
"Cataract: Diderot's Discursive
Politics 1749-1751"

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The enclosed paper by Jeffrey Mehlman, "Cataract: Diderot's Discursive Politics 1749-1751," is made available here as a supplement to the papers circulated for discussion at MLA Special Session 550, "The Language of Criticism." As a panel participant, Professor Mehlman will be commenting on the issues raised by this seminar from the perspective of his conviction that the customary hierarchy of "theory/practice" is ultimately an inhibiting factor in contemporary inquiry. He has suggested that we circulate this paper as illustrating a mode of critical practice in which questions of theory emerge from and are englobed by the engagement of specific texts. We are pleased to make the paper available; and though the paper is sufficiently long to preclude any full discussion of its implications in the seminar meeting itself, it does afford a useful occasion to expand the issues of the seminar, and opens the way to further exchanges. We urge seminar participants to read this paper not only for the intrinsic interest of its thesis and subject, but as a concrete illustration of the subtle conceptual reticulations on which critical reading depends and to which critical theory must be responsive.

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Cataract: Diderot's Discursive Politics 1749-1751

Il y a des nuages, il pleut et voilà tout.

--Michel Serres

In 1749, Réaumur, in couching the cataracts of a girl born blind, presided at what literary history has ~~come~~ come to regard as the "experiment of the century."¹ The event was decisive for Diderot and was integrally linked to the emergence of his philosophical and political "maturity." For the text that he was prompted to write by Réaumur's experiment, La lettre sur les aveugles, marks the first coherent articulation of his atheism.² And his ensuing imprisonment and act of submission at Vincennes was to necessitate a subsequent strategy of characteristic circumvention and ruse. It is to that strategy that these pages are devoted. For our reading of the 1749 text shall be oriented toward a consideration of the bracing implications of the deviousness of the first major essay which Diderot, with "tacit permission" from Malesherbes, was to publish after emerging from Vincennes, La lettre sur les sourds et les muets.³

We should do well to observe initially that whereas Diderot's contemporaries were transfixed by the spectacle of a blind sensibility emerging into light, he, on the contrary, was above all concerned with the new understanding that might accrue by sharing philosophically the

experience of the blind. Whence the essay's center, the fictive death-bed discourse of Saunderson, the blind professor of optics. For Saunderson speaks from the discursive position in which the cosmological proof of God's existence turns short. Eyeless, he is the missing link in the infinite chain of an allegedly ordered universe, the gentle Cambridge monster who can but smile in irony at every appeal to the self-evident splendor of the cosmos.

Diderot, of course, was careful to delineate his own difference from Saunderson in a letter of reply to Voltaire: "Le sentiment de Saunderson n'est pas plus mon sentiment que le vôtre..."⁴ But he continues: "C'est ordinairement pendant la nuit que s'élèvent les vapeurs qui obscurcissent en moi l'existence de Dieu; le lever du soleil les dissipe toujours..." The image recalls the discomfort of the deist in La Promenade du sceptique (1747), interrupted in his discourse by a storm: "le ciel s'obscurcit; un nuage épais nous déroba le spectacle de la nature."⁶ The discourse of atheism, the core of Diderot's text is the language of a cloud (nuage, vapeurs). Emblematically, returning to the point of inception of the Lettre, we may designate that cloud a cataract. Littré: "Cataracte; opacité du cristallin ou de sa membrane...qui empêche les rayons lumineux de parvenir jusqu'à la rétine et qui cause ainsi la perte de la vue."

In its most virulent core, Saunderson's discourse--and Diderot's text--comes close to transcribing a series of passages from Book V of De Rerum Natura. Paul Vernière, in particular, has been insistent

and persuasive in maintaining that it is Lucretius--"Lucrèce et Lucrèce seul"--(and not Diderot's contemporary physiologists) who dictates Saunderson's quasi-delirium of a universe of chance worlds monstrously emerging and fading away.⁶ Diderot takes us to a hypothetical origin of things: "si nous remontions à la naissance des choses et des temps, et que nous sentissions la matière se mouvoir et le chaos se débrouiller, nous rencontrerions une multitude d'êtres informes." (121) Thus our cataract--or cloud--takes on a certain positivity. Far from being a simple obstacle to the vision of God's splendor, it becomes a stochastic chaos, a suspended fog, out of which things and times in their plurality are precipitated. Diderot's cataract ceases to be privative, and emerges--potentially--saturated with the entire universe of Lucretius.⁷

One index of the positivity of Diderot's blind universe is the extent to which it is dominated by what he regarded as the most fundamental of senses: touch. (See, most succinctly, the third Entretien sur le 'Fils naturel': "Les sens ne sont qu'un toucher...")⁸ It is in this realm perhaps that a more essential and idiosyncratic relation to Lucretius than that traced by Vernière in his search for "sources" may be approached. For De Rerum Natura as well offers a universe bizarrely subordinated to touch. Consider, on the one hand, Diderot's blind man defining a mirror: "une machine...qui met les choses en relief loin d'elles-mêmes..." (174) And symmetrically: "un miroir est une machine qui nous met en relief hors de nous-mêmes." (175) And now, Lucretius, in Book IV, on the cause of vision: "there exist what we call images of

things; which, like films drawn from the outermost surface of things (quasi membranae summo de corpore rerum deraptae), flit about hither and thither through the air...⁹ "In the first place, from everything we see there must of necessity continually flow and discharge and scatter bodies which strike our eyes and excite vision."¹⁰ The blind man's mirror in Diderot, estranging an object--or subject--from itself, and Lucretius' simulacrum both appeal primarily to touch. So much so, in fact, that we are tempted to confront the Lucretian "proof" of the existence of simulacra, on the one hand:

"In the first place, since amongst visible things many throw off bodies...as often when cicadas drop their neat coats (tunicas) in summer, and when calves at birth throw off the caul from their outermost surface, and also when the slippery serpent casts off his vesture amongst the thorns...since these things happen, a thin image must also be thrown off from things, from the outermost surface of things (ab rebus mitti summo de corpore rerum)."¹¹

and Diderot's terse assertion, on the other:

"Saunderson voyait donc par la peau." (117)

For whether the skin (tunica, peau) be that of subject or object, a phenomenology of vision is displaced by an energetics of touch.

But what are we to make of this unorthodox connection between Diderot's text and what Diderot scholarship has long recognized to be its principal source? More simply, what is the relation between sight and touch in Lucretius? It is here that we shall draw on the analyses of France's most imaginative adept of Lucretius, Michel Serres.¹² For we shall attempt to demonstrate that his own "untimely" reading of Diderot's Latin source provides as well the unexpected elements for a

a reading of the philosophe. First off, a confirmation of our earlier comments: "La physique épicurienne...est du tact plus que de la vue..."¹³ Now along with the theory of simulacra, the other main oddity of Lucretian--or Epicurean--physics is the celebrated clinamen: "that while the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void, at times quite uncertain and uncertain places (incerto tempore ferme incertisque locis apatio), they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused among the first-beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything."¹⁴ And further on: "bodies must incline a little; and not more than the least possible (nec plus quam minimum)."¹⁵ From the stochastic cloud--or cataract--of Diderot's letter on blindness, we have come to the Lucretian downpour--or cataract--of atoms. But more immediately we are concerned with two infinitesimal deviations in the Epicurean scheme: the simulacrum or emission an extremely tenuous surface, and the clinamen or minimal swerve in the vertical fall of atoms.

