



Rameau's Nephew

DENIS DIDEROT



No matter what the weather, rain or shine, it's my habit every evening at about five o'clock to take a walk around the Palais Royal. I'm the one you see dreaming on the bench in Argenson's Alley, always alone. I talk to myself about politics, love, taste, or philosophy. I let my spirit roam at will, allowing it to follow the first idea, wise or foolish, which presents itself, just as we see our dissolute young men on Foy's Walk following in the footsteps of a prostitute with a smiling face, an inviting air, and a turned-up nose, then leaving her for another, going after all of them and sticking to none. For me, my thoughts are my prostitutes.

If the weather is too cold or too rainy, I take refuge in the Regency Café. I like to watch the games of chess. The best chess players in the world are in Paris, and the best players in

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Paris are in the Regency Café. Here, in Rey's establishment, they battle it out—Legal the Profound, Philidor the Subtle, Mayot the Solid. One sees the most surprising moves and hears the stupidest remarks. For one can be an intelligent man and a great chess player, like Legal, but one can also be a great chess player and a fool, like Foubert and Mayot.

One day I was there after dinner, looking on a great deal but not saying much, listening as little as possible, when I was accosted by one of the most bizarre people in this country (and God has made sure we don't lack such types). He is a mixture of loftiness and depravity, of good sense and buffoonery. The notions of honesty and dishonesty must be really badly confused in his head, for he shows without ostentation that nature has given him fine qualities, and has no shame in revealing that he has also received some bad ones. Beyond that, he's endowed with a strong constitution, a remarkably warm imagination, and an extraordinary lung power. If you ever meet him and his originality does not hold your attention, you'll either put your fingers in your ears or run off. God, what terrible lungs!

Nothing is more unlike him than himself. Sometimes he is thin and haggard, like an invalid in the final stages of consumption. You can count his teeth through his cheeks. You'd say he'd spent several days without a meal or had just left a Trappist monastery. The next month, he's sleek and plump, as if he'd been eating steadily at a banker's table or had been shut up inside a Bernadine convent. Today, in dirty linen and torn trousers, dressed in rags, almost barefoot, he slinks along with his head down. One is tempted to call to him to give him a hand out. Tomorrow, he marches along with his head

high, powdered, his hair curled, well dressed, with fine shoes. He shows himself off, and you'd almost take him for a gentleman. He lives from day to day, sad or happy, according to circumstances. His first concern in the morning, when he gets up, is to know where he'll have lunch. After lunch, he thinks about where he'll go for supper.

Night time also brings uncertainties. Should he return on foot to the little garret where he lives, assuming that the caretaker, in her irritation at not getting the rent, has not asked him to return his key, or should he settle for a working-class tavern to wait for daylight over a slice of bread and a mug of beer? When he hasn't got even six pennies in his pocket, which happens sometimes, he resorts to one of his friends who drives a cab or the coachman of a noble lord who gives him a pallet in the straw beside the horses. In the morning there are still bits of his mattress in his hair. If the season is mild, he paces all night along the Cours or the Champs Élysées. He reappears in town with the dawn, dressed up for today in yesterday's clothes, and dressed up today perhaps for the rest of the week.

I don't think much of these eccentrics. Some people turn them into familiar acquaintances, even friends. Once a year they interest me, when I meet them, because their character stands in contrast to others and they break that fastidious uniformity which our education, our social conventions, and our habitual proprieties have introduced. If one of them appears in company, he's a grain of yeast which ferments and gives back to everyone some part of his natural individuality. He shakes things up. He agitates us. He makes us praise or blame. He makes the truth come out, revealing who has

value. He unmasks the scoundrels. So that's the time a man with sense pays attention and sorts his world out.

The man I've described I knew from some time back. He used to hang about a house where his talent had opened doors for him. There was an only daughter. He swore to the father and mother that he would marry their daughter. They shrugged their shoulders and laughed in his face, telling him he was mad. I saw it happen. He used to ask me for money, which I gave him. He got himself introduced, I don't know how, into some good homes, where he had a place for dinner, but on condition he didn't speak without first getting permission. He kept silent and ate in anger. It was really good to see him under this constraint. If he was seized by a desire to break this agreement and opened his mouth, with his first word all the guests would cry out "O Rameau!" Then his fury would burn in his eyes, and he'd go back to his meal even more enraged.

You were curious to know this man's name, and now you do. He is the nephew of that famous musician who delivered us from the plain song of Lully, which we've been chanting for more than a century, and who wrote so much unintelligible visionary stuff and apocalyptic truths about the theory of music, none of which ever made sense either to him or anyone else. He left us a certain number of operas where there is some harmony, scraps of song, some disconnected ideas, noise, flights, triumphal marches, lances, glories, murmurs, victories that leave one breathless, and dance tunes which will last forever. He buried the Florentine but will now be buried by Italian virtuosi, a fact which he saw coming and which made him gloomy, sad, and surly. For no one, not even a

pretty woman who wakes up with a pimple on her nose, is as moody as an author who threatens to outlive his reputation—just look at Marivaux and the younger Crebillon.

He greets me. "Ah, ha, so there you are, Mister Philosopher. What are you doing here in this pile of idlers? Are you also wasting time pushing wood around?" That's how people speak contemptuously of chess or checkers.

ME: No. But when I don't have anything better to do, I amuse myself for a bit by watching those who push well.

HIM: In that case you don't get to enjoy yourself often. Except for Legal and Philidor, the others have no idea about the game.

ME: What about Mr. de Bissy?

HIM: That man plays chess the way Miss Clairon acts. They both know everything about their respective games that one can learn.

Miss Clairon was a well-known Parisian actress of the 18th century.

ME: You're harsh. I see you honour only men of genius.

HIM: Yes. In chess, in checkers, poetry, oratory, music and other similar nonsense. What good is mediocrity in things like that?

ME: Not much, I agree. But large numbers of men must work at them before the man of genius appears, one man in a multitude. But let's drop that subject. It's been an eternity since I last saw you. I hardly think of you when I don't see you. But I'm always pleased to see you again. What have you been doing?

HIM: What you, I, and all the others do—some good, some bad—and nothing. Then when I was hungry, I ate when I had a chance. After eating, I was thirsty and I drank sometimes. However, I grew a beard, and when that came, I shaved it off.

Composer in the court of Louis XIV, very influential in the development of French opera.

ME: You shouldn't have done that. It's the one thing you need to be a wise man.

HIM: That's right. I have a lofty wrinkled forehead, a burning eye, a jutting nose, large cheeks, black bushy eyebrows, a clean-cut mouth, curving lips, a square face. If this vast chin was covered with a long beard, can you imagine how splendid that would look in bronze or marble?

ME: Up there beside Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and Socrates.

HIM: No. I'd go better between Diogenes the philosopher and Phryne the prostitute. Like one of them I'm impudent, and I happily hang around the houses of the other.

ME: Is your health still good?

HIM: Yes, normally it is. But it's not so marvelous today.

ME: Why's that? There you are with a belly like Silenus and a face . . .

HIM: A face one might mistake for what's behind the belly. That's because the humour which is making my uncle waste away is apparently making his dear nephew fat.

ME: What about your uncle—do you ever see him?

HIM: Yes—he walks past me in the street.

ME: Hasn't he done anything for you?

HIM: If he's done anything for anyone, he's done it without being aware of what he's doing. The man's a philosopher in his own way. He thinks only of himself. To him the rest of the universe isn't worth a damn. His daughter and his wife might as well die whenever they want. So long as the parish bells which toll for them continue to resonate at the twelfth and seventeenth intervals, all will be fine. That's a good thing for him. And that's what I especially value in people of genius. They are good at only one thing. Other than that, noth-

ing. They've no idea what it is to be citizens, fathers, mothers, brothers, parents, friends. Just between us, we should try to be like them in every way, but without wanting their breed to become something common. We must have men, but men of genius, no. No, my goodness, we don't need them. They're the ones who change the face of the earth. And in the smallest things stupidity is so common and so powerful that no one can reform it without making a great fuss. That sets up, at least in part, what men of vision see. And part remains just as it was. Thus, we have two gospels, the costume of Harlequin. The wisdom of the monk Rabelais is true wisdom, for his own peace of mind and that of others—do one's duty, somehow or other, always speak well of your master the prior, and leave the world to its fantasies. That works well, because the majority is happy with it. If I understood history, I'd show you that evil has always come here below from some man of genius. But I don't know history, because I don't know anything. The devil take me if I've ever learned a thing and if I'm any the worse off for having learned nothing. One day I was at the table of one of the King's ministers who had brains enough for four men. Well, he demonstrated to us, as clearly as one and one adds up to two, that nothing is more useful to nations than lies, nothing more harmful than the truth. I don't recall his proofs very well, but it evidently follows that people of genius are detestable and that if a child at birth bears on its forehead the characteristics of this dangerous natural gift, one should either smother the child or throw it to the dogs.

ME: But people like that, so hostile to genius, all pretend to have some.

The *Rameau* of this dialogue (Jean-Francois Rameau) is the nephew of a well-known composer, Jean-Philippe Rameau).

HIM: I'm sure they think that about themselves deep inside, but I don't think they dare admit the fact.

ME: That's just their modesty. So from that point on you've developed a terrible hatred against genius.

HIM: Something I'll never put behind me.

ME: But I've seen the time when you were desperate to be anything but an ordinary person. You'll never be happy if the arguments for and against affect you equally. You have to pick a side and stick to it. I quite agree with you that men of genius are usually odd or, as the proverb states, that there are no great minds without a grain of folly. One can't deny the fact. But we despise the ages which have not produced men of genius, and men will honour those nations among whom genius has lived. Sooner or later, we raise statues to them and consider them benefactors of the human race. I don't mean to disparage the sublime minister you mentioned to me, but I think that even if a lie can be useful momentarily, it is necessarily harmful in the long run, and by contrast, the truth is useful over time, even though it could be harmful at a particular moment. From that I'm tempted to conclude that the man of genius who speaks out against a common error or who establishes a great truth is always a being worthy of our veneration. It could happen that such a being is the victim of prejudice and the law, but there are two kinds of laws, those which are based on equity, which are universally true, and others which are peculiar and derive their authority only from blindness or from the needs of certain circumstances. This second type confers upon the man who breaks them merely a passing ignominy, a shame which time turns back on the judges and countries who condemned him. The shame

stays with them for ever. Think of Socrates and the magistrate who made him drink the hemlock—which of those two is the dishonourable man today?

HIM: That's a great help to Socrates! Does that make him any less condemned, any less put to death? Was he any less a rebellious citizen? With his contempt for a bad law, didn't he encourage fools to disregard good laws? Was he any less an audacious and odd individual? Just now you were not so far from expressing how little you liked men of genius.

ME: My dear fellow, listen to me. A society should never have bad laws. And if it had only good ones, it would never be in a position to persecute a man of genius. I didn't say that genius was inseparably attached to malice or malice to genius. A fool is more often an evil person than a man of intelligence is. And if a man of genius were characteristically hard to get along with, difficult, prickly, and unbearable, even if he were bad, what would you conclude from that?

