Dialogue and Intertextuality:
The Posterity of Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau*

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As a writer, Diderot was preoccupied with the reader as interlocutor and made explicit, for instance, that for the great *Encyclopedia* posterity would constitute finally its only valid interlocutor. Curiously, the external history of the *Neveu de Rameau*, a work unknown to the reading public of the eighteenth century, exemplifies the very problem of finding its interlocutor that Diderot had prophesied for his encyclopedia. The text was first published in Goethe’s translation in 1805, only appearing in France in 1821, and it raises certain questions both about strategies of authorial composition and about the history of interpretation as well. A juxtaposition of Diderot’s *Neveu de Rameau* with one particular reading from the nineteenth century, E. T. A. Hoffmann’s *Ritter Gluck*, reveals a displacement from the intersubjective relationship traditionally associated with dialogue into an intertextual one. Indeed, it is with respect to the twofold problem of dialogue and intertextuality that I wish to situate the following schematic reading and thereby relate the status of dialogue as writing to the problem of a literary heritage; for the explicit and unabashed relationship between these texts suggests that the themes that recur are concomitant with the premises that underlie the works themselves: the question of artistic genius, dialogue, the status of the subject in language.

How and why does one talk about the posterity of a text? To show that it was important in generating a literary movement? To show it as the source of another work? Or to show that, in some way, it prefigures the problems of modernity? All of these questions are, in some sense, valid questions; all are tricky. It is the purpose of this essay to deal with such genetic questioning only insofar as it is immanent within the texts themselves and, specifically, as it relates to one major and overriding question: that of interpretation. By interpretation one may understand, first, those performances of pantomime in which the virtuosity of the mutilated genius becomes evident in the *Neveu de Rameau*. Second, the question of interpretation will arise as it is manifest in the musical performance described in Hoffmann’s tale. Finally, as an outgrowth of the more limited meanings, interpretation will come to include the ways in which one text interprets another in the process of rewriting it. The choice of texts for
this topic is clearly not neutral and involves the arbitrary decision to juxtapose two fictive texts: one might well prefer to play critical readings off against one another or to trace the changes that occur, for example, when a text is translated from one language to another. What can one say, indeed, about a text that reiterates another text and that is neither a translation nor a critical commentary? At the end of his book entitled *Lectures de Diderot*, Jacques Proust not only indicates that a history of criticism might be written from the illustrious posterity of Diderot's texts—passing through the hands of such notables as Hegel, Marx, Engels, Foucault, and more—but he remarks rather wistfully: “Mais il n'est pas sûr que les meilleurs lecteurs de Diderot soient ceux qui parlent ostensiblement et surtout professionnellement de lui. Je rêve d'un livre qui serait l'antidote de celui-ci et où, à la limite, le nom même de l'auteur pourrait n'être prononcé. Ce pourrait être aussi un montage de textes et d'images—mais on y reconnaîtrait Hoffmann, plutôt que Rosenkranz, Baudelaire plutôt que Faguet, Dostoievski plutôt que Bilbassov.”² Although primarily concerned throughout the book with those ideological presuppositions that underlie the reading given to Diderot's texts, Proust seems not to question the radical division between criticism and literature. Such an opposition divides, roughly speaking, into those who would consider criticism as a metalanguage and, in contrast, those who would view it as merely a part of the larger system of writing (*écriture*), hence refusing any distinction that valorizes the artistic over the critical work.³

In examining the intertextual weave between Hoffmann's and Diderot's texts, I take as a premise that there is a critical function at work that does not allow for the simple passage of meaning in the transfer from one fictive text to another; and, further, that it is this critical function that is most difficult to grasp and that ultimately puts into question the notion of interpretation. Inevitably, then, the question of how any other text—this one, for example—tampers with such a transposition repeats, if only tacitly, many of the same questions that are raised at both a thematic and a structural level in the *Neveu de Rameau* and *Ritter Gluck*. Put briefly, what is the nature of written language, whether it be critical or fictive?

