

## ONE

### LIFE'S DRAMA

---

**D'ALEMBERT:** J'avoue qu'un être qui existe quelque part et qui ne correspond à aucun point de l'espace; un Être qui est inéteudu et qui occupe de l'éteudu; qui est tout entier sous chaque partie de cette éteudu; qui diffère essentiellement de la matière et qui lui est uni; qui la suit et qui la meut sans se mouvoir; qui agit sur elle et qui en subit toutes les vicissitudes; un Être dont je n'ai pas la moindre idée; un Être d'une nature aussi contradictoire est difficile à admettre. Mais d'autres obscurités attendent celui qui le rejette; car enfin *cette sensibilité que vous lui substituez*, si c'est une qualité générale et essentielle de la matière, il faut que la pierre sente.

**DIDEROT:** Pourquoi non?

**D'ALEMBERT:** Cela est dur à croire.

**DIDEROT:** Oui, pour celui qui la coupe, la taille, la broie et qui ne l'entend pas crier.

**D'ALEMBERT:** Je voudrais bien que vous me dissiez quelle différence vous mettez entre l'homme et la statue, entre le marbre et la chair.

**DIDEROT:** Assez peu. On fait du marbre avec de la chair, et de la chair avec du marbre.<sup>1</sup>

Thus opens Diderot's enigmatic text of 1769, *D'Alembert's Dream*. Written as a series of dramatic conversations, the text is composed of three parts: "A Conversation between Diderot and D'Alembert," "D'Alembert's Dream," and "Sequel to the Conversation," all unified by convention as *D'Alembert's Dream*. To quickly rehearse the basics, in the first part Diderot and his friend D'Alembert enter into a debate about the question of sensibility and

its relation to the general questions of the nature of life and matter. Can we account for both life and matter with a single principle, or do we need an additional, extra worldly element? The second part, presented as having occurred on the night of the conversation, and in which the day's residues from the conversation are transformed into an enigmatic dream, marks the disappearance of Diderot as a speaker and the introduction of two new characters, Mlle de L'Espinasse, D'Alembert's companion, and one doctor Bourdeu, who both try to respond to D'Alembert's dreaming hallucinations regarding the essence of life. In the third part, taking place the following afternoon, D'Alembert himself disappears, leaving the doctor and the Mlle to discuss briefly some issues regarding "unnatural sexuality" that are unfit to discuss in company.

It is around the question of the essence of life, then, in its relation to the phenomenon of dreaming, that *D'Alembert's Dream* will develop that fundamental insight of Diderot's regarding a positive alienation which marks the self and the world with an originary intimate/external disaster, and which we are tracking through several of Diderot's fundamental texts.

As with all Diderot's major works, one asks upon a first reading, "What the hell is this thing?" "What just happened?" "Is it some bizarre three-organed monster, a three-headed creature perhaps, an unrecognizable fabulous animal that just crossed our path on its way to the mysterious cave that is its hidden dwelling?" "Or perhaps it is not one creature, or text, at all, but three smaller creatures somehow artificially joined together for a moment before parting company, each going its separate way?" "Were we dreaming or awake?" "Did we just see what we thought we saw or was it our imagination?"

This text is so strange and enigmatic partly due to the relations established between its dramatic form, its content—having to do with the development of a general materialism and a theory of life—and its characters: a philosopher, a doctor, a geometrician, and a woman. It is not exactly clear what kind of text it is. Is it a metaphysical treatise on the nature of that which is? Is it a scientific treatise in natural zoology, describing the history of the development of animal life? Is it a theatrical play? A love story? The delirious hallucination of a mad dreamer? A pedagogical text written by a man and intended for the education of women, or perhaps for the education of men by women? Is it perhaps all of these at once? We are left wondering how we might account for such an unholy concoction. What would account for the text's unity—if, in fact, it *has* a unity at all?

Traditionally, with few exceptions, the text has been read mainly from the point of view of its themes, by those examining its role in eighteenth-century materialism, its proto-Darwinian character, or its significance in the late-eighteenth-century rise of the life sciences and biology. Yet we miss the

essence of this text if we ignore its literary form, which is obviously not external to the concepts invoked but is immanent to them and transforms their very understanding.<sup>2</sup> That is, one can understand the text's major concepts—life, materialism, sensibility, organism, etc.—and Diderot's essential contribution in relation to them only by accounting for their precise relations to the text's "literary" form, the ways they are permeated by the question of dramatic conversation.

The following discussion aims to lay out the foundations for a real engagement with *D'Alembert's Dream* by examining the basic relations between its staging—that is, its dramatic form and the characters who populate it—and some of its major thematic concerns.

#### THE INFINITE CONVERSATION AND THE THINKING OF THE OUTSIDE

Let us, then, approach this strange and unrecognizable thing that we have bumped into along our way.<sup>3</sup> Where better to start than at the text's beginning, with the opening lines of *D'Alembert's Dream* that opened our discussion?

But as with all of Diderot's texts, we soon discover that there is no such thing as beginning, if we understand beginning in the strong sense of the term as a meaningful point of origin that orients everything that follows it. We always find ourselves *in medias res* and, more precisely for Diderot, in the *middle of a conversation*. We do not know when Diderot and D'Alembert started to talk, nor what they have been talking about before we began eavesdropping, nor what exactly brought them to say what they now say or adopt the positions they seem to endorse. All we know is that they are already in the middle of conversing. What is the significance of this starting in the middle? It means, to begin with, that we are presented with a text that is not the whole thing. It is not complete, having a beginning and an end. Rather, the text seems to be a fragment of something larger that we are not wholly given. Thus, it has an *outside*. But what would this outside be? We can of course say that the outside is simply further conversation. The two men's prior conversation has been omitted because the moment of conversation with which it opens is what is important to the text. The conversation itself was larger than the text, as we get a view of only its important part.