HIM: He should be drowned.

ME: Gently, my dear fellow. Now, tell me—I won't take your uncle as an example. He's a hard man, brutal, inhuman, and miserly. He's a bad father, a bad husband, a bad uncle. And it's by no means clear that he's a man of genius who has pushed his art a long way, so that in ten years we'll be discussing his works. But what about Racine? He certainly had genius, and he didn't have much of a reputation as a good man. What about Voltaire?

HIM: Don't press me on this question. I can give you an argument.

ME: Which of these two options would you prefer—that Racine had been a good man, known for his business, like

Briasson, or for his yardstick, like Barbier, getting his wife regularly pregnant every year with legitimate children, a good husband, a good father, a good uncle, a good neighbour, an honest merchant, but nothing more—or that he had been deceitful, treacherous, ambitious, envious, and nasty, but the author of *Andromache*, *Britannicus*, *Iphigeneia*, *Phedre*, and *Athalie*?

HIM: For him I imagine it would perhaps have been better if he'd been the first of the two.

ME: What you've just said is infinitely truer than you think.

HIM: There you go, you others! If we say something good, it's as if we're mad or inspired—just a fluke. It's only you others who really understand what you're saying. Yes, Mister Philosopher, I understand what I'm saying, and I understand that just as much as you understand what you're saying.

ME: All right, let's see. Why would that have been better for Racine?

HIM: The point is that all these beautiful things he created didn't bring him twenty thousand francs. If he'd been a good silk merchant on Saint Denis or Saint Honore street, a fine wholesale grocer, or a well-connected apothecary, he'd have amassed an immense fortune, and, in the process of getting it, he could've enjoyed no end of pleasures. From time to time he could've given a few coins to a poor foolish devil like myself, who'd have made him laugh and occasionally procured for him a young woman to relieve the boredom of his eternal co-habitation with his wife. We'd have had some excellent meals at his home, played for high stakes, drunk some fine wines, fine liqueurs, fine coffees, and gone for picnics in

the country. You see I know what I'm talking about. You laugh. But let me continue. That would've been better for those around him.

ME: No disagreement there, provided he didn't use the money he got from legitimate business for dishonest purposes and kept far away from his home all gamblers, hangers on, all those self-satisfied tasteless people, all those layabouts, all those useless perverts, and made his shop assistants beat senseless the officious gentlemen who in various ways relieve husbands of the disgust they feel at a never-ending life with their wives.

HIM: Beat senseless, my dear chap, beat up! We don't beat anyone senseless in a well-policed town. Pimping is a respectable profession. Many people, even those with titles, are mixed up in it. And what in the devil do you want us to use our money for, if not for a good table, good company, good wines, fine women, pleasures of all sorts, amusement of all kinds. I'd have no desire to possess a large fortune without these enjoyments. But let's get back to Racine. The man was good only for those he didn't know and for a time when he was no longer alive.

ME: I agree. But weigh the good and bad. A thousand years from now, he'll still make people cry and win men's admiration. In all countries of the world he will inspire humanity, sympathy, tenderness. People will ask who he was, what country he came from, and they'll envy France. He made a few people suffer who are no longer alive and in whom we have hardly any interest. We have nothing to fear from his vices or faults. No doubt it would've been better if nature had given him the virtues of a good man along with the talents of

a great man. He's a tree which has caused some trees planted near him to wither up and has suffocated the plants growing at his feet. But he carried his top right up into the sky—his branches stretched a long way. He provided shade to those who came, who come, and who will come to rest alongside his majestic trunk. He produced fruits with an exquisite taste which replenish themselves continuously. We could also wish that Voltaire had had the sweetness of Duclos, the ingenuousness of Abbé Trublet, the honesty of Abbé d'Olivet. But since that's impossible, let's look at the really interesting side of this issue. Let's forget for the moment the point which we occupy in space and time and extend our vision into the centuries to come, into the most distant regions, into nations yet to be born. Let's think of the well being of our species. If we are not generous enough, let's at least forgive nature for having been wiser than we are. If you throw cold water on Greuze's head, perhaps you will extinguish his talent along with his vanity. If you make Voltaire less sensitive to criticism, he will not know how to descend into the soul of Merope. He will no longer move you.

HIM: But if nature was as powerful as she was wise, why didn't she make those men good in the same way she made them great?

ME: But don't you see that with that sort of reasoning you confound the general order. If everything here below were excellent, then nothing would be excellent.

HIM: You're right. The important point is that you and I exist and that we exist as you and I. Let everything beyond that go ahead however it can. The best order of things, in my view, is one in which I had to exist. Who cares about the

most perfect of worlds, if I'm not on it? I prefer to exist, even as an impertinent quibbler, than not to exist at all.

ME: There's no one who doesn't think just as you do and who doesn't put existing order on trial, without noticing he's renouncing his own existence.

HIM: That's true.

ME: So let's accept things as they are. Let's see what they cost us and what they bring us, leaving aside everything we don't know well enough to assign praise or blame—what's perhaps neither good nor bad, but what's necessary, as many respectable people think.

HIM: I don't understand much about that pitch you've just made to me. It seems like philosophy, and I warn you I'll not get mixed up in that. All I know is that I'd be quite happy to be someone else, on the off-chance I'd be a genius, a great man. Yes, I have to admit it. There's something there which speaks to me. I've never heard a single genius praised without such tributes to him making me secretly enraged. I get envious. When I learn about some detail of their private lives which demeans them, I listen with pleasure. That brings us closer together, and I bear my mediocrity more easily. I say to myself, "It's true you never could have created *Mahomet*, but you'd never have praised Maupeou." So I've been mediocre, and I'm angry with my mediocrity. Yes, yes, I am mediocre and angry. I've never heard the overture to *Les Indes Galantes* or heard anyone sing *Profonds Abîmes du Ténéaire, Nuit, Éternelle Nuit*, without feeling pain and saying to myself, "There's something you'd never create." Hence I was jealous of my uncle, and if at his death there'd been some fine compositions

for the keyboard in his portfolio, I wouldn't have hesitated to remain myself and to be him as well.

ME: If that's the only thing bothering you, it's not worth the trouble.

HIM: It's nothing—they're just passing moments.

Then he started to sing the overture to *Indes Galantes* and the song *Profonds Abîmes*, adding, "That something or other inside me which talks to me says, 'Rameau, you'd love to have composed those two pieces. If you'd done these two, you'd probably have done two others. And when you'd composed a certain number, people would play and sing you all over the place. When you walked along, you'd hold your head high. Your own awareness would confirm your own merit for you. Others would point you out. They'd say 'There's the man who wrote those lovely gavottes.'"

He sang the gavottes, and then, looking like a man deeply moved, swimming in joy, his eyes damp, he added, rubbing his hands together, "You'd have a fine house"—he measured its extent with his arms—"a fine bed"—he pretended to stretch himself out on it nonchalantly—"good wines"—which he tasted by smacking his tongue against his palate—"a fine horse and carriage"—he raised his foot as if to climb in—"beautiful women"—he embraced their breasts and gazed at them voluptuously—"A hundred hangers-on would come to sing my praises every day"—he imagined he saw them all around him—Palissot, Poincinet, the two Frérons, father and son, La Porte—he listened to them, he puffed himself up, agreed with what they said, smiled at them, ignored them, scorned them, sent them off, called them back. Then he continued "That's the way people would

tell you every morning that you're a great man. You'd read in the history of *Trois Siècles* that you were a great man. You'd be convinced in the evening that you were great man, and that great man, Rameau the nephew, would fall asleep to the soft murmur of praise which echoed in his ears. Even while he was sleeping, he would have a satisfied air—his chest would expand, rise, and fall with assurance, and he'd snore like a great man." As he was saying this, he moved over and lay gently on a bench. He closed his eyes and imitated the happy sleep he'd just imagined. After having enjoyed this relaxed repose for a few moments, he woke up, stretched his arms, yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked around him for any dull admirers still there.

ME: So you think that a happy man sleeps like that?

HIM: Do I think so! I'm a poor wretch, and when I go back to my garret in the evening and tuck myself in on my pallet, I'm shriveled up under my coverlet—my chest is tight and my breathing short, like a weak moan that's hardly audible; whereas, a financier makes his apartment reverberate and amazes his entire street. But what bothers me today is not that I sleep and snore meanly like someone destitute.

ME: But that's sad.

HIM: What's happened to me is much worse.

ME: So what is it?

HIM: You've always taken some interest in me because I'm a good little devil whom deep down you despise—but I amuse you.

ME: That's true.

HIM: And I'm going to tell you.

Before beginning, he sighs deeply and puts both hands on his forehead. Then he recovers his calm appearance and says to me: “You know that I’m ignorant—a silly man, a fool—impertinent, lazy, what we Burgundians call an incorrigible crook, a swindler, a thief. . .”

ME: What a panegyric!

HIM: It’s true, all of it. I don’t take back a word of it. Let’s please not argue about it. No one knows me better than I do, and I’m not saying everything.

ME: I don’t want to upset you, so I’ll accept everything you say.

HIM: All right. I used to live with people who liked me precisely because I was endowed with all those qualities to an unusual extent.

ME: That’s odd. Up to the present I believed that people hid them from themselves or forgave them in themselves and condemned them in other people.

HIM: Hide them from oneself—is that possible? Rest assured that when Palissot is alone and reflects on himself, he tells himself something different. You can be sure that in a tête-à-tête with his colleague, they frankly confess that they are nothing but two outstanding rogues. Despise such defects in others! My people were fairer than that—their character made me a marvelous success in their company. I was in clover. They fêted me. They were sorry every moment I was away from them. I was their little Rameau, their beautiful Rameau, their Rameau the foolish, the impertinent, the ignorant, the lazy, the greedy, the clown, the great beast. There wasn’t one of these familiar labels which didn’t earn me a smile, a caress,

a pat on the shoulder, a slap, a kick, at table a fine morsel tossed onto my plate for me, away from the table a liberty which I tolerated as of no consequence, for I myself was of no consequence. People make of me, with me, and in front of me anything they want, without my taking exception. And all the small presents which showered down on me? I’m such a stupid dog I lost them all! I lost everything because once—the only time in my life—I had common sense. May that never happen to me again!

ME: What was it about?

HIM: It was an incomparable stupidity—incredible, unpardonable.

ME: What stupidity?

HIM: Rameau, Rameau, people didn’t accept you for your common sense! The idiocy of having had a little taste, a little intelligence, a little reason. Rameau, my friend, this will teach you to remain the man God made you, the man your patrons wanted you to be. So they grabbed you by the scruff of the neck, marched you to the door, and said: “Imposter, get out. And don’t come back. I believe it wants to have some sense, some reason! Beat it. We have these qualities to spare.” You went off biting your nails. You should’ve bitten off your damned tongue long before that. Because you didn’t think about it, here you are on the pavement, the ground, with no idea where to go next. You’d been eating high on the hog, and now you’ll return to slops; you’d been well lodged, and now you’ll be very lucky if they let you have your garret back; you had a nice place to sleep, and now the straw is waiting for you between Mr. de Soubise’s coachman and your friend Robbé. Instead of a soft and peaceful sleep, as you used to have, you’ll

be listening with one ear to the neighing and stomping of horses and with the other to a sound a thousand times more unbearable—dry, hard, and barbarous verse. Miserable, stupid fool, possessed by a million devils!