It is with respect to the status of the subject in language, particularly written language, that two modes of dialogue may be introduced: one in which language functions smoothly as communication, presupposing two subjects anterior to the discursive encounter and reverting to both meaning and truth; the other in which language no longer functions smoothly as communication, in which a disruption or dispersion takes place that prevents any totalizing process of meaning.

Regarding the first mode, no one sums up better than Emile Benveniste the tradition in which language as communication is fundamentally allocutionary, fundamentally dialogue. Benveniste asks, If language is an instrument of
communication, to what does it owe this property? His response is that it is the condition of dialogue that constitutes the subject in language, for it implies the reciprocity of the “I” and the “thou” (“je”/“tu”). It is the condition of intersubjectivity (subjectivity understood here as the appropriation of language by the subject) that renders possible linguistic communication, and, further, the reciprocity between “I” and “thou” that makes possible all social bonds. The second mode of dialogue has perhaps been most efficiently codified by Bakhtin’s use of the term dialogic, which involves three principal elements: writing, the receptor, and other texts. The status of the word, then, is defined first horizontally, as belonging to an emitter and receptor, and then vertically, related to the exterior corpus of literature. That is, the dialogic demands a reevaluation of both the notion of the subject and that of meaning, and this may be done through analysis of dialogue and examination of the relationship among texts. What is interesting is that Bakhtin suggests that the relationships that structure narrative are possible because the dialogic is inherent in language itself.

Both Bakhtin and Benveniste, though each in a radically different way, seem to be making claims about the nature of language through dialogue, whether in its limited or more diffused sense; and—what is more—Bakhtin links the dialogic to the problem of intertextuality.

The precise sense in which the eighteenth century understood the philosophical dialogue was that of a system closed upon itself in which, taking off from an initial question, the interlocutors progress from the resolution of one given difficulty to another, going through all the objections until an answer is given to the initial question—all this in order to arrive at truth. Just how Diderot channels the tradition of the philosophic dialogue and plays upon it is a complex matter, for almost all of his writing is laced with dialogue at one level or another. In a work such as the Supplément au voyage de Bougainville, Diderot turns the dialogue against itself and maintains a constant tension between the monologic and the dialogic. In the article entitled “Encyclopédie” of the vast Encyclopedia—in which Diderot attempts to account for the monologic totality of the work through a fragment—dialogue seems oddly enough to have both a stochastic as well as an apocalyptic function; he states that such projects as the Encyclopedia are proposed through accidents and in the form of a dialogue. The explicit goal of the work is to assemble all knowledge, to set forth its general system for those “avec qui nous vivons, et de le transmettre aux hommes qui viendront après nous.” In this quest for knowledge as truth, in the search for the constant—that is, the search for the invariant through the multiplicity of things—posterity was to be that invariable measure, and the guarantor of truthful dialogue to remain anchored in an unknown future generation referred to time and time again as “our nephews.” Such a utopian vision is tested and strained to the limit in the work that takes the word nephew as the key element of its title.
The Neveu de Rameau is the story, in dialogue form, of a nephew whose uncle was a musical genius, whose interlocutor (“Moi”) is a man of reason and morality, and whose identity has been the subject of major readings and interpretations ever since it was first published. If, as Diderot suggests elsewhere, in everything one must begin at the beginning, one might describe the story of the Neveu de Rameau as an encounter, seemingly accidental, that becomes a fragmentary inquiry into the origins and nature of a social parasite, “Lui,” whose depravation is such as to put into question the social order as a whole. A long-standing tradition of criticism, which begins with Hegel’s remarkable reading of the Neveu de Rameau in the Phenomenology of Mind, has tended to make of this conversation between the philosopher, “Moi”—a man of reason without sect or prejudice—and the parasite, “Lui,” a philosophical dialogue in which two opposing positions are put into dialectical confrontation; that is, on the one hand, the nephew shows the coherence of biological determinism and morality, in effect building a case for the legitimacy of anarchy and individual immoralism, whereas on the other, the philosopher defends reason and morality above and beyond the immediate needs and desires of the individual. The purpose of this essay is not to go back over this tradition but rather to concentrate on the relationship that “Lui” entertains with music in pantomime, for it is through this relationship that a series of highly charged oppositions arises between reason and madness, truth and falsity, genius and plagiarism. Let us consider the antitheses present in the latter pairing. The nephew is constantly forced to define himself by what he is not—a genius—and the title of the work alone relegates him to the position of a poor relation, deprives him of a proper name, and seemingly dooms him to the social parasite that he clearly and most cheerfully is throughout. The inadequacy of his own identity is thus to be measured in its relation to the other, Jean Philippe Rameau, whose plenitude of being may be equated with his status as genius. When he expresses jealousy for his uncle’s talent and celebrity, he points to the works as if they were transparent reflections of the inspired genius. The genetic quest for the individual self is not separable, it would seem, from the origins of the work of art.