And now, in what is only apparently a digression from our subject, several remarks on statistical thermodynamics from the "history of heredity" that François Jacob entitled La Logique du vivant:

1. "The properties of a gas can be described by the purely mechanical model of balls that collide, and entropy can be interpreted in terms of molecular agitation. If a man is unable to prevent the degradation of energy, it is because he is unable to distinguish each molecule and observe its characteristics. But it is perfectly possible to imagine a

being with a better brain and finer senses, whose faculties, according to Maxwell, 'are so sharpened that he can follow every molecule in its course; such a being, whose attributes are still as essentially finite as our own, would be able to do what is at present impossible to us.' This tiny being or demon has to be imagined as capable of 'seeing individual molecules,' and able to move a sliding door which causes no friction, in a partition separating two compartments of a gas-filled vessel. When a rapidly moving molecule arrives from left to right, the demon opens the door; when a slow moving molecule arrives, he closes it; and conversely. The rapid molecules will then accumulate in the right-hand compartment, which will get warmer, and the slow molecules in the left-hand compartment, which will cool down. 'Without expenditure of energy,' the demon will have converted non-utilizable energy into usable energy. He will have circumvented the second law of thermodynamics."¹⁵

2. The decrease of entropy, or increase of "negentropy," is plainly an increase in order and information within the contingent universe of cloud or gas.

3. Maxwell's demon was exorcised by Szilard and Brillouin: "For Szilard and Brillouin, on the contrary, information has to be paid for. The demon can 'see' the molecules only if he has with them some physical connection, such as radiation. Not only the gas, but the whole system composed of the gas and the demon tends towards equilibrium. Sooner or later, the demon becomes 'blind' to the gas."¹⁶

4. The resultant image of the organism: "Living or not, every system that functions tends to wear out, to fall into disrepair, to in-

crease in entropy. By means of a certain regulation, each local loss of energy is compensated by work provided by another part of the organism; hence another increase in entropy, in turn compensated by further work carried out at another point in the body. And so on, in a sort of waterfall, by which loss in one place is compensated by increased order elsewhere. The coordination of the system depends on a network of regulatory circuits by which the organism is integrated. But as in a waterfall, the total change of energy always takes place in the same direction, that imposed by the second law of thermodynamics. The statistical tendency to disorder gradually dilapidates any system that is closed to all exchanges with the outside world. Ultimately, the maintenance of a living system in good repair has to be paid for: the return to the ever unstable equilibrium leads to a deficit of surrounding organization, that is, to an increase in disorder of the total system composed of the organism and its environment. The living organism, therefore, cannot be a closed system. It cannot stop absorbing food, ejecting waste-matter, or being constantly traversed by a current of matter and energy from outside. Without a constant flow of order, the organism disintegrates. Isolated, it dies. Every living being remains in a sense plugged into the general current which carries the universe towards disorder. It is a sort of local and transitory eddy which maintains organization and allows it to reproduce."¹⁷

Thus the historian of science spontaneously rediscovers the imagery of Lucretius. In a stochastic universe, the transitory eddy in the waterfall corresponds to the turbulence resultant from the clinamen in

the atomic downpour. Systems relate in that cataract not through any process of contemplation, but rather by a transmission of energy, order, or information; whence the aptness of the Lucretian simulacrum. Finally, the irreversible direction of the flow, the fact that the cloud (cataract) in suspension has become rain (cataract) is testimony to the second principle of thermodynamics. At the center of Serres' recent work has been a remarkable articulation of the concerns of statistical thermodynamics with the aleatory grandeur of the Lucretian universe. To which achievement we shall return.

But what of Diderot? If it has yet to rain in our reading of the philosophe, we have nevertheless discovered a world that is aleatory and tactile, essentially Lucretian. For the world of virginal perception, in which Reaumur's experiment renewed interest, posed philosophical questions that Diderot was content to relinquish to others. Thus notice the delight with which he pairs off idealist (Berkeley) and sensualist (Condillac) in what he takes to be a thoroughly futile struggle: "Selon l'un et l'autre, et selon la raison, les termes essence, matière, substance, support, etc., ne portent guère par eux-mêmes de lumières dans notre esprit; d'ailleurs remarque judicieusement l'auteur de l'Essai sur les connaissances humaines, soit que nous nous élevions jusqu'aux cieux, soit que nous descendions jusque dans les abîmes, nous ne sortons jamais de nous-mêmes; et ce n'est que notre propre pensée que nous apercevons; or c'est là le résultat du premier dialogue de Berkeley, et le fondement de tout son système. Ne seriez-vous pas curieuse de voir aux prises deux ennemis dont les armes se ressemblent si fort?..."⁽¹¹⁵⁾ The extremes of sensualism and idealism tend, mirror-like, to oscillate into each other, based as they are on

the primacy of perception, the division between subject and object. To which we would oppose, speculatively, Diderot's blind and tactile world of energy and information.¹⁸ With Serres, the neo-encyclopedist, on the horizon: "Et peut-être n'y a-t-il pas une grande différence entre ce que nous appelons sujets, nous, et ce que nous nommons les objets..."¹⁹

Consider the problem of Molyneux, inherited from Locke and Condillac, in this perspective. To the question of whether a man born blind, upon gaining sight, could distinguish and identify at a distance the cube and sphere which were familiar to him from touch, Diderot is alone in answering in the affirmative, i.e., in dissolving the problem. Moreover, Diderot's treatment of the problem is marked by repeated recourse to the one figure--chiasmus--that structures what will be seen to be the pseudo-problem par excellence of the Lettre sur les sourds et les muets, that of inversion.²⁰ Thus: "Ces objets pourraient fort bien se transformer dans mes mains et me renvoyer, par le tact, des sensations toutes contraires à celles que j'en éprouve par la vue."⁽¹¹²⁾ Then: "Mais aurait-il continué avec Locke, peut-être que, quand j'appliquerais mes mains sur ces figures, elles se transformeraient l'une en l'autre..."⁽¹¹²⁾

Now in Lucretius, in the section concerning trouble in vision, we find an odd analogue to the problem of Molyneux:

And when afar off we see foursquare towers of a city, they often appear to be round, for this reason, because every angle at a distance is seen blunted or rather it is not seen at all, its blow is lost and the stroke does not glide across to our eyes; because while the images are rushing through a great space of air, the air with frequent buffetings forces it to become blunt.²¹

It may be suggested, emblematically, that the minute difference between circle and square might serve as an approximation of the tenuous surface

film constituting the simulacrum itself. But in that case the "trouble in vision" referred to would be not contingent but essential; it would refer to that breach in perception marked by an essentially tactile simulacrum. Such might have been a version of the problem of Molyneux which Diderot would not have hastened to dissolve.