Yet, from another, more essential point of view, what is outside the given conversation has a *completely different nature* than the conversation itself. Any conversation, it tells us, can *always only* start in the middle (or is the very activation of being in the middle, finding oneself in the midst of things), and in this sense no conversation can be complete, or whole.

There are only “fragments” of conversation; there is no such thing as the beginning of a conversation as a meaningful point of origin to orient and make intelligible everything that follows it. The conversation emerges *in medias res* out of something, an outside, that can itself never become an actual part of the conversation. This is an outside that the conversation therefore cannot say, but is nevertheless that which gets it going, serves as the constant resource from which it draws its movement as it progresses, and somehow is shown by the conversation.<sup>4</sup> Starting thus *in medias res*, eliminating the possibility of being present to a meaningful origin-point of orientation, Diderot makes us open to this outside that, while never becoming part of the conversation, is nevertheless fully immanent to it and constantly haunting it as that which, were it available, would finally give us the whole of the conversation. A haunting, immanent outside is thus that which is “viewed” when the text begins *in medias res*, in the middle of a conversation. And what is this outside? *Nothing*, but (to begin with, defined negatively) the very disappearance of the possibility of an origin-point that would intelligibly orient the whole.

Crucially, this disappearance of an absolute point of origin and orientation, the discovery of a haunting by an immanent outside, implies for Diderot that things always begin as a *conversation or as drama*, that is, as the interaction of at least two voices, or more precisely two speakers (there must be more than one speaker once there is no origin).<sup>5</sup> If there were only a single voice, a monologue, this voice could say it all, say the whole, since it would have no exteriority, no outside. Once the possibility of having a meaningful whole disappears, so does the single voice. Thus in the beginning—a beginning always *in medias res*—there was drama: the interaction of at least two voices haunted by an outside that marks their lack of meaningful origin.

If the conversation is that which lacks an orienting origin, there can be no external point of view to either bring it to an end or explain its movement. As such, the conversation is that which can be approached only out of itself, without relation to any externality and thus completely immanently. The haunting by the outside thus paradoxically implies a principle of absolute immanence. One cannot resort to anything outside the conversation to get hold of it and exhaust its movement. The conversation, whose “originating” resource is the outside, is thus simultaneously that which only happens out of itself.

Let us move on to the *content* of the conversation between Diderot and D’Alembert. What do the two conversers or dramatic characters talk *about*? Strikingly, they talk about how it is impossible to accept the existence of a *certain* outside to the so-called material world, an outside, call it God or soul, whose nature would be completely different from that of this world,

yet nevertheless could be established as something in relation to which this world operates: a transcendent thing, exterior to the world, which functions as a principle of intelligibility and causality of this world.

The discovery of an immanent outside, through the dramatic form of a conversation that begins in the middle, as if results, from the point of view of the content, with the dissolution of what Diderot, among others, calls metaphysics. The content becomes the reflection of the form, and *metaphysics is replaced by drama*.

We might thus begin to sketch a series of differences between metaphysical thinking, a thinking organized around the positing of a transcendent object, and the thinking with which Diderot attempts to replace it, call it dramatic thinking. If, in its basic operation, the metaphysical tradition's transcendent outside called for a contemplation of an externality that one dreams of merging with, then the basic operation of Diderotian dramatic thinking, a thinking guided by the discovery of the immanent outside, is a reflection and a showing of its own form, or of the medium that animates it, rather than the reaching to an object external to it. The contemplation of transcendence is replaced by a "showing" of an outside, an outside activated via a conversation that reflects itself.

### *Sensibility and Materialism*

Let us, then, continue looking at the text's opening conversation, and the enormous implications borne by this elimination of the metaphysical, transcendent outside and its replacement by a haunting immanent outside that implies an originary drama. We encounter here a demand for a new conceptual and terminological framework, a new way of writing, and the introduction of new dramatic personae onto the philosophical stage. The first term enabling this dramatic revolution, the term that allows Diderot to spearhead the attempt to dissolve metaphysical thinking, is sensibility,<sup>6</sup> now understood by Diderot as the general quality of "matter."<sup>7</sup> Yet *what is sensibility?* This is one of the central enigmas that this text poses for us. To some extent all the conceptual and literary moves made by the text hinge on, or are made possible by, its attempt to explore this concept's implications. Materialism is a new thinking of sensibility.

It is well known that the vocabulary of sensibility, sensation, sentiment, etc., became all-pervasive in eighteenth-century writing, but did so without, perhaps, achieving a particularly clear definition.<sup>8</sup> But my aim in exploring Diderot's understanding of this vocabulary is not historical; I am not interested here in deciding whether his use of this vocabulary is original or how it stands in relation to the uses made by other thinkers, such as Condillac in his *Traité des sensations*, La Mettrie, etc. However important

these questions, they are not mine. All that interests me in this context is to try to follow how this vocabulary functions within the realm of Diderot's text, and what thinking it makes possible.<sup>9</sup>

*The Stone's Cry*

**D'ALEMBERT:** [. . .] Mais d'autres obscurités attendent celui qui le rejette; car enfin *cette sensibilité que vous lui substituez*, si c'est une qualité générale et essentielle de la matière, il faut que la pierre sente.

**DIDEROT:** Pourquoi non ?

**D'ALEMBERT:** Cela est dur à croire.

**DIDEROT:** Oui, pour celui qui la coupe, la taille, la broie et qui ne l'entend pas crier.

**D'ALEMBERT:** Je voudrais bien que vous me disiez quelle différence vous mettez entre l'homme et la statue, entre le marbre et la chair.