ME: But isn't there some way to go back? Is the fault you committed unforgivable? In your place, I'd go to find my people again. You're more necessary to them than you think.

HIM: Oh, I'm certain that right now, when they don't have me around to make them laugh, they're bored to death.

ME: Then I'd go get them back. I wouldn't leave them the time to learn to do without me, to turn to some decent amusement. Who knows what could happen?

HIM: That's not what I'm afraid of. That won't happen.

ME: No matter how wonderful you are, another could replace you.

HIM: That would be difficult.

ME: I agree. However, I'd go back with this dejected face, these wild eyes, this disheveled collar, tousled hair—in the truly tragic state you're in right now. I'd throw myself at the feet of that goddess, stick my face against the earth, and, without getting up, I'd say to her in a low and sobbing voice, "Pardon, madame! Forgive me! I'm unworthy, despicable. That was an unfortunate moment, for you know I'm not subject to having common sense, and I promise you I'll never have it again in my life."

What was amusing was that while I was having this conversation with him, he carried out the pantomime. He threw himself down, stuck his face against the ground, and seemed to hold between his two hands the toe of a slipper. He was crying and sobbing the words, "Yes, my little queen. Yes, I do

promise. I'll never have it in my life, never." Then he got up quickly and added in a serious and deliberate tone:

HIM: Yes, you're right. I think that would be best. She's a good woman. Mr. Viellard says that she is so kind. And I know a little bit that she is. Nonetheless, to go humiliate oneself in front of an ugly bitch! To cry for pity at the feet of a miserable little actress who's always followed by the hissing from the theatre stalls! Me, Rameau, son of Mr. Rameau, apothecary of Dijon, a man of means, who's never bent his knee to anyone at all! Me, Rameau, nephew of the man who calls himself the Great Rameau, the man people see walking upright on the Palais Royal with his arms waving in the air, ever since Mr. Carmontelle made that drawing of him bent over with his hand under the tails of his coat. I, who have composed pieces for the keyboard which no one plays but which may well be the only ones which our posterity finds agreeable enough to play. I, well, I . . . I would go . . . but look here, sir, it's impossible.

Then, putting his right hand to his chest, he added, "I feel something there rising up—it says to me, 'Rameau, you'll do none of that.' There must be a certain dignity attached to human nature which nothing can extinguish. The most trivial thing will awaken it—something trifling. There are other days when it would cost me nothing to be as vile as anyone could wish. On those days for a penny I'd kiss the ass of the little Hus girl."

ME: But, my friend, she's white, pretty, young, soft, chubby—it's an act of humility that even a man more refined than you could sometimes stoop to.

Hus is a well-known Parisian actress, the lady whose home the younger Rameau was ejected from.

HIM: Let's understand each other—there's literal ass kissing and metaphorical ass kissing. Ask fat Bergier who kisses the ass of Madame de La Mark both literally and figuratively—my God, with them the literal and figurative disgust me equally.

ME: If the course of action I'm suggesting doesn't suit you, then have the courage to be a beggar.

HIM: It's hard to be poor, as long as there are so many wealthy idiots one can rely upon for one's living. And then contempt for oneself, that's unbearable.

ME: Do you know that feeling?

HIM: Do I know it? How many times have I said to myself, "How come there are ten thousand fine tables in Paris, each with fifteen or twenty places, and there's no place for you! There are purses full of gold spilling over left and right, and no piece falls on you! A thousand fine half wits without talent or merit, a thousand tiny creatures without charm, a thousand insipid schemers are well dressed, and you'd walk around naked? In this business how could you be so stupid? Couldn't you lie, swear, forswear, promise, and then perform or fail to perform, like everyone else? Couldn't you crawl on hands and knees like the others? Couldn't you promote a lady's affair and carry a love letter from a gentleman, like any other man? Couldn't you encourage this young man to speak to this young lady and persuade her to listen to him, like other men? Couldn't you tell the daughter of one of our bourgeois that she is badly dressed, that some fine earrings, a little rouge, lace, and a Polish-style dress would make her look ravishing, that those little feet of hers were not made to walk along the road, that there's a fine gentleman, young and

rich, who has a coat trimmed in gold, a superb horse and carriage, and six huge footmen, who saw her passing by and who finds her charming and who, since that day, has lost his desire for food and drink, doesn't sleep, and will die for her. 'But what about my father?' 'Yes, yes, your father! He will be a little angry at first.' 'And what about Mummy? She's told me so often to be an honest girl. She says there's nothing in the world but honour' 'An ancient saying which doesn't mean a thing.' 'And my father confessor?' 'You won't see him any more. Or if you continue the fairy tale of going to him to tell the story of your amusements, it will cost you some pounds of sugar and coffee.' 'But he's a strict man who has already refused me absolution for singing *Viens dans ma cellule*.' 'That's because you didn't have anything to give him, but when you appear before him in a lace dress . . .' 'Then I'll have a lace dress?' 'There's no doubt about it, all sorts of them, and diamond earrings.' 'So I'll have beautiful diamond earrings?' 'Yes.' 'Just like the ones belonging to that marquise who comes sometimes to buy gloves in our shop?' 'That's right. In a fine carriage with dappled gray horses, two large footmen, a small Negro, and a man running in front; you'll have rouge, beauty spots, a train carried behind you.' 'To a ball.' 'To a ball, to the opera, to the theatre.' Her heart is already quivering with joy. You play with a sheet of paper between your fingers. 'What's that?' 'It's nothing.' 'It seem to me to be . . .' 'It's a letter.' 'For whom?' 'For you, if you are at all curious.' 'Curious? I'm really curious. Let's see it.' She reads. 'A meeting. That's impossible.' 'Perhaps when you are going to mass.' 'Mamma always comes with me. But if he came here early in the morning. I get up first, and I'm at the counter before they get up.'

He comes. He is pleasing. One fine day at dusk the girl disappears, and I get paid my two thousand écus. How come you possess such talent and are short of bread. You wretched man, aren't you ashamed?" I remember a group of scoundrels who couldn't hold a candle to me and who were loaded with money. I was in a buckram overcoat, and they were dressed in velvet, leaning on gold-headed canes shaped like ravens' beaks, with pictures of Aristotle or Plato on cameo rings on their fingers. But who were they? For the most part they were incompetent musicians—nowadays a sort of nobility. At the time it gave me courage, raised my spirits, made my mind more subtle, capable of everything. But these happy states of mind apparently didn't last, because up to now I haven't been able to make any headway. Whatever the case, those are the words of my frequent soliloquies, which you can paraphrase however you like, provided you conclude from them that I understand disgust for oneself or the torment of conscience which arises from the uselessness of the gifts given to us by heaven. It's the cruelest thing of all. It would almost be better for a man not to be born.

I listened to him. While he was acting out the scene of the procurer and the young girl being seduced, I was pulled in two opposite directions—I didn't know whether to give in to my desire to laugh or get carried away with anger. I was perplexed. Twenty times a fit of laughter prevented my anger from bursting out—twenty times the anger arising at the bottom of my heart ended in a burst of laughter. I was taken aback by so much cleverness and base behaviour, by such valid ideas alternating with false ones, by such a general perversion of feeling and such complete depravity and such rare

frankness. He noticed the conflict going on inside me. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

ME: Nothing.

HIM: You seem upset.

ME: Well, I am.

HIM: What do you think I should do?

ME: Change the subject. You poor man, to be born or fall into such a debased condition.

HIM: I agree. However don't let my condition affect you too much. In revealing myself to you I didn't mean to cause you distress. From those people I've saved up something. Remember that I didn't need anything, absolutely nothing, and they gave me a considerable allowance for my trifling pleasures.

Then he began hitting his forehead again with one of his fists, biting his lip, rolling his wild eyes up to the ceiling, commenting, "But that business is over and done with. I've set something aside. Time has gone by. It's always that much more of a gain."

ME: You mean more of a loss.

HIM: No, no. More of a gain. We become richer every moment. It's one less day to go on living, or one écu more—it's all one. The important point is to keep emptying one's bowels easily, freely, pleasurably, copiously every night. *O stercus pretiosum!* That's the grand result of life in all conditions. In the last analysis, everyone is equally rich—Samuel Bernard, who by dint of robbery, pillaging, and bankruptcies leaves twenty-seven million in gold, or Rameau, who won't leave anything, Rameau, for whom charity will provide a

Latin for "Oh, precious shit!"

floor cloth as a shroud to wrap him in. A dead man doesn't hear the bells tolling. It's a waste of time for one hundred priests to shout themselves hoarse on his behalf or for him to be preceded and followed by a long line of burning torches. His soul does not walk alongside the master of ceremonies. To rot under marble or to rot under the earth—it's still rotting. To have around your coffin choirboys in red and choirboys in blue or none at all—what does that matter? Take a good look at this wrist. It used to be stiff as the devil. These ten fingers were like so many sticks stuck into a wooden metacarpal. And these tendons were old cords of catgut—drier, stiffer, and more inflexible than those used to turn a lathe operator's wheel. But I've tormented, broken, and abused them so much. You don't want to move, but, by God, I say that you will and that's that!

As he said this, with his right hand he grabbed the fingers and wrist of his left hand and bent them back and forth. The tips of his fingers were touching his arm. His joints were cracking. I was afraid he'd end up dislocating the bones.

ME: Be careful, I say to him. You're going to hurt yourself.

HIM: Don't worry. They can stand it. For ten years I've given them a hard time. Whatever they felt like, the little buggers had to get used to it and learn to strike the keys and fly over the strings. So right now they're working. Yes, they're working fine.

At that moment he takes on the pose of a violin player. He hums an allegro from Locatelli, and his right arm imitates the movement of the bow, while his left hand and his fingers seem to move along the length of the neck. If he hits a wrong note, he stops, tightens or loosens the string and plucks the

string with his nail, to make sure that it's just right. He resumes playing the piece where he has stopped. He keeps time with his feet, and thrashes about with his head, feet, hands, arms, and body.

Perhaps at some concert of spiritual music you've had occasion to see Ferrari or Chiabran or some other virtuoso in the same sort of convulsions, presenting a picture of the same torture. That gives me almost as much pain, for surely it's agonizing to watch the torment of someone who is busy giving me a representation of pleasure. If he simply has to show me a patient under torture, then draw a curtain between the man and me, something to conceal me. In the midst of his agitation and cries, if there was a moment when the note had to be held, one of those harmonious spots when the bow is drawn slowly across several strings at once, his face took on an ecstatic expression, his voice softened, and he listened in rapture. He was sure the harmony was resonating in his ears and mine. Then, placing his instrument under his left arm using the same hand he was holding it with and letting his right hand holding the bow fall, he said, "Well, what do you think of that?"

