bourgeois, but in eighteenth-century France, money was the key that unlocked many gilded doors.

The middle-class attempt to flee from common origins was enhanced by the revival of the principle of dérogance which declared noble status incompatible with business.¹¹ This aristocratic attempt to maintain the distinction between noble and bourgeois, since wealth gave the bourgeois the opportunity to "live nobly," spurred the middle-class movement away from business. A seventeenth-century observer had noted

that " 'as soon as a merchant has acquired great wealth in trade, his children by no means follow him in his occupation but go into public office.' "12

Hence the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie was ambivalent in its social goals; torn between its desire to flee the bourgeois world on the one hand and loyalty to its own traditional values on the other. Orderliness, thrift, frugality, devotion to hard work were all values necessary for the rational organization of business life and the success in it that made social rewards possible. Conjugal affection, close family relationships, and sexual chastity were all necessary to middle-class security in a world still hostile to or suspicious of bourgeois aspirations. The middle-class development of an increasing sense of self-worth and moral superiority is apparent in contemporary literature and memoirs. Of course, many of the haute bourgeoisie gave up frugality and adopted an elegant life style. The bourgeois "living nobly" was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. It was one of the distinctions between the many gradations and ranks within the middle class. A bourgeois aristocracy based on wealth, type of work, and age of family paralleled rankings within the nobility. Among the very wealthy bourgeoisie--financiers, tax farmers, lawyers and merchants--building fine houses and spending lavishly replaced the older, more conservative bourgeois way of life. Even among the lesser bourgeoisie, the purchase of landed estates was fairly common.¹³

The growing sense of dignity and self-worth of the middle-class man is reflected in the extensive increase of specifically middle-class literature in the eighteenth century. Geoffroy Atkinson has explored the changing nature of the eighteenth-century novel and drama in which

middle-class virtues were no longer lampooned but regarded instead as reflections of the essential worth of that class.¹⁴ Dancourt, Sedaine, Marivaux, Voltaire, Beaumarchais, and Diderot all wrote plays with bourgeois themes. In some cases, there was strong expression of anti-aristocratic sentiments. In Beaumarchais' Marriage of Figaro, the commoner, Figaro, expresses contempt for his master who thinks he is a great genius because he is a great noble. His master has done nothing to deserve the nobility, wealth, high rank, and offices that make him so proud. "You gave yourself the trouble to be born," says Figaro, "and nothing more. General opinion to the contrary, you are a pretty ordinary man."¹⁵ Similarly, in Diderot's novel Jacques the Fatalist, the servant, Jacques, is often openly contemptuous of the master, who, from Jacques' point of view, is dependent on his servant to cope with life.*

An increasing middle-class audience accounted for the growth of the bourgeois drama and the novel in England as well as France. Prévost and Marivaux in France and Defoe and Richardson in England were among those who appealed to middle-class values. Richardson's influence on Diderot, because of his stress on virtue, has already been noted.** The steady enrichment of the French language by technical terms in the arts, politics, and sciences is another reflection of the attempt at simplicity and clarity instead of the more exalted, aristocratic language of the seventeenth century. Rousseau and Diderot were among the philosophes who used an increasingly technical vocabulary. The use of every day, even plebeian language, although still scorned by polite society, is conspicuous in Rousseau's Confessions and Diderot's Rameau's Nephew and

*Infra, Chapter VI.

**Supra, Chapter I.

and Jacques the Fatalist.¹⁶

John Lough's study of Paris theatre audiences, shows the increasing patronage of the theatre by the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth-century.¹⁷ Here the evidence clearly shows a society in transition. Despite this patronage and some of the bourgeois themes in the drama, the dominant influence of the aristocracy was still apparent. The drame bourgeois of Diderot reflects this. In The Father of the Family and The Natural Son, he intended to draw characters close to the average spectator. His outlook on the middle class is found not only in the plays themselves but also in the Conversations on The Natural Son. The Conversations shed a good deal of light on Diderot's ideas on the nature of bourgeois drama, or what he liked to call plays of "serious genre." He believed the plot should be simple, domestic and close to everyday life. "Fundamental family relationships" were proper and important subjects:

. . . What it means to be a father, a husband, a sister or a brother. A father! What a subject that is in an age such as ours, when no one seems to have the slightest idea of what it means to be the father of a family.¹⁸

Diderot added a new dimension to the middle-class drama in his recognition of the importance of the social roles that people play. He was very aware of the growing importance of the middle class and the fluidity of social positions. He sought to explore the social functions and duties of the man of letters, the philosopher, the merchant, the judge, the lawyer, the politician, the citizen, the magistrate, the financier, the great lord, the estate manager:

New social roles are coming into being every day. Remember that there is possibly nothing we know less about than social functions and nothing that should interest us more. We each of us have our own place in society, but we all of us have to deal with the men of every other station.¹⁹

Despite his intention to dignify the ordinary man and simple, domestic themes, Diderot did not completely shake off aristocratic influence. Lough points out that, in The Father of a Family, M. d'Orbesson, lives in the noble life style and maintains an intendant to supervise his estates. He also attempts to dissuade his son from marrying a girl of lesser social station by pointing out the advantages of an alliance with a woman whose "education, birth, estate, and fortune" could assure his happiness and his father's hopes.²⁰ Jacques Proust's study of the history of Diderot's other drame bourgeois, The Natural Son, also notes that the heroes are really aristocrats and that the play was performed before a chosen company for one of the great families in France, that of the Duc ' d'Ayen.²¹

That Diderot, in the attempt to create the bourgeois drama and dignify bourgeois life, actually deferred to upper-class life styles, only reinforces the evidence of the existing contradictions and ambivalences in French society and the continued prestige of the aristocracy as the model for the bourgeoisie. Diderot entered the ranks of those who criticized the existing society for its social inequalities, publicly in articles in the Encyclopedia like "Political Authority," and surreptitiously in his contribution to Raynal's History of the Two Indies.*

The growing complexity of government in a stratified society with widely varying social, regional and local perquisites had begun to burden administration and indeed to make policy decisions extremely difficult. In addition, the influence of Enlightenment thought increased the gap

*Infra, Chapter VI.

between the actuality of administrative effort and the increased expectations of middle-class subjects who, inspired by the philosophes, began to see themselves as individuals rather than as subjects. The concept of individualism, and individualisme itself a new word, created a strain between the individual and society. The problem of reconciling the freedom of the individual with responsibility to society began to have public repercussions in this period. This, in fact, was the most significant issue underlying the yearning for a constitution in France. Complex, changing economic and social realities were in the process of definition in the intellectual concern of the Enlightenment. The philosophes and their allies who, as the Comte de Ségur observed, walked " 'on a carpet of flowers that concealed from us the abyss,' "22 were involved in a monumental struggle to define the rights and limitations of both the individual and society. In the process they leveled attacks that rent the fabric of society. They exposed all the inequities and hypocrisies of the existing order to the pitiless glare of reason.

The historical reality of French society thus was rooted in a mixture of tradition, stability, hierarchy, and social mobility that tended to blur class distinctions. In addition, the new intellectual, literary, and legal interest in the individual and his right to self-fulfillment created a new social issue. In a hierarchic society, individual rights were largely determined by the custom and law applicable to the estate to which he belonged. But with the Enlightenment emphasizing the rational, self-possessed individual, the concept of self-identity became a source of conflict with the established order of society. And self-identity and self-interest naturally posed the problem of harmonizing self-interest with broader social interests. By Diderot's

time the increased literary and philosophical focus on the individual also tended to define freedom and responsibility in terms of the individual. That focus demanded a new consideration of the individual's relationship to society. Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Diderot were among the major philosophes who came to grips with this problem.

An influential attempt to define the scope and nature of society appeared in the article "Société" in the Encyclopédia. Diderot's article, "Cité," can be usefully considered as a preface to Société since it traces the origin of the idea of society philologically to the word cité.²³ "Cité" is defined as the first of the great societies of several families which relinquished power to "a physical person or a moral being" to oversee their safety. Families joined together to form cities (cités) or civil societies in which they relinquished their "wills and powers." Thus the ancient name cité was associated with the state or civil society as well as with the territorial entities known as cities.

It is the extensive article "Société" that deals with the foundations of society, the principles or "springs" (les ressorts) of society, reciprocal obligations of the "tacit contract" and attempts to divorce civil society from religion. This unsigned article was formerly attributed to Diderot. Although there is a question about its original authorship, it is very much in the style of Diderot.²⁴ The opening sentence of the article begins with one of Diderot's favorite thoughts: "Men were made to live in society."* If they were meant to live alone, the article theorizes, God would have given men the characteristics for a solitary

*Supra, page 88; infra, Chapter VII.

life. Instead, man's constitution and nature are such that, outside of society, he could not conserve his life, perfect his faculties and talents, nor "procure a true and solid happiness." Nature testifies to man's desire for society by endowing him with the faculty of communication, the natural desire for company, and the fear of total solitude. Everything encourages man to enter society--need, inclination, and natural disposition. Society is founded on the principle of the individual's desire to be happy. This principle is part of human nature. But other human beings also share in the same natural propensity to seek happiness. To prevent this self-love from harming others, nature has also endowed man with the principle of benevolence (un sentiment de bienveillance) toward his fellow man.

This benevolence is the principle of sociability from which derive all the laws of society and our duties and obligations to each other. This notion that some form of benevolence resided in human nature appeared fairly frequently in Enlightenment thought. Hume found the principle of sympathy present in all men. Rousseau claimed that pity existed in the state of nature prior to society. Crocker has claimed that Diderot wrote the passage in Rousseau's Second Discourse, proclaiming pity as a natural feeling which moderates self-love.²⁵ But Diderot's views sometimes veered toward pessimistic conclusions. We have already seen his views that man is the cruelest animal and that vice or virtue depends on whether a man is "happily or unhappily born."*

The article "Société," by grounding sociability in this principle of benevolence, draws the conclusion that duty to other human beings is

*Supra, Chapter IV.

the basis for the morality of all civil society. This morality requires four conditions: (1) that the common good must be the supreme rule; (2) the principle of sociability must be universal; and (3) the equality of the nature of man is central. This equality between men, however, is based on their common humanity; the article does not claim equality of attributes for all men. The fourth condition emphasizes the duty of sociability. Those who break the links with society offend their friends.* If an individual breaks the laws of society, he is subject to justice, but the principle of benevolence should permit him to reenter society when justice has been rendered.

The traditional view of ranking in society would seem to be reflected in the statement that subordination is the link in society, necessary for order in the family and in government. But the article departs from the traditional view by suggesting that the principle of subordination is valid only to provide for public welfare--the protection and happiness of the people. Men institute civil society and renounce their natural freedom (leur liberté naturelle) when they endow the civil sovereign with the necessary force to protect them from injury. The authority of the civil sovereign is lawful only when it contributes to the end for which it was instituted--happiness. This is the formal or "tacit contract" agreed on by all men, to make their society as happy as possible. The article is a testimonial to human happiness as one of the key tenets of Enlightenment thought.** It is also interesting to contrast the lofty use of the "tacit contract" (le contrat tacite)

*Compare Diderot's offense at Rousseau's withdrawal from society, supra, Chapter II.

**A word count in the article "Société" shows the words "happy" or "happiness" used fifteen times.

here as a compact of mutual obligations, to Diderot's satirical treatment of the "tacit agreement" (un pacte tacite) in Rameau's Nephew and Jacques. There, the "tacit agreement" is the cynical agreement for the ruthless pursuit of self-interest.*

"Société" raises the crucial question of how self-interest is to be reconciled with the interests of society. In a statement reminiscent of Diderot's article on "Natural Right," "Société" recognizes that our inclinations and passions may be at cross purposes with the interests of society. Thus, we must thwart passions by self-restraint which is regarded as the foundation of all virtue.

Vices that hurt society are considered to include even those things that would normally seem to affect only the individual. Drunkenness, for example, "destroys all spark of reason" and incontinence harms society by destroying marriage and increasing the possibility of crimes of passion. On the positive side, citizens have two kinds of duties, those enforceable by law, and those necessary for society's welfare but not legally enforceable. These latter include hospitality, charity, gratitude, and "love of fatherland," a duty significantly created by society which does not exist in the state of nature.

In a section which echoes Rousseau's Discourse on the Sciences and Arts,²⁶ and Diderot's "Satire on Luxury," the creation of new needs and desires is described as a flaw in society that does not exist in nature. Cupidity, venality, and avarice all follow from the increase in the arts.

A lengthy conclusion on religion pleads for tolerance on the

*Infra, Chapter VI.

principles of justice, as demonstrated by Locke.* It argues for the separation of Church and state. Although it is conceded that religion helps to reinforce moral virtue, religion is held to be outside the scope of the magistrate. Religious matters should not be confused with the civic role of society. Nor does religion have the power of compulsion that the civil authority possesses.

"Société" is an important article because of its attempt to define the origins of society and the mutual obligations of the individual and society as a whole. Its attempt to confine the role of religion completely to the moral sphere represented the Enlightenment effort to protect the individual and freedom of thought from the coercive power of government to enforce religious belief. "Société" is not a vehement attack on religion. It is, rather, a moderate statement that does lip service to the importance of religion to fortify morals. But it is characteristic of Enlightenment thought in its attempt to divorce the state from the legal enforcement of religious and moral principles. It is a reasoned argument which traces the "confused blending of civil and religious interests" to the Judaic tradition where religion and civil society were united. "Société" attempts to separate civil and religious interests. It defines the role of religion as procuring the favor of God, "a distinct and independent goal from that of civil society" whose end purpose is the "care of the body and its interests."²⁷

This attempt to establish the secular nature of society was a key ingredient in the emergence of a new concept of society which assumed the independence of both individuals and their social groupings.

*However, Locke's principles are not spelled out in "Société."

"Société," by emphasizing the distinctions between religious and civil authority, aided this process of the secularization of society. By helping to dispel the notion that religious and civil society were one and the same, the effect of the article served to concentrate attention on the autonomous realm of practical human activity.

Diderot launched a far more immoderate attack on religion in his novel, The Nun, and in the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage. In those works, his hostility was directed at religious scruples which affected sexual attitudes and which Diderot felt were unnatural and crippling to the individual. In his more moderate conte, Conversation with the Maréchale de * * *, he attempted to separate religion from ethics.²⁸ In that dialogue, he demonstrated that religion has no real effect on morals and that the individual can be moral without being religious.

Central to the theoretical discussion of society was the perception that the individual is inextricably bound into society and must function within its framework. If benevolence, the common welfare, sociability, and happiness were all central "springs" of the theoretically ideal society, the problem was how to actualize the ideal. No one was more aware of this problem than Diderot, for whom society represented the essential condition for human existence. His Encyclopedia article, "Natural Right," (p. 10) acknowledged that the desire of every individual for happiness could conflict with the interests of all society.²⁹ Thus, the will of the individual is always suspect, but the "general will" is always good and never wrong. "The general will determines the limits of all duties." The individual has the "most sacred natural rights" in everything not contested by the interest of the entire species. He

explained that the depository of the general will varies with the type of society. It is found in the principles of law in civilized nations, in the social practices of savage or barbaric peoples, and even in the "tacit conventions" of criminal groups. The general will is found even in the passions of "indignation and resentment" which nature has supplied to compensate for the deficiencies in society's laws.

It is interesting to note that this last point was illustrated in Diderot's belief that the sage or superior man can sometimes make a more just decision than the law, as he held in the Conversation of a Father with His Children.^{*} Individual submission to the general will is the necessary bond of all societies, even those formed by crime. Diderot's theory of natural rights also argued that there is an element of constancy in the general will even within a constantly changing society. Even if there is perpetual flux in species, he maintained, the nature of "natural rights" would not change--it would always be related to the general will of the entire species.³⁰

Diderot was as concerned as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau with the importance of the nation's morals (moeurs). It has already been seen that he believed art and the theatre could play a part in molding the morals of the nation.^{**} His defense of the theatre was based on its potential moral role in teaching virtue. However, he did not believe the opposite, that art could corrupt morals, the position held by Rousseau.³¹ Diderot saw a tangible relationship between morals and legislation, although there could be a difference between them. In

^{*}Supra, Chapter III.

^{**}Supra, Chapter I.

the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, he observed that if laws are good, morals are good; but if the laws are bad, morals are bad. The worst possible condition for society, however, occurs when the laws, whether good or bad, are not observed, for then there are no morals at all. His concern, like many other philosophes, including Rousseau, that luxury might corrupt the nation's morals (p.91) was also expressed in the Supplement.³²

Society was a key element in Enlightenment thought; it is properly a subject for study in itself. A theoretical society constructed on the foundations of enlightened thought was a concern of every major philosophe. There were almost as many theories of society as there were men of letters. Nor is there necessarily any consistency in the thought of a particular philosophe. Diderot, again, is one of the best examples because his work offers the most striking contrast between sober, conventional theories and radical perceptions of society which he developed in such works as Rameau's Nephew, Jacques, D'Alembert's Dream and the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage.^{*} This is not to contend that Diderot was a hypocrite, but rather that in the contrast between reality and ideal, between the hope for good and the recognition of evil, there was perhaps a greater tension in his thought than in that of other philosophes.

Every distinguished man of letters was ultimately concerned with society, particularly because the reality of French society by the mid-eighteenth century seemed to represent false values and hypocrisy. Perhaps most terrifying was the vision of those philosophes, like Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Diderot, who glimpsed in the corruptions of any social

^{*}Infra, Chapters VI and VII.

order, the forces for the alienation of the individual from himself and society. Montesquieu's Persian Letters, for example, did much more than criticize tyrannical societies.³³ It satirized the corruption of government and social morality in Regency France and it emphasized the relativism of all societies. For Montesquieu, social existence, absolute values, and morals are all relative to a multiplicity of factors such as time, place, climate, custom, religion, and national beliefs. The Persian Letters reflects the concrete historical experience of increasing contacts with non-European civilizations which intensified the comparison of societies and the disintegration of belief in the superiority of European society. The eighteenth-century fascination with Oriental themes opened the European mind to dazzling possibilities of a new freedom. But it also shook the foundations of comforting traditional, stable values and truths. If Montesquieu's mythical episode of the Troglodytes showed the need for social cooperation and virtue for a viable society, it also demonstrated that no society is permanent and stable.³⁴ Under the seeming order there is always the potential chaos of disintegration. The older order declines and gives way to the new.

The Persian Letters also represents Montesquieu's recognition of the importance of individuality, a subject which also concerned Diderot. The tyranny of the Persian harem demonstrated more than the tyranny of despotism on a small scale. It illustrated the terrible destruction of individuality in a repressive society. The suicide of Roxane, the harem favorite, represents the ultimate act of freedom. Her letter to Usbek, her husband and lord of the harem, informs him of her coming death with a vengeance worthy of Diderot's Mme de la Pommeraye. She announces that she has deceived him, seduced his eunuchs, taken

advantage of his jealousy, and made his "horrible harem a place of pleasure and delight."³⁵ Never has she been the mere object of his pleasure and domination; she has always been free:

How could you have thought that I was naive enough to imagine that I was put in the world only to adore your whims? That while you pampered yourself with everything, you should have the right to mortify all my desires? No! I might have lived in servitude, but I have always been free. I have rewritten your laws after the laws of nature, and my spirit has ever sustained itself in independence.³⁶

Montesquieu's The Spirit of the Laws was his mature masterpiece on the nature of different societies. But the Persian Letters caught the essence of French society in transition and struck an authentic note of individual freedom and dignity.

For Rousseau, man could not go back to nature; society was the reality within which he lived. But society represented the corruption and loss of virtue and innocence of the natural state.³⁷ Only in society did man lose his natural goodness and become the social animal, clawing his way through a jungle of competition and insincerity, alienated not only from other men but from himself by false masks. Jean Starobinski has suggested that Rousseau saw man in society veiled from others and from himself by social masks that hide the true self.³⁸ But man could not go back to the state of nature, nor was the state of nature the ideal for Rousseau--it represented only that state in which man had once enjoyed innocence and freedom from the vicious characteristics he developed in society. Rousseau's theory of society thus predicated a total program for restructuring society and the individual for the ideal goal of virtue. The Émile and the Nouvelle Héloïse conceived of developing moral, free individuals through education and natural religion.³⁹ The Social Contract would provide the conditions

for a legitimate, moral government within which the moral individual could achieve authentic freedom.

The city represents another aspect of society on which Enlightenment philosophes held different views. It has already been shown that the word cité in the Encyclopedia was defined to show its relationship both to the origin of society and to the geographical expression of the city. Throughout human history, the city has been connected with the idea of the center of civilized society. For the most part, the eighteenth-century view of the city connected the city with civilization and the arts, the very substance of progress and Enlightenment.⁴⁰ For the philosophes, the city was the very hub of the universe, the meeting place for the exchange of ideas in the salons and cafés. Two well known and informative accounts of eighteenth-century Paris life are those of Sebastien Mercier and Restif de la Bretonne. Mercier's Tableau de Paris is a detailed accounting of manners, morals, and daily life in Paris. Restif's Les Nuits de Paris is a rich collection of his observations, sketches and caricatures of Parisian environs and inhabitants. It is especially fruitful for the ambience of street life and crowds which fascinated Restif.⁴¹

In Montesquieu's Persian Letters, the references to the city carry a positive connotation of thriving, bustling activity. The city permits "freedom of the mind" and self-identity. For Montesquieu, the city made dissimulation difficult, because everything is visible, audible, and open. In virtue, as well as vice, nothing can be hidden in the openness of a metropolitan society:

Dissimulation, that art so practiced and necessary among us, is unknown here [Paris]. Everything speaks out; everything is visible; everything is audible. The heart shows itself as clearly

as the face. In their customs, in their virtue, even in vice, something akin to naïveté is always visible.⁴²

Voltaire also saw the city as the core of civilization. In his Philosophic Letters, he noted that Paris and London were populated, opulent, the source of progress and social mobility.⁴³ The city represented for him the perfection of civilization. But for Rousseau, the city was the cesspool of corruption. "A chacun son goût" is the apt proverb to describe the different attitudes toward the city expressed by Montesquieu and Rousseau. All the excitement, activity, liberation, and openness that Montesquieu found in Paris, for Rousseau only served to hide men's real natures. In Julie, Saint-Preux goes to Paris to get to know men by studying them in society: "It is not Parisians I am studying, but inhabitants of great cities."⁴⁴ But instead of men being themselves, Saint-Preux finds that underneath, men in the city hide their true feelings even more than elsewhere. The problem of the city is that it makes men different from what they really are. Everybody talks, but no one says what he really thinks. People must go out into society every night to discover what opinions they will have the next day. In contrast to Montesquieu's favorable view of the city as the dynamic center of freedom, Rousseau believed that the city only fostered an illusion of freedom that masked falsity.