One of the most striking observations on the blind realm of touch concerns an experimental tracing on a hand of the shape of a familiar hand. When asked whose hand it is, the blind man proves the best subject of the experiment, for: "la somme des sensations excitées par une bouche sur la main d'un aveugle est la même que la somme des sensations successivement réveillées par le crayon du dessinateur qui la lui représente."⁽¹¹⁸⁾ We would suggest that the mouth indistinguishable from its own simulacrum be regarded as that of Lucretian Venus, the muse of his sensual physics. Or perhaps it should be read as the organ of a logos which, in the world of the blind, proves to be contaminated originally by a form of writing (trace)... We touch here on what might be elaborated as the opposition "Serres"-Derrida, a question to which we shall return...

La Lettre sur les aveugles was published 9 June 1749. On 24 July Diderot was taken to Vincennes. On August 13, he confessed to lieutenant general Berryer as follows: "I therefore avow to you, as my worthy protector, what the tediousness of a prison and all imaginable penalties would never have made me say to my judge: that the Pensées, the Bijoux,

and the Lettre sur les aveugles are excesses that slipped out of me; but that I can on the other hand pledge my honor (and I have some) that they will be the last, and that they are the only ones."¹² Diderot was released from Vincennes on November 3. He immediately set to work on his tasks for the Encyclopédie, but in the course of the following year wrote a sequel to the text that had resulted in his imprisonment, the Lettre sur les sourds et les muets. It is to that work's odd relation to the discourse on blindness, in the context of the "neo-Lucretian" remarks already made, that we now shall turn.

Early in the second Letter, addressed with mock deference to the newly named occupant of the chair in Greek and Latin philosophy at the Collège de France, Diderot imagines an experiment in which a series of "conventional mutes" would be obliged to answer questions in the language of gestures: "Ne serait-ce pas une chose, sinon utile, du moins amusante, que de multiplier les essais sur les memes idées; et que de proposer les memes questions à plusieurs personnes en memo temps. Pour moi, il me semble qu'un philosophe qui s'exercerait de cette maniere avec quelques-uns de ses amis, bons esprits et bons logiciens, ne perdrait pas entièrement son temps. Quelque Aristophane en ferait, sans doute, une scene excellente; mai qu'importe? on se dirait à soi-même ce que Zenon disait à son proselyte: _____, si tu veux être philosophe attends-toi à être tourné en ridicule."⁽¹¹⁹⁾ The final barb seems ironically intended for the abbé Batteux, the addressee of the Lettre. In brief, the comedy sketched would be emblemized by Diderot's text itself. But the name of that comedy, of course, is The Clouds. Whereas the

image of the cloud (vapeurs) in the letter to Voltaire seemed essentially privative, here "clouds" constitute the positive content of the 1751 text. Or as Diderot says of his own procedure later in the Lettre: "moi qui m'occupe plutôt à former des nuages qu'à les dissiper, et à suspendre les jugements qu'à juger..."⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ Now the comedy of a mass interrogation demanding response in an other than oral medium is precisely the scenario of Les Bijoux indiscrets; gesture has replaced the discourse of the bijou. We need but transcribe Diderot's own subsequent translation of a segment of Lucretius' invocation to Venus--"Parle, o déesse"--at the beginning of De Rerum Natura to see how potentially saturated with Lucretian values the "clouds" of the second Lettre may be.²³ The text, then, is, at some level, the assemblage of "clouds" through which Venus speaks.

We have clouds, but not yet any rain; neither downpour nor clinamen, the infinitesimal deviation (Lucretius: non plus quam minimum). And yet as early as the Lettre on the blind, the premonitions of a Lucretian storm have been entertained: "Saunderson avait de commun avec l'aveugle du Puiseaux d'être affecté de la moindre vicissitude qui survenait dans l'atmosphère..."⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ Let that sensitivity to the slightest aerial vicissitude serve as a transition to the torrent we shall soon see drenching the text of 1751...

Perhaps the section of the Lettre sur les sourds that most crucially links it to its predecessor concerns Diderot's mocking request of the abbé Batteux, his addressee, that he clear up the question of what is meant by "la belle nature." In his concluding summary, the philosophe states: J'ai tâché, Monsieur, de vous faire entendre que ceux qui ont

lu vos Beaux-Arts réduits à l'imitation de la belle nature, se croyaient en droit d'exiger que vous leur expliquassiez clairement ce que c'est que la belle nature."⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ Now that exchange between Diderot and the abbé Batteux may be read, I would suggest, as a simulacrum, transposed into the realm of esthetics, of Saunderson's deathbed colloquy with Mr. Holmes in the earlier text. It was precisely the untenability of any appeal to the "beauty" of nature that vitiated Holmes' cosmological argument for God's existence; but it is the failure to include a chapter on what "la belle nature" is that renders Batteux's entire treatise "sans fondement."⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ And the multiple ironies of Diderot toward his well-placed interlocutor are so many affirmations that the "foundation" requested is not about to be supplied. Thus whereas the philosophe in 1749 had pretended to be merely translating Saunderson, and had distinguished his position from the Englishman's in a letter to Voltaire, in 1750-51 Diderot was implicitly assuming as his own the discursive position whose simple presence in the earlier text had led to his imprisonment. All this under the guise of a submissive surrender to authority...

Now the final section of the second Lettre, in which Diderot taunts Batteux on the subject of beautiful nature, is as well studded with short verso quotations from both "ancients" and "moderns", examples--or elements--of the Diderotian "sublime." Although our author demonstrates no interest in the thematic content of the fragments selected, a remarkable mutuality of orientation among them may nevertheless be demonstrated. Thus toward the center of the section we find two exemplary passages of verso discussed. First, from the conclusion

of the second chant of Le Lutrin:

Soupire, étend les bras, ferme l'oeil et s'endort. (133)

Then, from the ninth book of the Aeneid:

Pulchrosque per artus
It cruor; inque humeros cervix collapsa recumbit,
Purpureus veluti eum flos succisus aratro
Languescit moriens; lassove papavera collo
Demisere caput, pluvia cum forte gravantur.