ME: Wonderful.

HIM: That was all right, I thought. That sounded almost like the others.

All at once he crouches down like a musician sitting down at a keyboard. I say to him, "Have mercy on yourself and me."

HIM: No, no. Since I've got your attention, you'll listen. I don't want anyone's approval unless they know why. You'll praise me with a more confident tone, and that might be worth another pupil to me.

ME: I don't go out very much, and you're going to exhaust yourself to no purpose.

HIM: I'm never tired.

Since I saw that my wish to pity the man was useless, for the violin sonata had left him bathed in sweat, I decided to let him do what he wanted. So there he was, seated at the keyboard, his legs bent, his head raised towards the ceiling where one would have said he was looking at a written musical score, singing, playing a prelude, working through a piece by Alberti or Galuppi, I don't know which of the two. His voice went like the wind, and his fingers flew across the keys, sometimes abandoning the upper part to play the bass, sometimes abandoning the accompaniment to return to the upper register. A series of emotions went in succession across his face. You could see there tenderness, anger, pleasure, sadness. You could feel the soft notes and the loud ones.

I'm sure that someone more astute than myself would have recognized the piece from the movement and style, from his expressions, and from some snatches of melody coming out of him now and then. But what was really strange was that from time to time he groped around and started again, as if he had made a mistake and was upset at himself for not having the piece at his finger tips. Finally he straightened up, wiped the beads of sweat running down his cheeks, and said, "You see that we also know how to play a tritone or an augmented fifth, and that we're familiar with transitions of dominants. Those enharmonic passages which my dear uncle has made such a fuss about, there's not all that much to it. We'll get a handle on it."

ME: You've gone to a lot of trouble to show me that you've got great skill. But I'm a man who would've taken your word for it.

HIM: Great skill? Oh no! I know a few tricks of the trade, and that's more than one needs. After all, in this country does anyone have to understand what he teaches?

ME: No more than people have to understand what they learn.



HIM: How old is your child?

ME: What the devil—leave my child and her age out of it, and let's get back to the teachers she'll have.

HIM: My goodness, I know nothing as stubborn as a philosopher. If one supplicates you very humbly, might one not be able to learn from Monsieur the Philosopher the approximate age of Mademoiselle his daughter?

ME: Let's assume she's eight years old.

HIM: Eight! She should have had her fingers on the keys four years ago.

ME: But perhaps I don't worry very much about putting into the plan for her education a study which is so time-consuming and which is so little use.

HIM: And what are you intending to teach her? Please tell me.

ME: To reason correctly, if I can. That's something uncommon among men and even rarer still among women.

HIM: Let her reason badly, as much as she likes, provided she's pretty, amusing, and flirtatious.

ME: Since in her case nature has been so ungrateful as to give her a delicate constitution with a sensible soul and to expose her to the same pains of life as if she had a strong constitution and a heart made of bronze, I'll teach her, if I can, to bear those pains bravely.

HIM: Oh, leave her to cry, suffer, and simper, with delicate nerves, like the others, provided she is pretty, amusing, and flirtatious. What, no dancing?

ME: No more than what's necessary for her to curtsy and have a decent carriage, to present herself well, and to know how to move.

HIM: No singing?

ME: No more than is necessary for her to enunciate well.

HIM: No music?

ME: If there was a good teacher of harmony, I would willingly entrust her to him for two hours a day for one or two years, no more.

HIM: And in the place of these essential things you are cutting out . . .

ME: I put grammar, literature, history, geography, a little drawing, and a great deal of moral instruction.

HIM: It would be so easy for me to prove to you the uselessness of all those subjects in a world like ours. Did I say uselessness—perhaps I should have said danger. But for the moment I'll confine myself to one question: Won't one or two teachers be necessary?

ME: Undoubtedly.

HIM: Ah, well there we are again! And these teachers—you hope they'll know something about the grammar, literature, history, geography, and morality which they're teaching her in her lessons? That's just a song and dance, my dear sir, a song and dance. If they grasped these matters well enough to teach them, they wouldn't be teaching them.

ME: Why not?

HIM: Because they would have spent their lives studying them. It's necessary to be profound in art or in science in order to grasp the basics well. Educational works can only be properly produced by those who have grown white in harness. It's the middle and the end which illuminate the shadows at the beginning. Ask your friend Mr. d'Alembert, the leading light in the mathematical sciences, if he would be too good to teach the basics. Only after twenty or thirty years of practice did my uncle glimpse the first faint light of musical theory.



ME: What have you read?

HIM: I've read, I read, and I constantly re-read Theophrastus, La Bruyère and Molière.

ME: Those are excellent books.

HIM: They are much better than people think, but who knows how to read them?

ME: Everyone, according to how intelligent he is.

HIM: Hardly anyone. Could you tell me what people are looking for in those books?

ME: Amusement and instruction.

HIM: What instruction? That's the point.

ME: A knowledge of one's duties, a love of virtue, and a hatred of vice.

HIM: Well, I gather from them everything one should do and everything which one shouldn't say. So when I read *L'Avare*, I say to myself: be a miser, if you want to, but be careful not to talk like a miser. When I read *Tartuffe* I tell myself: be a hypocrite, if you like, but don't talk like a hypocrite. Keep the vices which are useful, but don't assume a tone or an appearance which will make you ridiculous. In order to be sure about this tone and appearance, you have to know them. Now, these authors have provided excellent portraits of them. I am myself, and I remain what I am. But I act and speak in a way that's suitable. I'm not one of those people who disparage the moralists. One can profit a lot from them, above all from those who have put morals into action. Vice doesn't hurt people, except now and then. But the visible features of vice injure them from morning to night. Perhaps it would be better to be a scoundrel than to look like one—insolence in a character is only insulting from time to time, but an insolent appearance is always insulting. As for the rest, don't go and imagine that I'm the only reader of this sort. I've no particular merit in this, except that I've done systematically, with a keen intelligence and a reasonable and true aim in mind, what most others do by instinct. That's the reason why what they read doesn't make them better than me and why they continue to be ridiculous in spite of themselves—whereas I'm ridiculous only when I choose to be, and then I leave them far behind me. For the same art which at certain times

teaches me to save myself from being ridiculous also teaches me at other times to make myself ridiculous in a superior way. Then I recall everything other people have said, everything I've read, and I add to those everything from my own capital funds, which in this type of thing are a surprisingly rich resource.

ME: You've done well to reveal these mysteries to me. Without that I would've thought you were contradicting yourself.

HIM: No, I don't do that at all. Fortunately, for one occasion when it's necessary to avoid ridicule there are a hundred where one has to be ridiculous. There's no better role to play in the presence of grand people than that of the fool. For a long time there was an official jester to the king, but there has never been an official wise man to the king. Me, I'm a fool for Bertin and many others, perhaps for you at this moment, or perhaps you're my fool. A man who wanted to be wise would not have such a fool. That's why anyone who has a fool is not wise. If he's not wise, he's a fool and perhaps, if he's a king, his fool's fool. Beyond this, you should remember that in a subject as varied as morals, there's no absolute, essential, universal truth or falsity, unless it's the fact that one has to be what one's self-interest wants one to be, good or bad, wise or foolish, decent or ridiculous, honest or vicious. If by chance virtue had led the way to a fortune, either I'd have been virtuous or I'd have pretended to be virtuous, just like anyone else. People wanted me to be ridiculous, and that's what I've made myself.

ME: Yes, I think you're very useful to them, but they're even more so to you. You won't find a house as good as that

one, when you want to, but those people, if they're missing one fool, can come up with a hundred.

HIM: A hundred fools like me! Mister Philosopher, they're not as common as that. Yes, some insipid fools. It's harder to find quality in foolishness than in talent or virtue. I'm a rare member of my species, yes, very rare. Now that they don't have me any more, what are they doing? They're as bored as dogs. I'm an inexhaustible sack of impertinence. At every moment I had a joke which made people laugh until they cried. For them I was an entire house of idiots.

ME: At the very least it's indecent to make your benefactors sound ridiculous.

HIM: But isn't it even worse to let your good deeds give you an excuse to discredit your protégé?

ME: If the protégé wasn't vile on his own, nothing would give his protector such a right.

HIM: But if these people weren't ridiculous in themselves, one couldn't make up good stories about them. And then is it my fault if they become vulgar? Is it my fault, once they've become vulgar, if people betray and ridicule them? If they decide to live with people like us and have any common sense, they have to expect all sorts of dark stuff. People who take up with us, surely they know us for what we are, for self-interested souls—vile and two-timing? If they understand us, then everything's fine. There is a tacit agreement that they'll provide good things for us and sooner or later we'll pay back the good they've done us with something bad. Isn't this the agreement that exists between a man and his pet monkey or parrot? Brun cries out that Palissot, his guest and friend, has written some couplets attacking him. Palissot had to com-

pose the couplets, and it's Brun who's in the wrong. Poinsetin cries out that Palissot has ascribed to him the couplets he wrote against Brun. But Palissot had to ascribe to Poinsetin the couplets he wrote attacking Brun, and it's Poinsetin who's in the wrong. The little Abbé Rey cries out that his friend Palissot has snatched away his mistress after he introduced her to him. But he shouldn't have introduced someone like Palissot to his mistress if he wasn't prepared to lose her. Palissot did his duty, and it's Abbé Rey who is in the wrong. The bookseller David cries out because his associate Palissot has slept with or wanted to sleep with his wife. The wife of the bookseller David cries out that Palissot has told anyone willing to listen that he has slept with her. Whether Palissot has slept with the bookseller's wife or not is difficult to determine, because the wife's duty was to deny the fact and Palissot could've let people believe what was not true. Whatever the case, Palissot played his role, and it's David and his wife who are in the wrong. Helvetius may cry out that Palissot slanders him by putting him in a scene as a dishonest man, but Palissot still owes him the money he borrowed for the medical treatment for his bad health, as well as for his food and clothing. But should Helvetius have expected any other treatment from a man soiled with all sorts of infamy, a man who for fun makes his friend swear off his religion, who appropriates the assets of his partners, who has no faith, law, or feeling, who runs after fortune *per fas et nefas* [through right and wrong], who measures his days by the acts of villainy he commits, and who has even lampooned himself on stage as one of the most dangerous rascals—a piece of impudence I believe we've not seen in the past and won't see in the future?