Diderot's view of the city reflected his usual ambivalence. Paris, the cafés, like the Regency and the Procope, the salons, and the theatre furnished the main backdrop for his busy life. His quarrel with Rousseau was based in part on Rousseau's retreat from the city and his condemnation of the theatre,* usually regarded as one of the attributes of

*Supra, Chapter I.

polished society and urban life. Yet Diderot's "Satire on Luxury" sounded a warning against the destruction of virtue by the luxurious corruptions of city life. And in Rameau's Nephew, a subtle, negative judgment of the city can be read in the Nephew's caustic observations on the back-biting, role-playing, and "vile pantomimes" that were part of Parisian society.

Diderot's censure of society in Rameau's Nephew was far more critical and outspoken than even these cynical observations of the Nephew indicate. In his radical works, particularly Rameau's Nephew and Jacques the Fatalist, Diderot created characters subversive of the existing society. Rousseau, perhaps more extensively than any other philosophe, devoted himself to the criticism of society and the attempt to reconstruct a new society of virtue. No one can read Rousseau without the awareness of the authentic vision implicit in all his work. But Rousseau had the single-minded vision of the fanatic who withdrew from the real world as much as possible. Diderot's outlook represented that of the multifaceted philosophe, whose own complexity alerted him to the frail reality of human nature and whose hope for the good society was always bounded by this world of reality.

CHAPTER VI

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERSONALITY:

SOCIETY IN FERMENT

Whoever stands in need of another is needy and takes a position. Really, what you call the beggar's pantomime is what makes the world go round.

Diderot, Rameau's Nephew

If you want to become a tyrant civilize . . . man; poison him as best you can with a system of morality that is contrary to nature. . . . Do you want man to be happy and free? Then keep your nose out of his affairs. . . .

Diderot, Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage

The problem of relating the Enlightenment to the realities of eighteenth-century French society continues to be a thorny historical issue. The question of how much influence the philosophes had in creating a "climate of opinion" favorable to revolution is as old as the aftermath of the French Revolution. Tocqueville's Old Regime and the French Revolution was one of the initial studies to place a heavy burden of responsibility on the philosophes for having created expectations and having raised hopes that outran the capacity of the Old Regime. For the first time, he said, an entire nation received its political education from the hands of its writers and philosophers.

It is not my purpose here to enter that debate on the complex background of the French Revolution. The issue is complicated by a

fundamental problem of intellectual history--the interaction between ideas and the working out of historical events. In this case, the problem involves the extent to which the ideas of the philosophes were diffused through society as well as the extent to which the ideas themselves were radical. Robert Darnton has recently argued that the elitism of Enlightenment thought prevented it from reaching the lower strata of society. He cites the findings of the social historians of Livre et société, on the distribution of popular literature, the Bibliothèque bleue, in eighteenth-century France:

While the philosophes were stressing the rationality and sensibilité of human nature, the Bibliothèque bleue [sic] presented man as a slave of passion, driven by astrological forces and weird mixtures of the four humors and the four elements.¹

Jean Fabre has commented on the Marxist interpretation of Rameau's Nephew, which, taking a clue from Hegel's analysis of the Nephew as a "disintegrated personality," sees Diderot as a social revolutionary.² Arthur Wilson has pointed to the increasing radical strain in Diderot's later political thought, his growing concern with liberty, and his movement towards a more democratic point of view--all despite his derogatory estimate of "the people"--"le peuple est sot."³ Yet one should bear in mind that for the most part Diderot's thought reflecting these political views was expressed privately in his correspondence, or in works that were not published until well after the French Revolution. The relatively recent discovery and publication by Georges May of Diderot's commentary on Hemsterhuis' Lettre sur l'homme, illustrates Diderot's characteristic prudence: he cautioned Hemsterhuis to avoid persecution as he did, by the use of irony, obscurity, generalizations, and by being laconic.⁴ Diderot's discretion showed his realism: he had not forgotten his

experience with imprisonment at Vincennes in 1749 for having published the Letter on the Blind.⁵ In 1759, when the authorities ordered the cessation of publication of the Encyclopedia and most of the philosophes deserted the project, he nonetheless continued to carry out (virtually alone) the clandestine job of editing the Encyclopedia. No one can doubt that the Encyclopedia was freighted with ideas considered dangerous enough to the social order to halt its publication. That Diderot was running a considerable risk is attested by the decree of 1757 which prescribed the death penalty for authors whose writings aim "to attack religion, to assail our authority, or disturb the ordered tranquillity of our realm."⁷

With regard to the charge that the philosophes were generally mere tools for the so-called Enlightened Despots, Diderot's work reflected, to the contrary, an increasing hostility to strong, centralized government. He came to regard representative government as the only kind of legitimate government. In his Observations on the Nakaz (1774), his comments on the instructions of Catherine II of Russia to representatives called to compose a new law code, Diderot observed that Catherine was certainly a despot: "I see in the instruction . . . the name of despot abdicated but the thing itself preserved."⁸ He denied that the sovereign was the source of all power and observed that true sovereignty rests in the consent of the nation, represented by deputies or assembled in a body. His poem Les Eleuthéromanes (1772) has often been cited for its lines on strangling the king in the entrails of the priest.*⁹ Wilson points out that among Diderot's rare poems, this one is not written in a

*Et ses mains ourdiraient les entrailles du prêtre
Au défaut d'un cordon pour étrangler les rois.

light witty manner. Its significant subtitle, Men Frenzied for Liberty, indicates its political overtones which combine respect for the natural rights of liberty with hatred for despotism. In 1771, during the Maupeou crisis with the Parlements, Diderot expressed the view that the spirit of the age was one of liberty. In the same letter, he noted that the cord which binds society has two strands, that of the sovereignty of heaven and that of sovereignty on earth, and that the breaking of one would lead to the snapping of the other. Although the letter was private, it reflects his observation that the political attack on authority was directly related to the philosophes' attack on religion, "the most formidable and respected barrier."¹⁰ Once men have assaulted that barrier, it would be impossible to stop there, he believed.

Although he continued to be generally cautious about publishing his innermost thoughts, he made important, if anonymous, contributions to Raynal's radical History of the Two Indies (1780), especially in those portions directed against tyrants and despots.¹¹ The book was ordered burned by the Parlement of Paris in 1781. Raynal escaped prison by going abroad.¹² Thus, there is sufficient evidence to indicate that Diderot's later political thought also shared the increasingly outspoken radicalization of political thought in the last decades before the Revolution.

However, Diderot's most radical, subversive ideas were expressed most vividly in his later creative, imaginative works: Rameau's Nephew, Jacques the Fatalist, D'Alembert's Dream and the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, all of which were first published many years after his death. Rameau's Nephew, as Fabre has established, was his most secret work, unmentioned in Diderot's correspondence and unknown to his most

intimate friends and even his mistress, Sophie.¹³ Despite the fact that these works were not published in his lifetime, unpublished manuscripts can manifest the general social and intellectual milieu as well as the author's own changing thoughts.

These works can be considered revolutionary in more than a political sense. In them he expressed ideas of society that were symptomatic of what we tend to regard as part of the modern state of mind. He created revolutionary characters, in the sense of personalities who launched devastating attacks against the hypocrisies of any social order, on the idea of society itself, and the way it controls the individual. In the persons of Rameau's Nephew, Jacques, and the "originals" in Jacques the Fatalist, Diderot fully expressed the essential tension in his thought, torn between a recognition of social needs and the affirmation of total individuality.

Diderot, basically, was entangled in a double moral standard. His statement that "there are no laws for the wise man" reflected an elitist attitude which derived both from his materialism and from his fundamental belief in the importance of the intellectual or artistic genius. His materialist philosophy made it impossible for him to relate morality to any standard of eternal truth. This is his essential modernity--the denial of the relevance of human behavior to God's commandments. As he demonstrated over and over again, but most forcefully in D'Alembert's Dream, a universe could evolve from the chance organization of matter, without a Creator. In such a world, there is no eternal moral truth. Right or wrong, good or bad, can be determined only by the standards to be applied in a particular situation, in a particular society, and in a particular time and place. As Diderot

argued, even the standards of society are subject to change. He defined the "fallacy of the ephemeral" in D'Alembert's Dream as "the error of the transitory being who believes in the immutability of things."¹⁴ In such a view, every standard is man-made and changeable.

Diderot also equated moral behavior with the particular individual and especially with psychological states and superior talent. The episode of Mme de la Pommeraye illustrates Diderot's justification of her revenge because of her wounded pride. He interrupted the narrative expressly to challenge the reader not to judge her behavior without considering her psychological state--she had defied society's moral standard by taking a lover and then had been cruelly rejected. His literal intervention in the story to make the point is a vindication of her behavior as justified by the situation.

His concept of the genius and the superior man, condoning the right of persons with extraordinary talent to transcend ordinary morality, fortified his concept of an individualistic ethic. This elitist ethic is theoretically bound by some rules--the genius would be justified by his creativity and the superior man by his use of right reason to make the correct moral decision. The fundamental dilemma of such an ethic is how to move from the realm of the genius or sage to the ordinary individual. And here Diderot clearly saw the probability of moral chaos in society if the moral rules of elite groups--the geniuses, the philosophes, and the actors--were to be taken up by everyone.

In Rameau's Nephew particularly, Diderot, the artist, created precisely the man he saw, in his acknowledged stance as philosophe, as the most dangerous threat to the social order: the free spirit, the man who does not conform, the being "happily made for existing," with integrity

of self. The "moi tout pur" that Diderot longed for, was embodied in his amoral, but self-aware, Rameau's Nephew. In Jacques, Diderot affirmed the dignity and uniqueness of the individual and the will to be free, even in a determined, materialist universe. In both works, Diderot tore away the veils of social hypocrisy and the masks of morality that covered secret vice. Both Rameau's Nephew and Jacques illustrate the denial of absolute moral values and the consequent ethical problems for society in a materialist order where neither vice nor virtue, right nor wrong can be defined. Every grade of behavior corresponds to the individual who, like Diderot's "wise man," genius, or master criminal, can act outside the law--Rameau's Nephew on principle; Jacques when it is expedient.

In the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage,¹⁵ Diderot continued to pursue the problem of the individual and society. He contemplated anarchistic social views in an idealized picture of a Utopian society in which "natural man" could be free of the repressive fetters of "artificial" social man. In these works, Rameau's Nephew, Jacques, and the Supplement, Diderot created the prerevolutionary version of modern, alienated man.

Rameau's Nephew: Roles and Pantomimes

"Je n'estime pas ces originaux-là." Thus Moi, the philosophe of Rameau's Nephew, shrugs off Lui, the Nephew, the most wretched, bizarre, and material of beings. Lui is a composite of apparently conflicting characteristics and appearances. He is a compound of elevation and baseness, good and bad qualities, decency and depravity. Even his physical appearance lacks unity and consistency. Sometimes he is fat, sleek and

well-fed, at other times lean and hungry looking. One day he is in filthy rags, the next day, he appears powdered, curled and dressed in finery. He is totally rooted in a materialist existence. He lives from day-to-day and from hand-to-mouth. His first thought of the day is where and what he will eat and, after that, where he will sleep--in a garret, stable, or in the streets, all depending on his luck. He is a parasite whose very existence depends on his playing the role of fool and flatterer to patrons whom he despises.

This introduction to the Nephew and the dialogue which ensues between Moi and Lui, in which Lui displays the most odious, amoral, and immoral beliefs and actions, has sparked numerous interpretations and speculations about the meaning of the dialogue and Diderot's attitude towards the character he had created. Did Diderot see himself as Moi, or Lui, or was he a divided self, who reflected an ambiguous, ambivalent philosophy, pitting the two characters against each other in a verbal fencing match on morality, society, freedom, and existence?

Mornet believed that Rameau's Nephew represented the dichotomy between the two facets of Diderot's nature--the part that professed virtue, through the idealized Moi, and the other part that saw in Lui the implications of amorality deducible from a materialist position.¹⁶ Mornet's reading stresses Lui as representative of the bohemian nature of the youthful Diderot which he succeeded in exorcising in this work. Fabre, in a more complex interpretation, has insisted that Diderot's philosophy of virtue was an official stance, sentimental and even hypocritical.¹⁷ Fabre holds that Rameau's Nephew was Diderot's "secret domain," a work that reflected his full identification with the freedom and anarchism of Lui. The creation and careful rewriting of the work

over the years, according to Fabre, represented Diderot's salvation of his creative genius and his belief in freedom of the individual triumphing over a determined, materialist universe.¹⁸

Doolittle, like Fabre, has stressed the multiplicity of natures embodied in Lui and the identification of Diderot with Lui's freedom.¹⁹ More recently, Donal O'Gorman, in a brilliant analysis of Diderot's style, language, thought, and the influence of Horace's satires, the quarrel with Rousseau, and Diderot's rejection of Helvétius' view of man, has identified Diderot with Moi. O'Gorman argues that Moi represents Diderot's view of the philosophe as a rational, controlled philosopher, and Lui as the inconsistent, mediocre man, closely identified, in Diderot's eyes, with Rousseau, " 'the sophist' ".²⁰

In a Freudian psychological study, Ronald Grimsley relates the Moi-Lui conflict to an attempt by Diderot to clarify the conflict within his own personality between Moi as an ideal "ego" for Diderot, and Lui as representing the "pressure of an abnormally high ego ideal upon a basically sensual temperament."²¹ Grimsley has pointed the way for the necessity of a full-scale, psychological study of Diderot's own personality.²²

A basic reason for the discrepancies among these interpretations comes directly from Diderot's portrayal of the characters. In the contest between Moi and Lui, it is Lui who remains forever etched on the mind of the reader. Moi represents the virtue we should admire and he emerges "ice cold," as virtue appears to everyone, according to Lui. We have here again the supreme paradox embodied in Diderot's treatment of

the grand criminel in the episode of Mme de la Pommeraye.* When she is virtuous and good, she is least fascinating. When she asserts her ego and domination for revenge, she overawes us. Similarly, in the contest between virtue and the amorality of Rameau's Nephew, virtue comes off second best artistically, particularly if we consider the work as literature rather than a moral message. For it is through Lui, that Diderot launched the scathing, cynical, ingenious indictment of the inner corruptions, artificiality, and restraints of "polite society."

We have already seen that Lui is mediocre, both as an artist and as a villain.** What is it then that this moral and artistic bankrupt says about morality and society that intrigued Goethe, Hegel, Balzac, and Freud and has confounded scholars about Diderot's real intentions? The singular gift of the Nephew is that he "unmasks the rascals" (il démasque les coquins) and reveals the good people (les gens de bien).²³ A scoundrel and parasite himself, he can distinguish between the good and the worthy and the scoundrels and hypocrites. Thus, the sensible man, the philosophe, acknowledges and stands to learn something about the world he lives in by listening to the Nephew. The distinguishing characteristic of the "original" is that, immoral himself, he has a moral insight into the corruption of the everyday social world. He forces a confrontation with the world of reality, so that he "smokes out the truth."

Both the philosophe and the reader are forced into this recognition. Immorality and corruption are not the sole province of the under-

*Supra, Chapter IV.

**Supra, Chapter III and IV.

world; they are characteristic of society. The Nephew, corrupt himself, has no illusions about his own morality, so he is not a hypocrite, as even the philosophe is forced to admit.²⁴ His rascality is that of everyman, without the self-delusion of pretended virtue. He plays the game of a morally and spiritually corrupt society, but he does it knowingly. This self-awareness does not elevate him to a state of grace, but it does redeem some of his depravity. His distorted notions of morality serve as a refreshing corrective for a pompous naïveté about the beauty and nobility of virtue in a society that respects and honors mediocrity, as long as it is accompanied by material success. If he is rooted in the needs of the flesh, so is the society he inhabits as a parasitic hanger-on.

For it is in society that the individual is forced into distorting roles that destroy human dignity. Rameau's Nephew lacks the fiber (la fibre m'a manquée)*of both the genius and the master criminal. He also lacks the moral fiber that would enable him to resist the corruptions and hypocrisies of his patrons in particular, and of society in general. But if nature has determined him in this way and society adds the outside pressures of need, how does the unheroic personality cope with the society that he lacks the moral strength to rise above? The Nephew's answer is rooted in his determined nature and the material needs of the human being. He is not admirable, but he is honest.

Rameau's Nephew survives as a parasite, dependent for his livelihood on his talents as fool and clown to satisfy his patron's need to be amused. He is the classic fool, "the irreplaceable man," who reveals

*Supra, Chapters III and IV.

the truth in his jests, but who must have the skill to avoid hitting too near the truth. If he does this, he risks being thrown out. Even when he is in favor, he is degraded:

I was their dear Rameau, their pretty Rameau, their Rameau--the fool, the impertinent, stupid, greedy, lazy, buffoon, a great blockhead. Not one of these homely epithets went without a smile, a caress, a little pat on the back, a slap, a kick.²⁵

When the philosophe (Moi) meets up with him, he is torn with remorse and berates his stupidity. He has lost his comfortable berth by his independence in expressing his opinion. In thus speaking out, he has denied the nature God gave him and the way his patrons wanted him.²⁶ Thus, he confirms Diderot's materialist determinism by accepting that his nature was biologically fashioned for this role of fool and parasite.

Moi mocks Lui with the prospect of reinstating himself to favor by returning to his patron's mistress in his present unkempt state and throwing himself before the goddess, (la divinité), to beg forgiveness. Lui accompanies this advice with a pantomime in which he prostrates himself at Moi's feet and acts out the scene, crying, sobbing, and generally debasing himself. Then, suddenly, he drops the pose and pulls himself together. Even though Moi's advice is sensible, he cannot take it. He cannot humiliate himself and throw himself at the feet of the "little bitch . . . a second-rate actress." He recalls that his father, a man of substance, an apothecary at Dijon, has never bent his knee to anyone. He remembers with pride that he is the nephew of the great Rameau, that he himself is an artist who has composed keyboard works that no one plays but that posterity may appreciate. The act of humiliation is impossible: "Rameau, you will do no such thing. A certain dignity attaches to the nature of man that nothing must destroy." This dignity

comes to the fore at the most unexpected times, the Nephew admits, for there are other times when he would "kiss the backside (je baiserois le cul) of the little Hus for a penny."²⁷

Moi suggests that if his dignity will not permit the apology, then Lui should have the courage to be poor. But Lui cannot do this either. "It's hard to be poor while there are so many wealthy fools to sponge on."²⁸ But more than that, Lui says he cannot bear the "self-contempt" (le mépris de soi).²⁹ This new turn takes Moi by surprise. He cannot believe that anyone who has admitted his parasitic existence so openly could feel self-contempt. But it develops that Lui's contempt is not brought on by shame over his degradation but by the inconsistency in his character which occasionally prevents him from fully utilizing his talent for flattery and deceit. He laments his stupidity when so many stupid, untalented schemers succeed:

Can't you lick boots like the rest? Haven't you learned to lie, swear, forswear, promise, perform, or cheat like anyone else? Can't you walk on all fours too?³⁰

Moi is totally disgusted, torn between scorn and laughter. He is repelled by Lui's "cunning and baseness," but amused by his comic pantomimes and the grain of truth in his cynical observations.³¹

Lui brushes off Moi's moralizing objections and contemplates the equalizing nature of the human condition, in which rich and poor, all end up rotting matter, under marble or in the earth:

The important thing is to keep the bowels moving, freely, agreeably, liberally, every night. O stercus pretiosum. That is the great end of life in all social conditions. At the last all are equally rich: Sameul Bernard, who by dint of stealing, swindling and fraud leaves twenty-seven millions in gold is no different from Rameau who leaves nothing.³²

For the Nephew, everything is rooted in this elementary existence--the

need to eat, sleep, and use the garderobe, the need for pretty women. These are the common elements of humanity. "All the rest is vanity."³³ Patriotism, friendship, duty, all are "vanity." Duty only brings jealousy, worry, persecution. "The way to get on is to flatter people, pay court, serve their vices, and support their misdeeds."³⁴

When Lui describes his skill in cheating in his music lessons, the philosophe scorns these "vile little tricks." But Lui points out that these tricks are the stock in trade of society. In every trade and calling, each profession makes its own exception to universal morality through the use of specific jargon related to their trades, the "trade idioms" (idiotismes de métier).³⁵ The sovereign, the minister, financier, soldier, writer, merchant, and teacher, "all the respectable people" use their own idioms to suit their selfish purposes--to deviate from moral behavior.

Diderot introduced in the "idioms" another version of the mask by which people disguise truth and hide their real selves. We have already seen the mask to disguise falsity in the episode of Bouret's dog,* and the reference to Lui's ability to "unmask the rascals." In Jacques the Fatalist, Mme de la Pommeraye masked her hatred by sympathetic facial expressions and words and hid her face from des Arcis when she wanted to disguise her rage.** The "idioms" represent the mask of language. In his First Satire, On the Words and Character of Words, and Profession, Diderot had discussed the way in which language and expression subtly reveal an individual's character and his profession.³⁶

*Supra, Chapter IV.