(the blood spread over his lovely limbs, and his neck, relaxing, sank on his shoulder. He was like a bright flower shorn by the plough, languishing and dying, or popples, weighted by a sudden shower of rain, drooping their heads on their necks.) (135)²⁴

In these two remarkably dissimilar verse achievements, the first from a seventeenth-century satire, the second from a Latin epic, we are nevertheless confronted with a sudden--potentially fatal--drooping of...the head. (In the context of the imprecation to Batteux to define "la belle nature," it is a bit as though Diderot's nature were presided over by a Divine Thug silently, sublimely "rubbing out" his victims.) It is for that reason, that a subsequent passage quoted from the récit de Théramène in Act V of Phèdre takes on an odd resonance:

Il suivait pensif le chemin de Mycènes,
Sa main sur les chevaux laissait flotter les rênes.
Ses superbes coursiers qu'on voyait autrefois
Pleins d'une ardeur si noble obeir à sa voix,
L'oeil morne maintenant, et la tête baissée,
Semblaient se conformer à sa triste pensée. (142) *my emphasis*

Once again, in an entirely different context, we find a characteristic lowering of the head, or rather, in Diderot's terms, a "nutation," an inclination. (143) Now toward the very beginning of the philosophe's sequence of examples we are offered another fragment from the récit de Théramène:

...Les ronces dégouttantes
Portent de ses cheveux les dépouilles sanglantes. (115)

With this initial precipitation of drops, we approach a second associative chain, along with the inclination of head. For it may be noted that the decline of the head in the passage from Virgil was accompanied by a jet of blood metaphorized as the weight of rain.

Whereupon the verb flotter in our earlier Racine fragment may be assumed to take on an added resonance. For we are touching here on the associated theme of liquid descent. That dimension passes through a playful allusion to Petronius' parody of the Virgilian passage, in which the liquid may be assumed to be sperm, but reaches catastrophic magnitude in a key passage cited from Voltaire's Henriade:

Et des fleuves français les eaux ensanglantées
Ne portaient que des morts aux mers épouvantées. (133)

We may conclude the series in the midst of Diderot's skeptical observations about the possibility of transposing poetry into paint. For he there quotes again The Aeneid:

Interea magno misceri murmure Pontum,
Emissaque hiemon senscit Neptunus, e imis
Stagna refusa vadis; graviter commotus, e alto
Propisciens summa placidum caput extulit unda.

(But meanwhile Neptune had been made aware by the ocean's roaring commotion, and the currents eddying even in the sea's still depths, that a storm had been unleashed. Gravely provoked, he raised his head from the waves...) (147)

Diderot's comment is: "Par quelle singularité...ce peintre ne pourrait prendre le moment frappant, celui où Neptune élève sa tête hors des eaux? pourquoi, le dieu ne paraissant alors qu'un homme décollé, sa tête si majestueuse dans le poème, tenait-elle un mauvais effet sur les ondes?" (147)

With this concluding image our two series converge. The descending current has reached the sea and the declining head has been washed along with it.

Now in the course of discussing the earlier fragment from Virgil--
 Euryalus, his head declining midst a spurt of blood--Diderot, just prior
 to commenting on the accuracy of Virgil's rendering of the "jet de
 sang," observes: "Je ne serais guère plus étonné de voir ces vers s'en-
 gendrer par quelque jet fortuit de caractères que d'en voir passer
 toutes les beautés hiéroglyphiques dans une traduction." (135) The liquid
 (jet de sang) whose precipitation we have been charting comes into con-
 tact with the chance casting of letters (jet fortuit de caractères).
 But in the most audacious of the Pensées philosophiques of 1745 (XXI),
 "jets fortuits de caractères" had been assimilated to the thoroughly
 convincing genesis of our world through a "jet fortuit des atomes."
 That equivalence, of course, is fundamentally Lucretian. The torrent
 of descending liquid is less the theme of Diderot's "sublime" than
 the chance cataract of characters or atoms out of which every theme
per se is precipitated.²⁵

Perhaps our reading thus far may be described in terms of two
 models. First, from the Letter on the deaf, the example of Diderot
 stuffing his fingers into his ears in order to block his hearing as soon
 as the curtain rose in the theatre. His purpose in so doing was, of
 course, to better gauge the import of that crucial dimension of the actor's
 art: gesture. Whence the bizarre decision to refuse to listen in order
 better to understand ("pour mieux entendre"). (104) I would suggest that
 in deliberately deafening ourselves to Diderot's argument, in charting
 the odd narrative tendentially inscribed into the heterogeneous,
 multilingual fragments of verse that stud Diderot's text, we have

attempted something akin to the philosophe's experiment in the theatre.

But a second case, in which Diderot this time imagines himself in
 the situation of the blind, offers a still more telling model. Consider
 Diderot on the language of Saunderson: "Ceux qui ont écrit sa vie disent qu'il
 était fécond en expressions heureuses...Mais qu'entendez-vous par des
 expressions heureuses, me demanderez-vous peut-être? Je vous répondrai,
 madame, que ce sont celles qui sont propres à un sens, au toucher, par exemple,
 et qui sont métaphoriques en même temps à un autre sens, comme aux yeux;
 d'où il résulte une double lumière pour celui à qui l'on parle, la lumière
 vraie et directe de l'expression, et la lumière réfléchie de la métaphore." (110)
 The speech of the blind is thus doubly inscribed, and bears with it an
 unintended, metaphorical dimension. That second stratum, split off from
 the intentionality of the speaker, offers the image of a rudimentary
 "unconscious": "Il est évident que dans ces occasions Saunderson, avec
 tout l'esprit qu'il avait, ne s'entendait qu'à moitié, puisqu'il n'aperce-
 vait que la moitié des idées attachées aux termes qu'il employait." (111)
 But Saunderson's case is soon generalized to the two cases of Witz and
parapraxis: "Mais qui est-ce qui n'est pas de temps en temps dans le même
 cas? Cet accident est commun aux idiots, qui font quelquefois d'excellentes
 plaisanteries, et aux personnes qui ont le plus d'esprit, à qui il échappe
 une sottise, sans que ni les uns ni les autres s'en aperçoivent." (111)
 Soon, however, the felicitous estranging of linguistic terms turns out
 to be the special achievement of foreigners speaking an alien tongue,
 and writers to the extent that they are in the situation of foreigners
vis-à-vis their own language: "J'ai remarqué que la disette de mots pro-
 duisait aussi le même effet sur les étrangers à qui la langue n'est pas

encore familière: ils sont forcés de tout dire avec une très petite quantité de termes, ce qui les contraint d'en placer quelques-uns très heureusement. Mais toute langue en général étant pauvre de mots propres pour les écrivains qui ont l'imagination vive, ils sont dans le même cas que des étrangers qui ont beaucoup d'esprit; les situations qu'ils inventent... les écartent à tout moment des façons de parler ordinaires." (111)