No. So it's not Palissot but Helvetius who's in the wrong. If one takes a young man from the provinces to the zoo at Versailles and his foolishness persuades him to stick his hand through the bars of the tiger's or panther's cage, and if the young man leaves his arm behind in the throat of the ferocious animal, who's in the wrong? All that is written in the tacit agreement. Too bad for the man who doesn't know that or who forgets it. How many of those people accused of viciousness I could justify by appealing to this universal and sacred pact, whereas people should accuse themselves of stupidity. Yes, you fat countess, you're the one in the wrong when you gather around you what people of your sort call "characters," and when these "characters" play dirty tricks on you and you do the same, thus exposing yourself to the resentment of decent people. Honest people do what they ought to do, so do your "characters." And it's your fault for having collected them. If Bertinhus lived quietly and peacefully with his mistress, if through the honesty of their characters they'd made the acquaintance of decent people, they'd have summoned round them men of talent, people known in society for their virtue. If they'd reserved for a small enlightened select group hours of entertainment taken from the sweet life they had together loving each other in the quiet of their retreat, do you think people would have made up stories about them, good or bad? So then what happened to them? They got what they deserved. They've been punished for their imprudence. And we're the ones whom Providence has destined from all eternity to bring justice to the Bertins of today. And it's people like us among our descendants who are destined to bring justice to the Montsauges and Bertins of the future. But while

we execute the decrees of justice on stupidity, you paint us as we are and carry out these just decrees against us. What would you think of us, if, with our disgraceful habits, we claimed that we enjoyed popular favour? You'd say we were out of our minds. And those who expect decent treatment from people born vicious, from vile and base characters, are they wise? Everything in this world receives its due. There are two public prosecutors. The one by your door punishes the criminal offences against society. Nature is the other. She recognizes all the vices which escape the laws. You devote yourself to debauchery with women. You'll get dropsy. You're a scoundrel. You'll get consumption. You open your door to rascals, and you live with them. You'll be betrayed, mocked, and despised. The simplest thing to do is to resign yourself to the equity of these judgments and tell yourself that it's all right. Then you can shake your ears and change your ways, or else stay as you are, but on the conditions mentioned above.

ME: You're right.

HIM: In fact, about these bad stories—I don't myself make any of them up. I stick to the role of peddler. They say that a few days ago, at five o'clock in the morning, people could hear a really violent noise. All the house bells were in motion. There were stifled and broken cries of a man choking. "Help, help. I'm being suffocated. I'm dying." These cries came from the apartment of my patron. People arrived. They went to help him. That fat creature of ours had lost her mind and was no longer aware of what she was doing—which sometimes happens at such moments. She kept speeding up her movements—raising herself on her two hands so that from higher up she could let fall on his casual parts her

weight of two or three hundred pounds, energized with all the speed provided by furious desire. They had a lot of difficulty getting him out from under. What a devilish fantasy for a little hammer to place himself under a heavy anvil!

ME: You're too naughty. Speak about something else. Since we've been talking, I've had a question on the tip of my tongue.

HIM: Why has it stayed there so long?

ME: I was afraid it might be indiscreet.

HIM: After the things I've just shown you, I don't know what secret I could conceal from you.

ME: You have no doubts about how I judge your character.

HIM: None whatsoever. In your eyes I'm a very abject person, very contemptible, and I'm also sometimes just the same in my own eyes, but rarely. I congratulate myself on my vices more often than I criticize myself for them.

ME: That's true, but why show me all your nastiness?

HIM: Well, first because you know a good deal about it already, and I saw that there's more to win than to lose by confessing the rest to you.

ME: Please tell me how that works.

HIM: If it's important to be sublimely good at anything, it's above all necessary with being bad. People spit on a petty cheat, but they can't hold back a certain respect for a grand criminal. His courage astonishes you. His atrocity makes you tremble. In everything, people value integrity of character.

ME: But this worthy integrity of character, you don't yet have it. From time to time I find you vacillating in your prin-

ciples. It's uncertain whether you hold to your nastiness from nature or from study, or if study has taken you as far as it's possible to go.

HIM: I agree with that. But I've done my best. Haven't I had the modesty to recognize beings more perfect than myself? Haven't I spoken to you about Bouret with the most profound admiration? Bouret, in my view, is the greatest man in the world.

ME: But immediately after Bouret, there's you.

HIM: No.

ME: Then it's Palissot?

HIM: It's Palissot, but it's not only Palissot.

ME: And who could be worthy of sharing second place with him?

HIM: The renegade from Avignon.

ME: I've never heard mention of this renegade of Avignon, but he must be a really astonishing man.

HIM: That he is.

ME: The history of great people has always interested me.

HIM: That I can believe. This one used to live with a good and honest descendant of Abraham—the one who was promised he'd be father of the faithful and they'd be as numerous as the stars.

ME: He lived with a Jew?

HIM: With a Jew. He began by winning the Jew's sympathy and then his good will, and finally his total confidence. That's how it always goes. We count so much on the effects of our kindnesses that we rarely hide a secret from someone we've buried in our good deeds. It's impossible to have no ungrateful people when we expose men to the temptation of be-

ing ungrateful with impunity. This perceptive idea is one our Jew did not think about. So he confided to the renegade that he could not in good conscience eat pork. Now you're going to see the advantages a creative mind can derive from this confession. A few months went by, during which our renegade strengthened the bond between them. When he thought that the Jew was totally won over and truly caught, that his attentions had completely convinced him that he didn't have a better friend in all the tribes of Israel . . . You have to admire the man's circumspection. He didn't hurry. He lets the pear grow ripe before he shakes the branch. Too much eagerness could have ruined his project. Usually greatness of character comes from a natural balance of several contrasting qualities.

ME: Leave your reflections and go on with your story.

HIM: That's not possible. There are days when I have to reflect. It's a sickness which has to be left to run its course. Where was I?

ME: At the well established intimacy between the Jew and the renegade.

HIM: So the pear was ripe... But you're not listening to me. What are you dreaming about?

ME: I'm dreaming about the unevenness of your style—sometimes lofty, sometimes low.

HIM: Can the style of a vicious man be unified? He comes one night to the home of his good friend, with an agitated air, his voice broken, his face pale as death, trembling in all his limbs. "What's the matter with you?" "We're lost." "Lost? How?" "Lost, I'm telling you, lost without hope." "Explain yourself." "Wait a minute until I get over my fear." "Come on,

pull yourself together," the Jew said to him, instead of saying, "You're an incorrigible scoundrel. I don't know what you have to tell me, but you're an incorrigible scoundrel. You're pretending to be terrified."

ME: And why should he have spoken to him like that?

HIM: Because the man was a liar and had gone too far. That's clear to me, so don't interrupt me any more. "We're lost, lost without hope." Don't you sense the affectation in the repetition of the word *lost*? "A traitor has denounced us to the Holy Inquisition—you as a Jew and me as a renegade, as a disgusting renegade." Observe how the traitor was not embarrassed to use the most odious expressions. It requires more courage than people think to call yourself by your proper name. You have no idea what it costs to get to that point.

ME: Of course not. But what about this disgusting renegade...?

HIM: He's a liar, but it's a really adroit lie. The Jew gets scared. He pulls his beard. He rolls on the ground. He sees the guard at his door. He sees himself dressed in the San Benito and his own *auto-da-fé* being prepared. "My friend, my dear friend, my only friend, what do we do?" "What do we do? You show yourself, you affect the greatest self-confidence, go on with your business as usual. The procedures of this tribunal are secret, but slow. You must use the delay to sell everything. I'll charter a ship or I'll get a third party to do it—yes, a third party, that'll be better. We'll put your fortune in it, because it's mainly your fortune they want, and we'll go, you and I, to seek under another sky the liberty to serve our God and to follow in safety the law of Abraham and our con-

science. The important point in these perilous circumstances we find ourselves in is not to do anything imprudent.” No sooner said than done. The ship is chartered, loaded with provisions and sailors. The Jew’s fortune is on board. The next day, at dawn, they’re going to set sail. They can dine happily and sleep soundly. The next day, they’ll escape their persecutors. During the night the renegade gets up, steals the Jew’s wallet, his purse, and his jewels, goes on board, and sails away. And you think that’s all there is to it? If so, you haven’t got the point. When I was told this story, I guessed what I haven’t yet told you, to test your intelligence. You’ve done well to be a respectable man—you wouldn’t have been anything but a petty rogue. And up to this point, the renegade has been only that—a miserable wretch whom no one would want to be like. But the supreme part of his wickedness is that he had himself denounced his good friend the Israelite. The Holy Inquisition seized him when he got up and, some days later, turned him into a fine bonfire. That’s how the renegade became the peaceful possessor of the fortune of this cursed descendant of those who crucified Our Saviour.

ME: I don’t know which gives me greater horror—the evil of your renegade or your style of speaking about him.

HIM: That’s the very thing I was telling you. The atrocity of the action takes you beyond contempt, and that’s the reason why I’m so sincere. I wanted you to understand how I excelled in my art and to pull out of you the admission that I was at least original in my degradation. I wanted to give you the idea that I belonged in the line of great scoundrels and then to shout to myself, “*Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum impera-*

tor!” Come, Mr. Philosopher, sing along, “*Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum imperator!*”

At that point he began to sing a really extraordinary fugue. Sometimes the melody was serious and full of majesty; sometimes light and playful. At one moment he imitated the bass, at another one of the upper parts. He indicated to me with his outstretched arms and neck the places with held notes and performed and made up on his own a song of triumph. It showed that he knew more about good music than about good habits.

As for me, I didn’t know if I ought to remain or run away, to laugh or grow indignant. I stayed, intending to steer the conversation onto some subject which would rid my soul of the horror filling it. I was starting to find it difficult to endure the presence of a man who talked about a horrible action, a hideous crime, like a connoisseur of painting or poetry examining the beauties of a tasteful work or like a moralist or historian selecting and emphasizing the circumstances of a heroic action. I became gloomy, in spite of myself. He noticed that and spoke to me.

HIM: What’s the matter? Are you feeling ill?

ME: A little. But it will pass.

HIM: You have the worried look of a man upset about some distressing idea.

ME: That’s it.

After a moment of silence on his part and mine, during which he walked around whistling and singing, to get him back to his talent I said to him: “What are you doing at present?”

HIM: Nothing.

“Long live Mascarillus, Emperor of the Rogues!”

ME: That very tiring.

HIM: I was already stupid enough. Then I went to hear the music of Duni and other young composers, and that finished me off.

ME: So you approve of this style of music?

HIM: No doubt.

ME: You find beauty in these new melodies?

HIM: My God, do I find beauty in them? I'll say I do. What declamation! What truth! What expressiveness!

ME: Every art of imitation has its model in nature. What's the musician's model when he writes a tune?

HIM: Why not tackle the issue at a higher level? What's a melody?

ME: I confess to you that this question is beyond my capabilities. In that we're all alike. In our memory we have only words which we think we understand from our frequent use of them and even the correct way we apply them. But in our minds they are only vague notions. When I say the word "melody," I don't have ideas any clearer than yours or those of the majority of people like you when they say "reputation," "blame," "honour," "vice," "virtue," "modesty," "decency," "shame," "ridicule."