**Supra, Chapter IV.

Now in Lui's definition of "idioms," we see the use of language to veil hypocrisy: "The older the profession, the more the idioms. . . . People make the trade go for as much as they can."³⁷

The Nephew regards his "vile tricks" only as part of the generally accepted social morality. He swindles without qualms because his victims were also swindlers. Diderot's familiarity with Mandeville's Fable of the Bees may have influenced his view that all society is parasitic.³⁸

My pupils' parents were fat with ill-gotten gains. They were courtiers, tax collectors, wholesalers, bankers, stockbrokers. I merely helped them to make restitution. In Nature all species live off one another; in society all classes do the same.³⁹

He is a swindler, but so is everyone else. Only the idiot or the loafer fails to levy tribute. The Nephew is a scoundrel, but he claims to be in good company among a society of "well-heeled" scoundrels, all parasites living off each other. All are respectable on the surface, but dishonest underneath. They preach "moral idioms" (idiotismes moreaux) that they only pretend to uphold. Lui only claims a superior skill in reflecting what is the "opinion and language of all society."⁴⁰

Society itself is based on a "tacit agreement" (un pacte tacite) to return evil for good.⁴¹ Under the terms of the "tacit agreement,"* Lui spells out a determinism that Diderot was to deal with more fully in Jacques the Fatalist. Everyone must act as he does because of what he is. Decent people act as they must and so do the "types" (espèces) who do their dirty tricks. Those who consort with "types" will be betrayed and mocked by them. The dupe is the one who has forgotten

*Compare with the "tacit contract" in the Encyclopedia article, "Société," supra, Chapter V.

the terms of "the universal and sacred pact." The fault is not in the villainies of the wicked but rather in the stupidity of those who permit themselves to be tricked.⁴²

But, surprisingly, Lui has a deeper, sensitive nature which emerges in the extensive discussion of music, following his famous musical pantomime of the creative genius (p.52). Lui, who has scorned the philosophe's stock phrases about the beauty of virtue and education, launches into a poetic, reasoned discussion of music theory and the mediocrity of contemporary music. This mediocrity may be esteemed for a while, but in the long run it is a bore. "The true, the good, and the beautiful" will prevail, finally recognized for their superiority.⁴³ Diderot here put his own theories of art and his vision of the "ideal line"* set by the genius in the mouth of Lui. Thus, in addition to his ruthless honesty about his own nature, Lui has another virtue--true sensitivity to art. He also has genuine musical talent which failed to materialize in genius. His foresight about the future change that will come about in music, marks him as out of step with his own time and opens him to ridicule. He also believes his own musical composition will someday be appreciated.

These facets of the Nephew appear to be directly related to Diderot's own experience and feeling that he had not been recognized in his own time. They represent a specific judgment by Diderot not only on the mediocrity of Lui's patrons but on patronage and taste in eighteenth-century French society. At this point in the dialogue, Moi cynically advises Lui to teach his son music as one of the best ways to serve the

*Supra, Chapter III.

vices of the rich. Diderot's condemnation of those who had put difficulties in the way of the Encyclopedists, his repeated faith that he would merit the appreciation and thanks of posterity because of the Encyclopedia, and his reflections on the neglected genius should be recalled in conjunction with these passages.*

Moi asks Lui why his musical sensibility has not led him to the "beauties of morality . . . the charm of virtue." The Nephew replies that there must be a special fiber for morality which he lacks because of the taint in his heredity.⁴⁴ Besides, the philosophe's view of virtue is not everybody's: "You call your quirks virtue, or philosophy, but virtue and philosophy are not for everybody."⁴⁵ Virtue and vice are interchangeable, depending on the individual point of view. What is vice for one man, is virtue for another. Lui proclaims the total relativism of morality:

In any event, remember that in a subject as variable as manners and morals, nothing is absolutely, essentially, universally true or false--unless it be that one must be whatever self-interest requires, good or bad, wise or foolish, decent or ridiculous, honest or vicious.⁴⁶

There is another dimension, the social one, that must be considered with regard to Lui's outlook on virtue. In answer to Moi's advice to try to rise above his fate, even if he lacks the fiber, Lui says that he has tried, but because of the handful of geniuses, the rest, the minor talents, are ignored--they are "so many donkey's ears."⁴⁷ And there is also the problem of poverty: "The voice of conscience and honor is pretty feeble when the guts cry out."⁴⁸ In this predominant theme of the needs of the empty belly, Diderot pondered the relationship between morality and material needs. How can there be virtue when the need to eat is

*Supra, Chapters I and III.

unsatisfied?

But if it is natural to be hungry--I always come back to hunger, for with me it is an ever-present sensation--I find that it is no part of a good order to be sometimes without food. What a devil of an economy! Some men gorged with everything, while others whose stomachs are no less importunate, whose hunger is just as recurrent have nothing to bite on.⁴⁹

Society dehumanizes man because need destroys the possibility of integrity and makes men hypocrites. In a final pantomime, Diderot, through Rameau's Nephew, introduced the pantomime of the "positions," the choreography of the needy man. Worse than hunger for the "needy man" (l'homme necessiteux), says the Nephew, is the "constrained posture" he must assume. He does not walk like other men; he skips, twists, cringes, crawls, and spends his life choosing and performing "positions." He minces and flatters, takes orders and runs to carry them out, opens doors, closes windows, carries chairs, and otherwise degrades himself as a lackey to please others.⁵⁰ Such is the nature of society, that not only the hungry man, but everyone is engaged in some kind of role-playing. Moi, concedes Lui's point. There is hardly anyone who does not dance at least a few steps of the pantomime: "Whoever stands in need of another is needy and takes a position."⁵¹

The pantomime of positions is the ultimate mask that camouflages sincerity. As the actor pantomimes and imitates reality, the ordinary individual assumes different roles or masks to flatter, please, and deceive others for his own purposes. Even the king plays one role to please his mistress and another before God. He dances the pantomime as does the minister who has to please, flatter and play footman to the king. "The crowd of self-seekers dance all your positions in a hundred ways, each viler than the next." The noble Abbé dances the pantomime

before the official who makes appointments to Church benefices.

"Really what you call the beggar's pantomime is what makes the world go round."⁵² No one is truly free. The potential of the totally free self, the moi tout pur Diderot longed for, is destroyed--for the beggar by hunger, for everyone else by the need to play the role expected of him to get on in society.

Moi has conceded the pantomime of positions, but he attempts to exempt the philosopher from the degrading pantomime. He holds that the philosopher is the only truly free man, because he has nothing and asks for nothing. This is one of the portions of the dialogue that is most controversial as to whether Diderot favored Moi or Lui.⁵³ Does Moi succeed in making the case for the integrity of the philosopher and his greater degree of freedom? From Lui's point of view, the philosopher is free only if he pays the price of removing himself from reality. If he can maintain his independence only by denying the material life, by doing without food, comforts, even basic sexual needs,⁵⁴ he has no authentic independence. The philosophe maintains that deprivation of the good things of life is better than to prostitute one's self and crawl. In return for material comforts, Lui will have to pay this price and continue to dance the "vilest pantomime" of all. Lui accepts this condition; it is his destiny. He embraces his identity, determined by his "molécule paternelle maudite." His argument is a total affirmation of his own self-identity in a society in which vice is the common denominator and virtue only a facade. If he caters to vice, his vileness can flourish only because men are corrupt and prefer vice to virtue: "Virtue is ice cold."⁵⁵ Everyone pays lip service to it, but all run away from it. Virtue is unnatural and therefore it makes people unhappy

and uncomfortable. People want to laugh, not be unhappy, so Rameau's Nephew must be a fool, continuing to play his pantomimes. But he will do so on his own terms. In accepting his identity, moreover, he emphasizes his superiority in using "right reason" to carry out his role:

My sole merit is to have accomplished systematically, through good judgment and right reason, what most other people do by instinct.⁵⁶

The Nephew's argument is a wholly cynical appraisal of the powers of enlightened reason to lead men to virtue. Diderot's basic philosophy of the purpose and value of the Encyclopedia, to educate men to virtue and thus make them happier, is dissolved in the Nephew's cynical use of the power of reason. He is a living testimonial to the philosophy worked out from determinism, a new morality, where there is neither right nor wrong, neither vice nor virtue. Of what use is the education Moi plans for his daughter, an education of utility designed to teach her to "bear life" courageously?⁵⁷ If the secret spring of society is hypocrisy, not virtue, if men really run from virtue, and if the only way to get on is to pay court, and serve other people's vices, then the philosophe's educational theory is poor indeed. Then Lui's encouragement of his son's natural tendencies to be lazy, greedy, and a liar by teaching him to worship gold, the only key to happiness in society, is a more useful education.⁵⁸ Besides, Lui observes that if his son has inherited the "accursed paternal molecule," like his father, then he is already destined to be a ne'er-do-well. To educate him for anything else would only distort his true nature and make him a mediocre bungler.⁵⁹ Lui's argument here is a direct inference from Diderot's materialist theory that man is only organized matter and the way in which his matter is organized determines his physical and moral character.

This denial of the efficacy of education is staggering in view of Diderot's years of dedicated work on the Encyclopedia and his call for education to change the way men think. On the moral plane, it is obviously a denial of the ability of education to make the ethical individual. But although this argument rejecting education's ability to change human nature is put in the mouth of the cynical Nephew and the philosophe does not accept it, neither does he refute it. And further, the Nephew's rejection of the power of education is only a more blunt statement of Diderot's limits on the power of education in the Refutation of Helvétius (1773-1776). There he gave specific examples of the futility of education or reprimands to change the combination of individual structure, character, and temperament. Ironically, in the Refutation, Diderot referred to his own "almost thirty consecutive years" of work on the Encyclopedia "against my personal taste" to argue that it was each man's particular structure combined with the element of "chance" that determined the pattern of his life.⁶⁰

There is another element to be considered in connection with Diderot's view of individuality. We know that Diderot admired "unity of character." In fact, Moi admonishes Lui because he lacks this unity of character. When Lui admires the great criminal precisely for this quality, Moi observes that Lui has not yet achieved it: "But you don't have this estimable unity of character yet. I find you, from time to time, vacillating in your principles."⁶¹ There is no doubt that, as has been seen, Lui is mediocre both as a genius and as a master criminal. He himself laments his lapse from consistency when he deviated from his true nature by speaking out. On the whole, however, Lui constantly affirms that his vile life is the one that is most consistent with his

nature. He refuses to pretend to virtue or try to become virtuous because the best way he can secure his well being is by vices that are natural to his character. At the same time, he holds that these vices are also congenial to the contemporary society and to the character of his patrons. Thus to adopt virtue would be to deny his own character. It also would serve no useful purpose, indeed it would be positively harmful since virtue in him would make him appear to mock his patrons.⁶²

Thus, despite some ambiguity as to Lui's "unity of character," there is a degree of consistency in his unwavering acceptance of his identity and his declared intention to continue to conform to it. This concern with consistency or unity of character that Diderot considered so important is interesting in connection with his view of his own character. At times he seemed delighted with his own complex nature: "It is bizarre, the variety of roles I play in this world."⁶³

Point by point, Moi and Lui arrive at a standoff in which Moi continues doggedly to affirm the life of philosophy and virtue and Lui establishes the cynical conception of the reality of corrupt society, and the unnaturalness of virtue. He is vile, lazy, greedy, debased, an artist frustrated by the lack of genius and the corruptions of society. But he clings to a shred of dignity, self-awareness, and a life-affirming quality rooted in the notion of sheer existence: "I am myself and I stay as I am" (Je suis moi et je reste ce que je suis).⁶⁴ Life is a precious gift, for "the dead man hears no bells," and the world he is in is the only one that matters. He hopes for another forty years of life: "He laughs best who laugh last."⁶⁵

Who has won the argument? It is open-ended; neither man concedes the basic viewpoint of the other, although they sometimes change positions.

But there is little doubt that, despite his amorality, Lui is the most unforgettable character and has been given all the best arguments. The philosophe, who affirms decency, integrity, and virtue comes off second-best, a pale figure measured against the cocky individuality of Rameau's Nephew. Indeed, as Doolittle has pointed out, it was the readers of this, Diderot's Second Satire, who christened it Rameau's Nephew.⁶⁶

The work is a tribute to Diderot's genius and artistry in remorselessly following through the problem of morality that can derive from a materialist view of the universe. The complexity of human nature is nowhere better illustrated than in the ambivalences in Diderot's own nature reflected in this work. If the victor in the debate appears to be the Nephew, we must also recall that Diderot, in the Refutation of Helvétius, and the Essay on Claudus and Nero, again affirmed virtue as the best way to live. We must thus assume that virtue was the final, ideal image, the identity he wished to embrace. It was also in the Refutation that he regretted that he had never attempted to write the definitive work on virtue because he feared he would fail to do it justice.⁶⁷ Ironically then, the philosophe who above all else would have preferred to have written a sublime work on virtue, had some of his most penetrating insights into man in his social environment in his creation of a revolutionary personality, the protean Rameau's Nephew.

Jacques the Fatalist: Society
and the "Quiproquo"

Rameau's Nephew represents Diderot's most striking elaboration of a totally amoral, materialist personality, "the original," whose redeeming value is his shrewd perception of the debased, false values of society and his ability to be himself. In Jacques the Fatalist and His Master,

written between 1771 and 1778,⁶⁸ we have already observed Diderot's treatment of ego, individuality, and vengeance themes in the episodes of Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson. We have noted, too, the amorality and individuality of the minor "originals without principles"* who are lesser versions of the Lui of Rameau's Nephew. But in the character of Jacques himself, Diderot created another example of the extraordinary individual free of conventional moral constraints and at the same time imbued with insights into the vices and immorality that are masked as virtue in society. Jacques is an "original" with principles, often in spite of himself. He lacks the erratic, corrosive edge of Rameau's Nephew, but like him, he also sees that vice and virtue are merely convenient names to disguise self-interest. He also recognizes the hierarchy of society in which power and domination are motivating themes for most men. And like the Nephew, he admits that he is often inconsistent, forgets his principles, and despite the fact that intellectually he accepts that everything is already determined, he still acts to the contrary.

In Jacques, Diderot created another revolutionary personality, who sees all of society as a quiproquo, comparable to Rameau's Nephew's view of society as a "tacit agreement" run on the principle of "moral idioms" of self-interest. And in another dimension, Jacques also expresses revolutionary social sentiments in his analysis of the master-servant relationship and his observations on social injustice. Jacques, like Rameau's Nephew, has been seen by Franco Venturi as "veined" with Diderot's own youth.⁶⁹ He also undoubtedly reflects some of the mature

*Supra, Chapter IV.

Diderot's indictment of the impoverished contemporary social values and morality. And despite the fact that Jacques is an amiable, less bitter character than Rameau's Nephew, he also has a certain dignity, self-awareness, and affirmation of individuality that singles him out from the ordinary breed of men.

The rambling structure of Jacques, with its stories-within-the story,* its digressions and interruptions by Diderot as author directly addressing the reader,⁷⁰ and its treatment of the time element on several planes, mingling past, present and future, have all led to a recognition of this work as transitional to the modern novel.⁷¹ The framework of the story is built around a journey undertaken by Jacques, a wounded ex-soldier, now a valet or man servant, who accompanies his master. The tenor of the work is set by the opening lines: "How had they met? By chance, like everyone else. What were their names? What does it matter to you? . . . Where were they going? Does anyone ever know where he's going."⁷²

Jacques lives by a formula--he said that his captain had said that everything that happens down here, good or bad, is written "up there" (là-haut) on "the Great Scroll" (le grand rouleau).⁷³ Jacques is thus seemingly committed to a deterministic belief that whatever happens was meant to be. He attributes the wound in his knee to his captain's belief that "every bullet has its billet."⁷⁴ His present Master, on the other hand, maintains a rather smug belief in unfettered free will. The Master is delineated only as an automaton whose chief characteristics are to smoke his pipe and consult his watch. His thinking is

*Supra, Chapter IV.

based on an inflexible commitment to everyday notions of morality, virtue, and the divine purpose of Providence. Actually, as we come to see, the Master accepts fatalism much more than Jacques does. Jacques' determinism is based on Diderot's materialist theory. Each individual is determined by the physical and psychological organization of matter. He has been determined by inheritance, environment, and the process of change over eons of time. His psychological makeup is also a part of his determined nature but as it responds to and interacts with the environment.* Although Jacques has a ritualized formula for everything that happens--it is all written up there, on the Great Scroll--we find that he acts despite this belief, to attempt to change what will happen. His apparent weakness is his inconsistency, which paradoxically marks his strength as a human being. His inconsistency is based on his attempt to overcome what he believes to be the inevitable. He recognizes that he forgets his principles and his captain's lessons, and laughs and cries like a fool, even though logically he should accept whatever happens on the basis of his philosophy.

Although to some extent Jacques manifests a determinism drawn from Diderot's materialist theory, he also displays the ultimate recognition Diderot gave to the purely human factor--despite the limits of determinism, it is within man to try to overcome those limits through an act of will. This is not the routine mouthing of free will, held forth by the Master, but rather the purely human affirmation to be human. If we compare Rameau's Nephew and Jacques, the Nephew has so fully embraced his determined nature, that it is only rarely that he

*Supra, Chapter II.

overcomes it in an act of defiance against his patrons. Nonetheless, he has a certain integrity in his self-awareness of his baseness and peculiar dignity. Jacques, on the other hand, expressing the same determinism drawn from materialism, accepts it as his credo, and yet constantly defies it. In spite of his determinism, he is "a good man, frank, honest, brave, devoted, faithful, obstinate and loquacious."⁷⁵ Jacques pays lip service to his principles but acts as a basically decent human being, risking his neck to save a helpless person, although his doctrine tells him it is useless to interfere with destiny.

Jacques represents, in a humorously developed way, the essential denial of free will that Diderot had upheld in his Letter to Landois* (1756) and in D'Alembert's Dream (1769). Man is what he is, determined by his make-up. All is linked in a chain of causes: "Change the universe and you change me," as D'Alembert holds in the Dream. For Jacques, we each act as we do because no two individuals are alike and we each have our own nature, and our own causes. The same moral problem present in much of Diderot's work is posed here: if all is determined, and there is no free will, how can man act morally? This is the essential crux of Diderot's moral thinking, which caught him in the dilemma of the quest for moral freedom and self-identity in a world in which he believed determinism and chance play such a great part.

Closely related to Jacques' repeated belief in determinism and destiny, is his practical, human good sense which surfaces in his discovery that destiny often conforms with the practical and the expedient. For example, when destiny brings him into the hands of robbers, he consults

*Supra, Chapter II.

destiny "in his head" and decides that since it was all written up yonder, the prudent thing is not to defy them. When destiny becomes mute, in his head, he reads its counsel in his wine gourd: "Let's consult the bottle. . . . Such is the bottle's opinion and my own." In a delightful treatise on "divination by . . . the gourd," he ranks Rabelais, La Fontaine, and Molière among the true gourd-inspired writers; Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau* are "false brothers of the gourd," because they praised good wine without drinking it.⁷⁶ In this Rabelaisian touch, Diderot used the digression on Bacbuc, the sacred gourd, to criticize the artistic mediocrity of his age. He equated the decline of "the cult of the gourd" with the decline of passion and genius in artistic works:

And so no more of those great poems, no more of those pieces of sublime eloquence, no more of those productions bearing the imprint of intoxication and genius. All is reasoned, formal, stiff, academic, and flat.⁷⁷

The humour and general gaiety of Jacques, however, does not obscure its serious moral purpose. As both Fabre and Crocker have pointed out, Jacques is another example of Diderot's testing of moral paradoxes and the difficulty of reconciling a moral society and virtue with a determined world. Jacques himself acts as commentator on the vices of society, although Diderot directly cast himself as a character and observer in this work, often interrupting the action to reflect on the situation and express his own opinions. There are many themes in Jacques that parallel or compare with moral and social observations in Rameau's Nephew. The master criminal theme and "the originals" have already been explored in both works; the masks and roles in Rameau's Nephew are

*Another pointed reference to Diderot's dislike of Rousseau. Supra, Chapters I and II.

comparable to Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson's ability to mask their vicious purposes under the guise of virtue. There are also fruitful comparisons in Jacques' views of the general immorality of society, domination and jealousy, virtue and vice, and the revolutionary aspects of Jacques' attitudes towards the social hierarchy.

Jacques is another example of Diderot's formula that there is neither vice nor virtue: "Jacques did not know the name of vice or virtue; he held that we are happily or unhappily born."⁷⁸ Recompense means only encouraging the virtuous; punishment, terrifying the wicked. As Rameau's Nephew had observed, there is neither virtue nor vice, nor absolutes in morality, except that of self-interest. So Jacques, with less rancour but no less conviction, observes that there are no universal moral principles because each man has his own character and each man adapts principles to his own needs.

I don't know what your principles are unless rules for one's own benefit laid down for the conduct of others. Every sermon sounds like the preamble of a royal edict; all the preachers want us to practice their lessons because we might be the better for it, but as for themselves--Virtue!⁷⁹

If virtue is a good thing, as the Master holds, because both good and evil people speak well of it, then as Jacques points out, it is because each finds it to his advantage to espouse virtue. All of life is a "quiproquo" in which things appear to be what they are not:

My dear master, life passes in quiproquos. There are the quiproquos of love, the quiproquos of friendship, the quiproquos of commerce, of wives, of husbands. . . .⁸⁰

As in Rameau's Nephew, what is virtue for one, is vice for another. The Nephew held that the way to get on in society was to cater to other people's vices. In the case of Jacques, he remarks that he has exactly the vice that suits his master, his incessant gossip.⁸¹ We cannot really

communicate with each other, because we all function according to our own needs and in diverse situations. It is even difficult to make moral judgments; each individual judges good and evil in his own way. Jacques cites the example of a man so moved by compassion for the unfortunate that he spent his own fortune and then begged from others for funds to help the needy. To the poor he was a good man, to his family and the rich he was a fool, if not a downright madman.⁸² To complicate life further, helping one person often means hurting someone else. The wife of a physician who has cured Jacques asks Jacques to help secure her husband a lucrative post. But the post is already occupied. So to repay a good turn, Jacques would have to do a bad one to someone else. Self-interest is the predominant spring that motivates society.

In Jacques, Diderot further developed the conception of relativism in morality. Not only are vice and virtue interchangeable among individuals in a particular society, but the concepts of vice and virtue depend on custom and style: "Every virtue comes in and goes out of style."⁸³ This is exemplified in the episode of the two sworn friends who cannot live without each other but who also constantly duel. Are they mad? Perhaps, but then their madness was the folly of all Europe for centuries when it was accepted under the name of chivalry. Now, these dueling friends have outlived their time, and dueling, once a chivalrous virtue is now a social vice. In pursuing the concept of the duel, Diderot, who has interceded as author-commentator at this point, further observes that the duel has not really been eliminated. All of society is a duel, without horses and swords, but with more subtle weapons. Duels are part of the secret envy and desire for superiority and domination. As the two dueling friends love each other and yet are "secretly and violently

jealous" of each other, so jealousy pervades all levels of society and the duel is carried on in different forms. There are duels between priests, between lawyers, between writers, between philosophers. "Each calling has its lance and its horsemen."⁸⁴ These weapons are the equivalent of the "trade idioms" of society in Rameau's Nephew (p. 127). Even the salons and social gatherings are tournaments where the presence of women increases the intensity of the duel to ridiculous limits and the shame of loss becomes even greater.