**DIDEROT:** Assez peu. On fait du marbre avec de la chair, et de la chair avec du marbre.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, is sensibility? In its most basic and essential determination, from which all other determinations must follow, sensibility is simply *the possibility anything possesses to suffer an event where it is taken outside itself, and involuntarily so, where its identity is exceeded by something not in its control*. As Diderot says in his *Encyclopédie* entry on sensation: "Les sensations font sortir l'âme *hors d'elle meme*."<sup>11</sup> Or, as he says in another context, listing specific cases of events associated with sensibility that mark instances of a self losing itself and its identity: "Sensibility, according to the only accepted usage of that word up until now, is, it seems to me, that disposition in beings, always accompanied by a weakness of the organs—a consequence of excessive mobility of the diaphragm, liveliness of the imagination, or irritability of nerves—that causes them to sympathize, to shudder, to admire, to fear, to be disturbed, to weep to faint, to help others, to run away, to cry out, to lose their reason, to exaggerate, to despise, to disdain, to have no precise idea whatever of the truth, goodness, or beauty, *to run mad*."<sup>12</sup> Sensibility thus both marks an outside and a possible experience of madness. The outside in question here is, again, not a simple externality, but, as in the case of the conversation, something internal to the soul, part of its very constitution: the soul as ex-posed or ecstatic, "containing" as what is what is most

internal to it, a fundamental ex-cess. Diderot names this excess madness, the madness of the outside.

In the cases mentioned above the vocabulary of sensibility and sensation, and the madness of the outside implied by it, is used in relation to the human realm. But this vocabulary is not limited to this realm, and marks for Diderot the basic “determination” of anything that is. Anything whatsoever has to be understood according to the logic of sensibility; that is, anything whatsoever exists in relation to the possibility that it suffer not being itself, or suffer being taken outside itself or its identity, understood as that which makes it what it is. In this sense, nothing exists that is only itself; every entity is always also not itself, “containing” an outside that somehow haunts its identity. In the words of the delirious, dreaming D’Alembert: “All creatures intermingle with each other, consequently all the species . . . *everything* is in a perpetual flux. Every animal is more or less man; every mineral is more or less plant; every plant is more or less animal.”<sup>13</sup>

The activation of sensibility means a *passage through an outside*, which for Diderot is a passage through madness, in its being completely undetermined by any identity or preexisting condition; that is, it is completely non-teleological and, in a way, is nothing but the very fact of activating that which has neither beginning nor end: the activation of the *in medias res*.

In the beginning was sensibility, the being outside itself.

Let us, then, go back to the text and examine Diderot’s engagement with this notion of sensibility.

D’Alembert grasped the consequences of Diderot’s argument for a general sensibility of matter, thus of everything that is (which we can now understand as the inscription at the heart of everything there is—“matter” in the sense of a realm without transcendence—of an unfulfillable outside). He raised, as we saw, the objection that a stone itself should be seen as something that can sense. “And why not?” Diderot asks.

First, it is important to pay attention to this question, which is in fact the very first thing uttered by Diderot in the text. “Why not?” encapsulates the whole of Diderot’s philosophical method: it is itself the activation in the mode of questioning of the being of the outside, or the activation of the outside as a question proper to it, a question that is thus to some extent mad.

Seeing a madman arguing intensely with a streetlamp, a bystander comments that this is not a person with whom you can argue. “And why not?” asks the madman. For what type of utterance is this question? It neither affirms nor denies the proposition to which it responds; it neither agrees nor disagrees with it but first of all suspends it, *paralyzing* the person who made the proposition, preventing him/her from acting until he takes account

of that which s/he thought was obvious. If the classical-philosophical Socratic question, "What is . . . ?" (What is beauty?, What is the good?, etc.), paralyzes its listener, showing that s/he does not know what she or he has been talking about, the question nevertheless assumes a pre-given essence or not-yet-revealed identity that we haven't been able to rightly open up to. The "Why not?" question is very different, not assuming a pre-given essence or identity of anything, but rather simply opening a space where something becomes unrecognizable, not itself. As such, anything it puts in question is exposed to an unpredictable outside with no presupposition. We can call this gesture an *experimental* gesture, if the very notion of the experimental entails the suspension of any known identity and operates under the assumption that whatever it might be or become, it is perhaps not what we assumed it to be, it is not itself. Thus, if the philosophical question *par excellence* is "What is?" then the fundamental question of the *experimental thinker of sensibility*, the figure with which Diderot attempts to replace the classical, contemplative philosopher, the thinker activating (experimenting with) an outside exposing anything whatsoever to a fundamental non-identity, is "Why not?." We can thus say that "Why not?" is a question that prepares the self for an encounter with strangeness, lifting its attachment to itself, putting it in question through suspension and paralysis.

D'Alembert states that it hard to believe that the stone senses; yes, says Diderot, for those who cut and grind it, without hearing it cry. The "Why not?," then, is that which is supposed to open the way, for the person struck or paralyzed by it, to the possibility of hearing a stone cry. To be struck by this question is thus to be prepared to undergo a specific kind of learning or education, which, in this case, brings the possibility that one might listen differently, hear (or see, etc.) what had not been heard before, and in this sense has never existed<sup>14</sup>; to be struck by this question is thus to undergo something we might call an *education of the senses*, or an *education into sensation*. By becoming strange to ourselves, by undergoing the activation of our sensibility, we open up to the strangeness (thus to the opaqueness to our regular modes of recognition) of everything, to everything else *as sensibility*.<sup>15</sup>

In the beginning was strangeness, the not-being-itself of anything and everything.