HIM: A melody is an imitation using the sounds of a scale invented by art or inspired by nature, whichever you like, either with the voice or with an instrument, an imitation of the physical sounds or accents of passion. You see that, by changing some things in this definition, it would fit exactly a definition of painting, oratory, sculpture, and poetry. Now, to get to your question. What's the musician's model or the model of a melody? It's declamation, if the model is alive and think-

ing; it's noise, if the model is inanimate. You must think of declamation as a line, and the melody as another line which winds along the first. The more this declamation, the basis of the melody, is strong and true, the more the melody which matches it will intersect it in a greater number of points. And the truer the melody, the more beautiful it will be. That's something our young musicians have understood really well. When one hears *Je suis un pauvre diable*, one thinks one can recognize the sad cry of a miser. If he wasn't singing, he would speak to the earth in the same tones when he entrusts his gold to it, saying, *O terre, reçois mon trésor*. And that little girl who feels her heart beating, who blushes, who's confused, and who begs the gentleman to let her go—would she express herself any differently? In these works there are all sorts of characters, an infinite variety of declamations. That's sublime—I'm the one telling you this. Go on, go on and listen to the piece where the young man who feels himself dying, cries out, *Mon coeur s'en va*. Listen to the song. Listen to the instrumental accompaniment, and then tell me what difference there is between the real actions of a man who's dying and the form of the melody. You'll see whether the line of the melody coincides completely with the line of the declamation or not. I'm not going to talk to you about measure, which is another condition of melody. I'm confining myself to the expression, and there is nothing more obvious than the following passage which I read somewhere—*musices seminarium accentus*—accent is the breeding ground of melody. Judge from that just how difficult and how important it is to know how to deal with recitative well. There is no fine tune from which one cannot make a fine recitative, and no fine recitative from

which an expert cannot derive a fine tune. I wouldn't want to guarantee that someone who recites well will also sing well, but I would be surprised if a person who sings well didn't know how to recite well. And you should believe everything I've said about this, because it's the truth.

ME: I'd like nothing better than to believe you, if I were not held back by one small difficulty.

HIM: And this difficulty?

ME: Well, it's this—if this music is sublime, then the music of Lully, Campra, Destouches, Mouret, and even, just between us, your dear uncle must be a little dull.

HIM: [*coming close and whispering in my ear*] I don't wish to be overheard, for there are plenty of people who know me around here. But their music is dull. It's not that I concern myself much about my dear uncle, if he's "dear" at all. He's a stone. He could look at me with my tongue hanging out a foot and he wouldn't give me a glass of water. But he's done well with the octave, with the seventh—tra la la, rum ti tum, too de loo—with a devilish noise. Still, those who are beginning to understand these things and who'll no longer accept this fussing about for music will never put up with that.

He crammed together and jumbled up together thirty songs—Italian, French, tragic, comic—in all sorts of different styles. Sometimes in a bass voice he went down all the way to hell, and sometimes he'd feign a falsetto and sing at the top of his voice, tearing into the high points of some songs, imitating the walk, deportment, gestures of the different singing characters, by turns furious, soft, imperious, sniggering. At one point, he's a young girl crying—portraying all her mannerisms—at another point he's a priest, he's a king, he's a ty-

rant—he threatens, commands, loses his temper. He's a slave. He obeys. He calms down, he laments, he complains, he laughs—never straying from the tone, rhythm, or sense of the words or the character of the song.

All the men pushing wood had left their chess boards and gathered around him. The windows of the café were filled up on the outside by passers-by who'd been stopped by the sound. People gave out bursts of laughter strong enough to break open the ceiling. But he didn't notice a thing. He continued, in the grip of some mental fit, of an enthusiasm so closely related to madness that it's uncertain whether he'll come out of it. It might be necessary to throw him into a cab and take him straight to the lunatic asylum. As he was singing snatches from *Lamentations* by Jomelli, he brought out the most beautiful parts of each piece with precision, truth, and an incredible warmth. That beautiful recitative in which the prophet describes the desolation of Jerusalem he bathed in a flood of tears which brought tears to everyone's eyes. Everything was there—the delicacy of the song, the force of expression, the sorrow. He stressed those places where the composer had particularly demonstrated his great mastery. If he stopped the singing part, it was to take up the part of the instruments, which he left suddenly to return to the vocals, moving from one to the other in such a way as to maintain the connections and the overall unity, taking hold of our souls and keeping them suspended in the most unusual situation which I've ever experienced. Did I admire him? Oh yes, I admired him! Was I touched with pity? I was touched with pity. But a tinge of ridicule was mixed in with these feelings and spoiled them.

But you would've burst out laughing at the way in which he imitated the different instruments. With his cheeks swollen, all puffed out, and with harsh, dark sounds he delivered the horns and bassoons. For the oboes he produced a shrill nasal tone, and then accelerated his voice with an amazing speed for the stringed instruments, trying to find the best approximations for their sounds. He whistled for the piccolos, warbled for the flutes, shouting, singing, carrying on like a maniac, acting out, by himself, the male and female dancers and singers, an entire orchestra, the whole musical company, dividing himself into twenty different roles, running, stopping, looking like a man possessed, frothing at the mouth. It was stiflingly hot, and the sweat running down the wrinkles in his forehead and down the length of his cheeks mixed in with the powder in his hair came down in streaks and lined the top of his coat. What didn't I see him do? He cried, he laughed, he sighed, he looked tender or calm or angry—a woman who was swooning in grief, an unhappy man left in total despair, a temple being built, birds calming down at sunset, waters either murmuring in a cool lonely place or descending in a torrent from the high mountains, a storm, a tempest, the cries of those who are going to die intermingled with the whistling winds, the bursts of thunder, the night, with its shadows—silent and dark—for sounds do depict even silence.

His mind was completely gone. Worn out with fatigue and looking like a man coming out of a deep sleep or a long trance, he stayed motionless, dazed, astonished. He directed his gaze around him, like someone disturbed who's trying to recognize where is. He was waiting for his energy and his

spirit to return. Mechanically he wiped his face, like someone who wakes up to see a large number of people surrounding his bed, totally forgetful of or profoundly ignorant about what's happened. He first cried out, "Well then, gentlemen, what's going on? Why are you laughing? What's so surprising? What's happening?" Then he added, "Now that's what people should call music and a musician. However, gentlemen, we should not deprecate certain pieces of Lully. I defy anyone to improve on the scene '*Ab! j'attendrai*' without changing the words. At that point, his voice grew loud, he sustained the sounds. The neighbours came to their windows, and we stuffed our fingers in our ears. He added, "Here's where we need lungs, a great organ, plenty of air. But before long it will be time to say yours sincerely good bye to Assumption, Lent, and Epiphany. They still don't know what needs to be set to music and thus what's appropriate for a composer. Lyric poetry has yet to be born. But they'll get there, by hearing Pergolisi, the Saxon, Terradoglias, Trasetta and the rest—by reading Metastasio they'll have to get there."

ME: So Quinault, La Motte, and Fontenelle didn't understand any of that?

HIM: Not the new style. There aren't six consecutive lines in all their charming poems which can be set to music. There are ingenious sentences, light madrigals, tender and delicate, but if you want to see how that's a barren resource for our art, which is the most demanding of all—and I don't except the art of Demosthenes—get someone to recite these pieces. You'll find them so cold, listless, and monotonous. There's nothing there which could serve as the basis for a melody. I'd sooner have La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* or Pascal's *Pensées*

set to music. The cry of animal passion should dictate the line which suits us. The expressive passages must follow each other closely. The phrasing must be brief, the sense cut off, suspended, so the musician can use the whole piece and each of its parts, leaving out a word or repeating it, adding a missing word, turning and re-turning it, like a polyp, without destroying it—all that makes French lyric poetry much harder than is the case with languages with inversions which in themselves offer all these advantages. “*Cruel barbarian, plunge your dagger in my breast. Here I am ready to receive the fatal blow! Strike. Dare.... Oh, I faint, I die.... A secret fire lights up my senses.... Cruel love, what do you want with me... Leave me to the sweet peace I enjoyed... Give me my reason....*” The passions must be strong. The tenderness of the composer and the poet should be extreme. The aria is almost always the peroration for the scene. We have to have exclamations, interjections, suspensions, interruptions, affirmations, negations—we call, we invoke, we cry out, we groan, we cry, we laugh openly. No wit, no epigrams, none of these neatly crafted thoughts. That’s too far from simple nature. And don’t go on thinking that the role playing of theatrical actors and their declamation can serve us as models. Bah! We need something more energetic, less mannered, more true. The straightforward language and common voice of passion are all the more necessary for us because our language is more monotonous and less stressed. The cry of an animal or a man in passion will provide them.

While he was saying these things to me, the crowd which had surrounded us had moved away, either because they couldn’t hear anything or were taking less interest in what he

was saying. For, in general, human beings, like children, prefer to be amused than to be instructed. They’d gone back, each to his game, and we remained alone in our corner. Seated on a bench with his head leaning against the wall, his arms hanging down, and his eyes half-closed, he said to me, “I don’t know what’s the matter with me. When I came here, I was fresh and in good form. And now, here I am beaten up and shattered, as if I’d hiked thirty miles. Something came over me all of a sudden.”

ME: Would you like some refreshment?

They served us some beer and lemonade. He fills a large glass and drains it two or three times, one after the other. Then, like a man with renewed energy he coughs, moves around, and starts again.

ME: How is it that with such fine discrimination and such a strong sensibility for the beauties of musical art, you are also blind to the beautiful things in morality and equally insensible to the charms of virtue?

HIM: I suppose it’s because there’s a sense for some things which I lack, a fibre which I wasn’t given, a loose fibre which one can pluck firmly but which will not vibrate, or perhaps it’s because I’ve always lived among good musicians and bad people, so that it’s made my ear become very refined and my heart deaf. And then there was something about heredity. My father’s blood and my uncle’s blood are the same. My blood is the same as my father’s. My paternal molecule was hard and stubborn, and this damned first molecule has swallowed up the rest.

ME: Do you love your child?

HIM: Do I love the little savage? I’m crazy about him.

ME: Are you seriously concerned about stopping the effects in him of this damned paternal molecule?

HIM: I've been working on it—but without much effect, I think. If he's destined to become a good man, I won't do him any injury. But if the molecule wants him to become a scoundrel like his father, the troubles I've taken to make him a decent man could be very harmful. Education would work against the tendency of the molecule, and he'd be pulled apart, as if by two opposing forces, and would stagger all over the place along the road of life, as I have seen in countless people, equally awkward in doing good or bad. Those are the ones we call "types"—which is the most frightening of all labels, because it indicates mediocrity and the final degree of contempt. A great scoundrel is a great scoundrel, but he's not a type. It would require an enormous length of time before the paternal molecule could reassert its mastery and take him to the state of perfect debasement where I am. He'd lose his best years. So I'm doing nothing about it at the moment. I'll let him come along. I'll keep my eye on him. He is already greedy and glib—a lazy thief and a liar. I'm afraid he's true to his heredity.

ME: Why not make a musician of him, so he'll be just like you?

HIM: A musician! A musician! Sometimes I look at him and grind my teeth, telling him, "If you ever learn a single note, I believe I'll wring your neck."