Now it is in the light of the preceding passage that we may interpret our entire analysis as an exploitation of the single word cataracte, from blinding cloud (La Lettre sur les Aveugles) to torrential downpour (La Lettre sur les sourds et les muets). Yet lest that splitting of meaning be regarded as the artifice of an ingenious foreigner, we would do well to consult that writer gifted with an "imagination vive," Littré. For he apprises us that the original meaning of cataracte is a barrier: "sorte de borne placée aux portes des villes," whence, in the plural, cataractes came to mean floodgates: "portes ou écluses qui sont supposées retenir les eaux célestes." It is from this sense that the optical use of the term--a visual opacity preventing the passage of light--is derived. A second and stranger derivation, however, resulted in the sense of torrential downpour. Littré accounts for it as follows: "Etymologiquement, la cataracte est l'engin qui, rompant avec force, bouche un puits; on a passé sans peine du sens de cet engin à celui de chute d'eau." Thus the term cataracte is imperceptibly split between the meanings of "barrier" and "transgression." We can constitute the term--and our reading--as a tripartite apparatus or "cataract": cloud/dike/downpour. In which case the "cloud" would be the focus of the first

Lettre, the ensuing "downpour" that of the second, and the--ineffective--"dike" would figure the sheer fact of censorship most dramatically encountered in the prison at Vincennes. As a discursive machine, the "cataract" is thus fundamentally political, allowing one to effect a transgression while affirming the terms of the barrier, to press forward one's articulation of the Lucretian scheme of things even as one pretends to recant one's initial moves in that direction. Such are the ruses of our "cataract" and the simulacra it calls into play.

We are now in a position to broach the central question of the Lettre sur les sourds: the inevitable gap between the necessary simultaneity inherent in every act of thought (or sensation), on the one hand, and the successiveness of the discourse that would convey it, on the other. Thus, for example: "mais la sensation n'a point dans l'âme ce développement successif du discours; et si elle pouvait commander à vingt bouches, chaque bouche disant son mot, toutes les idées précédentes seraient rendues à la fois..." (120) Diderot's discussion, pursued at length, ultimately invalidating the premises of the debate on temporal "inversions--for "il ne peut y avoir d'inversion dans l'esprit"--reaches its exemplary formulation in a celebrated passage: "Notre âme est un tableau mouvant d'après lequel nous peignons sans cesse; nous employons bien du temps à le rendre avec fidélité; mais il existe en entier et tout à la fois: l'esprit ne va pas à pas comptés comme l'expression..." (124) Time erupts with the materiality of discourse ("la langue se traîne sans cesse après l'esprit"); and manifests an essential incompatibility with and betrayal of the spatiality of mind or thought. (120)

Now it is a paradox worth noting that Diderot's elaborate image for conveying the essential simultaneity--or atemporality--of the activity of understanding ("l'entendement") should be the clock of classical mechanics: "Monsieur, considérez l'homme automate comme un horloge ambulante." In a development whose principal "sources" are Descartes and La Mettrie, Diderot proceeds: "que le coeur en représente le grand ressort, et que les parties contenues dans la poitrine soient les autres pièces principales du mouvement. Imaginez dans la tête un timbre garni de petits marteaux, d'où partent une multitude infinie de fils qui se terminent à tous les points de la boîte; élevez sur ce timbre une de ces petites figures dont nous ornons le haut de nos pendules, qu'elle ait l'oreille penchée comme un musicien qui écouterait si son instrument est bien accordé; cette petite figure sera l'âme. Si plusieurs des petits cordons sont tirés dans le même instant, le timbre sera frappé de plusieurs coups, et la petite figure entendra plusieurs sons à la fois." (my emphasis; 121-122)

As the model is developed, it eventually is assumed to accommodate discourse itself, but in its inception Diderot's clock is designed essentially to illustrate the simultaneity of perceptions in an act of thought. And consequently, to the extent that time--as discourse--has been deemed fundamentally incompatible with the atemporality of individual thoughts, we are faced with a paradoxical discrepancy between time and the clock.

Diderot's esthetics in the Lettre, however, are intended to obliterate that discrepancy. For such is the import of the crucial notion of "hieroglyphics," introduced in the course of an effort to define the "spirit" (esprit) of poetry: "c'est lui [l'esprit] qui fait que les choses

sont dites et représentées tout à la fois; que dans le même temps que l'entendement les saisit, l'âme en est émue, l'imagination les voit et l'oreille les entend; et que le discours n'est plus seulement un enchaînement de termes énergiques qui exposent la pensée avec force et noblesse, mais que c'est encore un tissu d'hieroglyphes entassés les uns sur les autres qui la peignent.. Je pourrais dire en ce sens que toute poésie est emblématique." (133) The virtual wads of hieroglyphics are thus intended to redeem--or deny--time, to stem the temporal flow of discourse in its incompatibility with the timelessness of mind.

There follows a discussion of an initial example of a hieroglyph that we have already encountered: "Mais l'intelligence de l'emblème poétique n'est pas donnée à tout le monde; il faut être presque en état de le créer pour le sentir fortement. Le poète dit:

Et des flouves français les eaux ensanglantées
Ne portaient que des morts aux mers épouvantées.

Mais qui est-ce qui voit, dans la première syllabe de portaient, les eaux gonflées de cadavres et le cours des flouves comme suspendu par cette digue? Qui est-ce qui voit la masse des eaux et des cadavres s'affaisser et descendre vers les mers à la seconde syllabe du même mot?" (135) The lines from Voltaire were a key element in the torrential cataract we constructed above. Here the initial hieroglyph that would suspend the flow of time is the first syllable of portaient--thus: porte--stemming the flow of the current; it is a dike (digue) or cataract (floodgate). And yet what this primal example of a hieroglyph comes to narrate is the catastrophic rush of water beyond the dike. The hieroglyph--indistinguishable in this case from our cataract--would appear to have its own failure (or transgression) inscribed within it.

Consider now the irreversible flow of time, discourse, cataract in its opposition to that emblem of simultaneity, the clock ("horloge ambulante") of classical mechanics. More specifically, we would inscribe what must be the inclined head--in view of its "oreille penché"-- atop the clock into that increasingly declining series of inclined heads--from Virgil, Boileau, Racine--that marked the verse fragments in the Lettre and culminated in the image of a solitary head apparently afloat on the Virgilian waters. In brief, the irreversibility of the cataract would succeed in decapitating the "man" imagined by Diderot in terms of classical mechanics.

The "time of poetry," however, may also be interpreted as the history of poetry or, in a still broader perspective, of language itself. That history narrates an irreversible loss. For what is the situation of French in relation to earlier idioms? Diderot is univocal: "Ou pour continuer le parallèle sans partialité, je dirais que nous avons gagné, à n'avoir point d'inversions, de la netteté, de la clarté, de la précision, qualités essentielles au discours; et que nous y avons perdu de la chaleur, de l'éloquence et de l'énergie."⁽¹²⁹⁾ Similarly, referring to Amyot and Montaigne, Diderot later invokes "cette noblesse prétendue qui nous a fait exclure de notre langue un grand nombre d'expressions énergiques."⁽¹⁵²⁾ Thus the temporality of poetry, the history of the language is an irreversible flow--or cataract--figuring a progressive loss of heat and energy. To enter into that current is quite simply to participate in beheading the man of classical mechanics, to encounter the reality of entropy.