The nephew’s identity is both constituted and contaminated by plagiarism. Where he excels is in role-playing, and his particular virtuosity becomes manifest through the numerous pantomimes of the text, which are doubled by the narrator’s description and alternate with the dialogued conversation. The pantomimes in which he plays an instrument, sings, even becomes an entire orchestra are an impromptu spectacle in which the talent of musical performance is feigned.

Let us look at two examples of pantomime from the Neveu de Rameau in which the nephew simulates the interpretation of a musician. In the first example, having imitated the most privileged of all the instruments next to the
voice—that is, the violin—the nephew now sets about to play the harpsichord. As elsewhere in the text, the pantomime is presented by the narrator, who addresses an unknown interlocutor and recounts the scene that he is witnessing. As the nephew plays, the narrator describes the various passions that sweep fleetingly across the nephew’s face, so much so that one initiated into these matters might be able to recognize the piece from the nephew’s expressions, his movements, and the isolated notes of song that escape from time to time. Head up, he looks toward the ceiling as though he were reading the musical score. Unlike the previous performance, however, this one is flawed. Every now and again he gropes about and starts again as if he had made a mistake and his fingers no longer knew where to go.

One can distinguish here at least two levels at which the problem of artistic interpretation and creation is posed. The first is that of written notation. In this scene the nephew seems to interpret the score of another composer. The questions implicit here, and explicit elsewhere in discussions about the problem of genius, are how the work (the musical score) comes to be and who produces it. Here there is already a certain remove, since the nephew is only interpreting the music of another, and, at that, it is not a perfect performance. If, indeed, the genetic quest for the individual self is not separable from the origins of the work, this scene shows just how far the nephew really is from the plenitude of being. The second level at which one may pose the problem of artistic creation is, then, that of the interpretation itself, the actual performance.

In the imitation of musical interpretation the nephew cannot be matched: he is supreme. Music in pantomime signals oddly enough at once the unique source of genius and its seeming disruption in madness: “je musiquais . . . je faisais le fou,” says the nephew. Since for Diderot, here as elsewhere, the arts stand homologously one to the other (architecture, painting, music, and writing), one may wonder whether the chaotic relationship between the mutilated genius and his absent uncle does not couch a more general statement about interpretation as the constant disruption of the creative subject.

Perplexed by the extraordinary display of pantomimes, the character “Moi” says to “Lui,” “vous vous êtes donné bien de la peine, pour me montrer que vous étiez fort habile; j’étais homme à vous croire sur votre parole.” Thus the pantomime, which is proper only to the nephew, is supplementary to spoken discourse, and in a passage from De la poésie dramatique, Diderot stresses the relationship of pantomime to language: “J’ai tâché de séparer tellement les deux scènes simultanées . . . qu’on pourrait les imprimer à deux colonnes où l’on verrait la pantomime de l’une correspondre au discours de l’autre et celle-ci correspondre alternativement à la pantomime de celle-là. Ce partage serait commode pour celui qui lit, et qui n’est pas fait au mélange du discours et du mouvement.”

The encyclopedic image of columns divided into, on the one hand, panto-
mime and, on the other, spoken discourse apparently serves the reader in making clear just how one complements the other. Indeed, if one is the substitute for the other, one the completion of the other, then one may postulate gesture in pantomime as the figurative that refers to spoken language as the proper. Such a view of language carries with it the hopeful reassurance that the function of language is to signify—crucial for the encyclopedic undertaking—and that its guarantor may be found in the notion of truth. By extension, gesture as the substitute for language will also signify, for, as Diderot says, “le geste doit s’écrire souvent à la place du discours.”