We should not understand Diderot to be saying in this context that the stone cries *in the same way* animals, or humans, or plants do, but rather that the cry is that which marks, in everything, each in its own specific way, the mode of becoming strange, exposed to an unfulfillable outside, an outside not marked by the primacy and priority of identity or of a pre-given teleology.

There is thus no such single meaning or experience we could designate as a cry; it is simply the expressive mark, and a memory trace, of the being of the outside in each thing. Each thing is now indeed to be understood as ex-pressive, that is, as ex-posing an outside that marks its very interiority, haunts its self-identity. We open to things, passing through the madness of sensibility, because they expose and express themselves, not in the sense of expressing some preexisting inner self that is then exteriorized, but in the opposite sense, where to express oneself is to show the dimension of the non-self, or of one's internal externality. Things express themselves *because* they are not themselves, because they are essentially alienated.

Yet not only is the cry singular and relative to each thing, marking the specific way it is foreign to itself. Due to its implication with the logic of expressive exposure, the cry is involved with the idea of a passage connecting things:

**D'ALEMBERT:** Then I wish you'd tell me what difference you think there is between a man and a statue, between marble and flesh.

**DIDEROT:** Not very much. You can make marble out of flesh, or flesh out of marble.<sup>16</sup>

Being exposed to an outside, each sensible thing is understood as always potentially undergoing a transformation, where the possibility of not-being-itself is activated so that the thing is taken away from itself, becoming another thing, in an absolutely open and unpredictable way. Anything can become anything, the stone can become human and the human become stone, and the possibility of the monster,<sup>17</sup> too, is always open—that is, a form that has never been seen, never before appeared.<sup>18</sup> Diderot's world is thus marked as standing under what is for him a key term, even if it appears only once in this text: *metamorphosis*. A true world of sensibility, a world exposed to an outside without pre-given identity, is a world of metamorphosis, where, because everything is outside itself, anything can activate this open potentiality in absolutely unpredictable ways, ways opened to the monstrously new.

If the cry signaled the expressiveness of the open outside internal to anything, each in its own specific way, then the cry is that which marks how, in a world of metamorphosis, everything is connected—that is, exposed to everything else, subjected to the possibility of becoming another via a passage through one's mad blindness. The cry is thus not only the expressiveness of each thing, but *the expressiveness of the world* (world being that which names the exposure of everything to everything, because everything is shared in the absolute outside) as a sensible world of metamorphosis. The cry is thus a singular cry that is at once a universal and universalizing cry.<sup>19</sup>

*The Genesis of Life*

Diderot calls “life” this universal exposure of everything to everything else, where each thing has its own modality of exposure even as, at the same time, everything is connected. Life, in this sense, as a singular-universal term, does not designate any specific content or form. It only marks the way, to begin with, that each thing is always constituted as a tension between being itself and not being itself, or being more than itself, exposed, haunted by a potentiality with no presupposed identity. Life is thus the specific life, a modality of the relations between identity and exposure, of each thing, as well as the universal life of everything as exposed to everything else. Or otherwise put, life is simply the way in which each thing undergoes its exposure to everything else.

Life is therefore not some obscure unified force passing through everything, nor something that can be said to consist of some basic minimal element, say vegetative life, on top of which will then be added hierarchically animal life and human life, each somehow containing the previous level in itself as well as a superior level. There is no basic level, nor any hierarchy, nor a process whereby levels are added. The life of each thing is an absolutely singular modality, and when things change, what life means changes as well, absolutely. This logic transforms the classical dilemma of whether life is univocal, meaning in the same way in each thing, which Aristotle, for example, denied, or whether it is said in many ways, to use Aristotle’s expression, meaning differently in relation to various things. (We use the same word to say that a human or a plant is alive, but the meaning is different.) Life is now univocal *and* said in many ways, a singular-universal. If there is such a thing as life itself, in excess of any of its singular manifestations, it will be articulated by Diderot as something that he calls pure sensitivity, the pure being that is outside oneself before each specific modality of exposure, a pure sensitivity which is perhaps nothing but time itself,<sup>20</sup> the time of the world, of which each singular thing, we might speculate, will be a delimitation. Each thing’s life will thus be a specific activation and delimitation of pure sensitivity, a sensitivity which will continue to haunt each thing as an internal excess, a potentiality for transformation and metamorphosis. Life, from this perspective, will be the insistent haunting of each thing by pure sensitivity (the time of the world), an internal excess of a pure outside threatening it with a dissolution and metamorphosis. Life will be each thing’s potential death.

In this world of metamorphosis where sensibility, the exposure to/ of the outside, precedes and exceeds any identity, life marks the relation between an absolute non-identity and the *emergence or genesis* out of this pure sensitivity of a *specific formation*, a specific identity. The new logic of sensibility therefore demands a genetic, or historical, thinking since, not

having always been itself, something has had to come into itself out of that exposure which precedes and continues to haunt it. The identity that emerges will be the singular way that each thing manages to remain itself and thus *to subject its exposure to an identity*,<sup>21</sup> all the while being haunted by the sensibility from of which it came, which is greater than it and threatens to dissolve it, a sensibility that is therefore its life/death.

Thus, if we are to learn to see, hear, and think according to this logic of sensible metamorphosis, we must learn to relate to anything not as if it were based on the specific formation of its current state as though it had always been there, but *to see it in the light of the haunting* which marks that it has come into its form (or its stability), genetically, as well as the possibility that it might lose this form.<sup>22</sup> How can we open to this haunting light? How can we listen to that which in a way has not been heard, and thus has not existed, before, the cry of life? This question is at the very heart of the philosophical task, which Diderot is trying to reformulate, re-conceive, and take beyond its classical understanding.