Littre: "cataracte: appareil qui, dans les machines à vapeur a simple effet, sert à régler le mouvement." With stunning untimeliness, Diderot's epistemologico-esthetic meditation on the sublime--"sublimation: passage de l'état solide à l'état gazeux"--has culminated in the realm of thermodynamics.

Francois Jacob: "The second law of thermodynamics imposes a direction on phenomena; no event can go in a direction different from that observed, for that would mean a decrease in entropy. No part of the universe's substance can return to a former condition, as might be imagined in a purely mechanical system such as an imaginary clock."²⁶ Michel Serres: "Le temps du moulin décline vers le temps du feu...L'éternel retour du même ne peut avoir lieu, ni en statique, ni en dynamique, ni en théorie de l'information. Ni pour le balancier, ni pour le moteur, ni pour la page d'écriture."²⁷

The meteorology of Lucretius, the thermodynamics of Serres, and somewhere in between, on the descent, the "cataract" of Diderot... In the structure we have elaborated, our intention has been to indicate the surprisingly rigorous coherence of a genealogy. Surely, a critical generation schooled in the imperialist techniques of psychoanalysis will not smart at the apparently anachronistic reference to thermodynamics. For a crucial relation to that discipline is present in Freud at the inception of his undertaking in 1895 and continues through the critical work of his later years. Indeed, it may be demonstrated that whereas Freud's enterprises reached its culmination in a marrying of the Empedoclean duality Love and Strife with the concerns of thermodynamics,

Serres' work has led him to a similar mating of Lucretian Mars and Venus with terms of the same discipline. But it is precisely at that juncture that the difference between Serres and those whose efforts derive essentially from Freud and Nietzsche becomes manifest. For whereas Freud read into the entropic death instinct repetition per se as the ground of psychical--or cosmic--functioning, entropy for Serres is precisely the physicist's access to an irreversibility of time corrosive of the repetitiveness of a reversible, minimally entropic classical mechanics. Whence the periodic disparagements of both Nietzsche and Freud which traverse his writings.

And Diderot in all this? If Serres has seemed to us, in important ways, the Diderot of our times, it is in part because the locus of just such a disparagement of the current cult of repetitive textuality seems devastatingly present in the Lettres we have analyzed: in the vain stuffing of hieroglyphics into the floodgate--or cataract--through which time, irreversibly, would flow. In the current critical context, the implications of that disquieting vision loom among the most forceful that a reading of Diderot may impel us to pursue.

A postscript, à la Diderot, on an additional segment of his work all but saturated by our cataract: the "moral tales." Offered as an extension, but, as well, as a provisional summary of our earlier findings.

If one were to pinpoint the formal specificity of Diderot's "fiction," it would lie in the extent to which the activity of nar-

ration (récit) comes to interfere--or coincide--with the events narrated (histoire). Thus, most impressively, in Jacques le Fataliste the dialogue between narrator and reader is perpetually interrupting the dialogue between Jacques and his master, the putative subject of the novel. Moreover, the tonality of those two dialogues is diametrically opposed: on the one hand, the "fatalism" of Jacques (ce qui est écrit là haut"); on the other, the anarchical freedom of the narrator, perpetually taunting the reader with new fictive possibilities he feels at liberty to complicate the plot with. Let these comments on Jacques (Serres: "Comment, du hasard, émerge une nécessité?...Tous les textes, sans doute, le mien, celui d'Aureville, ou Jacques le Fataliste, sont des modèles de cette question") serve as an introduction to our reading of the tales.²⁹

Upon superimposition, the "quatre contes" yield a surprisingly unvarying histoire. Three ("Mystification," "Ceci n'est pas un conte," "Madame de la Carlière") of the four are plainly concerned with the disastrous physical and moral effects undergone by a woman betrayed in love. "Mystification," for example, turns on the advice given by a bogus doctor to Mlle Dornet, abandoned by Galitzine, in order to "rétablir une machine usée par la peine et par le plaisir" (p. 16).³⁰ But the name of the exhaustion from which she and later Madame de la Carlière explicitly--and Mlle de la Chaux in "Ceci" at least by implication--suffer is "des vapeurs." That term is, in fact, sufficiently marked in the text to merit a scholarly appendix on that ailment in the critical edition of the tales. The apparently fated situation with which Diderot presents us repeatedly is the decline of physical and moral energy in what we may call, combining his words, a machine...à vapeurs.

If we turn now from the histoire to the dialogue through which it is narrated, we find a surprising recurrence. For the beginning of "Madame de la Carlière" offers, as well, a meditation on "vapeurs":

"Voyez-vous ces nuées?--Ne craignez rien; elles disparaîtront d'elles-mêmes et sans le secours de la moindre haleine de vent.--Vous croyez?--J'en ai fait souvent l'observation en été dans les temps chauds. La partie basse de l'atmosphère que la pluie a dégagée de son humidité va reprendre une portion de la vapeur épaisse qui forme le voile obscur qui vous dérobe le ciel. La masse de cette vapeur se distribuera à peu près également dans toute la masse de l'air, et par cette exacte distribution ou combinaison, comme il vous plaira de dire, l'atmosphère deviendra transparente et lucide." (p. 105)

These meteorological observations between narrator and reader thus serve as a raising of the curtain before the action begins. And yet that impression is deceptive. For the vapor is not removed or liquidated, but expanded, generalized to the point of invisibility. Moreover, the beginning of the Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, which, to all appearances, occurs on the day following that of "Madame de la Carlière," gives the lie to the narrator's confidence in the dissipation of the cloud:

- "A. Cette superbe voûte étoilée, sous laquelle nous revînmes hier, et qui semblait nous garantir un beau jour, ne nous a pas tenu parole.
B. Qu'en savez-vous?
A. Le brouillard est si épais qu'il nous dérobe la vue des arbres voisins..." 31

There is thus an irreducibility of the vapor out of which the action of the conte emerges. But that action can as well subside back into it. For within "Madame de la Carlière," the drama of the heroine gives way to a discussion of the chaotic manner in which the public--including reader and narrator--perceives it. We are treated to a description of random agglomerations of opinion within "la foule imbécile" (p. 126). This is the stochastic realm

of inconséquence that gives the tale one of its titles ("Sur l'inconséquence du jugement public de nos actions particulières"), and it resembles nothing so much as the process of cloud formation with which narrator and reader had earlier been preoccupied: "Dans les circonstances les plus équivoques le parti de l'honnêteté se grossit sans cesse de transfuges." (p. 127) More telling still: "car ils se poussent tous les uns les autres, et comme ils n'ont point de règles dans leurs jugements, ils n'ont pas plus de mesure dans leur expression..." (p. 133).