However, the nephew’s pantomimes do not fulfill this function. Through them he blurs the lines, crosses the divide between mind and matter, reason and madness and, in so doing, puts into question the possibility for an intersubjective relationship through language. Indeed, how is the narrator adequately to explain and describe those pantomimes that constantly exceed language in their play? The nephew’s positions are, it would seem, nontotalizable.

If the first example of pantomime, in the harpsichord scene, makes explicit questions relating to creation and interpretation, the second example points directly to the problem of signification. In this second example “Moi” asks “Lui” why he has not created a work of beauty, and “Lui” responds without seeming to pay any attention to the question. Instead, he recounts the story of Abbé Le Blanc, who was taken and led by the hand to the door of the academy, where he fell and broke both legs. When a man of the world suggests that he get up and break open the door, the abbé replies that he did just that and received a large bump on his forehead. At this the nephew wildly thumps his own forehead in search of the meaning of this story, and as he thumps he says, “ou il n’y a personne, ou l’on ne veut pas répondre,” as though in conversation with an absent inner interlocutor whose function is to make sense. Then suddenly coming to life with a burst of passion, he concludes: “seul, je prends la plume; je veux écrire. Je me ronge les ongles; je m’use le front. Serviteur. Bonsoir. Le dieu est absent; je m’étais persuadé que j’avais du génie; au bout de ma ligne, je lis que je suis un sot, un sot, un sot.”

Writing as the search for meaning in the context of an inner dialogue thus gives way to an image of reading in which his own genius is undone. The parody of self here is the last hold of meaning and unity, for if there is no unified subject, then there can be no meaning. Pantomime, as it is charged with excessive meaning in its inessentiality, thus puts into question the possibility of language as communication, the possibility of language as dialogue.

Let us now turn to Ritter Gluck in order to examine briefly the way in which Hoffmann rearticulates the problems of artistic creation and genius. Just as in the Neveu de Rameau, the story begins with an encounter between two people in a café: the narrator and a man whose presence becomes instantly compelling to him. There is a descriptive prologue, again as in the Neveu de Rameau, in
which the narrator recounts his state of reverie and his imaginary conversations. During all of this there is the sound of such harsh and unpleasant music in the background that the narrator speaks of the “cacophonic racket,” “the screeching upper register of the violins and flute,” “the octaves that lacerate the ear.” However, when the orchestra begins the overture to Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the man suddenly begins to play and conduct in pantomime, and precisely at this moment the narrator describes how meaning transcends the initial chaos and how beautiful music comes to replace the unbearable din. As the piece ends, the curious man emerges from the pantomime as if from a dream and pronounces himself satisfied with the performance; yet the narrator is quick to remind him that “only the pale outlines of a masterpiece that has been composed with vivid colors was presented.” The man confesses that he has been a composer himself, and that although music and composing, in particular, seem to be the only path to truth and the ineffable, he decided to give it all up because those pieces written in moments of inspiration “afterwards seemed to be flat and boring.”

Part 2, if one may arbitrarily divide the tale by the various geographical locales, takes place at the Brandenburg gate, where the strange man hears what no one else does: the sound of the EUPHON, which remains an enigma throughout. When their discussion now happens onto the performances that certain composers’ works enjoy in Berlin—specifically those of Gluck’s works—the man rails against transgressions of the composers’ intentions, again, in the *Iphigenia*.

Although the first part of the tale is almost a line-for-line adaptation of the *Neveu de Rameau*, a shift in emphasis nevertheless develops: first, in the man’s relationship to dreams and otherworldliness, and second, in the focus on, and primacy of, the ideal performance. It is this second aspect that part 3 amplifies in a most striking way.