The duel for position recalls the pantomime of positions in Rameau's Nephew. The desire to be on top, to dominate, masks even friendship and love. On the scale of Mme de la Pommeraye and Father Hudson, the duel for ego dominance and vengeance is fought on the grand scale of villainy. But the same theme, the struggle for mastery, is diffused throughout society. Everyone wants to give orders, so "everyone has his dog" (chacun a son chien).⁸⁵ Jacques observes that poor people have dogs, even if they barely have enough to feed themselves, because animals are the only creatures beneath them in the social order. Since the poor are at the bottom rung on the social ladder they have to take orders from all other classes. The poor maintain dogs to satisfy their desire for power. But, in truth, everyone is the dog of someone else:

And so everyone has his dog. The minister is the king's dog, the chief clerk is the minister's dog, the wife is the husband's dog, or the husband the wife's dog.⁸⁶

In the pantomime of positions in Rameau's Nephew, the dependent person, whatever his rank, must play the pantomime. Jacques, as servant, is his Master's dog when he is required to talk or keep silent, at his Master's bidding. "Weak men are strong men's dogs."⁸⁷ This phrase is similar to

Diderot's observation elsewhere: "The world is the house of the strong."⁸⁸

Even in family relationships, we are forced into roles and positions that make us "dupes" of one another. In an episode that probably reflects Diderot's youth in Langres, a father, outraged at his son's sexual escapades, admits to a friend that they had the same affairs in their own youth and deceived their own parents. As Jacques concludes, the moral is that parents and children can never understand each other: "They have always been and will always be, the reciprocal dupes, one of the other."⁸⁹ In a similar scene in Diderot's play, The Father of the Family, two fathers admit that they have misbehaved like their own sons in the past.⁹⁰ Thus, as fathers, they are cast in hypocritical roles, censuring misconduct they were once guilty of themselves.

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Jacques which reflects changing social attitudes towards the end of the century occurs in Jacques' verbal duel with the Master about his position, his refusal to take orders, and his general insolence. Hegel, who also admired Rameau's Nephew, commented that Jacques typified a particular relationship between master and servant in which the servant in French society was beginning to assert his independence. Hegel observed that the French aristocrat's relationship with his servant was that of familiarity, even friendship. He cited Jacques as the example of the servant who is more than a servant because of his master's dependence on him:

The servant boasts when they are alone; one sees Diderot's Jacques and His Master, the master does nothing other than sniff prize tobacco and look at his watch and lets the servant do as he wishes in the remaining things. The aristocratic man knows that the servant is not only a servant, but also knows town gossip, knows girls, and has good ideas. . . . The servant is allowed to have an opinion and express it, and when the master wants something, it is not ordered, but first he has to ask the servant's opinion about it. . . .⁹¹

Jacques, in some of his exchanges with the Master, also recalls Beaumarchais' Figaro, contemptuous of the social superiority of his own master. Early in the novel, Diderot posed the question: "But who was Jacques' Master's master?"⁹² The obvious answer is that no one is independent and no one ever lacks a master in the world. But, as the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent, that it is really Jacques who leads and the Master who follows. Just as Rameau's Nephew claimed he was the "irreplacable man" to his patrons, because of his ability to play the fool (p. 124), Jacques establishes that he is "essential" to his Master. After an argument in which Jacques has refused to take orders, he asserts that "a Jacques is not only as good as any other man, but sometimes better."⁹³ Peace is restored by the landlady of the inn. The terms restore Jacques' prerogatives with the Master which he fully intends to use:

Let us stipulate then, that first, since it is written up yonder that I'm essential to you, and since I feel and know that you cannot get along without me, therefore, I shall abuse these advantages at any and all times that the occasion permits.⁹⁴

Besides, since Jacques realizes his influence and power over the Master, and the Master in turn realizes his weakness, Jacques claims that, of necessity, he must be insolent and the Master must ignore the insolence. This is all part of the arrangement determined "up there the moment nature made Jacques and his Master."⁹⁵ The decree is very specific, says Jacques, and it is useless to try to oppose the will of nature: "It was decreed that you would have the title and I would have the stuff" (la chose).⁹⁶ When the Master protests that Jacques' lot is the better one, and he would rather change places, Jacques' reply is revolutionary in its implication that the Masters of the world are useless: "Don't you

know what would happen? You would lose the title and you wouldn't have the stuff."⁹⁷ Jacques suggests that they keep the relationship as it is and spend the rest of their lives making a new "proverb:"

Jacques leads his Master. We shall be the first of whom they've said it, but they shall repeat it about thousands of others who are worth more than you and me.⁹⁸

In response to the Master's shock at this philosophy that "seems rather hard to swallow," Jacques points out that "the proverb" resolves their constant quarrels once and for all. Now that it is understood clearly that the Master will only be called the Master but that it is Jacques who really is the Master, all can be peaceful. This philosophy which stuns the Master is derived from Jacques' own reading of the Great Scroll, which here can be compared to Rameau's Nephew's interpretation of the "tacit agreement" (p. 128).

In a later incident, Jacques arranges for the Master to fall from his horse to prove that he has no free will. In answer to the Master's rage, Jacques asserts his dominance again: "Haven't you been my puppet, and wouldn't you continue to be my puppet for a month if I so decide?"⁹⁹ It is indeed "hard to swallow" this unpalatable proposition, an ominous extension of Jacques' revolutionary notion that a "Cromwell" someday might emerge from a carpenter's shop.¹⁰⁰

What are we to make of Jacques? In many ways he is comparable to Rameau's Nephew. Both see society cynically, the Nephew in the "vile pantomimes" and Jacques in his philosophy of the "quiproquo" and "weak men are the dogs of strong men." The conclusion of Rameau's Nephew that everything in life seeks its well being at the expense of something else is comparable to Jacques' observation that "all in nature thinks of itself and only of itself."¹⁰¹ Both have a sense of dignity and self-awareness;

both embrace their determined identity. Each is aware of the contradictions in his nature. The Nephew believes that his lack of hypocrisy lies in his absolute admission that he is what he is. Jacques accepts the contradiction between his philosophy of determinism, and his inconsistency in trying to overcome it: "I have given up and decided to be just what I am."¹⁰²

In accepting the inconsistency, Jacques affirms his humanity. Instead of continuing for another forty years as a scoundrel, like Rameau's Nephew, he will continue to try to act morally, even if it makes no logical sense. The uniqueness of both characters lies ultimately in their life-affirming quality--Rameau with his wish for another forty years of life, with all its instability, and Jacques with his observation that, "all things considered, life isn't really such a bad thing."¹⁰³

There is no ultimate solution of the moral dilemma of a materialist world without vice or virtue in Jacques. The relativism of morality where there are no absolute values still posed for Diderot the same problems of establishing social morality and arbitrating or resolving the potential conflict between the individual and society. But Jacques reaffirms Diderot's shaky faith that despite the unenlightened self-interest of the general run of men, there are still those individuals like Jacques, who, despite the logic of determinism and the evidence of human behavior, will continue to think cynically, but act ethically.*

Utopia and Anarchy

Franco Venturi refers to the "curve of the Enlightenment" to indicate that ideas and politics as well as all society followed an

*The phrase is borrowed from Max Weber.

expanding curve that reached a crisis in the thirties, peaked in the fifties and sixties, and then witnessed profound disturbance for the last quarter of the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁴ Undoubtedly the philosophes as a group anticipated the very real possibility of social, political, and economic reform through Enlightenment. The influence of the Encyclopedia and other enlightened French publications was not limited to France. Their dissemination was significant, if less rapid, throughout Europe. But unquestionably, the last decades before the French Revolution were increasingly marked by the use of both an open and a disguised vocabulary that mocked and disparaged the Old Regime. An ideal government founded on and guided by reason took form in the philosophes' minds and wherever their ideas were taken seriously. The most advanced thinkers had begun to believe that only a republic could fulfill their demands. Utopian expectations mixed incongruously into demands for reform in their political agenda. Revolution still appeared to be a political mode appropriate only to the geographical extremes, Corsica or America.

Diderot, for all his precautions, had a premonition of a deep political disturbance when he noted (1765) the importance of preserving the knowledge of the Encyclopedia in the event that the seed of revolution might generate "even in the very center of civilized states."¹⁰⁵ Robert Darnton believes that some of the radical thought of the last decades of the Old Regime was subsumed in aberrant movements like mesmerism, in which "politics became enmeshed with fads," thus escaping the vigilance of the censor.¹⁰⁶

There is always an element of risk in attempting to categorize the spirit or mentality of an age--witness the term Age of Reason often

so loosely used to define the eighteenth century. No pat formula can delineate the century, marked by so many different modes of thought and feeling. If the "climate of opinion" was predominantly rationalist, nonetheless a significant element of what may be termed irrationality in eighteenth-century thought can also be identified. A definite quality of emotional agitation, religious frenzy, melancholy, morbidity, eccentricity, charlatanism, and a deep strain of moral nihilism all contributed to what has been termed the century's "spectrum of irrationality." George Rosen has attempted to relate these diverse currents, in which emotion overpowered reason, to individual and group fears, insecurities, sense of powerlessness, and feelings of alienation in which social and cultural goals had become unattainable through existing institutional channels.¹⁰⁷ Under these circumstances, the dissatisfaction with existing institutions, and the heightened sense of individualism which conflicted with traditional norms and values, helped produce those psychological strains and tensions which were released in forms ranging from emotional, religious revival on one level, to narcissistic dandyism on another level.

The uniquely secular character of the eighteenth century and the general attack launched by the philosophes against organized religion cannot obscure the fact that the same age witnessed intensely emotional religious revivals. Among these movements were included Pietism in Germany, Quietism in France, Methodism in England, the Shaker movement--first in England, then America--and the Hasidic movement among Eastern European Jews following the earlier mystical movement of Sabbatai Sevi.¹⁰⁸

The appeal of secret societies and mysterious rituals is reflected in the spread of Freemasonry and the Rosicrucian movement.¹⁰⁹ Mesmerism was only one manifestation of the popularity of pseudo-science. The Scot,

James Graham, used the scientific appeal of magnetism in his Temple of Health in London, a dubious establishment in which Lady Hamilton began her career as the Goddess of Health.

In literature, the appeal to heightened emotional excess was conspicuous in the Sturm und Drang literary movement in Germany and the development of the psychological novel in England and France. Goethe's Sorrows of Werther is the classic example of the extreme of the morbid, self-absorbed hero. Richardson's Clarissa, while extolling virtue, was basically an exploration in sexual pathology, as Diderot seemed to recognize.* Diderot's Rameau's Nephew is the literary incarnation of the bizarre, frenzied, alienated individual as well as a psychological projection of Diderot's own sense of a degree of alienation from his society.

The longing for change and reform found expression in another genre--that of the Utopian ideal. This also struck a responsive chord in Diderot and resulted in his Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage. The literature of ideal or Utopian societies flourished in the Enlightenment and was to burst into full bloom in the nineteenth century. The term Utopia, from Thomas More's Utopia of the sixteenth century, became permanently affixed to such idealized societies despite Marx's perjorative use of the term "utopian socialism" to denote planned societies other than those developed by the Marxist view of history. The outpouring of Utopian literature in the eighteenth century is within the realm of both rational and irrational tendencies of the age. From one point of view, Utopian schemes can be considered as irrational fantasies,

*Infra, Chapter VII.

escapes from reality to the purity of the perfect society. From another viewpoint, Frank Manuel has explained the seemingly paradoxical development of mythical Utopias in France, the land of reason, as a reflection of the ultimate in reason and logic--the planned, logical, clearly defined, engineered society.¹¹⁰

Although the nineteenth century was the great age of Utopian thought, there was a significant strain of Utopian theory that developed in France in the eighteenth-century. Utopian thinking ran a gamut between imaginary, idealized societies, like that of Mercier's The Year 2500 (1772), and the planned, programmed, highly regulated proposals for ideal societies like those of Morelly's Code of Nature (1755) and Restif de la Bretonne's Andrograph (1782). Restif perhaps falls into both of these categories since The French Daedalus (1781) was in the genre of the imaginary voyage to an idealized society.¹¹¹ Somewhere between these poles of thought, we find Rousseau and Diderot, both of whom often turned to the concept of primitive societies in order to satirize the inadequacies of French society.

The influence of seventeenth and eighteenth-century voyages played a large role in stimulating comparisons between an idealized non-western society and its European counterpart. Montesquieu's Persian Letters and the flood of novels on oriental themes testify to the popularity of exotic society as a literary theme.¹¹² But many of these works on exotic or primitive societies are not strictly-speaking Utopian societies. In the episode of the Troglodytes, however, in the Persian Letters, Montesquieu reflected an authentic Utopian note in the depiction of an ideal, communal society. Montesquieu's later monumental Spirit of the Laws was based on norms of the state and property, not on those of communal government.¹¹³

Although the details of Utopian communities varied with their authors, many of the Utopian theorists sought to organize society to eliminate conflict, regulate marriage, education, working conditions, and the distribution and consumption of wealth. One distinction that has been made between most of the philosophes and the radical Utopians like Meslier, Deschamps, and Morelly, is that the radicals were against the concept of private property and in favor of communal society. Morelly called "property the mother of all crimes."¹¹⁴ Although it is true that Rousseau's Second Discourse is famous for its diatribe against private property, nonetheless, The Social Contract recognized private property as a foundation of existing society.

The Utopian ideal often tended to be modeled on the Spartan virtues of the Ancients. There is a puritanical streak in the regulations on sexual morality in both Restif's and Morelly's ideal societies. Restif, whose literary fame rested largely on his sensual, amoral novels, like Monsieur Nicolas, rejected vice and luxury and proposed detailed regulations for marriage and sexual life in his Utopian society. The details of choosing or rejecting a marriage partner were incorporated in his proposed legal code. Marriage was not to be profaned by "brutal transports of passion or indecent liberties."¹¹⁵ Public assemblies were to censure a husband who let his wife dominate him. Quarrelsomeness, drunkenness, and wife-beating were to be punishable offenses. Morelly represents another interesting example of an about-face in regard to sexual morality. In his Naufrage des Isles Flottantes (1753) he lauded sexual freedom, including incest, in the way Diderot was to treat this theme in his Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage. But in his Code of Nature (1755), Morelly envisaged community control of morality by

requiring every citizen to marry and by regulating conditions of marriage, divorce, and the communal education of children.¹¹⁶

Although full-fledged Utopian schemes were only one current in the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, the attractiveness of the ideal society was considerable. Rousseau's conviction that man and society could be refashioned so that man could live in conformity with his true (that is, good) nature can be regarded as a form of Utopianism. Condorcet added the idea of progress and perfectibility to the idea of reform, thus generating the nineteenth-century liberal faith in which reform no longer seemed Utopian.* Diderot reacted ecstatically to Deschamps' radical proposal for a social state no longer oppressed by kings, priests, magistrates, laws, property, and concepts of vice and virtue: "Imagine how much this work has given me pleasure, for suddenly I found myself back again in the world for which I was born."¹¹⁷

Diderot's experiment with Utopian thought manifested itself directly in his Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage. The Supplement, although written in 1773, was not published in his lifetime. Diderot's customary prudence may have been influenced by the fact that he was widely considered to be the author of Morelly's Code de la Nature which was dangerous enough to be published anonymously, and was proscribed on the Papal Index. The Supplement falls into that category of Utopian thought that idealized primitive, non-Western societies. It was inspired by the account of Tahiti brought back by the French explorer, Bougainville. Diderot had read and incorporated much of Bougainville's own account of his voyage into the Supplement. However, a good portion of Diderot's

*Saint-Simon (1764-1825), although tutored by D'Alembert and influenced by Condorcet, belongs more properly to nineteenth-century Utopian thought.

work is idealized and imaginary. It has been suggested that Bougainville deliberately toned down the strict social distinctions in Tahitian society which would partly account for Diderot's idealized portrait of a simple, rather egalitarian society.¹¹⁸ But Diderot also idealized and simplified the Tahitian society as a device to sharpen his criticisms of European society and customs.

In the Supplement, Diderot espoused an extreme, almost anarchistic, individualism and expanded on the anti-social views he had expressed in Rameau's Nephew. The work is remarkable for its view that society is artificial and repressive, a view totally out of keeping with Diderot's conventional acceptance of the necessity of society. The Supplement is also an idealized portrait of an innocent Utopian island paradise where sexual freedom, including incest, is part of the natural order.*

It is primarily in the Supplement's concept of society and civilization as an unnatural burden, and in its criticism of property rights and disparities in rank and wealth that the Supplement most closely approaches the radical tone of Utopians like Mably, Deschamps, and Morelly. Property rights are seen as the source of dissension and warfare. The Tahitians are spared these conflicts because they have a limited sense of property. They plow and harvest in common and they live a communal life with simple wants, so that none of the usual conflicts over property develop. Happily, the Tahitians have not advanced to that stage of progress in which the initial need to win a living from the soil has pushed civilized man's cunning far beyond the goal of satisfying simple needs. The European folly of pursuing "false needs and imaginary

*Infra, Chapter VII.

virtues" which confer only "imaginary benefits" is contrasted with the Tahitian way of life which seeks to reduce labor and increase leisure. Even natural sexual pleasures are seen as perverted in western civilization by property concepts. The chief source of depravity and bad conduct in European society is traced to the possession of women as a property right. Distinctions in rank and wealth have determined civilized notions of propriety and impropriety in sexual morality.¹¹⁹

Civilization, the Supplement indicates, far from making men happy, has been the origin of nearly all human unhappiness. Diderot's view of society as a burden that ruins human nature should be considered here in conjunction with the importance he attached to individuality and the self.* In reality, Diderot was comparing the potential of freedom in a hypothetical society, which does not inhibit man's natural freedom, with the restraints of a civilized society. Diderot contended in the Supplement that man in society is completely torn between his natural instincts and artificial conventions. The historical origin of unhappiness is traced to the development of society. We are unhappy because an "artificial man" has been built up inside "natural man" and ever since "civil war has been raging within his breast." Sometimes natural man wins, sometime artificial, moral man gains the upper hand. In either case "the poor freak is racked and torn, tortured, stretched on the wheel, continually suffering." If he follows artificial, moral man's decrees, he is going against nature; if he follows natural instinct, he is weighed down by imaginary guilt.¹²⁰

Diderot's interest in the variety of ways in which an individual's true nature is masked is explored here in terms of "poverty and illness."

*Supra, Chapter II.

In civilized society, the natural man recovers his original simplicity only in extreme cases of necessity, such as poverty or illness. As in Rameau's Nephew, virtue does not exist for the man in dire financial need--he is entirely without scruples. Illness also overcomes artificial scruples, so that a seriously ill woman, for example, forgets modesty. But recovery from illness gradually brings back the artificial nature that hides the natural. When the illness is cured, the internal warfare erupts again.¹²¹

Since war continually rages between natural and artificial man, Diderot questioned whether it would be better to civilize man or leave him to nature. The verdict is against civilization. Men become more wicked and more unhappy as they become more civilized. To civilize man is to "poison him" with unnatural morality, "to saddle him with phantoms that terrify him," and to insure that "natural man will always have the artificial, moral man's foot upon his neck." Man can only be happy and free if he is left alone.¹²²

The "celebrated lawgivers" and all political, civil, and religious institutions that have broken the human race to the halter have only served their own interests: "Watch out for the fellow who talks of putting things in order . . . [that] always means getting other people under your control."¹²³ He admired the Calabrians because they refused to be fooled by lawgivers. Their barbarous, anarchistic society is probably less vicious than "polite society." Uncivilized people operate as a number of "separate, isolated springs" that may loosen so that a few slip or break. But this is better than organized society:

To prevent this some sublime genius . . . fitted all the little springs together into a complicated machine called society. All

the springs are wound up in such a way that . . . more get broken in a single day in . . . civilization than would have in a whole year if they had been left in their natural anarchy.¹²⁴

Worse yet is the wholesale destruction of "little springs" when the gigantic social machines collide with each other.

Despite the radical nature of the Supplement, Diderot concluded on a moderate note. On the question of whether to go back to the state of nature or obey the laws, he observed that we should speak out against "foolish" laws until they are reformed and meanwhile obey them as they are.¹²⁵ He further acknowledged the danger of the individual's breaking the law on his own authority:

Anyone who takes it upon himself, on his private authority, to break a bad law, thereby authorizes everyone else to break the good ones. There is less harm to be suffered in being mad among madmen than in being wise (sage) by oneself.¹²⁶

This conclusion again suggests the imbalance in Diderot's moral stance as a philosophe. In the Conversation of a Father with His Children, written at about the same time as the Supplement, Diderot took the position that there is no law for the wise man. Utopia and anarchy permitted an attractive, ideal freedom for the individual. But again the dilemma for Diderot was the conflict between the individual and the general welfare.

CHAPTER VII

SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND MORALITY:

THE NEW RELATIVISM

Il y'a un peu de testicule au fond de nos sentiments les plus sublimes et de notre tendresse la plus épurée.

Diderot to Falconet, 1767

The Libertine Century

By the middle of the eighteenth-century a characteristically modern moral dilemma had made its appearance. An increasing concern for individuality and along with it the recognition of the importance of the subjective personality gave rise to sharp differences between personal tastes and the conventional standards of behavior. The new ways posed a distinct threat to the old ones in what had become "a transitional society" marked by extremes of reason and emotion. The conflict between individual impulses and conventional moral standards had begun to reshape contemporary mores. Literary taste also underwent a change. The libertine novel which had emerged in the seventeenth century reached a new level of popularity. From the middle of the eighteenth-century the assemblies of the clergy repeatedly denounced the spread of an "impious literature." There can be no doubt that the taste for it had become widespread, that Paris was not the only place where the old morality had begun to be questioned.