ME: And why on earth would you do that?

HIM: It doesn't lead to anything.

ME: It leads to everything.

HIM: Yes, when one excels, but who can promise himself that his child will excel? The odds are ten thousand to one that he'll be nothing but an unhappy scraper of strings, like me. You know, it would probably be easier to find a child suited to govern a kingdom, to make a great king, than one to make a great violin player.

ME: It seems to me that agreeable talents, even mediocre ones, among a people without morals, lost in debauchery and luxury, would enable a man to advance rapidly along the road to fortune.

HIM: I see where you're going. One has to close one's eyes to that.. There is no principle of morality which doesn't have some inconvenience. At the worst, one has a bad fifteen minutes, and then it's all over.

ME: Even after such courageous and such wise opinions, I continue to think that it would be good to make him a musician. I'd don't know any way one can get close to important people more quickly, pander to their vices, and make a profit from one's own.

HIM: It's true, but I have plans for a faster and more assured success. Oh, if the child were only a daughter! But since we can't do what we want, we have to take what comes and get the best we can from that. And for that, one shouldn't be stupid, like most fathers who give a Spartan education to a child destined to live in Paris. They couldn't do any worse if they were intending to make their children unhappy. If education is poor, it's the fault of my country's customs, not mine. Whoever's responsible, I want my son to be happy or, what amounts to the same thing, honoured, rich, and powerful. I know a few of the easiest ways to arrive at this goal, and

I'll teach him those early on. If you criticize me, you wise men, the mob and my child's success will absolve me. He'll have gold—I assure you—and if he has a lot of that, he won't lack anything, not even your estimation and respect.

ME: You could be wrong.

HIM: Well then, he'll go without, like plenty of other people.

...

HIM: Come now, you needn't be afraid. The important point, the difficult point which a father has to attend to above all, is not so much to give his child vices that will make him wealthy or foolish behaviour that will make him valuable to great people—everyone does that, if not systematically, as I do, at least by example and in lessons—but to give him a sense of proportion, the art of dodging shame, dishonour, and the law. Those are dissonances in the social harmony which he must know how to set up, prepare, and resolve. Nothing is so insipid as a sequence of perfect chords. There has to be something which acts as a spur, which breaks up the light and scatters its rays.

ME: That's very good. With this comparison you bring me back from morality to music, which I'd strayed from in spite of myself. I thank you for that, for, to be perfectly frank with you, I like you better as a musician than as a moralist.

HIM: But I'm very second-rate in music and much better as a moralist.

ME: I doubt it, but even if that were true, I'm a good man, and your principles are not the same as mine.

HIM: So much the worse for you. Ah, if I only had your talents.

ME: Leave my talents out of it. Let's get back to yours.

HIM: You're right. In the entire kingdom, there's only one man who walks. That's the king. All the rest take up positions.

ME: The king? Isn't there more to it than that? Don't you think that, from time to time, he finds beside him a little foot, a little curl, a little nose which makes him go through a small pantomime? Whoever needs someone else is a beggar and takes up a position. The king takes up a position before his mistress and before God. He goes through the paces of his pantomime. The minister goes through the paces of prostitute, flatterer, valet, or beggar in front of his king. The crowds of ambitious people dance your positions in hundreds of ways, each more vile than the others, in front of the minister. The noble abbé in his bands of office and his long cloak goes at least once a week in front of the agent in charge of the list of benefices. My goodness, what you call the pantomime of beggars is what makes the earth go round. Everyone has his little Hus and his Bertin.

HIM: That's a great consolation.

But while I was speaking, he was imitating in a killingly funny way the positions of the persons I was naming. For example, for the little abbé, he held his hat under his arm and his breviary in his left hand; in his right hand he lifted up the train of his cloak. He came forward, with his head a little inclined towards his shoulders, his eyes lowered, imitating the hypocrite so perfectly that I believed I was looking at the author of the *Refutations* appearing before the Bishop of Orleans. For the flatterers and for the ambitious he crawled

along on his belly—just like Bouret at the Ministry of Finance.

ME: That's done extremely well. But there's one creature who can do without pantomime. That's the philosopher who has nothing and who demands nothing.

HIM: Where's there an animal like that? If he has nothing, he suffers. If he's not asking for anything, he'll get nothing, and he'll be suffering for ever.

ME: No. Diogenes mocked his needs.

HIM: But we have to have clothing.

ME: No. He went about totally naked.

HIM: Sometimes the weather was cold in Athens.

ME: Less so than here.

HIM: People eat there.

ME: No doubt.

HIM: At whose expense?

ME: At nature's. Where does the savage turn? To the earth, to animals, to fish, to trees, to grasses, to roots, to streams.

HIM: A bad menu.

ME: It's a big one.

HIM: But badly served.

ME: Still, it's nature's table that serves to cover our own.

HIM: I'll take you up on that. Diogenes also danced his pantomime, if not in front of Pericles, at least in front of Lais or Phryne.

ME: You're wrong again. Other people used to pay a prostitute well who gave herself to him for pleasure.

HIM: But what happened if the prostitute was busy and the cynic was in a hurry?

ME: He'd go back to his barrel and take matters into his own hands.

HIM: And you're advising me to imitate Diogenes?

ME: I'll bet my life it's better than crawling, demeaning, and prostituting oneself.

HIM: But I need a good bed, a fine table, warm clothing in winter, cool clothing in summer, spare time, money, and lots of other things which I prefer to owe to charity than to acquire by work.

ME: That's because you're a good-for-nothing, greedy coward—with a soul of mud.

HIM: I think I've told you that.

ME: Things in life no doubt have a price, but you've no idea of the sacrifice you're making to obtain them. You dance, you have danced, and you'll continue to dance the vile pantomime.

HIM: It's half past five. I hear the bell sounding for vespers for the Abbé de Canaye and for me. Farewell, Mister Philosopher. Isn't it true that I'm always the same?

ME: Alas, yes—unfortunately.

HIM: Well, I hope this misfortune keeps going for only another forty years. The man who'll laugh last will laugh best.



Lais and Phryne were well-known Parisian prostitutes.



The Encyclopedia

DENIS DIDEROT



Taste. The preceding article has described taste in its physical meaning. This sense, this capacity for discriminating between different foods, has given rise, in all known languages, to the metaphorical use of the word “taste” to designate the discernment of beauty and flaws in all the arts. It discriminates as quickly as the tongue and the palate, and like physical taste it anticipates thought. In common with physical taste it is sensitive to what is good and reacts to it with a feeling of pleasure, it refuses with disgust what is bad; it is frequently uncertain and misleading, at times it cannot even tell whether something is pleasant or not, and sometimes it needs practice to develop discrimination.

In order to have taste, it is not enough to see and to know what is beautiful in a given work. One must feel beauty and be moved by it. It is not even enough to feel, to be moved in a vague way: it is essential to discern the different shades of feeling. Nothing must escape an instantaneous perception. Here again intellectual and artistic taste resembles sensual taste: just as the gourmet immediately perceives and recognizes a mixture of two liqueurs, so the man of taste, the connoisseur, will discern in a rapid glance any mixture of styles. He will perceive a flaw next to an embellishment.

Just as having bad taste in the physical sense means deriving pleasure only from seasoning that is excessively piquant and unusual, so having bad taste in the arts is to enjoy only elaborate ornamentation and to be insensitive to *la belle nature* [beautiful nature].

A depraved taste in food consists in choosing those dishes which disgust other men; it is a kind of sickness. A depraved taste in the arts consists in enjoying subjects that are revolting to men of good judgment. Such taste leads us to prefer the burlesque to what is noble, and to prefer what is precious and affected to simple and natural beauty: this is a sickness of the mind. Man molds and educates his taste in art much more than his sensual taste: though it may sometimes happen in sensual taste that men end by liking things that at first seemed repugnant to them, yet nature intended that as a general rule men would have an innate feeling for their needs; intellectual taste on the other hand needs more time to develop. A young man who is sensitive but untutored cannot at first distinguish the parts in a large chorus; in a painting, his eyes do not at first distinguish the shadings, the *chiaroscuro*, the perspective, the harmony of its colors, and the correctness of the draughtsmanship; yet little by little his ears learn to hear and his eyes to see. The first time he sees a beautiful tragedy he will be moved, but he will be unable to discern either the effect of the unities, or the subtle art by which all unjustified entrances and exits are avoided, or the even greater art by which unity of interest is created, or any of the other difficulties mastered by the author. Practice and reflection alone will make it possible for him to experience immediate pleasure from elements that formerly he could not dis-

tinguish at all. Good taste develops gradually in a nation that has hitherto lacked it because, little by little, men come under the influence of good artists: they become accustomed to seeing pictures with the eyes of Lebrun, Poussin, and Le Sueur, they hear the musical recitation of Quinault's scenes with the ears of Lulli, the melodies of a symphony with the ears of Rameau, and they read books with the minds of the best authors.

It is said that one should not argue about matters of taste. This is true as long as it is only a question of sensual taste, of the revulsion one experiences for a certain food and the preference one feels for another. This is not subject to argument because it is impossible to correct a flaw that is organic. The same is not true in the arts: since the arts have genuine beauty, there exists a good taste that discerns it and a bad taste that is unaware of it, and often the flaw of the mind that produces wrong taste can be corrected. There are also cold souls and men incapable of sound reasoning; these can neither be inspired with feeling nor corrected in their thinking; with them one should not argue about matters of taste since they have none.

In many fields taste is arbitrary, such as in fabrics, finery, coaches, and all matters that cannot be considered on a level with the arts; in such cases we should use the word "whim." It is whim rather than taste that produces new fashions.

The taste of a nation can become debased. Such a misfortune usually happens after a century in which perfection was reached. The nation's artists, fearing to be imitators, venture along untraveled paths. They wander far from the *belle nature* their predecessors rendered successfully. There is merit in

their efforts, and as this merit hides their faults, the public being avid for anything new runs after them. It soon loses interest, however, and others appear who try to please it in still other ways. These stray even further from nature, taste disappears altogether, and men find themselves surrounded by a rapid succession of innovations. The public loses its bearings and vainly longs for the century of good taste that cannot return. Good taste becomes an heirloom which a few sound minds hold in safekeeping far from the crowd.

There are vast countries into which good taste has never penetrated. These are the countries where sociability has remained crude, where men and women do not gather together, where certain arts, such as the sculpture or painting of animate beings, are forbidden by religion. When there is little sociability, the mind shrinks and grows dull because there is nothing to educate its taste. When some of the fine arts are absent, the others rarely manage to exist, because all the arts are interdependent and sustain each other. This is one of the reasons why there is scarcely any kind of art in which the Asians have ever excelled, and why good taste has only fallen to the lot of a few nations in Europe. *Article by M. de Voltaire.*

Hermaphrodite. A person who has both sexes, or the natural parts of man and woman.