Part 3 begins when the narrator, as he is heading home one night, passes by a theater in which Gluck’s *Armida* is being performed, and he decides to go to the performance. As he is about to enter the theater, he spies the same strange man outside the window. Although unable to see what is happening within, the man delivers a soliloquy outside the theater in which he repeats through language the actions of the singers and the progressions of the musical movements. At the same time he gives a rather agonized critique of what is happening. The narrator—and, by the way, neither of their names has yet been given, seemingly by mutual agreement—wishing to take his curious interlocutor away from the theater, allows himself to be led to the man’s house. As they enter, he sees a piano in the middle of an ornate living room on which are to be found pen, ink, and paper for writing music. Behind a curtain on a shelf stand all of Gluck’s masterpieces in large bound copies. These are the complete works. The man picks the score of the *Armida* from the shelf, for upon leaving the theater he had
promised the narrator a performance of that same work. He places the book on the piano, and as it is opened the narrator discovers that there is not a single note written in it. The man then sits down at the piano and obliges the narrator to turn pages at the right moment, something he can only glean by watching the man's glance. He commences to play and, as he performs the piece, introduces myriads of new and inspired twists. The narrator is totally overwhelmed and exclaims: "What is it? Who are you?" The man disappears briefly, leaving the narrator in the dark (literally, the room is darkened), then returns richly attired, strides toward him, takes him by the hand, and, smiling strangely, says: "I am Ritter Gluck."

It would be needlessly tedious to enumerate the many similarities and differences between Diderot's and Hoffmann's texts. It will suffice to compare the ending of the tale with the pantomime mentioned earlier. Whereas in the nephew's flawed performance on the harpsichord he mimed reading the musical score, here the force of genius can be sensed in the inspired performance with its slight deviations from a score whose absence becomes manifest through its physical presence (the blank pages of the book). The score, it would seem, can only be a pale and exterior representation of truth. Thus, what begins as a pantomime in the prologue—making sense of a musical interpretation—ends with an interpretation so authentic that the ineffable seems to become intelligible. And it is only after the genius proves himself that he reveals his proper name: Gluck.

If the dialogue that takes place between the narrator and the other man becomes meaningful and clear only as the strange man's relationship to performance takes on significance, it does so only through the recapitulation in language by the narrator—who is an ideal listener since he seems to understand almost instantaneously the importance of everything that occurs.

What seems clear is that Hoffmann, in writing this text, is an interpreter interpreting a text about interpretation, and that his own story indeed reflects upon this process as both a tacit theory and a practice. That is, in rewriting Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, Hoffmann's tale fulfills an interpretative function as it rearticulates the terms of the narrative and seemingly totalizes the meaning left fragmentary in Diderot's text. One could presumably say, then, that the understanding of the first text (Diderot's) is reflected in the interpretation of the second, completing the hermeneutic model of reading in writing. Yet, although it seems that Hoffmann's text restores the genius to his proper place (and hence reinstates his name), and though the message appears to be that one gains access to truth through authentic interpretation by the individual genius, interpretation in the context of this tale can only be a false restoration, a false totalization, for the interpretation remains a metaphor—the recuperation of a presence through an absence—as it reflects the process of its own begetting. Music is, after all, not writing, and Hoffmann not Gluck. Once again the genius
is a step removed. As a distillation of Diderot's text, Hoffmann's tale plays out the drama of its own origins in the rewriting of another text and poses the question of reading as well as that of writing in terms of a disruption of the hermeneutic model. In the end, we as readers cannot be sure whether the narrator and the other man are one and the same, whether the genius possesses some higher truth or floats in the realm of madness. Perhaps like another of Hoffmann's characters, Councillor Krespel, who desperately searches for life's secret by taking violins apart, the artist along with the critic is fated always to write interpretations that are themselves interpretations—that are themselves interpretations. Maybe, even, the artist and the critic cannot make the final distinction that Saint Augustine would allow when he says that "discussing words with words is as entangled as interlocking and rubbing the fingers with the fingers, in which case it may scarcely be distinguished, except by the one himself who does it, which fingers itch and which give aid to the itching."23

1. During his lifetime Diderot was primarily known as an encyclopedist and dramatist but not as a novelist; many of his most daring works—Jacques le fataliste, Le Rêve de d'Alembert, Le Neveu de Rameau—were only published after his death. He only really became known as a literary figure through Schiller, then through Goethe's translation of the Neveu, and, finally, through the Paulin edition of his works, which appeared between 1830 and 1831. The Neveu de Rameau appeared in French in the Brière edition of 1821–23, but it was only in the Paulin edition that such works as Les Lettres à Sophie Volland, Le Voyage à Bourboune et à Langres, La Correspondance avec Falconet, and Le Rêve de d'Alembert appeared for the first time. For an extensive discussion of the history of Diderot's works in Germany, see Roland Mortier, Diderot en Allemagne (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954).