The scientific temperament so manifest in contemporary French thought--the result of the diffusion of Newtonianism--also made itself felt in popular literature. Frankness and objectivity, often clinical in its reportage of the intimate aspects of human relations, took possession of literary sensibility. The new vogue of libertine novels also had a psychological dimension extended both by the urge to be scientific as well as by the deepening concern for the states of the psyche. For the reading public the libertine novel had an appeal comparable to that exerted by subsequent forms of erotica. It had, at this time, a heightened interest stemming from an overt questioning of the rigid sexual standards set by Christian morality. A public eager to read this sensational literature paid hypocritical lip service to religious moral standards while indulging itself, if not in deed, then vicariously through the sexual stimulus provided by frankly erotic tales. The popularity of the oriental motif was heightened because, in many cases, it could be made to include exotic, sensuous details under the cover of providing educational information about life and culture in non-Christian societies.

The frankly erotic themes of Montesquieu's Persian Letters, including incidents of Lesbianism in the harem and incest between brother and sister, appealed to the tastes of a sophisticated reading public eager for salacious details. At the same time, Montesquieu's use of these themes permitted him to advance his moral message that despotism acted destructively on human dignity. Montesquieu, in his own later reflections on the Persian Letters, was pleased with his own ingenuity in using "a secret, and so to speak, obscure chain" to mix philosophy, politics and ethics in a novel.¹ He was not alone. Diderot's early

erotic novel, The Indiscreet Jewels (Les Bijoux indiscrets), used as its linking device the sultan's magic ring which, directed at the "jewel" of the female anatomy, causes it to reveal its indiscreet sexual secrets.²

A list of the most important French psychological novelists of the century would include Lesage, Crébillon fils, Montesquieu, Diderot, Restif de la Bretonne, and Laclos, all of whom to some degree, reflected the libertine, sensual nature of upper-class French society. Laclos' sexual-psychological themes in Les Liaisons dangereuses, with its mixture of eroticism and evil, may properly be considered the masterpiece of the century. Only Sade surpassed Laclos in the development of sado-masochistic sexual terror. Laclos, however, like Richardson in Clarissa, may even have intended a moral purpose in his portrait of an immoral upper-class society in which love was a game. The novel's principal shock effect, however, came not so much from its sexual detail, as from its failure to condemn the villains, Mme de Merteuil and Valmont. They are both destroyed at the end, but, as one critic has pointed out, their fate is not so much retribution as plain bad luck.³

The notoriously relaxed moral atmosphere in France had its counterparts elsewhere. England had its share of debauchery in high places. The Hell-Fire Club, whose members included, among others, John Wilkes, Hogarth, several members of Parliament, the Earl of Sandwich, and Sir Francis Dashwood, met for secret debauches, first at Medmenham Abbey, and later in the Hell-Fire chalk caves on the estate of Sir Francis. The members dressed as monks and the women introduced to the revels were required to dress as nuns and to wear masks.⁴

This was the age of the rake, the hunter whose quarry was women,

and who made an intricate game of seduction. Sexual laxity was not new to the eighteenth century: what was new was the exploration of the psychological motivations of these lascivious sexual impulses. Here, Richardson's Clariſſa set the standard for the psychological novel in its revelation of the darker human purposes underlying Lovelace's morbid pursuit of his prey. The influence of Richardson on Diderot was direct. If he admired Richardson's depiction of virtue (p. 7), that did not prevent him from recognizing the objectives of Richardson's quest--the unconscious motives welling up from the depths of the human psyche and the exposure of hypocrisy masked as virtue. Diderot noted the frightening insights revealed by Richardson: "He whispers to the sublime spirit who appears at the entrance of the cave; and the hideous Moor is discovered behind the mask."⁵

The Philosophe in the Boudoir

Diderot's marked interest in sexual themes is apparent in many aspects of his life and writing. His conversation and correspondence, his philosophical works, art criticism, some of the contes, such novels as The Indiscreet Jewels and The Nun (La Religieuse), all bristle with sexual allusions, often direct and sometimes vulgar. The scabrous elements in Rameau's Nephew, Jacques the Fatalist, D'Alembert's Dream, and the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, are evident to even the most cursory reader. This preoccupation with sexual themes has been noted by Georges May in his study of The Nun, by Yvon Belaval, and in psychological studies of Diderot's character by Ronald Grimsley and Pierre Mesnard.⁶ Mesnard formulates an "index of sensuality" in which Diderot ranks high among other figures of the century as a complex,

erotic personality. He emphasizes that there is more than a "veine gauloise" in the imagery of The Indiscreet Jewels in which Diderot imagined men reduced to the "essential organ of their passion" and identified women with the "pulsations of their wombs."⁷ Diderot's portrayal of an idyllic sexual Utopia, his willingness to endorse homosexuality, incest, and bestiality as part of the natural order, and his psychological study of Lesbianism in The Nun, all seem far removed from the author of bourgeois drama exalting modesty and virtue as well as the admirer of Richardson's virtuous Clarissa.

The sexual themes in his writing raise the important question of his intentions. Was he merely reflecting personal concerns or were these musings on sexual morality in part the expression of a mind accustomed to following its thoughts like "trollops" in a logical explication of his philosophy of materialism and individual freedom? The complexity of human nature which intrigued Diderot is exemplified in his own writing in which his personal life and problems became intertwined with his philosophy. For example, the development of the Lesbian theme in The Nun was certainly inspired by Diderot's belief that religious celibacy was unnatural and destructive of the true nature of the individual. At the same time, some personal aspects of his life also shaped his literary concerns. It was at this time that Diderot wrote his mistress, Sophie, that he suspected her sister of having Lesbian affections for her. There is also some evidence that Diderot feared latent homosexuality in his own nature. These personal overtones cannot be dismissed out of hand when, as in Diderot's case, they bore a direct relationship to themes found in his writing. And it is undeniable that both as an artist and as an

individual, he felt the attraction of the bohemian life, unrestrained by the chafing fetters of social convention. In a letter to Sophie, he described why "libertines" were welcome people in the world: they were "cheerful," "pleasant," more amiable and more spirited than other people, and they had a better understanding of people and of the human heart.⁸

Yet it would be an error to ignore the overriding philosophical intent of Diderot's work. To a great extent he understood sexual liberation to be part of the Enlightenment effort to overthrow the traditional Christian moral view towards sex. From his point of view, Judaic-Christian morality stunted the full freedom and development of the individual. In fact, religious moral teaching was itself undergoing a profound transformation. Bernard Groethuysen's study on religions and the bourgeoisie explores the changes in the idea of sin and moral behavior by the Jesuit school of moral theology. There was a decided shift to a broader view from the all-enveloping assumption about mankind's corruption to a conception of sin as a voluntary act. The new moral theology also stressed a view of the world in keeping with enlightened thought: man is not an exile in this world; he can create a happy life for himself and, indeed, religion itself can teach man how to be happy. Catholic moral theology also developed to the point of separating some aspects of life from the moral scrutiny of the Church. Instead of emphasizing the more traditional view that man is responsible to God for all his actions, personal and social as well as religious, the new view conceived of life consisting of a "sacral" and a "secular part." The latter was to be judged moral or immoral on grounds other than religious--by utility, civic obligation, fidelity

to self-interest and the like. While this moral accommodation to the changing society of eighteenth-century France was not complete, it does illustrate the awareness of the religious establishment that the old order was changing.⁹ This change that was already pervading the moral atmosphere is part of the changing current of thought of which Diderot was a more extreme, avant garde element.

Nonetheless, there was still enough influence among the traditional theologians calling for a need for better moral behavior for Diderot and other philosophes to feel that individuality still was fettered by religious supervision. For example, in 1775 l'Assemblée générale du clergé de France insisted on the reaffirmation of the principle that God alone is both the source and guarantor of moral behavior and that other moral systems, permitting a more privatized religion, were too unsure a basis for morality. And the clergy repeatedly sent addresses, memoirs, and remonstrances to the king calling for a general tightening of moral behavior.

The main tenets of the Christian sexual ethos emphasized heterosexuality, because of the natural division of mankind into two sexes, and a moral limitation of sex to conjugal relations, because of the emphasis on procreation and family life. Although these religious restrictions were ignored by many in society, they nonetheless remained the accepted standard. Diderot was to challenge these assumptions, both on artistic grounds and on the basis of his materialist reading of nature. As an art critic, he noted the stultifying effects that a puritanical morality could have on the arts. He complained of the lack of proficiency among painters in depicting the human body: "We never see the nude; our religion and our climate are against it."¹⁰ The

climate could not be changed, but the implication was that religious domination over morality could be ended. Reason and the new awareness of psychology could be used to dethrone traditional moral standards so as to allow the individual the full freedom to develop his own identity.

Traditional moral usage, whatever its source, was considered invidious by philosophes like Montesquieu and Diderot, if it crushed and perverted human nature. When Diderot attacked convent life in The Nun and celibacy in the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, the major grounds for his assault was the unnaturalness of a life which warped the sexual nature of the individual. For Montesquieu, the harem, with its unnatural life for the women and the eunuchs, was the equivalent of the unnatural cloistered life. Roxane, the harem favorite, could not establish her freedom and identity except by suicide. The theme of Lesbianism in The Nun, illustrated Diderot's belief that the unnatural segregation of women from men could only result in perversion, madness, or both.

Even the sensuality and perversion in Sade's novels are accompanied by a steady respect for Enlightenment reason and justification of the autonomy of the individual. Sade's rationalistic justification of torture, perversion, murder, and total moral irresponsibility serves as the unifying thread of his novels. In Philosophy in the Bedroom, the use of reason is carried to almost absurd lengths when the participants in an incredible variety of sexual gymnastics take time out to sit down and discuss philosophy.¹¹

Diderot's sexual theories resulted from a complex mingling of his own nature, his scientific theories of materialism, his dedication to individual freedom, and his awareness of the potential conflict of

interests between the individual and society, particularly in sexual matters. He had raised this point very early. The Encyclopedia article, "Natural Rights" dealt with the social problem of the individual whose violent passions could lead him to fulfill them, even at the cost of other people's lives.*

Another element that influenced his sexual theories stems from the question of moral relativism. This moral relativism, so all-pervasive in Diderot's thought, was part of a general tendency throughout the eighteenth century. It was a tendency shared by many of the philosophes and by some of the moralists among the clergy. The Jesuits took the lead in their readiness to accommodate to contemporary behavior and thus acquired a reputation for moral laxness. The Jesuit doctrine of "probabilism" permitted the view that any action, large or small, could be considered without sin if even a single Christian authority could be found to have considered it without sin. The practical effect of "probabilism" was to foster the tendency to judge morals in view of the circumstances of the total situation and to refer disputed moral issues to the individual conscience.

It was to the philosophes' decided advantage that opinion was divided with respect to moral attitudes among the clergy. Indeed, many sets of the Encyclopedia were bought by the clergy and there were a fair number of clergymen who contributed articles to the Encyclopedia. This cloudy moral atmosphere and loss of certainty among many of the clergy added to the climate of moral relativism in which Diderot's challenge to established morality, although often shocking, was a logical extension

*Supra, Chapter I.

of thought in a society in which all was "cast in doubt."

As Rameau's Nephew had pointed out, there are no absolute standards in morality because the content of morals depends entirely on whose point of view is being considered. Not only is morality relative between individuals, but it is also relative between societies. What is immoral in one society, like polygamy and incest, might be socially acceptable, even useful, in another society. Thus, as Diderot set about to demonstrate, the ultimate test of morality actually was set by local custom and by social utility. He noted in the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, that religious sanctions for morality tend to become transformed into the civil laws of a society.¹² Time, is another factor that promotes moral relativism. Each age has its own moral usage. As the outmoded duel in Jacques the Fatalist illustrates so well, the virtue of one age has become the vice of another.

Materialism and Morality

By extending his philosophy of materialism to morality, Diderot theorized that all sexual practices come within the scope of natural behavior--that is, neither good nor bad as defined in the traditional sense. If everything in nature results only from the different organization of matter, then everything is natural and nothing can be outside the scope of nature. As the "monster" is only matter differently organized from the more typical member of a species,* so sexual deviation is also equally a part of nature, determined by various combinations of heredity and chance in material organization. From this materialist premise, Diderot could justify homosexuality, bestiality, and incest as

*Supra, Chapter II.

both logical and natural. Such sexual practices could be considered immoral only by society's conventions, but not in terms of being natural or unnatural. In the realm of nature they are beyond good and evil.

In D'Alembert's Dream (1769) Diderot developed these ideas in an imaginary conversation between three real characters, Dr. Bordeu, Julie de L'Espinasse, and his friend and early co-editor on the Encyclopedia, D'Alembert.¹³ D'Alembert's Dream is a work that combines a scientific explanation of materialism, biology, physiology, and psychology with an artistic, creative interplay of imagery and imagination. Its development of the sexual implications derived from a totally materialist view of the cosmos is fully recognizable in modern sexual morality.

In a remarkable display of physiological knowledge, Diderot described the reversal of anatomy in men and women, in which the sexual organs resemble each other:

You were just telling Madameoiselle that the womb is nothing but a scrotum that has been turned inside out and tucked inside the body. In the process, the testicles were spilled out of the pouch in which they had been contained and were tossed, one to the right and the other to the left, to the sides of the abdominal cavity. You were explaining, too, that the clitoris is a male member in miniature, and that in the female this male member gets smaller and smaller in proportion as the womb, or reversed scrotum, gets larger.¹⁴

The dialogue between Julie and Dr. Bordeu then ranges over the morality of masturbation, homosexuality, and bestiality. The standard of judgment is established immediately by Dr. Bordeu: sexual matters concern physical science, morality, and aesthetics. In the aesthetic hierarchy, the combination of pleasure and utility occupy first place; second place is granted to the pleasant; third place, to the merely useful; and at "the bottom of the heap," those things that are neither pleasant nor profitable. By this standard, chastity and continence are

"at the bottom of the heap." They are not virtues, but are childish, ridiculous, absurd, and harmful to the point of positive evil because they deny the essential nature of the human being.¹⁵ As for "solitary pleasures" (les actions solitaires), they do no harm, supply a need, and give pleasure, especially in a "society such as ours" where the fear of consequences and of lost honor leads young people either to sexual repression or to the cynic's way out (à s'expédier à la façon du cynique).¹⁶ Besides, Bordeu reasons that one should not be denied a necessary and delightful pleasure (un instant nécessaire et délicieux) just because the action cannot be consecrated by "the seal of utility" (le sceau d'utilité).¹⁷ Since nature does not put up with anything useless, why should the individual not help nature out in relieving the body of seminal fluid by the most direct means? In response to Julie's protest that this doctrine of self-help should not be taught to children, Bordeu agrees and adds that anyone who taught it would "be trampling decency underfoot" and committing a "crime against society." But he maintains that sexual repression is damaging to the health and sanity of the young.¹⁸

The conversation turns to homosexuality and bestiality. At the very beginning of their conversation Julie had asked Dr. Bordeu's opinion of mating between species (mélanges des espèces). Bordeu did not reply directly to that point but digressed on the utility--pleasure principle of sexual standards and his "remedy" of onanism for young people. Now he comments that although he would not "tip his hat" publicly to a man he suspected of teaching his doctrine, he and Julie are "speaking without witnesses and without consequences." So he would say of his philosophy what Diogenes, "stark naked," said to the Athenian youth with

whom he was about to wrestle: "Have no fear, my boy, I'm not wicked like that fellow over there."¹⁹

In reply to this implication of homosexuality, Julie now asks whether Bordeu really believes that there is no difference whether one limits oneself to one's own species? (Comment! soit qu'on se renferme dans l'enceinte de son espèce, soit qu'on en sorte?).²⁰ When Bordeau answers that it makes no difference, Julie calls him monstrous. But Bordeau maintains that it is not he, but only society or nature that is monstrous. He then poses a question which seems to imply both homosexuality and bestiality:

I ask you, which would common sense rule in favor of between two acts, both equally limited to the satisfaction of lust, both capable only of giving pleasure without utility, but of which one gives pleasure only to the one who does it and the other shares it with a similar being, male or female, for sex in this case, the use of the same sex means nothing.²¹

Julie wonders then about all the possible combinations that are "contrary to nature." But there is nothing contrary to nature for Bordeu, the materialist: "Nothing that exists can be either against nature or outside of nature."²² Even voluntary chastity, which would be a crime against nature, if it were possible to sin against nature, is within nature's scope. This inclusion of continence as a natural phenomenon is a contradiction of Diderot's objection to celibacy as unnatural in The Nun and the Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage (pp.173; 175). But here the argument is within the strict materialist framework that nothing is outside the scope of nature.

Julie is shocked by Bordeu's matter-of-fact acceptance of sexual deviance. She expresses the obvious dilemma that Diderot faced then and that contemporary society faces with today's sexual morality:

I keep getting back to your horrid syllogisms, and the problem is I see no middle ground; it is necessary to deny everything or agree with everything . . . [sic]²³

Nonetheless, she presses on and repeats her original question, which she apparently feels has not been covered by Bordeu's answer: "What do you think about the mating between species?" (Que pensez-vous du mélange des espèces?) In an exposition that is an odd mixture of the scientific, the fanciful, and the amusing, Bordeu says that because of prejudice and the laws, few experiments have been made in this area: "Thus we do not know what copulations would be unfruitful; or those cases where the useful could be united with the agreeable."²⁴ Because of the gradations between species, Bordeu believes that the preliminary condition for mating the species would be accomplished by long-term experiments in which two species would be brought close to each other by similar diet. Diderot was obviously considering the possibility of mating human beings with animals--Julie says the notion of similar diet will be difficult to accomplish with men, because they are not likely to browse in a pasture. But they could drink freely of goat's milk, Bordeu counters, and goats could readily eat bread. Bordeu proposes that the mating of human beings with goats could produce an efficient set of domestic servants and end the colonial policy of using natives as beasts of burden.²⁵ In answer to Julie's first question about the origin of these "abominable tastes," the discussion ends on a note typical of Diderot's mingling of cynicism and satire:

Invariably they are due to the wretched constitution of the young, and to the corruption of the brains in the old; by the attraction of beauty in Athens, the scarcity of women in Rome, and by the fear of the pox in Paris.²⁶

The Psychology of Sexuality

Although Diderot theorized in D'Alembert's Dream that homosexuality was natural, he treated it quite differently in his novel, The Nun (1760). There he considered Lesbianism as a sexual aberration that can develop into mental disorder.

The Nun, originally written as a hoax, was revised several times, although it remained unpublished in Diderot's lifetime.²⁷ But what had perhaps begun as a joke, served eventually as a serious vehicle for his indictment of convent life. The Nun is an argument against the destruction of human personality by convent life. It is also an Enlightenment argument against the waste of human resources in what Diderot considered a socially unproductive atmosphere.²⁸ Although his criticisms were sharp, he was not charting entirely new ground. The Catholic hierarchy repeatedly criticized the cloistered orders. Joseph II of Austria suppressed hundreds of monasteries. In France, some four hundred religious houses were suppressed between 1768-1783. The criticisms included the abuse of these orders to dispose of unmarried daughters, a charge Diderot made in The Nun. The utilitarian argument--that the orders were not practically productive--was another indictment in an age that had begun to respect practical, worldly achievement.

On a personal level, it was also in 1760--about the time he undertook to write The Nun--that he wrote to Sophie that he was ashamed of his suspicious feelings but could not suppress it--he suspected that her sister's affections for her were not natural:

Your mother says that your sister likes pretty women and it is certain that she is very affectionate towards you; then think

of that nun she was so fond of, and of the voluptuous and loving way she sometimes has of leaning over you, and her fingers so curiously intertwined with yours.²⁹

On the psychological level, Diderot's insights are remarkable, both in the study of the young nun, Suzanne Simonin, and in the study of sexual frustration and neurosis. Suzanne has been coerced into entering a convent by her mother. This episode itself is full of psychological insight for as Suzanne becomes aware that she is illegitimate, she also experiences an unwelcome reminder of her mother's past adultery. The convent had presented a convenient way of getting rid of her. Suzanne, oppressed by the convent life, attempts to break her vows through a law suit. She loses her case and becomes subject to continuous persecutions and petty tyranny by the Mother Superior. Suzanne's sufferings are reminiscent of the torments of Richardson's Clarissa. The subject of virtuous suffering has a strong element of the morbidly erotic, a subject Sade was to understand so well.

Suzanne is transferred to another convent where the most celebrated episode in the novel occurs. The Mother Superior, a Lesbian, falls in love with Suzanne. Under the guise of sympathy, she begins to woo the young nun. With considerable subtlety, Diderot unfolds Suzanne's experiences on a double plane--the reader is totally aware of the Superior's sexual motivations while Suzanne remains innocent of what is really happening. She regards the Superior's attentions, caresses, and kisses as marks of kindness, or, at the most, ridiculous behavior.³⁰

The Lesbian theme was not new either to literature or to the century. But Diderot's treatment of the theme was the first psychologically probing case study of this type of sexual behavior. The importance of

The Nun for Diderot stemmed from his belief that this unnatural segregation ruined the self totally. In The Nun, he restated his belief that "man is born for society." To segregate him twists his character, raises "ridiculous affections in his heart," and his ideas grow disconnected.³¹ We witness this irrational conduct develop in the Mother Superior.

The full psychological power of the novel is revealed in her gradual lapse into melancholy, despair, and final madness because Suzanne avoids her "sweetness." The Superior dies utterly insane, convinced that she is damned. The sympathetic new Director and confessor of the order, blames the Superior's "irregular passions" on the absurdity of shutting up lively young women in sepulchres. Self-torture, doubt, languor, and madness are their lot. The happiest ones are those who manage to live out their lives with consoling illusion and vague hopes that someday they will be liberated.³²

Sexual Utopia

In The Nun, Diderot had attacked celibacy because it warped human nature. The explorer Bougainville's account of his voyage to Tahiti, especially its description of a free sexual morality, struck a responsive chord in Diderot. In his Supplement to Bougainville's Voyage, based on Bougainville's account and enhanced by Diderot's imagination, he again attacked traditional sexual morality by contrasting the sexual freedom of a primitive society with the false restraints of "polite society." At the same time, the Supplement, like Montesquieu's Persian Letters, permitted him to satirize the corruption of European society.