If we turn to "Ceci n'est pas un conte," we find that the opening discussion of "vapeur" between narrator and reader in "Madame de la Carlière" may be superimposed on a discussion of a discursive analogue to the meteorological phenomenon. For the tale to be told will no doubt initiate a frenetic and random circuit of communication: "un sujet aussi intéressant devrait mettre toutes les têtes en l'air, défrayer pendant un mois tous les cercles de la ville, y être tourné et retourné jusqu'à l'insipidité, fournir à mille disputes, à vingt brochures au moins et à quelques centaines de pièces envers pour et contre" (p. 73). A further after effect of the tale: "une litanie d'historiettes usées qu'on se décochait de part et d'autre" (p. 74). Pour et contre; de part et d'autre; plainly, we are in an aleatory medium, the discursive equivalent of the clouds discussed at the beginning of "Madame de la Carlière."

Consider now the relation between récit and histoire as we have constituted them in the tales. We find a fated and irreversible degradation of moral and physical energy (vapeurs) emerging from a stochastic, cloud-like space of communication (vapeur). Diderot has assigned the same name to "chance" and "necessity."

To the question of the etiology of "vapeurs," Diderot supplies at least three answers:

1. In "Mystification," the bogus doctor Desbrosses offers an interested theory explaining Mlle Dornet's illness. But before discussing it, we should note that his theory occurs at the point of intersection of a remarkable number of motifs with which we have been concerned in this essay:

- a. Desbrosses, examining Mlle Dornet: "Je n'écoute pas, je regarde" (p. 7). Explaining the constraints of "Turkish" medicine: "C'est qu'il n'est pas permis d'interroger sa malade... On juge la maladie aux gestes..." (p. 13). The reader recognizes here an odd repetition of the scenario in the Letter on deaf-mutes.
- b. Desbrosses is an expert at "la Chiromantie ou la connaissance de sa fin par les traits de la main" (p. 14). He proceeds to read Mlle Dornet's hand, thus enacting a strangely displaced version of the crucial form of writing--of shapes inscribed on a hand--proposed by Diderot in the Letter on the deaf.
- c. Desbrosses defines the retina as "une toile d'araignée tissée des fils nerveux les plus déliés, les plus fins, les plus sensibles du corps, qui tapisse le fond de l'oeil" (p. 22). That "textual" image, crucial to Le Rêve de d'Alenbert, is continuous with the generally centrifugal meditation (hands vs. eye) of the Letter on the blind. To find it situated here in the core of vision ("au fond de l'oeil") is a striking, implicit affirmation of the thesis of that Letter.

Now at the center of this minor text, so studded with fragmentary simulacra of essential motifs of Diderot's thought, the author, through Desbrosses, offers a pseudo-theory of the etiology of vapeurs: "On dirait qu'il s'échappe des choses qui ont appartenu, qui ont touché à un objet aimé, des écoulements imperceptibles qui se portent là. Cette idée n'est pas nouvelle; c'est la vieille doctrine d'Epicure. Ces Anciens-la en savaient plus que nous. Cela tient à la vision, et la vision comment se fait-elle? Par des simulacres minces et légers qui se détachent des corps et s'élancent vers nos yeux" (p. 20). Thus at the point of intersection of these various simulacra of Diderotian theory, we are presented with...Lucretius' theory

of simulacra. Behind the "vapeurs," "des écoulements..." As the Lucretian storm--or cataract--gathers, one understands the precipitation with which J. Froust, in the critical edition, footnotes, "bien entendu," Diderot's lack of sympathy with Desbrosses' theory (p. 164).

2. A second cause--or precipitating factor of "vapeurs" is tendered in "Madame de la Carlière." For the heroine discovers the betrayal of her beloved when his love letters--to another--come fluttering out of a sealed chest that accidentally falls and breaks in her presence: "Là l'anneau casse, le coffret tombe, le dessus se sépare du reste, et voilà une multitude de lettres éparses aux pieds de Madame Desroches..." (p. 118). Whereupon: a recognition of betrayal and...les vapeurs. But the narrator prepares this sequence with a warning to his reader: "J'ai dit cent fois aux amants: N'écrivez point, les lettres vous perdront; tôt ou tard le hasard en détournera une de son adresse. Le hasard combine tous les cas possibles, et il ne lui faut que du temps pour amener la chance fatale" (p. 118). The language is remarkably close to Pensée philosophique XXI, in which the world is assumed to be explicable through an infinite series of castings of atoms even as a masterpiece could be fortuitously composed through an infinite series of castings of "caractères." Atomes, caractères, and now, in "Madame de la Carlière," lettres. Out of the stochastic chaos or "vapeur" at the beginning of the tale comes a disastrous and fortuitous cataract of Lucretian "letters" (détournement for clinamen), and the moral stability of the tale's world is ruined in the process. (Note that in Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, the figure for entropy is a surreptitious and renegade postal system, disrupting for centuries the West's channels of communications.) The definitive reading of "Madame de la Carlière"

may well be the epigraph we have chosen from Serres: "Il y a des nuages, il pleut, et voilà tout."

3. A third observation on vapeurs occurs in Le Rêve de d'Alembert, where Mlle de l'Espinasse refers to it as a "sorte d'anarchie qui nous est si particulière."³² Anarchy, moreover, is defined as that situation in which "tous les filets du réseau sont soulevés contre leur chef, et où il n'y a plus d'autorité suprême." Order or authority here is largely the illusion of autonomy emergent at the point of maximal intersection of the strands constitutive of the network. When that fortuitous center of gravity breaks down, the stochastic chaos from which it emerges--and which insists on its fringes--asserts itself (Diderot's "anarchie"). The political image here will allow us to account for the case of the one male ruined by a treacherous mate in the contes: Tanió in "Ceci n'est pas un conte." For he is destroyed by two voyages to the colonies dictated by his rapacious mistress (Reymer). His fate, that is, is to be ruined by his estrangement from the métropole ("le chef"), first in Santo-Domingo, then in the far North where he dies: "J'ai été lui chercher la fortune dans les contrées brûlantes de l'Amérique, elle veut que j'aille la lui chercher encore au milieu des glaces du Nord" (p. 81). If vapeurs is the name of a principle of moral and physical--or thermic--degradation which irreversibly governs the constitutive fringes of an order whose center is thereby threatened, Tanió, as much as any of Diderot's women, has been devastated by vapeurs.

Thus vapeur--stochastic chaos and irreversible degradation of energy--comes to repeat in the contes the division within the cataract we elaborated earlier: cloud and torrent. Meteorology as the measure of morals? What seems perhaps archaic in Lucretius and magnificently perverse in Serres

is, of course, explicit in Diderot: "Le premier serment que se firent deux êtres de chair, ce fut au pied d'un rocher qui tombait en poussière; ils attestèrent de leur constance un ciel qui n'est pas un instant le même; tout passait en eux et autour d'eux, et ils croyaient leurs coeurs affranchis de vicissitudes."³³ Lucretius, Diderot, Serres: beyond the science(s) they have drawn upon--might Serres not have found all the thermodynamics he needed in Diderot's machine...à vapeurs?--it is the prodigious spiral of discursive energy circulating through that genealogy that promises to yield--feedback or après-coup--interpretative possibilities we are only beginning to gauge.