For if classical thought is that which rejected the exposure to the absolute outside, transforming this outside into a transcendent substance separate from and external to this world, then life itself, the very activity of the outside in each thing, the haunting connecting every thing to everything else, is that which has always remained un-thought, that to which we remained deaf and blind. All our manners of thinking, feeling, hearing, and seeing, our investigative procedures and ways of writing, our concepts and our methodologies have to be reformed, or destroyed, so that what is at the heart of our existence can, for the first time, really become accessible to us.

The primal, essential move in this reconfiguration of philosophy that is supposed to enable us, for the first time, to open up to *this* haunting life, the life in the world of sensible metamorphosis, involves, we have started to see, a dramatization, the putting in more or less conflictual dialogue of two voices starting to speak in the middle (of nowhere). Diderot's critical method in relation to the tradition might be named *a dramatization of philosophy*, or *a dramatization of logos*. To speak dramatically, to activate an originary and irreducible in-betweenness of several speakers, would be to activate this unheard-of life as the haunting of the outside. Such dramatization is neither, for example (to name some other critical projects), a critique of pure reason, where thought is made to take stock of its own procedures to which it was to some extent blind, nor exactly a deconstruction, where a certain excess beyond the tradition's capacity to mean is discovered to operate within the texts of the tradition, destroying them from within, discovering in them a speechlessness that can nevertheless be made to speak out of its traditional repression, disturbing the meaningful voice that tried to silence even as it also originated from it.

Behind Diderot's dramatic method lies the intuition that what is at stake in the necessary critique of traditional thought, or metaphysics, is not so much the liberation of Reason from its traditional illusions via a discovery of its own nature, immanently, out of itself, nor even (though this is much closer) the retrieval of an essential forgetting which nevertheless leaves a memory-trace at the heart of the tradition, call it a forgetting of Being, whose retrieval demands a destruction or deconstruction of philosophy.

Rather, at stake for Diderot in the need to undermine the tradition in the form of its dramatization is the liberation of life—a life blocked by a tradition which tried to exorcise the haunting, preventing the specific mode of life called the human from really opening up to its “own”<sup>23</sup> life and preventing as well its relation to everything else in terms of its life, that in everything which is more than it. What is at stake in the liberation from the tradition is thus a reactivation of haunting life. Metaphysics has to suffer a haunting. Philosophy, or however we would want to name this discourse that Diderot is trying to bring about (he himself still wanted to name the activity in which he was engaged “philosophy,” a philosophy brought to life through a dramatic intervention in its tradition), is now to become the activity that is “adequate” to life, or to the cry of life. Yet, what does such an adequacy mean? It first means that nothing else but life as such is to be that in which this type discourse is interested. Yet what would be the nature of such a discourse for which life itself—the excess haunting anything, each in its own way, as not being itself—is the sole issue?

To begin with, this discourse, if it is to be adequate to life—unlike traditional philosophy whose inadequacy consisted in the blocking of life—it has to be something that makes life itself, as such, accessible, unblocking it. But life can only be made accessible, Diderot is trying to show, *as* life, that is, only if one is made to live, or to participate in life. If life is to be made accessible, one has to become it, become alive/dead. Life cannot become accessible in the mode, say, of representative knowledge, as something that we know about. Life can only be made accessible out of itself, out of living. The philosophical text thus becomes a “place” or a “space” *where life is made to happen* (and life is that which happens, happening being the activation of the exposure of the outside without predetermined identity).<sup>24</sup>

Yet to live, or to be made to live, in the manner understood in this conception by philosophy, that is, *to live life as such and to occupy the place where life happens*, is a very strange affair. For life as such happens precisely where we are not ourselves, when we are absent to ourselves as a recognizable identity. For life/death is not the life of an identity, but the exposure of identity to what is more than it and precedes and exceeds it, occupying its blind heart. To be made to live is thus to be made to suffer the event of becoming strange to oneself. One must become the excessive sensibility that haunts one and occupy the “place” that we have started to define

as one's blind madness, the place where one's identity no longer precedes one's exposure. This becoming is at the heart of what Diderot understands by experience.<sup>25</sup>

To be made to live in the philosophical space, to enter this space, would thus mean to be made, or to become, a phantom, abstracted from one's everyday life of recognition and self-recognition.<sup>26</sup> To live, philosophically, is thus to occupy the space of a strange phantom, a haunting signifying one's excess beyond oneself as one's life/death. It is as if only the ghost were truly alive, and therefore one can become alive—or, more precisely, life overtakes one only if one is somehow made to suffer one's own haunting madness and becomes a phantom. Life, in this sense, was what we were, necessarily, blind to, in that it occupies the place of our blindness, that is, of not being ourselves, of being unrecognizable and unreflective to ourselves. Philosophy will thus have to be that which *shows* this blindness, making it accessible. We will later associate this showing with the term *image*. Philosophy cannot be that which represents the sort of life that somehow exists on its own outside it, since to some extent life really happens, in the sense of becoming open to it as such, only *as* philosophy/image.

Yet, of course, suffering such madness is not sufficient if one is to be truly initiated into life philosophically. One must also somehow *appropriate* life in such a way that one can sustain a ghostly existence which remains faithful to life as such. But how can one appropriate life (that is, bring it into our realm of conscious recognition) if life is, by definition, that which is inappropriable, unconscious, that which cannot belong to an identity, or has no predetermined signification and orientation? This might be the ultimate paradox that constantly haunts Diderot's thinking. To resolve it marks the achievement that he will call wisdom, to which we will return.