The theme of sexual repression related to celibacy appears also in the Supplement. In the language of an eighteenth-century philosophe,

the Tahitian Orou rejects the strange Christian ideas of chastity as "contrary to nature and reason."³³ He cannot understand why the healthy young chaplain resists his hospitable offer of the use of his wife and three daughters for his pleasure. The chaplain finally surrenders, despite his "religion" and his "holy orders," after he is convinced that he will be rendering a favor to the youngest daughter who has not yet been fortunate enough to bear a child.³⁴ Out of a sense of fairness, the chaplain similarly obliges Orou's other daughters and his wife on succeeding nights.

Orou believes that the moral laws of the chaplain's God, the "old workman" (vieil ouvrier), are against all common sense since he has made two sexes.³⁵ These laws are also calculated to increase the number of crimes and cause endless annoyance to the "old workman" who gives commands that are not obeyed. These commands are against nature because love is part of the natural order, reduced to simple physical appetite (un simple appetit physique).³⁶ Civilized society, by denying the concept of morality to the sex act, has turned a natural instinct into something contrary to reason and nature. The unnatural commands and prohibitions which approve sexual relations only after marriage turn sex into a property right. They assume that a human being with feelings and a sense of freedom can be the property of another being. Civilized society has confused objects that one buys or sells, "a trader's stock of goods," with human beings who have freedom, will, and desires of their own.³⁷

To chain two people together perpetually by vows of fidelity is also "against the general order of things," because there is nothing constant about human love:

Is there anything more unreasonable than this perfect fidelity

that would restrict us, for the enjoyment of pleasures so capricious, to a single partner--than an oath of immutability taken by two people of flesh and blood under a sky that is not the same for a moment, in a cavern that threatens to collapse on them, at the base of a cliff crumbling into dust. . . .^{*38}

There is only one way to know what is good and bad, in all times and places: "Pay close attention to the nature of things and actions, to your relations with your fellow creatures, to the effect of your behavior on your own well-being and on the general welfare."³⁹

The eternal will of nature moves it to choose good rather than evil and the general welfare rather than individual well-being of the individual (le bien général au bien particulier).⁴⁰ This pure Enlightenment philosophy about the general will at the same time Diderot was making the case for individual sexual fulfillment, is indicative of his belief that it was the existing moral code, not the individual, that was out of harmony with nature. The threats, punishments, and guilt for supposed sexual offenses, Orou points out, can only make more wretches and rascals and more corruption. Moreover, under this code, European society must be composed either of a "swarm of hypocrites" who secretly trample on the laws, or a multitude of wretches and tortured individuals who try to obey them.

In contrast with civilized society, the primitive society of the Supplement attaches no stigma to the free sexual relationship between a man and a woman. Both men and women, once they are of age, are free to contract and break whatever sexual arrangements they choose to make. There are no penalties for loss of virtue, a notion that is unknown in

*This denial of the possibility of constant love appears also in Jacques the Fatalist and The Father of the Family. Yet Diderot vowed the constancy of his own love for Sophie.⁴¹

this primitive society. Children born of every union are considered wealth. "Marriage" is irrelevant and therefore there is no stigma on illegitimacy. The more children a woman has, the more desirable she becomes. Her children go with her to any man she lives with, thus making him wealthier.⁴² This connection of wealth with increased population was an idea contemporary to the eighteenth century. Montesquieu's Persian Letters contain passages on the population decline that he believed to be occurring in his own time. One of his condemnations of harem life stemmed from the population loss caused by the unnatural life of the eunuchs and the slave girls who were not permitted to marry.⁴³ Also, contrary to Diderot's happy picture of polygamous society, Montesquieu believed that the polygamy of the harem was unhealthy, not only because it was a form of race suicide, but because of the sexual frustrations and jealousies it aroused.⁴⁴

In the Supplement, because of the value of children, birth is an occasion for joy and children are brought up with infinite care. Diderot's description of the parents' joyful reception of the young unwed girl's announcement of pregnancy is perhaps reflective of a wistful regret for a society in which parents would not have to worry about the social stigma of unwed motherhood. The fictional scene contrasts strongly with Diderot's warnings to his daughter to guard her virginity and not to kill him and her mother with disgrace.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, the Supplement provides a detailed, prescribed ritual for safeguarding children before they reach maturity. Young boys wear long tunics and "little chains around their loins" and young girls wear veils until they reach the proper age for sexual relations. That decision is based on certain signs--for the girl, when she seems "wilted"

and "bored;" for the young man, "when the principal indication of virility lasts for a sufficient time, and when we are confirmed in our judgment by the quality and by the frequent emission of seminal fluid. . . ."46 They are then unchained and unveiled and are free to go into society and select partners, either temporarily or for a longer union.

Women who are barren by nature or age, however, do not fare so well in this society. They must wear black veils and if they occasionally sneak out at night without their veils and look for men, they are banished or enslaved. The standard for punishment is set by a utilitarian test--these women are considered dissolute because no offspring can come from their sexual unions. This argument is very different from Dr. Bordeu's standard of pleasure in which the utilitarian argument of procreation is placed "at the bottom of the heap" in D'Alembert's Dream.

However, incest, condemned as a "horrible crime" in the chaplain's European society, is condoned. Again the test of "general welfare and utility" is the only standard to be applied. Here, indeed, Diderot's utilitarian reasoning had led him up a strange alley. An example of the utility test cited by Orou is the compassion a father may feel for an ugly daughter who lacks suitors.⁴⁷ The fact that the incest taboo also exists in many primitive, non-Christian societies was probably unknown to Diderot. But he was concerned with demolishing the traditional morality, and incest offered a perfect opportunity to challenge the Christian moral code.

The flaw in this free moral system, the chaplain suggests, is that tenderness between husband and wife and maternal love must be lukewarm. If so, Orou insists that the defect is compensated for by "a more universal, powerful, and lasting impulse" --self-interest. He demonstrates

the powerful motivation of self-interest by a cynical observation:

Examine your conscience . . . put aside the hypocritical parade of virtue . . . and tell me if there is anywhere on the face of this earth a man who, if he were not held back by shame, would not prefer to lose his child, a husband who would not prefer to lose his wife, rather than lose his fortune and the amenities of life?⁴⁸

The self-interest of the Tahitians, Orou suggests, lies in the importance of increasing the population to provide workers to cultivate new land, soldiers to protect them from enemies, and to make up losses caused by epidemics.⁴⁹

The Supplement concludes, as it began, with a dialogue between A and B, European observers who comment on the manners and customs of Orou's society. They "put nature to the question" in an attempt to decide whether European sexual customs are natural. Marriage is a part of the natural order only in the sense of a mutual preference leading to a more or less durable union that perpetuates the species. This same kind of preference can be observed among other animal species. Courtship inspired by passion is also natural in all species. But flirtation is nothing but a deceptive game, simulating passion one does not feel and promising favors with no intention of fulfilling them. Marital fidelity is the "punishment for stubbornness" and constancy "the vain delusion" of young people blinded to the fact that everything passes in nature.⁵⁰

Jealousy is conceded as natural, since nature includes both vices and virtues. But modesty is a product of society and property rights:

As soon as a woman came to belong to a certain man, and as soon as another man's furtive enjoyment of that girl's favors came to be considered robbery, then the words modesty, demureness, and decency were born, and all sorts of imaginary vices.⁵¹

Society has made of the sexual act, the most solemn in its purpose, and the "sweetest and most innocent of pleasures," the source of depravity.⁵² The tyranny of men, who have converted possession of women into property rights, is one of the chief causes. Morality and custom have burdened marriage with too many obligations and the civil laws have subjected marriage to an infinite number of formalities. Disparity in rank and wealth is held responsible for instituted social conventions and inequality (des convenances and des disconvenances).⁵³ The birth of a child, which should increase natural wealth, brings more abject poverty to the poor family. Also at fault is the political philosophy of rulers which teaches them to subordinate everything to their own interests and security. Finally, religious institutions are at fault for having branded as "vice and virtue" actions that are independent of morality. Diderot thus used sexuality as the basis for an indictment of the "unnaturalness" that characterized the entire European society. But for Diderot, "the wild heart" will claim its due. No matter how ferocious the penalties, they will not succeed in wiping out natural impulses.⁵⁴

The Language of Sexuality

Sooner or later, commentators on Diderot note his outspoken language, the frequent lapses into sensuality in his letters, conversation, and writing, his earthiness, and sometimes outright bawdy remarks. In his own time, the Abbé Raynal criticized the coarse, vulgar style so apparent in The Indiscreet Jewels. In this century, as recently as 1948, his language has been referred to as overly sensual and, at times, "revoltingly coarse."⁵⁵ Herbert Dieckmann, who discovered the Leningrad

manuscript of Jacques The Fatalist, shows by textual comparison with the earlier known versions that Diderot's family had censored the obscene language.⁵⁶

Diderot's keen interest in language as the primary factor in the formation of ideas and in the insights language revealed about human nature has been noted. In his First Satire, he maintained that every animal species has its own distinctive cry and every man expresses his individuality in a unique way--there are "cries of nature," "cries of passion," and "cries of profession" (cris de la nature, cris de la passion, cris de la profession).⁵⁷ For Diderot, these "cries" both revealed and masked human nature. It was not unnatural, with his combination of analytical power and artistic, creative imagination, and his extraordinary command of a wide range of subjects, that he should have been interested in all possible forms of communication in order to express himself.

One of the recurrent themes in his work is the inability of people to understand each other. There is a long discussion on the origins of symbolism and language in D'Alembert's Dream. Dr. Bordeu comments that two people can never understand each other because no one man is exactly like another and because language either overshoots or falls short of the mark in exactly expressing sensation.⁵⁸ In Jacques the Fatalist, the same thought on the difficulty of communication between people is expressed.⁵⁹

Because Diderot had both a scientific and poetic mind, his language is both concrete and imaginative depending on the subject he was writing about. A recent study on Diderot's language and gesture analyzes his combined use of language and pantomime in Rameau's Nephew

to portray fully the variety of natures of the Nephew.⁶⁰ It has also been noted that Diderot used rapid-fire, colloquial French in both Rameau's Nephew and Jacques, a device that gives both works an immediacy and dynamism that they would otherwise lack.

Given Diderot's interest in psychology and his belief that language was a key to the penetration of ideas and human personality, it is not strange that his language was often sensual and erotic. In a study on the linguistic style of Diderot, Leo Spitzer analyzes the article "Enjoyment" in the Encyclopedia. He demonstrates that Diderot's language and style give a "poeticized picture of the sex act" through rendering the rhythm of feeling by the rhythm of language.⁶¹ Beginning with primeval love, the pace of language accelerates, sentences become shorter and breathless as the sexual union is described. As the description turns to sexual union at a higher, more civilized level, Spitzer points out that the language becomes calmer. Diderot speaks of the "divine enthusiasm" of the union of two souls and in the closing lines the sentence structure is relaxed.⁶² In a similar analysis of the language structure of The Nun, he convincingly demonstrates that the Lesbian Superior's language is accompanied by gestures that mark her erotic feeling. As the Superior's words express sympathy for the tortures inflicted on Suzanne's body, her gestures gradually become caresses. As the Superior's emotional language reaches a climax, the reader is fully aware of the erotic climax of the love-making.⁶³

In Jacques the Fatalist, there is a long digression in which Diderot pleads with the reader for the use of the proper word (foutre; futuo) to describe the sexual act.⁶⁴ As direct participant in the novel, Diderot interrupts the action to lecture his reader with

hypocrisy:

Villainous hypocrites, leave me alone. F . . . tez [sic] like mad donkeys; but permit me to say f . . . tre; I give you the action, leave me the word. You boldly use kill, steal and betray, but you don't dare let the other leave your mouth.⁶⁵

What, he asks the reader, has the "genital action, so natural, so necessary and so right done to you" that you are afraid to soil your mouth, eyes and ears with it. The word futuo is as familiar as bread--no age has been without it. It has a thousand synonyms in every language. Yet the sex which does most of it, suppresses it the most. Diderot calls on the reputation of Montaigne, who used the word, to justify his demand for authentic language: "The license of his style is practically a guarantee to me of the purity of his habits."⁶⁶ The modern note in the stylistic techniques of Jacques⁶⁷ is nowhere more apparent than in this argument that it is not language but the mind that is impure: "Reader, to be frank with you," Diderot says, "I find that the more wicked of us is not myself."⁶⁸

With Diderot's theoretical denial of absolutes in both sexual and social morality, his intellectual journey to the new relativism in morality was completed. Yet what the philosophe advocated and what he did were not necessarily the same. Of all his "bizarre" roles (p.135), none was more bizarre than the one in which this philosophe of modern moral relativism arranged, to his family's best advantage, the dowry details of his daughter's marriage agreement while at the same time he was writing the Supplement. In his everyday life, the speculative utilitarian ethics of a totally free sexuality spelled out in the Supplement, were inconsistent with his practical adherence to socially accepted norms of behavior.⁶⁹ Society still demanded and society still

received his outward conformity. It was as a thinker that Diderot was pushing to the limit the possibilities that logically followed a theory denying absolute moral standards. It would remain for another generation to make explicit many of the implications of Diderot's moral theory in which no aspect of human behavior is outside the scope of nature.

THE MASKS OF DIDEROT

There is a famous portrait of Diderot, painted by Michel Van Loo, which Diderot disliked because he said it made him look like an old "coquette" making herself agreeable. He went on to note that in a single day he could have a hundred different facial expressions, according to what was affecting him at the moment. He could appear serene, sad, dreamy, tender, violent, passionate or enthusiastic depending on circumstances. He believed the painter had not caught his expression because of the variety of impressions that had flitted across his face:

I have a mask which fools the artist, whether because there are too many things blended together, or whether it is that the impressions of my soul succeed each other so rapidly and paint themselves on my face. . . .¹

The description is very revealing for one who was so interested in the many masks of language and gesture which reveal or disguise emotions and character. But more than that, it signifies a further recognition by Diderot of the "bizarre" number of roles he often played,* sometimes with delight, and at other times with a feeling that his true nature was being smothered. In a moment of anguish he complained of this to Sophie: "These people don't wish me to be myself. I will give them all the slip and I'll live in a hole."²

His "hundred faces" are another revelation of his awareness of the enormous complexity of the individual, a complexity compounded in

*Supra, Chapter VI.

the case of the intellectual or artist. In his materialist world of determinism and chance, where the only absolutely certain truth was that nothing is stable, everything changes, and only the whole endures,³ he who admired the classical concept of "unity of character" reflected most in himself the many masks of the modern, protean personality.⁴

His materialist philosophy led him to explore a world of moral possibilities in which human behavior is totally unrelated to any other standard than that of individual wish, desire, convenience or impulse. In this, he was at the threshold of modern situational ethics in which right or wrong are determined by a relativistic standard derived from the particular situation and the reaction of the particular individual, molded by his own psychological states and his own social and moral convictions. The totally secular nature of his thought, the absence of any religious conceptions, especially of the idea of sin, his reluctance to explain character on grounds other than those of "organization of matter" in the individual, and his total refutation of free will, characterized his view of morality.

Diderot did not fully endorse that state of morality where "everything is permitted," because as a philosophe of Enlightenment he drew back, publicly at least, from a total commitment to a world devoid of moral standards. That he accepted such a world intellectually, we know from his radical works denying all fixed moral values and accepting the proposition that nothing is unnatural or immoral in the realm of a vast material, indifferent Nature.

But for the man who played as many roles as an actor, the pessimistic conclusions of a nihilistic philosophy remained a speculative philosophy for le sage, not for practice, and not for the ordinary

man. As an Enlightenment philosophe, regardless of his reservations about the efficacy of education, outwardly he remained committed to the desire for the general welfare secured by a philosophy which would affirm the nobility of virtue. The role he wished to be remembered for by posterity was that of the philosophe whose monumental task was to foster "le bonheur:"

Virtue, virtue, wisdom, morals, love of children for their fathers and fathers for their children, the care of the sovereign for his subjects and of his subjects for him, good laws, good education, the general affluence, that is what I earnestly desire.⁵

But Hegel captured an authentic insight into Diderot's moral philosophy. In his analysis of Rameau's Nephew, Hegel, fascinated by the self-consciousness of Rameau's Nephew, used him as the model for the "self-estranged spirit"⁶ in a society in flux. This spirit's "universal talk and depreciatory judgment rending and tearing everything" expresses the real truth about society while the more conventional "honest soul" of the philosopher "takes each moment as a permanent and essential fact" and does not see the reality. Hegel stressed the special quality of the language of Rameau's Nephew whose awareness of the fact that everything in society is the opposite of what it appears to be prompts the realization that there is a "universal deception of itself and others." Because of this awareness, his language is full of "esprit and wit" and his "style of speech is the madness of the musician 'who piled and mixed up together some thirty airs, Italian, French, tragic and comic,'" in tones varying from raving to soothed, from imperious to jeering. The philosopher, on the other hand, the "simple, placid consciousness" trying to hold on to "the good and noble," can speak only in monosyllables when face to face with the frank,

eloquent self-consciousness of the self-estranged spirit.⁷ Hegel used Rameau's Nephew to analyze the culture of eighteenth-century France conscious of its own self-estrangement:

To be conscious of its own distraught and torn condition and to express itself accordingly,--this is to pour scornful laughter on existence, on the confusion pervading the whole and on itself as well, it is at the same time this whole confusion dying away and yet apprehending itself in doing so.⁸

Diderot's failure to develop a consistent, compact, and unassailable philosophy of virtue, other than one based on hope, rests to some extent on this fundamental awareness of the "confusion" and absurdity of human existence. Diderot was much too complex a thinker to accept a mere simplistic duality of thought. Nonetheless, his persistent emphasis on the exemption of elites of the genius, the artist and the philosopher from traditional moral norms, together with his equally persistent affirmation of virtue, are suggestive of Leo Strauss's concept of an "esoteric/exoteric" philosophy in which hidden truths intended for those capable of understanding them lurk behind the commonplace truths for the ordinary man.⁹ Diderot, as philosophe in the role of Rameau's Nephew, saw the perverted relationship between the true and the false in society. In the role of philosophe as "honest soul," he tried to affirm the "true, the good and the beautiful" as an ideal image for a viable society. His paradoxes and new notions of morality added to the swelling current of opinion that there were many moral systems, some metaphysical, some religious, others purely personal, and none absolute.

Diderot, like his creation, Rameau's Nephew, "smoked out" truths that forced a reevaluation of morality, the concept of modern man, free of moral absolutes, and an affirmation of the spontaneity of life at

all costs. But this affirmation, as he recognized, is a dangerous doctrine for society. Thus, the final tribute to virtue in the Refutation of Helvétius and the Essay on Claudius and Nero stands as a desperate act of will in the face of the logic of the amoral social implications of his materialist philosophy. And for that act of will, the philosophe, as he advised the actor, might have to be prepared to don many masks and play many roles and still try to safeguard his integrity, his "moi tout pur:"

Preserve your own way of thinking and behaving. I shall respect you all the more for it, since, when one is obliged by his profession to simulate all sorts of feelings . . . it often happens that he is in danger of losing all his own. All of life is then reduced to playing roles that must be adapted to fit the different situations one encounters.¹⁰

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Correspondance, Denis Diderot, Correspondance, ed. Georges Roth and Jean Varloot, 16 vols., (Paris, 1955-70).

DS, Diderot Studies: Vol. [1], ed. Otis Fellows and Norman L. Torrey (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1949); Vol. II, ed. Otis Fellows (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1951); Vol. III, ed. Otis Fellows and Gita May (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1961); Vol. IV, ed. Otis Fellows (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963). For other volumes, see J. Robert Loy: "Diderot Studies: A Profile," Modern Philology (1968-69), pp. 265-72.

Encyclopédie, Denis Diderot, ed., Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire des sciences, des arts, et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, 17 vols. (Paris, 1751-65); Microprint reproduction, 6 vols., Readex Microprint Corp. (New York, 1969).

LSV, Denis Diderot, Lettres à Sophie Volland, ed. André Babèlon, 3 vols. (Paris, Gallimard: 1930, 1938).

OE, Denis Diderot, Oeuvres esthétiques, textes établis, avec introductions, bibliographies, notes et relevés de variantes, par Paul Vernière (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1959).

OP, Denis Diderot, Oeuvres philosophiques, textes établis avec introductions et notes par Paul Vernière (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1961).

OR, Denis Diderot, Oeuvres romanesques, texte établi, avec présentation et notes, par Henri Benac (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1966).

Salons, Denis Diderot, Salons, texte établi et présenté par Jean Seznec et Jean Adhémar, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957-67).

SECC, Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture: Proceedings The American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve).

SVEC, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century (Geneva: Institut et musée Voltaire).

NOTES

CHAPTER I

THE HONNÊTE HOMME AND VIRTUE

¹Diderot, article "Encyclopédie" in Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres, mis en ordre et publié par Diderot, de l'Académie Royale des sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Prusse, et quant à la partie mathématique, par M D'Alembert, de l'Académie Royale des sciences de Paris, de celle de Prusse, et de la société Royale de Londres, 17 vols 1751-1765. All references are to the 6. vols. Microprint version, published by Readex Microprint Corp., (New York, 1969), I: 1156-62 (hereafter cited as Encyclopédie). "Encyclopedia" is in English translation in Rameau's Nephew and Other Works, trans. by Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen, with an introduction by Ralph H. Bowen (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1956), pp.277-308 (hereafter referred to as Barzun and Bowen, RNOW).

²Diderot, Éloge de Richardson, Oeuvres esthétiques, textes établis avec introductions, bibliographies, notes et relevés de variantes, par Paul Vernière (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1959), p.31 (hereafter cited as OE).

³Diderot, Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, OE, p.152.

⁴Ibid., p.78.

⁵Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien, OE, pp.299-381. A full English translation is available in The Paradox of Acting by Denis Diderot and Masks or Faces by William Archer, ed. Eric Bentley with an Introduction by Lee Strasberg (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp.11-74. The difference in Diderot's and Rousseau's attitudes towards the theatre is discussed in Robert Niklaus, Diderot et Rousseau: Pour et contre le théâtre, Diderot Studies IV (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1963):153-190 (hereafter cited as DS).

⁶Diderot, Essai sur la peinture, OE, p.717.

⁷Ibid., p.718.