4. Julia Kristeva chooses to define the term intertextualiti, which she herself introduced, in terms of a transposition: "Le terme d'intertextualité désigne cette transposition d'un (ou de plusieurs) systèmes de signes en un autre, mais puisque ce terme a été souvent entendu dans le sens banal de 'critique des sources' d'un texte, nous lui préférons celui de transposition" (La Révolution du langage poétique [Paris: Seuil, 1974], p. 60).

5. "Immédiatement, la société est donnée avec le langage. La société à son tour ne tient ensemble que par l'usage commun de signes de communication" (Émile Benveniste, Problèmes de linguistique générale, 2 vols. [Paris: Gallimard, 1974], 2: 91).

6. For Mikhail Bakhtin the monologic reverts to reason and truth and includes the traditional notion of dialogue; the dialogic reverts to no fixed meaning or subject and is nontotalizable.


8. In Éléments de littérature Marmontel states: "Le difficile . . . c'est de démêler, de classer, de circonscrire nos idées, en leur donnant toute leur étendue, d'en saisir les justes rapports, de tirer ainsi du chaos les éléments de la science et d'y répandre la lumière. C'est à quoi le dialogue philosophique est utilement employé: parce qu'à mesure qu'il forme des nuages, il les dissipe; qu'à chaque pas il ne présente une nouvelle difficulté qu'afin de l'aplanir lui-même; et que l'ignorance,


12. Regarding the philosopher’s understanding of things as separate from, or at one with, his instrument, interlocutor Diderot says in L’Entretien entre D’Alembert et Diderot: “L’instrument philosophe est sensible; il est en même temps le musicien et l’instrument” (Œuvres philosophiques [Paris: Garnier, 1961], p. 273).


18. That is where the genius outdoes himself as he undercuts his own power. In the article entitled “Génie” Diderot states: “L’imagination gaie d’un génie étendu agrandit le champ du ridicule, et tandis que le vulgaire le voit et le sent dans ce qui blesse l’ordre universel” (Œuvres esthétiques, p. 11).

19. For a comparison of the thematic similarities and differences between the Neveu de Rameau and Ritter Gluck, see Steven Paul Scher, Verbal Music in German Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).


22. Ibid., p. 12.

Mais plus gênants encore et plus difficilement défendables que les alinéas, les tirets, les deux points et les guillemets, sont les monotones et gauches: dit Jeanne, répondit Paul, qui parsèment habituellement le dialogue.

Nathalie Sarraute, *L'Ere du soupçon*

Try to strike the golden mean between the constant repetition of "he said" and . . . such substitutes as "he asserted," "he asked," "he replied." . . . The use of these labels is often necessary, but they should not be used to the point of calling attention to themselves.

Douglas Bement, *Weaving the Short Story*

Do not discriminate against such good expressions as "he acquiesced, admitted, argued, asked, assented, boasted, called, cautioned, chuckled, corrected, cried, croaked, crowed, declared, drawled, droned, ejaculated, emended, enjoined, enumerated, exclaimed, exploded, flashed, frowned, gasped, growled, grumbled, grunted, hinted, inquired, insinuated, intimidated, jeered, jested, laughed, leered, maundered, mumbled, nodded, opined, pronounced, puffed, questioned, rejoined, retorted, returned, simpered, snarled, sneered, snickered, stammered, stipulated, stormed, suggested, urged, volunteered, wondered, yelled," and a whole dictionaryful besides, each precisely suited to the shade of mood to be depicted.

J. Berg Esenwein, *Writing the Short Story*