This term comes to us from the Greeks; they composed it of the name of a god and a goddess, in order to express in one word, according to custom, the mix or the conjunction of Mercury and Venus, whom they believed to have presided over the birth of this extraordinary being. But whether the Greeks drew this prejudice from the principles of Astrology

or from hermetic philosophy, they cleverly imagined that the *hermaphrodite* was the offspring of Mercury and of Venus. An honorable place is due to the child of a god and a goddess, and this is why legend continues to honor Greek illusions. The nymph Salmacis having fallen desperately in love with a young *hermaphrodite*, and not being able to awaken him, prayed to the gods to make their two bodies into one; Salmacis got her wish, but the gods left traces of both sexes on the new being.

Nevertheless, this prodigal of nature, who united the two sexes in the same being, was not favorably welcomed by all, if we believe the account of Alexander ab Alexandro, who says that the people who bore the sexes of both man and woman, or to use a single word, the *hermaphrodites*, were regarded by the Athenians and the Romans as monsters, and thrown into the sea at Athens and at Rome into the Tiber.

But are there true *hermaphrodites*? One could raise this question in the times of ignorance; one should no longer propose it during the enlightened centuries. If nature wanders sometimes in the production of man, it does not go as far as metamorphoses, confusions of substances, and perfect assemblages of two sexes. That which is given at birth, even, perhaps, at conception, does not change into another; there is no person in whom the two sexes are perfect, that is to say who could reproduce in herself as a woman, and also outside himself as a man, *tanquam mas generare ex alio, & tanquam foemina generare in se ipso* [...for as much as the male to produce out of another and the female to produce in her own self...] in the words of one canonist. Nature never permanently confuses these true signs, nor its true marks; nature ul-

timately shows the characteristics that distinguish sex; and if from time to time these are hidden in infancy, they are definitively revealed in puberty. *Article by Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt.*

Angola, African kingdom in the Congo, between the Dande and the Coanza rivers. Its coast provides Europeans with the best Negroes; the Portuguese are powerful on this continent and they carry away so many inhabitants that it is surprising that they haven't depopulated the country. In exchange for Negroes they give cloth, feathers, fabric, canvas, lace, wines, alcohol, spices, hardware, sugar, fish hooks, pins, needles, etc. The Portuguese have a settlement at Benguela that is so unhealthy they send their criminals there. *Diderot.*

America, or *the New-World*, or *the Western Indies*, is one of the 4 parts of the world, bathed by the ocean, which was discovered by Christopher Columbus, from Genoa, in 1491. It was called *America* for the Florentine explorer Amerigo Vespucci, who in 1497 reached the part of the continent below the equator. The continent is principally controlled by the Spanish, French, English, Portuguese, and Dutch. It is divided into *north* and *south* by the Gulf of Mexico and by the strait of Panama. The known part of *North America* extends from the 11th to the 75th degree of latitude. Its major regions are Mexico, California, Louisiana, Virginia, Canada, Newfoundland; and the islands of Cuba, Saint-Domingue, and the West Indies. *South America* extends from the 12th degree north to the 60th degree south; its regions are Terra-

firma [Colombia], Peru, Paraguay, Chile, the Magellanic regions [Patagonia], Brazil, and the Amazon.

South America offers gold and silver: silver in ingots, specks, pepins and in powder; silver in bars and piasters. *North America* offers beaver, otter, moose and lynx pelts. Pearls come either from Margerita in the Northern Sea, or from the Las-Perlas islands in the Southern Sea. Emeralds come from the region of Santa Fe de Bogota. The most commonly traded merchandise is sugar, tobacco, indigo, ginger, cassia, mastic, aloe, cotton, shells, wool, leather, cinchona, cocoa, vanilla, logwood, sandalwood, sassafras wood, brazilwood, gaiac wood, cinnamon-bark, indigo wood, &c. Also Tolu, Copahu and Peru balsam; plus bezoar, cochineal, ipecacuanha, dragon's-blood, amber, gum copal, nutmeg, quicksilver, pineapples, jalap, mechoacan, wines, liqueurs, Barbados-water, canvas, &c.

Each region in *America* does not produce each of these products: we refer the reader to the articles on the commerce of each province or kingdom, which give more detail on the goods produced there. *Diderot.*

Chocolate, a type of cake or bar prepared with different ingredients but whose basic element is cocoa. *See Cocoa.* The beverage made from this bar retains the same name; the cocoa nut originates from the Americas: Spanish travelers established that it was much used in Mexico, when they conquered it around 1520.

Indians, who have enjoyed this beverage since the dawn of time, prepared it in a very simple way: they would roast the cocoa nuts in their clay pots, melt it in warm water and

mix the result with some spice, *see* Spice; for more mannered people, *achiote* would be added to add some color to the mixture, while *atolle* would serve to give it more volume. *Atolle* is a stew made from corn flour, either spiced up by the Mexicans or whose flavor was enhanced by Spanish nuns or ladies, not with spices, but with sugar, cinnamon, scented oils, amber, musk, etc. In these regions, *atolle* is used in similar ways, for rising rice cream. All these ingredients mixed together give this composition so rough an appearance and so wild a taste, that a Spanish soldier once said that it would be more appropriate to the feeding of pigs than to the relish of humans; and that he would never have gotten used to it, if it were not for the shortage of wine that forced him to such a violent alternative, so that he could alternate pure water with something else.

Spaniards, who learned about this beverage from the Mexicans and were convinced, through their own experience that this beverage, though unrefined, was good for the health, set out to correct its defaults by adding sugar, some ingredients from the Orient, and several local drugs that it is unnecessary to list here, as we only know their name and as, from all these extras, only the vanilla leaf traveled to our regions (similarly, cinnamon was the only ingredient that was universally approved) and proved to resist time as part of the composition of *chocolate*. *Diderot*.

Idiot, is said of someone in whom a natural deficiency in the organs used for understanding is so great that he is unable to combine any idea, so that his condition seems, from this point of view, more limited than an animal's. The difference

between the *idiot* and the imbecile, it seems to me, is that people are born *idiots*, but become imbeciles. The word *idiot* comes from ιδιώτης, which means *private person*, one who has taken refuge in a hermetic existence, far from the business of government; that is to say, one whom today we would call a *wise man*. There was a famous mystic who, through modesty, took on the quality of an idiot, which suited him much more than he imagined. *Diderot*.

Beer, a kind of strong or wine-like alcoholic beverage, made, not with fruit, but with starchy grains. The invention of beer is attributed to the Egyptians. It is claimed that these people, deprived of the grapevine, searched for the secret to imitating wine in the preparation of grains, of which they had in abundance, and from which they created *beer*. Others trace the origin of beer back as far as the times of fables and say that Ceres or Osiris, while traveling about the earth, Osiris to make men happy by educating them, Ceres to find her lost daughter, taught the art of making *beer* to peoples to whom, in the absence of vines, they couldn't teach the art of making wine: but when we leave the fables to stick to history, it is agreed that the usage of *beer* spread from Egypt to other regions of the world. It was first known as the *Pelusian drink*, after Pelusium, a city situated near the mouth of the Nile, where the best *beer* was made. There were two kinds: one, the people named *zythum* and the other, *carmi*. They differed only in some way that made the *carmi* sweeter and more pleasing than the *zythum*. They were, to all appearances, one to the other, as our *white beer* is to our *red beer*. The use of *beer* did not take long to be known in Gaul, and it was for a

long time the drink of its inhabitants. The emperor Julian, governor of these regions, alluded to beer in a fairly bad epigram. At the time of Strabo, *beer* was common in the northern provinces, in Flanders, and in England. It is not surprising that the cold regions, where wine and even cider are missing, have had to resort to a drink made of grain and water; but that this liquor has gone as far as Greece, into these beautiful climates so rich in grapes, is something one would find difficult to believe if famous authors had not vouched for it. Aristotle speaks of *beer* and its intoxicating effects; Theophrastus called it οἶνος κριθῆς, *barley wine*; Aeschylus and Sophocles, ζυθὸς βρώτογ. The Spaniards also drank *beer* at the time of Polybius. The etymologies given to the word *beer* are too flawed to be reported; we will make do with only pointing out that it was also called *cervoise*, *cervitia*; as to its properties, kinds, and the method of making it. See the article *Brewery*. Diderot.

Authority in speech and writing. By *authority in speech*, I mean the right to be believed in what one says: thus, the more one has the right to be believed in what one says, the more *authority* one has. This right is founded on the degree of science and good faith recognized in the speaker. Science prevents one from deceiving oneself, and helps one avoid the error that could be born out of ignorance. Good faith prevents one from deceiving others, and suppresses lies to which malevolence would seek to give credence. It is thus enlightenment and sincerity which are the true measures of *authority* in discourse. These two qualities are essentially necessary. Even the most learned and the most enlightened of men no

longer deserves to be believed, as soon as he is dishonest; no more than the most pious and saintly man, as soon as he speaks about that of which he knows nothing; such that Saint Augustine was right to say that it was not the number, but the merit of authors that should carry weight. To conclude, merit must not be judged by reputation, especially in regard to people who are members of a corps, or who are carried away by an agenda. The true touchstone, when one is able and in a position to make use of it, is a judicious comparison between discourse and its subject matter, taken on its own terms: it is not the name of the author upon which the work is valued; it is the work that must oblige us to render justice to the author.

Authority does not have any power and is not appropriate, in my sense of the word, except in regard to facts, religious matters, and history. Elsewhere, it is useless and irrelevant. What difference does it make if others have thought the same or differently than we have, provided that we think correctly, according to the rules of common sense, and in accordance with the truth? It makes little difference that your opinion is that of Aristotle, as long as it follows the laws of the syllogism. What good are these frequent citations, when it's a question of things that depend solely on the testimony of reason and the senses? What good does it do me to assure myself that it is day when my eyes are open and the sun shines? Great names are good only for dazzling the people, tricking small minds, and providing chatter among the semi-educated. The people, who admire everything they do not understand, always believe that he who speaks the most and speaks the least naturally is the most skillful. Those who lack

a mind broad enough to think for themselves are content with the thoughts of another and simply count the votes. The semi-educated who do not know how to be quiet and who take silence and modesty as symptoms of ignorance or imbecility, make for themselves inexhaustible stores of citations. Nevertheless, I do not claim that *authority* is absolutely useless in the sciences. I want only to make clear that it must serve to support us and not to lead us; and that, otherwise, it would usurp the rights of reason.

Those who conduct themselves in their studies by *authority* alone resemble blind people who walk under the guidance of another. If their guide is bad he sends them down the wrong path, where he leaves them, tired and weary, before having taken one step along the true path of knowledge. If he is skilled, he in fact helps them cover a lot of ground in a short time, but they have had the pleasure of noting neither the goal to which they were headed, nor the objects that embellished the sides of the road, and made it pleasant.

I imagine those minds that do not want to owe anything to their own thoughts, and who are guided always by the ideas of others, to be like children whose legs never become strong, or the ill who never emerge from their state of convalescence, and never take a single step without leaning on the arm of another. *Diderot*.

—Adapted from the Michigan Encyclopedia Project
(<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/>)