⁸Diderot, Salon of 1763, in Diderot, Salons, ed. Jean Seznec et Jean Adhémar, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957-67) I:233 (hereafter cited as Diderot, Salons).

⁹Diderot, Salon of 1765, Salons III:75.

¹⁰Article, "Philosophe," Encyclopédie, II:1368. This article is unsigned. It is generally considered to be an adaptation of an article published earlier in the century. Though its authorship is still in doubt, Arthur Wilson credits Diderot with the "scissors-and-paste-version." Arthur Wilson, Diderot, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.71. "Philosophe" describes the "honnête homme" as a man of reason, reflection, and social qualities. Diderot used the term "honnête homme" in the article "Encyclopédie," and in the Entretien sur le Fils naturel. The problem of authorship of many of the unsigned articles is discussed by John Lough, "The Problem of the Unsigned Articles in the Encyclopédie," Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vol. 32 (1965) 327-90 (hereafter referred to as SVEC); see also Jacques Proust, Diderot et L'Encyclopédie (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967); R.N. Schwab et al., Inventory of Diderot's Encyclopedia, SVEC, 6 vols. (vols. 80, 83, 85, 89, 91-93; 1971-72); Frank Kafker, "A List of Contributors to Diderot's Encyclopedia," French Historical Studies (1963), pp.106-122.

¹¹Diderot, La Religieuse, Oeuvres romanesques, texte établi, avec présentation et notes, par Henri Bénac (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1962), p.235 (hereafter referred to as OR).

¹²Diderot, article "Eclecticisme," Encyclopédie, I:1064-70. An English translation is available in The Encyclopedia: Selections, ed. and trans. by Stephen J. Gendzier (New York: Harper and Row, Torchbook, 1967), p.86 (hereafter referred to as Gendzier, Encyclopedia).

¹³Diderot, "Foreword to Vol VIII," Encyclopédie, II:280; in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, p.50.

¹⁴Diderot, article "Encyclopédie," Encyclopédie, I:1156-1162 in English Barzun and Bowen, RNOW, p.277.

¹⁵Ibid., p.297.

¹⁶Ibid., p.289.

¹⁷Diderot, article "Modification," Encyclopédie, II:911.

¹⁸Diderot, article "Droit naturel," Encyclopédie, I:1025.

¹⁹Ibid., p.1025.

²⁰Ibid., p.1025.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW INDIVIDUALITÉ

¹Elinor Barber, The Bourgeoisie in Eighteenth-Century France (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955).

²Geoffroy Atkinson, The Sentimental Revolution: French Writers of 1690-1740 (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1965), chap. 3, "Growth of Self-Esteem Among Commoners."

³Peter France, ed. Diderot's Letters to Sophie Volland (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), Introduction, p.17.

⁴Denis Diderot, Correspondance, ed. Georges Roth and Jean Varloot, 16 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1938) VII:171. For the development of the concept of the self in the eighteenth century, see Jean A. Perkins, The Concept of the Self in the French Enlightenment, Histoire des idées et critique littéraire, vol. 94 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969; Marshall Berman, The Politics of Authenticity. New York: Atheneum, 1970) is a study of radical individualism in the eighteenth century with emphasis on Montesquieu and Rousseau.

⁵Choderlos de Laclos, Les Liaisons dangereuses, Oeuvres complètes, texte établi et annoté par Maurice Allem, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1959): Lester G. Crocker, "Jacques le Fataliste, an 'experience morale,'" DS, III:88.

⁶Restif de la Bretonne, Monsieur Nicolas, ou le Coeur-humain dévoilé, 16 vols. (Paris, 1794-1797). The modern edition is by Pauvert (Paris: Tuileries, 1959), 6 vols; Le Paysan perverti, 4 vols. (1775).

⁷Diderot, Pensées philosophiques, Oeuvres philosophiques, texte établis avec introductions, bibliographies et notes par Paul Vernière (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1961), p.4 (hereafter cited as OP).

⁸Ibid., pp.10-11.

⁹Diderot, LSV, I:258.

¹⁰This theme is developed espically in Diderot's Le Neveu de Rameau (Rameau's Nephew), and Jacques the Fatalist. See Chapters IV and VI, this work.

¹¹Diderot, Salon of 1767, Salons, III:65.

¹²Diderot, Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, OE, p.98.

¹³Ibid., p.98.

¹⁴Diderot, Discours sur la poésie dramatique, OE, p.261.

¹⁵Ibid., pp.261-62.

¹⁶Ibid., p.196.

¹⁷Essais sur la peinture, OE, p.718.

¹⁸Ibid., p.721.

- ¹⁹Wilson, Diderot, p.423.
- ²⁰Diderot, Pensées philosophiques, OP, pp.22-23.
- ²¹Diderot, Lettre sur les aveugles (Letter on the Blind), OP, pp.81-164.
- ²²Nicholas Saunderson, a blind English professor of mathematics, whose observations on blindness were used by Diderot. For the complete story of Saunderson, see Wilson, Diderot, p.98.
- ²³Diderot, Lettre sur les aveugles, OP, pp.122-24.
- ²⁴Diderot, De l'Interpretation de la nature, OP, pp.241-42.
- ²⁵Ibid., pp.241-42.
- ²⁶Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, as it is popularly known, consists of three parts: Entretien entre D'Alembert et Diderot; Le Reve de D'Alembert; and Suite de l'entretien, OP, pp.257-385. (Hereafter referred to as D'Alembert's Dream. Diderot's letter to Sophie referring to the work is in LSV, II:224.
- ²⁷Diderot's application of the term "sensibility" to matter occurs in D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.260. Aram Vartanian, Diderot and Descartes: A Study of Scientific Naturalism in the Enlightenment (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp.268-72, describes Diderot's special use of the term "sensibility" for organic and inorganic matter, from "sensibilité inerte" to "sensibilité active."
- ²⁸Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, pp.260-64.
- ²⁹Ibid., pp.265-66.
- ³⁰Ibid., p.278.
- ³¹Ibid., pp.270-71.
- ³²Ibid., p.300.
- ³³Diderot, Salons, III:153.
- ³⁴Diderot, article "Eclecticisme," Encyclopédie: I:1064-70; in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, p.89.
- ³⁵Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, et son maître, étude et notes de Yvon Belaval (Paris: Le club français du livre, 1953), p.69. This edition of Belaval is used throughout for references to Jacques le fataliste, (hereafter cited as Belaval, Jacques).
- ³⁶Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, pp.310-11.

³⁷Diderot in François Hemsterhuis, Lettre sur l'homme et ses rapports avec le commentaire inedit de Diderot, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Georges May (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p.243.

³⁸Diderot, "Foreword to Volume VIII (1765)," Encyclopédie, II:280; in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, pp.50-52.

³⁹Diderot, article "Encyclopedia" (Encyclopédie), in Encyclopédie, I:1156-62; in English in Barzun and Bowen, RNOW, pp.290-91.

⁴⁰Diderot, LSV, I:31.

⁴¹Ibid., II:211.

⁴²Quoted in Lester G. Crocker, Diderot: The Embattled Philosopher (London: Neville Spearman, 1955).

⁴³Wilson, Diderot, p.692.

⁴⁴Wilson, Diderot, p.415; also Otis E. Fellows, "The Theme of Genius in Diderot's Rameau's Nephew," DS II:179; see also Franco Venturi, Jeunesse de Diderot, 1713-1753, traduit de l'italien par Juliette Bertrand (Paris: Skira, 1939).

⁴⁵Charly Guyot, Diderot par lui-même (Bourges: "Ecrivains de Toujours," Aux éditions du Seuil, 1953), p.75.

⁴⁶Act IV, Scene III in le Fils naturel. See Jean Fabre, "Deux Frères ennemis: Diderot et Jean Jacques," DS, III(1961):179-80.

⁴⁷Wilson, Diderot, p.705.

⁴⁸An interesting study of Diderot's fascination with monsters is found in Norman Laidlaw, "Diderot's Teratology," DS, IV(1963):105-129.

⁴⁹Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, pp.86-87.

⁵⁰Rousseau, Lettre à M D'Alembert sur les spectacles, ed. F. Fuchs (Paris, 1948). An English edition is available in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Politics and the Arts Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre, trans. with notes by Alan Bloom (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960).

⁵¹A discussion of the dialectical character of Diderot's thought is in Wilson, Diderot, p.194.

⁵²Ibid., p.423.

⁵³Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.352.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp.347-48.

⁵⁵Diderot, LSV, II:265.

⁵⁶Georges May, Quatre Visages de Denis Diderot (Paris: Boivin, 1951) pp.34-99, "Diderot Pessimiste." See Henry Vyverberg, Historical Pessimism in the French Enlightenment (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp.189-200 for pessimistic strains in Diderot's thought.

⁵⁷Diderot, LSV, II:17; in English, in ed. France, Diderot's Letters to Sophie Volland, p.128.

⁵⁸Diderot wrote Rameau's Nephew in 1761. It was revised in 1766, 1767, and 1775 but 1761 appears to be the date in which the work was composed as a unity. Georges May traces the relationship between the creation of Rameau's Nephew and the failure of Diderot's play, The Father of the Family when it was performed. Georges May, L'Angoisse de l'échec et la genèse du Neveu de Rameau, DS, III(1961):285-308.

⁵⁹Diderot to Mme d'Epinau (1767), Correspondance, VII:171.

⁶⁰Goethe was introduced to Diderot's work by Schiller and translated Rameau's Nephew into German. The major work on Diderot's influence in Germany is Roland Mortier, Diderot en Allemagne, 1750-1850 (Paris, 1954).

CHAPTER III

THE GENIUS AND MORALITY

¹Daniel Mornet, Histoire de la Littérature française classique, (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1942) Chap. II, "Particulièrement de la précocité."

²Voltaire, "Genius," in Philosophical Dictionary, cited in Otis Fellows, "The Theme of Genius in Diderot's Neveu de Rameau, DS II(1952): 168-99. See also Herbert Dieckmann, "Diderot's Conception of Genius," Journal of the History of Ideas, II(1941):151-82.

³Diderot, article "Eclecticisme," Encyclopédie, I:1064-70; in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, pp.86-92.

⁴Diderot, LSV, I:258

⁵Diderot, article "Encyclopédie," Encyclopédie, I:1156-62; in English in Barzun and Bowen, eds., RNOW, p.288.

⁶Diderot, Salon of 1767, Salons, III:59-61.

⁷Ibid., pp.63;156-57.

⁸Diderot, Essais sur la peinture, OE, p.739. Yvon Belaval, L'Esthétique sans paradoxe de Diderot (Paris, 1950), argues that Diderot always believed in control and self-discipline and denies the paradox. However, Arthur Wilson holds that Diderot's shift from enthusiasm to emotion controlled by reason was gradual. Wilson, "Biographical Implications of Diderot's Paradoxe sur le comédien," DS III(1961):369-83.

- ⁹Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, pp.356-57.
- ¹⁰Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien, OE, p.309.
- ¹¹Diderot, Sur le Génie, OE, pp.19-20. The Encyclopedia article "Genius" is available in English, ed. Gendzier, Encyclopedia, pp. 118-24.
- ¹²Diderot, Paradoxe sur le comédien, OE, p.309.
- ¹³Ibid., p.309.
- ¹⁴Denis Diderot, Le Neveu de Rameau, Édition critique avec notes et lexique par Jean Fabre, Textes Littéraires Français (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1950), p.45 (hereafter referred to as Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre).
- ¹⁵Diderot, D'Alemberts Dream, OP, p.355.
- ¹⁶Helvétius, Oeuvres, ed. Lepetit, 3 vols. (Paris, 1818); in English Helvétius, De l'Homme, trans. by William Mudford, (Albion Press, 1810).
- ¹⁷Diderot, Réfutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvétius intitulé l'Homme, OP, pp.591,615. (Hereafter cited as Refutation of Helvétius).
- ¹⁸Daniel Mornet, "La véritable signification du Neveu de Rameau," Revue des Deux Mondes, vol. 40 (15 August 1927):881-908; Milton F. Seiden, "Jean-François Rameau and Diderot's Neveu," DS(1940):143-91; Ronald Grimsley, "Psychological Aspects of Le Neveu de Rameau," Modern Language Quarterly, 16 (1955):195-209. See Fabre, Neveu, Appendice, p.255 for Sebastian Mercier's description of the historical Jean-François Rameau in Mercier's Tableau de Paris.
- ¹⁹Georges May, Quatre visages, pp.34-99; see also May, L'Angoisse de l'échec, pp.295-97.
- ²⁰Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.5.
- ²¹Ibid., p.9.
- ²²Diderot, Salons, III:149. The reference compares the plight of the genius with the well-being of the bourgeois alderman at Toulouse who "drinks, eats and sleeps well," ignorant of Horace and themes of death. In the passage Diderot also reprimands the government for the neglect of the genius.
- ²³Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, pp.11-14. See L. Natalie Sandomirsky, "Ethical Standards of the Genius in Diderot's Neveu de Rameau," Symposium vol. 18 (1964):46-55.
- ²⁴Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, pp.97-98.
- ²⁵Ibid., p.100.

²⁶Diderot, article "Eclecticisme," Encyclopédie, I:1064-70; in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, p.89.

²⁷Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, pp.90,99.

²⁸Diderot, Refutation of Helvétius, quoted in Dieckmann, "Diderot's conception of Genius," p.160.

²⁹Diderot, Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants, OP, pp.409-43.

³⁰Ibid., p.436.

³¹Ibid., p.443.

³²Ibid., p.443.

³³Quoted in Guyot, Diderot par lui-même, p.59.

CHAPTER IV

THE MASTER CRIMINAL: GENIUS IN EVIL

¹Guyot, Diderot par lui-même, p.61.

²Diderot, Correspondance, II:107.

³Diderot, LSV, I:119.

⁴Diderot, Elements of Physiology, Diderot's Selected Writings, ed. with introduction and notes by Lester G. Crocker (New York: Macmillan Co.; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), p.21.

⁵Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.311.

⁶Laidlaw, "Diderot's Teratology," DS, IV:105-29.

⁷Isabel Knight, The Geometric Spirit: The Abbé de Condillac and the French Enlightenment (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), especially pp.144-97.

⁸Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.313.

⁹Diderot, Lettre sur les aveugles, OP, p. 119.

¹⁰Diderot, Elements of Physiology, in Selected Writings, ed. Crocker, p.274.

¹¹Diderot used this phrase in Jacques the Fatalist, in D'Alembert's Dream, and in the "Letter to Landois" (1756) in which Diderot totally denied free will, Diderot, Correspondance, I:209-217.

¹²Diderot, "Letter to Landois" (29 June 1756), Correspondance, I:214.

- ¹³Choderlos de Laclos, De l'Education des femmes, Oeuvres, pp.403-58.
- ¹⁴Herbert Dieckmann, "Presentation of Reality in Diderot's Tales," DS, III:101-28.
- ¹⁵Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.53.
- ¹⁶Ibid., p.54.
- ¹⁷One of the Nephew's patrons, described in the dialogue as a "fermier general," one of the wealthy farmers-general of France. Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.52.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p.52.
- ¹⁹Ibid., pp.59,69.
- ²⁰Ibid., p.90.
- ²¹Ibid., p.72.
- ²²Ibid., pp.73-76 *passim*.
- ²³Ibid., p.76.
- ²⁴Ibid., p.76.
- ²⁵Diderot, article "Feroce," Encyclopédie, I:1394.
- ²⁶Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belaval, p.184.
- ²⁷Montesquieu, Les Letters persanes, Oeuvres complètes, 2 vols., texte présenté et annoté par Roger Callois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1949), especially Lettre XXXIV, I:179-80, and Lettre LV, I:211.
- ²⁸Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belaval, p.138.
- ²⁹Ibid., p.194.
- ³⁰Diderot, Refutation of Helvétius, OP, p.570.
- ³¹Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belavale, p.239.
- ³²Roger Kempf, Diderot et le roman, ou le Démon de la présence (Paris: Aux Editions du Seuil, 1964), p.202.
- ³³Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belaval, p.255.
- ³⁴Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.5.
- ³⁵Ibid., pp.40,44.
- ³⁶Ibid., p.39.

³⁷Ibid., p.5.

³⁸Ibid., p.5. In the Refutation of Helvétius, Diderot, in the discussion of genius, distinguishes "un original" from the genius by the element of the bizarre: ". . . un original est un être bizarre qui tient sa façon singulière de voir, de sentir et de s'exprimer de son caractère. Si l'homme original n'était pas né, on est tenté de croire que ce qu'il a fait n'aurait jamais, tant ses productions lui appartiennent," The genius, however, can have some of the qualities of the "original"--for example, he cited Rabelais as an "original" in Pantagruel, Molière in his burlesques, and Shakespeare, not in his sublime passages, but in the "extraordinary, incomprehensible, inimitable mixture of great taste and bad taste," but above all, in the "bizarrerie de celles-ci." OP, p.578.

³⁹Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.109.

⁴⁰Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belaval, p.85.

⁴¹Ibid., p.85.

⁴²Ibid., pp.85-86.

⁴³Ibid., pp.327-44, passim and pp.354-62, passim.

⁴⁴Diderot, "Letter to Landois," Correspondance, I:214.

⁴⁵Diderot, Elements of Physiology, in Selected Writings, ed. Crocker, pp.281-82.

⁴⁶Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.95.

CHAPTER V

THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

¹Pierre Goubert, L'Ancien Regime. Tome I. La société, 2nd. ed. (Paris, 1969) is the standard account of eighteenth-century French society. On economic and social history of the period, see Ernest Labrousse et.al., eds. Histoire économique et sociale de la France. Tome II. Des Dernier Temps de l'âge seigneurial aux préludes de l'âge industriel (1660-1789); Livre Premier, chap. III, Pierre Goubert, "Revolution démographique au xviii siècle," pp.55-84; Joseph J. Spengler, "Demographic Factors and Early modern Economic Development," Daedalus (Spring, 1968: Historical Population Studies), pp.433-46 includes a very good general bibliography of early modern population studies. On the latter, see also H.J.Habakkuk, Population Growth and Economic Development since 1750 (New York: Humanities Press, 1971) pp.49ff.

²Diderot, Entretien d'un père, p.412. In this literary portrait of his father, a retired cutlery maker, Diderot noted his father's propensity for drinking coffee.

³Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees; or Private Vices, Publick Benefits, with a commentary by F.B. Kaye, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), pp.433,435,437.

⁴Article "Luxe" (Luxury) in Encyclopédie, II:709-11; in English in Encyclopedia, ed. Hoyt and Cassirer, pp.203-32. The article, formerly believed to be by Diderot, is now attributed to Saint-Lambert; "Lacédémon," Encyclopédie, II:556-68; Diderot, Salon of 1767, Salons, III:121-26; Hans Kortum, "Frugalité et luxe à travers la querelle des anciens et des modernes," SVEC, 56 (1967):755-75, discusses the philosophes views on luxury.

⁵Arthur Wilson, "The Philosophes and Theories of Modernization," SVEC, 63 (1967):1893-1913.

⁶Jacques Proust, Diderot et L'Encyclopédie (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967) examines the social position of the collaborators on the Encyclopédie; Richard N. Schwab et al., Inventory of Diderot's Encyclopédie, 6 vols. SVEC (vols. 80,83,85 and 91-93, 1971-1972) is a systematic study of the contributors to the Encyclopédie.

⁷Elinor Barber, The Bourgeoisie in Eighteenth Century France (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955). Except for urban or regional studies there are no satisfactory comprehensive studies of the bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century France. However, Ernest Labrousse, "Voies nouvelles vers une histoire de la bourgeoisie occidentale aux xviii^e et xix^e siècles (1750-1850)," Actes X, Congrès international de sciences historiques (Rome, 1955) IV:365-96 is helpful.

⁸Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1924; reprint ed., New York: Doubleday & Co., Anchor, 1954) p.240.

⁹David Bien, Address, Secrétaires du Roi, Society for French Historical Studies Conference, 29-30 March 1974, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

¹⁰Barber, Bourgeoisie, p.100.

¹¹R. B. Grassby, "Social Status and Commercial Enterprise under Louis XIV," Economic History Review (1961) pp.19-38.

¹²Henri Hauser, "Le 'Parfait négociant' de Jacques Savary," Revue d'histoire, économique et sociale, XIII (1925), p.12: "'Dès le moment qu'en France un négociant a acquis de grandes richesses dans le commerce, bien loin que ses enfants suivent cette profession, au contraire, ils entrent dans les charges publiques.'"

¹³Barber, Bourgeoisie, pp.94-97.

¹⁴Geoffroy Atkinson, The Sentimental Revolution, chap. 3, "Growth of Self-Esteem Among Commoners;" Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, chapters 16 and 17, comments extensively

on bourgeois themes in eighteenth-century French literature; Frederic C. Greene, French Novelists, Manners and Ideas from the Renaissance to the Revolution (London: 1929; republished, New York: Frederic Ungar Co., 1964), chapters VIII, IX, and X, is useful on the growth of sensibility and the sentimental novel.

¹⁵Beaumarchais, Marriage of Figaro, quoted in Barber, Bourgeoisie, p. 68.

¹⁶John Lough, An Introduction to Eighteenth-Century France (New York: David McKay Co., 1960), pp.281-83. Lough notes the plebeian language of Diderot's Rameau's Nephew and Jacques the Fatalist.

¹⁷John Lough, Paris Theatre Audiences in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), chap. 2 pp.81-98, and chap. 4, pp.185-227, deals extensively with aristocratic and middle-class influences on the theatre.

¹⁸Diderot, Entretien sur Le Fils naturel, OE, p.154.

¹⁹Ibid., p.154.

²⁰Lough, Paris Theatre Audiences, p.251.

²¹Jacques Proust, "Le Paradoxe du Fils naturel" DS IV(1963):209-20.

²²C.B.A. Behrens, The Ancien Regime (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967; reprinted Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p.19.

²³Article "Cité," Encyclopédie, I:604; article "Société," Encyclopédie, III:549-51.

²⁴John Lough, "The Problem of the Unsigned Articles in the Encyclopédie," SVEC 32 (1965):327-90; Jacques Proust, Diderot et l'Encyclopédie, indicates its authorship is still uncertain. Annexe II, pp.533-40, contains a useful list of the articles definitely established as by Diderot.