Notes

1. J. Gouillet, La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot (Paris: Armand Colin, 1973), p. 132.
2. Page references in the text to Lettre sur les Aveugles are to Oeuvres philosophiques, ed. P. Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1964).
3. Page references in the text to Lettre sur les sourds et les muets are to Premières œuvres, II, ed. N. Rudich (Paris: Editions sociales, 1972).
4. Cited in the critical edition of the Lettre, ed. R. Niklaus (Paris: Minard, 1963), p. 89.
5. Oeuvres complètes, ed. J. Assézat and M. Tourneux (Paris: 1875-1877), vol. I, 235.
6. Oeuvres philosophiques, p. 122.
7. For the passages virtually translated from Book V of De Rerum Natura in Saunderson's discourse, see Oeuvres philosophiques, pp. 121-123.
8. Oeuvres esthétiques, ed. Vernière (Paris: Garnier, 1965), pp. 167-168.
9. Translation from the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge: Harvard, 1975) by W. H. D. Rouse, p. 279.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
12. Serres lectured extensively on Lucretius at Johns Hopkins in the spring of 1976, and those lectures are the matter of a forthcoming volume. Serres' reading of Lucretius informs a recent article on Barbey d'Aurevilly ("Analyse spectrale; Barbey d'Aurevilly" in Critique, 349-350, June-July 1976) to which reference is made below. It is hoped that the reading of Diderot attempted in this paper will simultaneously offer access to recent developments in the writings of one of France's most iconoclastic thinkers.
13. Serres, "Analyse spectrale," p. 566.
14. Lucretius, p. 113.
15. F. Jacob, The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity (New York: Vintage, 1976), trans. B. Spillmann, p. 196.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 253, my emphasis. The Maxwell-Brillouin juncture has as well furnished one of the orienting schemes of the novels of Thomas Pynchon. This is nicely captured by R. Poirier in an article on that author in which he is obliged to explicate Brillouin's paper, "Maxwell's Demon Cannot Operate": "The rage to order, Pynchon seems to say, is merely a symptom of accelerating disorder" ("The Importance of Thomas Pynchon" in Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon, ed. G. Levine and D. Leverenz, Little, Brown & Co., Boston, 1976, p. 20). A worthwhile point of departure for any "grafting" of French thought on and in American cultural reality might well be a consideration of why Maxwell-Brillouin should figure centrally in America in the work of a novelist (Pynchon) and in France in that of someone (Serres) whose efforts lead him to claims normally those of a critic.
--or not to normally--
18. That world may be elaborated as a reading of Diderot's De l'Interprétation de la nature (1753). The continuity with the Lettre sur les Aveugles is marked by the epigraph from the section on "trouble in vision" in Book IV of De Rerum Natura: "Quae sunt in luce tuorum/E tenebris (we see out of the dark what is in the light)." Scientific activity, in Diderot's text, is interpreted as favorable to a general reversal of the traditional hierarchy in which "experimental philosophy" had been subordinated to "rational philosophy." Thus, in the exemplary Pensée XXIII, experimental philosophy--metaphorized in terms of its tentative, tactile ("tâtonnant"), blind ("les yeux bandés") activity--erects up by disproving the arrogant claims of rationalism--metaphorized as the bearer of a torch ("flambeau")--by demonstrating that light can be decomposed. But the "tactile" is generalized to the principle of the constitution of the world in the "extravagant" series of conjectures on the "general laws of the communication of movement" in Pensée XXXVI. Arguing against the thesis of the homogeneous transmission-distribution of movement in cases of impact ("le choc"), Diderot maintains that in the transmission of force, what is communicated is subject to elaborately coded constraints ("il y a, dans les corps choqués, des parties oscillantes infiniment petites, et des noeuds ou points immobiles infiniment proches..."). In brief, what is communicated may be thematized as order, information, energy... Finally, the world as the generalized system of such communication is imagined by Diderot, pressing Maupertuis' intuition to the limit, as "une copulation universelle" (Pensée I). Thus the Venusian motif comes to join, under the epigraph from Lucretius, the dimensions of "touch," "blindness," and aleatory "communication" in their opposition to a metaphysics--"rational philosophy" or "geometry"--of light.
19. Serres, p. 598.
20. "Inversion" would be a reversal of order in the passage from a natural medium to a conventional language. But since thought, the most natural medium of mentation, is, according to the Lettre sur les sourds, atemporal in its essence, there can be no natural order of grammatical parts in thought.

21. Lucretius, p. 305.
22. Quoted in A. Wilson, Diderot (New York: Oxford, 1972), p. 108.
23. Salon de 1767, Oeuvres complètes, vol. XI, p. 77.
24. Translation by W.F. Jackson Knight in The Aeneid (Baltimore: Penguin, 1956), IX, 433-437.
25. A passage of Lucretius (I, 810-811), twice quoted in the Lettre, occurs in De Rerum Natura just prior to the poet's assimilation of atoms to letters.
26. Jacob, p. 198.
27. Serres, pp. 563, 568.

neveu at his most intense, however, is driven to pantomime ("On ne chante pas bien sous ce tonneau..."). With an audience whose hearing is blocked responding to a remarkable practitioner of gesture, we rediscover the scenario of the Lettre sur les sourds et les muets.

b. "MOI, Comment se fait-il qu'avec un tact aussi fin, une si grande sensibilité pour les beautés de l'art musical, vous soyez aussi aveugle sur les belles choses en morale...?" Here the opposition between ethics and esthetics is superimposed on that between sight and touch, the focus of the Lettre sur les aveugles. To that extent, we may imagine the esthetic (tact) coming to engulf the ethical (light), thus confirming the Nietzschean reading of Le Neveu that Foucault (Histoire de la folie), most recently, has undertaken.

c. Just prior to the Danaid reference, Rameau imagines himself as one of the many who fail to be the mythical status of Minon, his archetype of genius. They remain mute upon being struck by light. Thus is the nephew's failure located at the intersection of the two texts we have read.

Perhaps we should think of Rameau, a genius only in abjection, perspiring ("tout en eau") in his vile pantomime, imitating with greatest effectiveness "des eaux ou qui murmurent dans un lieu solitaire et frais, ou qui descendent en torrent du haut des montagnes..."

29. Serres, p. 580.
30. References in the text are to Quatre contes, ed. J. Proust (Geneva: Droz, 1964).
31. Oeuvres philosophiques, p. 456.
32. Ibid., p. 346.
33. Oeuvres romanesques, ed. H. Benac (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 604.