

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***Rameau's Nephew*** 1761-64

Denis Diderot. 1713-1784

### OVERVIEW

*Background* Composed in the 1760's *Rameau's Nephew* is one of the most audacious and forward looking documents of what we are calling the Romantic Movement in French literature and culture. (When we speak of the Romantic Movement we do not intend limiting ourselves to the finer arts, where the deeper messages of a culture are embedded, but refer to a broad pattern of sensibility change, which cuts across all manner of exfoliation of the characteristics of a movement which comes to mean us all. Being of the Romantic movement—shifting with that stage of consciousness---- will mean having allowed yourself a slightly fresh valence of performativity. That clumsy formulation will prove applicable to the in-life movements of the principal character in the following dialogue. That principal character is somewhere inside the parameters of a new kind of personal behavior, and, if we are attentive to his—LUI's—behavior we are likely to deal with many surprising cadences. We are likely to discover traces of what we are today, three hundred years later.

The Romantic Movement in France was wide enough to embrace the unexpected in character, and precisely such a challenge to expectation is the launching pad for the new cultural life we encounter in the present text. What than this new cultural life could more sharply have split the French cultural life of eighteenth century drawing room proprieties—Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Sauvigne—from the Cartesian precisions of the foregoing century, the seventeenth, in which the greatest minds, Kepler, Newton, Gassendi-- were employed in characterizing the geometries of the universe? The irregularities which were up for recharacterizing, in the eighteenth century of Diderot, were perfectly to be exemplified by the use of a character like Rameau's nephew, who had no compunctions about overturning the apple cart of a new cosmology, or putting his own appetites ahead of those of the rest of the world.

The eighteenth century comes out of the pungent French centuries, with a skill for feeling—the Romantic—new as well as with a sense of how to 'make it new.' Who is more adamant to force the unexpected on to the Enlightenment century than an eighteenth century *philosophe* with Romanticism in his bones like Diderot, master of the Enlightenment movement which was in process of mating with early Romanticism. Who was a more fitting than Diderot master of the Enlightenment, to bring together a set of multiple sensibilities, for finding that unexpected, which at an angle, which would bring into profile any number of new possibilities both of Romanticism and of Enlightenment thought.

*The dialogue where it happens.*

The blend of Romanticism with Enlightenment thought stirs a strange mix. Our topic, and the scene we have let Denis Diderot set for us, is, straight off the streets of Paris, capital of the—in the eighteenth century—world's liveliest versions of modern society. (France of the time out paced even Britain, in quality and quantity of fine mercantile goods, products of the fine arts diffused throughout the social fabric.) On the streets of France's vibrant cultural capital, our narrator, who will call himself *MOI* (me)—but whom we are cautioned not to identify with Denis Diderot—thereby disclaiming responsibility for a personal point of view, and leaving the anything goes atmosphere in charge—*MOI* occasionally runs into a funny duck—in which Paris abounds—and falls into conversation with him. This duck, whom the narrator of the text calls *LUI* (he), will become the narrator's interlocutor through the course of the text that is here laid before us.

It so happens that the 'funny duck' is in fact—though fact is in truth a casualty of this entire dialogue—the nephew of a noted French baroque musical figure—Jean Phillippe Rameau—respected as one of the greatest baroque composers of the eighteenth century. (Thus the rage for order, which penetrates the French Enlightenment, is playing constantly across the background of the conversations into which we are investing ourselves.) Those conversations, as we soon discover, are a continual counter challenge to the order once lived and felt by the senior Rameau.

*So what happens in the dialogues between LUI and MOI?*

As we slide into our café chairs and dialogue LUI makes clear that he is on the side of genius, appreciating those around him—wits, nimble chess players, ladies of subtle fashion—who constitute a kind of ground level drawing room, to mime the kind of elegant sitting rooms above them, which sustain Parisian elegance in the grands boulevards of central Paris. (Such *grande maison* drawing rooms had since the Renaissance been places of advanced ideas and opinion making, instrumental in the making of the new country of France.) The wit level of the conversation takes off from the ground level of banalities, then slowly contorts itself upward. LUI, questioned about what he has been doing recently, confesses that he has done his usual, nothing except change his clothes and oh yes wash his face and get a shave. (A reader of our moment could, at this juncture, call to mind any of the banal entries that self-generate their way through a play like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*., or through a television comedy like *Seinfeld*.) The banal—as often in these dialogues-- leads inauspiciously upward into the substantial: a typical passage runs this way. MOI teases LUI that all he needs—a propos of the world of shaving—is to let his beard grow long, and thus to put on the simulation of classical wisdom. To which LUI responds with a mocking riff: 'if this chin of mine were covered with a long beard, that would look pretty terrific in bronze or marble, no?' And from there LUI moves to an imagination of himself as Caesar or Socrates. The dialogue's whole rhythm is launched with a simple riff, which has opened the thematics of the entire dialogue and of its sparring milieu. We feel, as we follow the conversation, that we are riding on the waves of a new kind of historical sensibility. We are rockabilly playing with the centuries.

The driver for the longest outlyings of thought in this dialogue, will lie in the Nephew's cynicism, which has assured his only begrudging acceptance of MOI's sociability. There is in fact an inherent refusal in the attitude and thinking of LUI. While the Enlightenment thought of MOI is basically unilinear and 'progressive,' both trademarks of Enlightenment thinking, LUI is obstinate, dubious. And anti linear. He is also a stubborn pragmatist, refusing to allow his brilliant ideas and sallies to lead him away into what he would consider the stupidity of platitudinous virtue talk. The perspective of LUI in fact takes us back to the world view of Neronian Rome, the Golden era of high society, of fast talkers, social fancy boys, who lived off the wealthy patronage of upper classes who enjoyed their wit. LUI embraces the world view of the friends of Catullus, who come to dinner and stay for a month, the on hanger parasites who make what they can out of the host of Petronius' *Satyricon*.

The figures who emerge from the dialogue of two *wanderers in the city*, effectively repel all reader efforts to identify them—who simply appear periodically in one another's lives, and who scramble and discuss the news of the day and 'world'—from the current geopolitical developments through the news of high society events, through the vanity of human ambition—as though the Café de la Regence, in which these occasional dialogues were taking place, was a sample of the new world transitioning into ever more comprehensive states of consciousness. This last insight of Moi morphs at one intense point into an altitude of insight into issues of virtue and genius in the arts, and reminds us to what an altitude of insight this serpentine dialogue can bring itself, The topic has turned to the classic French dramatist, Racine, and to the discrepancy between his selfish private personality and the lasting ability of his work to inspire human emotion and understanding into centuries far in the future. By a common mindedness, between these two duelers, who are so often at odds, it is agreed that simply to be here is a good. 'May everything play out as it will,' remarks LUI; 'the finest order of things, in my opinion, is that where I belong, and as for the most perfect of worlds, if I don't fit in there, I prefer simply to be, even to be an impertinent little logician, than not to be at all.'