²⁵Lester G. Crocker, An Age of Crisis: Man and World in Eighteenth-Century French Thought (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), p.338.

²⁶Rousseau, Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (First Discourse), in The First and Second Discourses: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, ed. and trans. Roger D. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp.31-74.

²⁷Article "Société," Encyclopédie, III:551.

²⁸Diderot, Entretien d'un philosophe avec la Maréchale de * * *, OP, pp.525-53.

²⁹Diderot, article "Droit naturel," Encyclopédie, I:1025.

³⁰Ibid., p.1025.

³¹Arthur Wilson, "The concept of moeurs in Diderot's social and political thought," in The Age of Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman, eds. W.H. Barber, J. H. Brumfitt et al. (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1967), pp.188-99.

³²Diderot, Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, OP, pp.447-516 (hereafter cited as Supplément, OP).

³³Montesquieu, Oeuvres complètes, 2 vols., texte présenté et annoté par Roger Callois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), Lettres persanes, I:129-373; available in English translation in Montesquieu: The Persian Letters, ed. and trans. J.Robert Loy (New York: World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1961).

³⁴Montesquieu, Lettres persanes, XI-XIV, Oeuvres, I:145-53.

³⁵Ibid., (Lettre CLXI), I:373.

³⁶Ibid., (Lettre CLXI), I.373.

³⁷Rousseau, Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality, in First and Second Discourses, ed. Masters, pp.101-81.

³⁸Jean Starbowski, Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'obstacle (Paris: Plon, 1957).

³⁹Rousseau, Émile, ou de l'éducation, ed. F. et P. Richard, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1951); La Nouvelle Héloïse, ed. R. Pomeau (Paris: Garnier Freres, 1960). For studies of Rousseau, see Ernst Cassirer, Rousseau, Kant and Goethe: Two Essays, trans. by Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randal, Jr., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945; Harper & Row Torchbook edition, 1963); Jean Guéhenno, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966). William Blanchard, Rousseau and the Spirit of Revolt: A Psychological Study (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).

⁴⁰Carl Schorske, "The Idea of the City in European Thought," in The Historian and the City, ed. Oscar Handlin and John Burchard (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963), pp.45-53 treats Montesquieu's image of the city; Thomas Cassirer, "Awareness of the City in the Encyclopedia," Journal of the History of Ideas, vol. 24 (1963):pp.387-96 analyzes Encyclopédie articles on attitudes toward the city and its social effects.

⁴¹A selection from Mercier's Tableau de Paris is available in English in The Waiting City, trans. H. Simpson (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1933); Restif de la Bretonne; Les Nuits de Paris, ou le spectateur nocturne 8 vols. (Paris: 1788-94) is available in a one-volume selection in English, Les Nuits de Paris, or The Nocturnal Spectator, introd. by Jacques Barzun, trans. Linda Asher and Ellen Fertig (New York: Random House, 1964).

⁴²Montesquieu, Lettres persanes, Oeuvres, I:223.

⁴³Schorske, "Idea of the City," pp.97-99.

⁴⁴Cited in Berman, Politics of Authenticity, p.114.

CHAPTER VI

THE REVOLUTIONARY PERSONALITY: SOCIETY IN FERMENT

¹Robert Darnton, "In Search of the Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social History of Ideas," Journal of Modern History, vol. 43,1, March, 1971, 113-32.

²Jean Fabre, Neveu, Introduction, lxxxii.

³Wilson, Diderot, pp.597-601.

⁴Francois Hemsterhuis, Lettre sur l'homme, ed. May, p.513.

⁵A detailed account is in Wilson, Diderot, pp.104-16.

⁶Douglas H. Gordon and Norman L. Torrey, The Consoling of Diderot's Encyclopedie and the Re-established Text (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp.18-22; Frank A. Kafker, "The Effect of Censorship on Diderot's Encyclopedia," Library Chronicle, vol. 30(1964-1965):38-49.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.18.

⁸Diderot, Observations sur le Nakaz, Oeuvres politiques, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1961), pp.343-458.

⁹Wilson, Diderot, pp.599-600; Fabre, Neveu, introd., lxxviii.

¹⁰Diderot, Correspondance, XI:20.

¹¹The full title is Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes (Paris, 1770; 3rd ed., Geneva, 1780).

¹²Wilson, Diderot, p.702.

¹³Fabre, Neveu, Introd., p.lxxxviii.

¹⁴Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.303.

¹⁵Diderot, Supplément, OP, pp.455-516.

¹⁶Mornet, Signification du Neveu, pp.881-908.

¹⁷Fabre, Neveu, Introd., pp.vii-xcv.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p.lxxxviii.

¹⁹James Doolittle, Rameau's Nephew: A Study of Diderot's Second Satire, (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1960).

²⁰Donal O'Gorman, Diderot the Satirist, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971).

²¹Ronald Grimsley, "Psychological Aspects of Le Neveu de Rameau," Modern Language Quarterly, 16 (1955)195-209.

²²Pierre Mesnard, Le Cas Diderot: étude de caractérologie littéraire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952).

²³Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.15.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p.93.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.21.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.22.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.22.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p.22.

³¹*Ibid.*, p.24.

³²*Ibid.*, p.25.

³³*Ibid.*, p.40.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p.40.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p.36.

³⁶Diderot, Satire I, Sur les Caractères et les mots de caractère, de profession, etc., Oeuvres, texte établi et annoté par André Billy, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1951). An interpretation of Diderot's use of language and gesture is in Herbert Josephs, Diderot's Dialogue of Gesture and Language: Le Neveu de Rameau (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969); see also Kempf, Diderot et le roman, pp.93-118.

³⁷Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.36

³⁸Mandeville, Fable of the Bees, II:433,435,437.

³⁹Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.37.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p.55.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p.68.

⁴²Ibid., p.70.

⁴³Ibid., p.81.

⁴⁴Ibid., p.89.

⁴⁵Ibid., p.39.

⁴⁶Ibid., p.61.

⁴⁷Ibid., p.100.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp.48,100.

⁴⁹Ibid., p.103.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp.104-05.

⁵¹Ibid., p.105.

⁵²Ibid., p.105.

⁵³Doolittle, Rameau's Nephew, pp.99-101; O'Gorman, Diderot the Satirist, pp.68-91; Fabre, Neveu, Introd., pp.lxxx-llxxxvi; xciv.

⁵⁴The reference is to onanism in a discussion of Diogenes the Cynic. In D'Alembert's Dream, Diderot also discussed onanism as a "remedy" for young people. Infra, chap. VII, this work.

⁵⁵Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.44.

⁵⁶Ibid., p.60.

⁵⁷Ibid., p.30.

⁵⁸Ibid., p.92.

⁵⁹Ibid., p.90.

⁶⁰Diderot, Refutation of Helvétius, OP, pp.570-71. In these passages, Diderot regretted that he had not spent more time on his creative works, like his plays.

⁶¹Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.72.

⁶²Ibid., p.44.

⁶³Diderot, to Sophie Volland (1768), Correspondance, VIII, p.178.

⁶⁴Diderot, Neveu, ed. Fabre, p.60.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp.25,103,109.

⁶⁶Doolittle, Rameau's Nephew, p.47. Officially, Rameau's Nephew is Diderot's Second Satire. His Satire I is Sur les caracteres et les mots.

⁶⁷Diderot, Refutation of Helvétius, OP, p.595.

⁶⁸Diderot, Jacques le fataliste, ed. Belaval. All references in in the following discussion are to this edition.

⁶⁹Franco Venturi, Jeunesse de Diderot (Paris: Skira, 1939), p.14.

⁷⁰Herbert Dieckmann, Cinq Leçons sur Diderot (Paris: Minard; Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1959), "Diderot et son lecteur," pp.15-40.

⁷¹J. Robert Loy, Diderot's Determined Fatalist (New York: Columbia University, King's Crown Press, 1950), chaps. 1,3,5.

⁷²Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, p.1.

⁷³Ibid., p.1.

⁷⁴Ibid., p.2.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp.234-35.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp.292-93.

⁷⁷Ibid., p.294.

⁷⁸Ibid., p.233.

⁷⁹Ibid., p.114.

⁸⁰Ibid., p.69.

⁸¹Ibid., p.218.

⁸²Ibid., pp.70-73.

⁸³Ibid., p.87.

⁸⁴Ibid., pp.87-88.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp.229-30.

⁸⁶Ibid., pp.229-30.

⁸⁷Ibid., p.230.

⁸⁸Diderot, Elements of Physiology, Crocker, Selected Writings, p.281.

⁸⁹Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, p.274.

⁹⁰Clarence D. Brenner and Nolan A. Goodyear, eds., Eighteenth-Century French Plays (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1927), pp.374-414. Diderot, Le Père de famille (French text).

⁹¹G.W.F. Hegel, "Wer Denkt Abstrakt," Sämliche Werke, XX:450.

⁹²Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, p.61.

⁹³Ibid., p.220.

⁹⁴Ibid., p.226.

⁹⁵Ibid., p.226.

⁹⁶Ibid., p.226.

⁹⁷Ibid., p.226.

⁹⁸Ibid., p.227.

⁹⁹Ibid., p.371.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p.362.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p.346.

¹⁰²Ibid., p.107.

¹⁰³Ibid., p.255.

¹⁰⁴Franco Venturi, Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment (London: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p.118.

¹⁰⁵Diderot, "Forword to Vol. VIII," Encyclopédie, II:280.

¹⁰⁶Robert Darnton Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968; reprint ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p.3.

¹⁰⁷George Rosen, "Forms of Irrationality in the Eighteenth Century, SECC, vol. 2. Irrationalism in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve, 1972), pp.255-88.

¹⁰⁸Gerschom Scholem, Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676, Bollinger Series XCIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

¹⁰⁹Robert Schackleton, "The Encyclopédie and Freemasonry," The Age of Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Bestermann, ed. W.H.Barber et al (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1967), pp.223-38; Maurice Crouzet, gen. ed., Histoire générales des civilisations, Tome V: Le XVIII^e siècle l'époque des "lumières" (1715-1815), par Roland Mousnier et Ernest Labrousse, 5th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), pp.79-81; Frances A. Yates, The Rosicrucian Enlightenment (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

¹¹⁰Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, eds., French Utopias: An Anthology of Ideal Societies (New York: Free Press, 1966; reprint ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p.2.

¹¹¹Louis Sebastien Mercier, L'An 2440, trans. by W. Hooper as Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred (London, 1772), English selections in Manuel and Manuel, eds., French Utopias, pp.133-48; Morelly, Code de la nature, ou le véritable esprit de ses lois (Paris, 1755), publiée avec texte par Edouard Dolléans (Paris: Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1910); Restif de la Bretonne, L'Andrographe, ou idées d'un honnête homme sur un projet de règlement proposé à toutes les nations de l'Europe, pour opérer une réforme générale des mœurs et par elle, le bonheur du genre humain (Paris, 1782), English selections in Manuel and Manuel, French Utopias, pp. 175-82; Restif de la Bretonne, La Découverte australe par un homme-volant, ou le Dédale français, 4 vols. (Paris: 1781), English selections in Manuel and Manuel, French Utopias, pp.169-74.

¹¹²Geoffroy Atkinson has written on the influence of seventeenth-century voyages on ideas in Les Relations de voyages du XVII^e siècle et l'évolution des idées (Paris: Champion, 1924) and in The Extraordinary Voyage in French Literature from 1700 to 1720, 2 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1922); Gilbert Chinard L'Amerique et le rêve exotique dans la littérature française au XVIII^e siècle (Paris: Hachette, 1913); René Pomeau discusses the influence of the voyages to the Orient and South Seas on eighteenth-century literature and on Diderot in "Voyage et lumières dans la littérature française du XVIII^e siècle," SVEC, vol. 57, pp.1269-90.

¹¹³Montesquieu, Lettres Persanes (XI-XIV), Oeuvres, I:145-53. Charles Rihs, "Les Utopistes contre les lumières," SVEC, vol. 57 (1967): 1321-55, contrasts the earlier and later views of Montesquieu.

¹¹⁴Morelly, Code de la nature, p.18; Rihs, "Les Utopistes," contrasts the radicalism of the Utopians like Morelly and Mably to the thought of more conventional philosophes like Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau.

¹¹⁵Restif de la Bretonne, L'Andrographe, Manuel and Manuel, eds., French Utopias, p.178. A recent study of Restif's Utopian theory has been made by Mark Poster, The Utopian Thought of Restif de la Bretonne (New York: New York University Press, 1971); Marc Chadourne, Restif de la Bretonne ou le siècle prophétique (Paris:Hachette,1958) relates Restif's life to his works.

¹¹⁶Morelly, Code de la nature, pp.99-108. Manuel and Manuel, French Utopias, provides the English version of some portions of Morelly's Code.

¹¹⁷Diderot, cited in Wilson, Diderot, p.573.

¹¹⁸René Pomeau, "Voyages et lumières," says that the difference in social rankings among the islanders at the time of Bougainville's voyage was "cruel" and that Bougainville knew it.

¹¹⁹Diderot, Supplément, OP, pp.503-504, 509-510.

¹²⁰Ibid., pp.511-12.

¹²¹Ibid., p.511.

¹²²Ibid., pp.511-12.

¹²³Ibid., p.512.

¹²⁴Ibid., p.512.

¹²⁵Ibid., p.515.

¹²⁶Ibid., p.515.

CHAPTER VII

SEXUAL ATTITUDES AND MORALITY: THE NEW RELATIVISM

¹Montesquieu, Quelques reflexions sure les "Lettres persanes," Oeuvres, I:129. Two recent studies on libertinism are Barry Ivker, "Towards a Definition of Libertinism in Eighteenth-Century French Fiction," SVEC, 83 (1970):221-36, and R. F. Brissenden, "La philosophe dans le boudoir; or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World," SECC, vol. 2, Irrationalism in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve, 1972):113-42.

²Diderot, Les Bijoux indiscrets, OR, pp.8-9 and passim.

³P.W.K.Stone, Introduction to Choderlos de Laclos, Les Liaisons dangereuses, trans. P.W.K. Stone (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), p.9.

⁴Donald Goddard, "The Hel-Fire Club: Visions of Debauchery Danced in Their Heads," New York Times, 27 February 1972, sec. 10, p.14.

⁵Diderot, "Eloge de Richardson," OE, p.32.

⁶Georges May, Diderot et "La Religieuse": Étude historique et littéraire, Institut d'Études Françaises de Yale University (New Haven: Yale University Press; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954), p.81 and chap. V, "Diderot Sexologue," pp.98-114; Yvon Belaval, "Les Protagonistes du Reve de d'Alembert," DS III (1961), p.45; Ronald Grimsley, "Psychological Aspects," p.202; Pierre Mesnard, Le Cas Diderot, pp.65-76, 112.

⁷Mesnard, Le Cas Diderot, p.111.

⁸Diderot, LSV, I:112 (17 September 1760). The English version is in France, Diderot's Letters, p.60. Yvon Belaval, "Les Protagonistes," p.45, n. 3, notes Diderot's affection for Grimm. In a letter to Sophie (14 July 1762), Diderot referred to his attraction to a youth at the baths, LSV, I:237. In his letter to Sophie of 7 October 1761 on the attractive qualities of libertines, he commented that "one is, one has been, and perhaps one day will be a libertine," LSV, I:224-25.

⁹Bernard Groethuysen, Die Entstehung der burgerlichen Welt-und bebensanschauung in Frankreich (Halle, 1927-1930) 2 vols. The French edition is entitled Origines de l'esprit bourgeois en France. Vol. 1. L'Eglise et la bourgeoisie (Paris, 1927). The English translation is a shortened version entitled The Bourgeois: Catholicism vs. Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France, 1968), chap. VIII, "The Idea of Sin," pp.102 ff. Changing trends in Catholic moral theology is also discussed by Lucien Goldmann, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment: The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment (London, 1972) and Robert R. Palmer, Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

¹⁰Diderot, Salons, I:116.

¹¹Sade, Philosophy in the Bedroom, in Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom and Other Works, trans. by R. Seaver and A. Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp.177-367.

¹²Diderot, Supplément, OP, pp.460-61.

¹³J. Christopher Herold, Love in Five Temperaments (New York: Atheneum, 1961), pp.193-257 on Julie de l'Espinasse.

¹⁴Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.329.

¹⁵Ibid., p.375.

¹⁶Ibid., p.376. This reference to "the cynic's way out" is similar to the referenc to Diogenes and onanism in Rameau's Nephew.

¹⁷Ibid., p.377.

¹⁸Ibid., p.378.

¹⁹Ibid., p.379.

²⁰Ibid., p.379. Bordeu's answer apparently is obscure or, as she remarks, "trop sublime." The text of his answer reads: "Je vous demanderai donc, de deux actions également restreintes à la volupté, qui ne peuvent rendre que de plaisir sans utilité, mais dont l'une n'en rend qu'à celui qui la fait et l'autre le partage avec un être semblable mâle ou femelle, car le sexe ici, ni même l'emploi du sexe n'y fait rien, en faveur de laquelle le sens commun prononcera-t-il?" Diderot's definition of "espèce" appears in his Salon of 1767, in answer to a question by his companion: "Qu'est-ce qu'un espèce? . . .[sic] Une multitude d'individus organisés de la même manière." Salons, III:148.

²¹Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.379.

²²Ibid., p.380.

²³Ibid., pp.380-81.

²⁴Ibid., pp.381-82.

²⁵Ibid., pp.384-85.

²⁶Ibid., p.385.

²⁷For the circumstances of the composition of The Nun, see Wilson, Diderot, pp.382-84 and Herbert Dieckmann, "The Preface-Annexe of La Religieuse," DS III (1961):130.

²⁸Robert J. Ellrich, "The Rhetoric of La Religieuse" and "Eighteenth-Century Forensic Rhetoric," DS III (1961):130.

²⁹Diderot, LSV, I:112.

³⁰Georges May, Diderot et "La Religieuse", pp.85-97, describes the characteristics of the real model for Diderot's Lesbian Mother Superior, identified by him as Louise-Adélaïde d'Orléans, daughter of the Regent.

³¹Diderot, La Religieuse, OR, p.342. The pages following this statement describe the suggestive, amorous behavior of the Mother Superior (pp.342-47).

³²Ibid., pp.381-82.

³³Diderot, Supplément, OP, p.480.

³⁴Ibid., p.476.

³⁵Ibid., pp.479-80. See Peter Gay's interesting essay, "Three Stages on Love's Way: Rousseau, Laclos and Diderot," in his The Party of Humanity, (Princeton, 1959; reprint ed. W.W.Norton, Norton Library, 1971), pp.133-61, for Diderot's Supplément as the complete repudiation of Christian morality.

³⁶Diderot, Supplément, OP, p.503.

³⁷Ibid., pp.480-81.

³⁸Ibid., p.481.

³⁹Diderot, Supplément, OP, p.482.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.482.

⁴¹Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, p.147; Diderot Le Père de famille, in Breener and Goodyear, eds., Eighteenth-Century French Plays, pp.373-416; Diderot, LSV, I:31 and II:42.

⁴²Ibid., pp.482-84.

⁴³Montesquieu, Lettres persanes (CXIV), Oeuvres, I:299-300.

⁴⁴Roger B. Oake, "Polygamy in the Lettres Persanes," Romanic Review, (Feb. 1941), pp.56-62.

⁴⁵Diderot, Supplément, OP, p.492.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp.487-88.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp.495-96.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p.499.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p.500.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p.507.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p.507.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p.509.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p.510.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp.509-10.

⁵⁵Quoted in Wilson, Diderot, p. 86; Leo Spitzer, Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics (Princeton, 1948; reprint ed. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), chap. 4, "The Style of Diderot," pp.176, 178, n. 17. Basically, however, Spitzer's is a sympathetic study of Diderot's style and language.

⁵⁶Herbert Dieckmann, "Observations sur les manuscrits de Diderot conservés en Russie," DS IV (1963):64. A more detailed discussion of this point is in Richard T. Arndt, "The Vandeul Manuscript Copy of 'Jacques le Fataliste,'" DS III (1961):17-25.

⁵⁷Diderot, Satire I, ed. Billy, Oeuvres, pp.1217-18 and 1223.

⁵⁸Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.370.

⁵⁹Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, pp.69-70.

⁶⁰Josephs, Diderot's Dialogue of Language and Gesture.

⁶¹Diderot's article, "Jouissance," Encyclopédie, II, is in English in Gendzier, Encyclopedia, pp.95-97; Spitzer, Linguistics and Literary History, p.139.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p.150.

⁶⁴Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, pp.290-91.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p.290.

⁶⁶Ibid., pp.290-91.

⁶⁷Loy, Introduction to Jacques the Fatalist, xxii; Emily Zants, "Dialogue, Diderot, and the New Novel in France," Eighteenth-Century Studies, II (1968-69):172-81.

⁶⁸Diderot, Jacques, ed. Belaval, p.290.

⁶⁹Diderot's own strong, sentimental family ties reflect the maturation by the eighteenth century of the modern family, with close family ties and responsibility for child-rearing that Philippe Aries traced the origins of in France in the seventeenth century. Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life (London, 1962; New York: Vintage paperback, n.d.).

THE MASKS OF DIDEROT

¹Diderot, Salons, III:67.

²Diderot, Correspondance, VIII:223.

³Diderot, D'Alembert's Dream, OP, p.300.

⁴Robert Jay Lifton, "Protean Man," in History and Human Survival (New York: Random House, 1970; Random House, Vintage Books, 1971), pp.311-31; see also the provocative essay by Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Healthy, Happy Human Being Wears Many Masks," Psychology Today, May, 1972, pp.33-35 ff.

⁵Diderot, Salons, III:125. See Robert Mauzi, "Diderot et le bonheur," DS III (1961):263-84, for an analysis of what Mauzi calls Diderot's "trilogy" of "le bonheur" in "knowledge of the past, enjoyment of the present, and glorious conquest of the future."

⁶G.W.F.Hegel, The Phenomenology of Mind, trans. by J.B.Baillie (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan Co., 1910,1959; Harper & Row Torchbook, 1967), p.508. According to Baillie, Hegel got this phrase from Goethe's translation of Rameau's Nephew.

⁷Ibid., pp.540-44, passim.

⁸Ibid., p.546.

⁹Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952), especially Chap. 2, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," pp.22-37.

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