But what could or should such a "space" be where life as the haunting phantom is made to happen and, through this happening, in which we participate, becomes accessible? It is the space of theater, the place of drama. Why so? Because, if life is to be made accessible and we are made to participate in its happening, it must involve the liberation of the outside which (by definition, as we've seen) involves the in-betweenness of several speakers or voices, and this occurs only through the confrontation of at least two identities, who, made to discover in each other their own primary exposure, the impossibility of gathering themselves into an identity, are thus forced into life by this dramatic confrontation. Each discovers in the other, or through this confrontation, the life which has haunted it as announcing its being more than itself, activating its own internal-external cry. Life happens in and as a dramatic confrontation between at least two voices exposed to each other. Life is a drama, and happens as drama.

We have also seen that this dramatic space can be characterized as an experimental space in which the "Why not?" question is raised. To enter

the space of (non-metaphysical) philosophy is thus to enter the realm of an experimental theater.<sup>27</sup> This experimental theater is not only the place where life happens, in the sense of one becoming the phantom that one had been blind to, but it is also where life is made to happen in the sense of the scientific association of the term experiment, and the space associated with it, the laboratory. *D'Alembert's Dream* is an experimental theater where drama happens as the presentation of an unrecognizable haunting dimension abstracted from the everyday; but it is just as much an experimental laboratory, where the discovery of the phantomal dimension of life as such is understood as the origin of the scientific experiment under two main modalities: 1) Through the abstraction of an existing thing from its given context—an abstraction that constitutes the essence of the experiment, in its artistic and scientific dimensions, as the isolation of a thing from its recognizable identity—and its introduction into a laboratory space, a thing can be *observed* with new eyes, the phantomal eyes of the experimental space, which do not regard it from the point of view of its given identity.<sup>28</sup> These phantomal eyes subject the thing to another type of gaze, a gaze that sees it from the vantage of an exposure that is prior to its identity, from the point of view of its being more than itself. These eyes thus see the thing in terms of its genetic emergence out of a dimension that exceeds it and continues to haunt it as an internal excess. It is only, in a way, in the abstracted, thus experimental space of the laboratory that the thing can be viewed from the perspective of life, that is, from the perspective of a haunting excess of exposure that precedes anything's identity, and out of which the identity is now understood to have genetically emerged. The things that are constantly introduced into *D'Alembert's Dream's* abstracted experimental laboratory are examined with these phantomal eyes, eyes liberated from the domination of a thing's present identity. Life is made to happen in this space as that out of which and through which something comes to be observed in its genesis.

2) The second experimental dimension of this abstract laboratory involves the imaginative force of *invention* liberated by the discovery of life. If life is that which exceeds any identity or form, marking it as subjected to an exposure as unpredictable metamorphosis, then the phantomally enlivened space of the laboratory can serve as the arena to experiment with the non-existing, which has never existed and might never come into being, yet can be made to exist in the form of the imaginative hallucination of the scientific phantom.<sup>29</sup> The Diderotian laboratory is thus also a space where formerly unimagined forms of life, beautiful monstrosities, are raised as specters fleetingly evoked before they quickly disappear into the ghostly recesses from which they came. Life is made to happen in this space of imagined invention<sup>30</sup> as the activation of the power of metamorphosis.

Phantomal observation of the genesis of life and metamorphic inven-

tion are thus the two sides of the dramatic, experimental laboratory that is *D'Alembert's Dream*. Science, for Diderot, is thus framed by, or opens out of, the dramatic, that which activates the dimension of ghostly life.<sup>31</sup>

*The Laboratory—Between Poetry and Science*

Let us briefly learn to observe with Diderot, putting on our phantomal glasses and joining him as he introduces a small creature into his laboratory, in one of the most astonishing passages in *D'Alembert's Dream*, uniquely mixing science and poetry. Diderot attempts to explain to D'Alembert how something comes to be genetically, rather than having been always the same:

“D’abord c’est un point qui oscille, un filet qui s’étend et qui se colore, de la chair qui se forme; un bec, des bouts d’ailes, des yeux, des pattes qui paraissent; une matière jaunâtre qui se dévide et produit des intestins; c’est un animal. Cet animal se meut, s’agite, crie; *j’entends ses cris* à travers la coque; il se couvre de duvet; *il voit*. La pesanteur de sa tête, qui oscille, porte sans cesse son bec contre la paroi intérieure de sa prison; la voilà brisée; il en sort, il marche, il vole, il s’irrite, il fuit, il approche, il se plaint, il souffre, il aime, il désire, il jouit; il a toutes vos affections; toutes vos actions, il les fait”

“At first there is a little dot that bobs about, then there is a thread that takes on color and grows larger, then there is flesh starting to form, then there is a beak, there are wing tips, eyes and feet beginning to appear, a yellowish substance that divides to make the intestines—at last there is a living thing. This creature moves, it stirs about, it makes a noise—I can hear it peeping inside the shell. Its body begins to be covered with fuzz. It can see. The weight of its head, which wobbles back and forth, constantly forces its beak against the interior wall of its prison. At last the wall is broken and the chick comes out. It walks, it flutters its wings, it feels irritations, it runs away, it comes back again, it complains, it suffers, it loves, it desires, it enjoys. It shows all the emotions that you show and does everything you can do” (translation slightly modified).<sup>32</sup>

This passage’s syntactical, rhythmic brilliance, which strikes one first and foremost, acts out the very coming into being of the sensible creature. Composed of two sentences, the second one slightly longer, the passage is divided between the pre-formation of the creature, the stages preceding the reception of its final shape as a living thing, and its life as an animal.<sup>33</sup>

Within each of the sentences, two types of divisions are introduced, commas and semicolons; in the first sentence, the semicolon separates the creature's completely unformed stage and the moment when it begins differentiating into parts: beak, wings, eyes, feet. In the second sentence, with the living creature already fully differentiated, an animal, the semicolon marks two types of divisions, first between personal pronouns (I will deal with these in a moment), and second, between two stages of the differentiated creature's life, the stage when it is confined to the shell and the stage after it has broken out of it. The commas mark mostly the divisions between different activities and states of existence: running, flying, fleeing, complaining, suffering.

The passage's second major dimension is its use of pronouns: the indefinite pronoun dominates the first sentence, concerning the pre-fully-formed animal state, whereas the second sentence is dominated by the third person "Il," referring to the animal, and the first person "Je," referring to Diderot.

The passage tries to link so closely its linguistic articulation, the formation of the sentences, to an existential articulation, the formation of the chick, its gradual movement toward its final organization—in doing so, what is it telling us? That the sentence is a *representation* of the chick, something coming after the fact, pointing to what has already happened, and trying to imitate the animal's growth for an effect of some sort? Or perhaps that the sentence is something *like* a chick, a living thing similarly organized and articulated? Or, rather, that the life of the living thing itself can somehow find a completely appropriate place for itself in the sentence, that it *shows itself*, out of itself, out of its own life; sings itself, so to speak, in language; that language is that strange thing, a medium, which lets the things be in it, happen in it, the way they really are? This would mean that the articulations of the sentence, the commas, the semicolons, the periods, are not *like* the articulations of an existing thing, but rather, that they mark that through which the thing can show itself out of itself. That is, it is as if they are the prisms through which something is "seen," the way it really is, and their mode of articulation has to do with the specific nature of the linguistic thing that is different from the existing thing.

If this is the case, in what way, then, do they function as the prisms through which the thing shows itself? We might say, to begin with, that these linguistic divisions act as *cuts* (manipulations of emptiness), and do so in a double way: they mark temporal cuts, in the sense that the divisions they introduce mark a temporal acceleration, or a temporal leap, in relation to the sentence's content; that is, the transitions between the chick's developmental stages can be viewed, very quickly, within the scope of two sentences, since the sentences do not correspond one-to-one with the temporality of the development but, rather, speed it up, editing out weeks or months of development, inserting in their place a blank cut. Thus, though

the sentences might pretend to mimetically correspond to the development of the chick, they actually enact a complex editing procedure. It is through this temporal cut introduced by the sentence between the chick's developmental stages that, in a way, another cut is actually introduced, a cut between the developmental stages themselves. It is as if, by introducing a temporal discontinuity, the sentence allows us to see that this discontinuity is not only the property of the sentence, but is something that haunts the development itself. It is as if the stages can no longer be understood to follow each other in purely linear fashion, in a sort of natural progression of something determined in advance; rather, there is something between each of the stages, a something in the place of which the cut happens, that operates as an excess and out of which the stages come, almost arbitrarily, in the sense that things could also have been otherwise. The stages, in this sense, come as if out of nothing (nothing signifying the excess beyond linearity and predetermined formation): another organ could have been formed, a limb could have developed differently, and another animal would have come into existence, an animal whose ghost virtually haunts to some extent the actual animal that came to be. Each animal, thus, in a way, carries as part of its being the ghosts of those other formations that never came to be, and perhaps remembers, in the sense of carrying a trace, all these virtual creatures whose loss it mourns, and in whose possibilities it rejoices.<sup>34</sup> It is as if to move from one stage to another a certain excessive nothingness has to be crossed, a nothingness that could have taken an infinite number of other directions, and that has to be delimited and to an extent eliminated for this specific formation to come into existence.

Thus the sentences seem to mark a relation between a temporal cut and a developmental cut, and therefore it is as if they show that the excess operating between the developmental stages is time itself, as a sort of infinite exposure to metamorphosis which must be delimited and formed if anything specific and actual is to be. Time (the blank time of the world, pure sensitivity) is the excess of the unformed, an exposure that keeps haunting every actual formation. Language, this would seem to suggest, is that strange, paradoxical thing, a ghostly medium that incarnates that which never came to be, or incarnates time, an infinite nothing, as the excessive exposure that goes beyond any formation.

I have also said that these syntactical formations, the linguistic cuts, are also the prisms through which the thing shows itself, as it really is, out of itself. It takes the prism of a ghost to see a thing as it really is, the way it shows itself out of itself, rather than in relation to a prejudiced and predetermined point of view. If the linguistic structure and the developmental states are so closely articulated that the creature itself seems to inhabit these sentences, and if the linguistic cuts and the formless excessive exposure

haunting any development are to be thought together, then it would seem that the creature can come to be in language and can show itself in the way it really is because it *shows itself through* this excessive dimension. Its excess is that which is internal to it, in the sense that it always remains to some extent part of its formation, the non-realized part, and external to it, in that it marks the dimension that never became part of its final identity and formation, and always remains more than it, external to its identity.

Why do we say that the creature *shows itself* through this excess? Since in order to show, thus in order to come to be seen, something has to make itself available, open itself up, to an external position or perspective. Something shows or comes to be seen if it is exposed to an elsewhere. This means that anything, if it is to show, has to somehow “contain” an external position. This external position which the thing contains is, as we’ve seen, the formless excess, time as exposure, an internal externality. This means that the thing shows, is seen, from the “place” where it is *not* itself, from the place of the haunting that exceeds its finalized identity, yet is nevertheless somehow internal to it. This is the place occupied by language as a ghostly medium. But when the thing shows, we have said, it shows its *self*, the unique identity that only it can give to the seer. To see the unique self, why must one have the ghostly prisms of that which infinitely exceeds this self, the internal-external, formless exposure? Because the self’s uniqueness lies in the specific way, unpredictable and to some extent arbitrary—in the sense that it could have taken an infinity of different paths—that its formation came out of the exposed excess preceding it and continuing to haunt it as marking the impossibility of its fully being itself. The uniqueness of the self which shows can thus show only as the relation between an excess and a “miraculous”—in the sense of its being unpredictable—formation coming out of this excess.<sup>35</sup>

The sentence is thus the place where the creature, by being exposed, comes to show its unique formation, which is always a relation between the excess haunting it and its final emergence. To learn to observe scientifically, thus experimentally, the way Diderot understands it, is to learn to occupy this haunting position where a thing can finally show itself the way it really is, precisely because it comes to be seen in light of a ghostly excess that is external-internal to it, an excess from which emerges, genetically, its uniqueness. The scientific space of the laboratory and the type of observation it involves are therefore to be understood as a ghostly space whose medium is language.

Scientists, obviously, need not be writers to really observe; but the type of space they come to occupy, the experimental laboratory, is essentially tied to the being of language as the medium that can provide them with their phantom eyes.

But it is therefore perhaps here—noticing the essential relation for Diderot between the ghostly medium that is language and scientific observation, and thus between the space of writing (the literary laboratory) and the scientific laboratory, as articulated by the extraordinary sentences, mixing science and poetry, that shows the chick's coming into existence—that we can also articulate the proximity of scientific observation and literary writing to each other, and their difference. For what is also shown by these sentences—in which the chick comes to show itself as it really is—are the sentences themselves, thus the medium through which something shows itself. In addition to showing the chick's self-showing, the sentences show themselves: Diderot's procedure is thus, we can notice it here again, that of *reflecting the medium*.

And how, or where, do the sentences show themselves? Precisely at the moments when the being of the chick and the being of the sentences seem to be closely tied as well as disjointed; that is, at the moments of the cuts. Why do the sentences show themselves at these moments? Because by distinguishing themselves from the chick, occupying the lacunae of excess that are more than the chick, the sentences show that they are neither representations of the chick nor something like the chick. They thus show that they are not subordinated to the primacy of the chick but make up something that has its own mode of being.<sup>36</sup> This mode of being is necessary if the chick is to show itself, but as a result, precisely, the sentences are also distinguished from the chick, occupying the place of its excessive internal/external madness, inhabiting the places where the chick is not itself, where it is exposed. They thus remain in excess beyond the chick's being, and in this excess indicate their own being as incarnations of the phantomal dimension of exposure.

To show oneself, we have started to see, is to show through one's places of exposure, through the places where one is not oneself, and this must also be true for the sentence itself. This would mean that a sentence shows itself at the places where it is more than itself, that is, more than its identity as the place where the chick shows itself. But what is the nature of the sentence's self-identity, and where can it be more than itself, thus exposed and showing itself? The sentence, if it be the place where the chick is to show itself, must somehow delimit itself so as to show the emergence of *this* specific formation, thus to finally subject itself to the primacy of that which shows itself in it. Its lacunae are specific to this chick; most importantly, its termination point, its *period*, has to mark as a delimitation the place where the chick, having emerged out of that which is not itself, to an extent finally comes to itself, achieves the identity that is its own. As the chick does, so does the sentence, which is thus to an extent effaced in favor of the chick's emergence.

Yet if the period finally closes the sentence so that the chick can achieve its being in it, the sentence is always haunted by the other cuts that keep open the possibility that it would not have ended this way, would perhaps have ended differently, etc. In this sense, the cuts, in their excess beyond the period, maintain an excess where the sentence is more than itself, and is thus exposed and showing.

It is obvious that every sentence has cuts and a period, and perhaps there is no reason to claim that this specific sentence achieves a self-showing more than any other does. Yet, what is crucial about these sentences, as mentioned, is the precise way in which they join themselves to, and are disjoined from, that which they show, namely the chick's emergence. Via this complex relation between their own form and that of their content, this self-showing truly arises. For the precise way that the excess of the sentence and the excess of the chick beyond itself reinforce each other allows both to remain open to an extent, and prevents the chick and the sentence from fully resting in their finalized identity. It is as if the excess of the sentence over the chick really allows the chick to show itself, while the excess of the chick occupied by the sentence prevents it from resting in its finalized form, reminding it of its openness; for had its content been a content of finalized identity, the sentence would, so to speak, have forgotten its own "nature," been allowed to believe that it fully corresponds to that which it shows, and that its own ending really coincided with that which it reveals as an identity. The excess of the content prevents, in this sense, the sentence from achieving self-reflection, where it could pretend to discover itself through its content, that is, where, having brought forth a finalized content, it could pretend that it had reached a finalized form, had achieved an identity. The joining and disjoining of the sentence and its content allows the phantom dimension of excess (the excess of things beyond themselves, the exposure incarnated by language as a ghostly medium) to remain open, and thus show.

This showing of the phantom, the reflection/bringing into view of the linguistic medium, is that which, in a way, distinguishes the literary writer's task from that of the experimental scientist, the literary laboratory from its scientific analogue. For if the scientist, if s/he is to learn to observe things as they really are, must be equipped with the eyes of the phantom—occupying a ghostly space where things show themselves through their excess beyond themselves, through their exposure—it is nevertheless not given to the scientist to show the phantom itself, through which s/he comes to observe. It is the literary writer who is tasked with showing this excessive phantom at the heart of the experimental space which is the laboratory—and which allows the scientists to be equipped with their eyes in the first place. The literary writer, through this showing of the phantom, must ensure that it is