Diderot’s *Supplément* as Pendant for *La Religieuse*

*I have multiplied visions and used similitudes.*—Hosea 8:10
The often substantiated belief that Diderot's thoughts could be mercurial, his interests varied and mobile, and his convictions constantly at the mercy of his lively and far-roaming mind was already widely accepted in his day. In fact, he himself, in numerous instances, lent credence to such an opinion. In one of his more famous analogies, it will be recalled, he likened the Langrois to a weather vane. He hastened to add, however, that through years of enforced discipline and hard work in Paris he had succeeded in achieving a modicum of intellectual and emotional stability.

The echo of Diderot's intellectual and emotional inconstancy lingered on in his great posthumous writings. *Le Neveu de Rameau* drew both epigraph and inspiration from Horace's satire of a fellow who for inconsistency knew no peer. This fitted *Lui* admirably; and according to Daniel Mornet and countless readers both before and after him, *Lui* reflected one side of Diderot's essence. Moreover, both *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* and *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien* dwelt, among other things, on those individuals who—like the author himself—are viscerally vulnerable to their own sensitive natures and, because of their emotionalism, find themselves incapable of firmness in judgment and steadfastness in purpose. Diderot, in *Le Paradoxe*, said it with a decided economy of words: "L'homme sensible est trop abandonné à la merci de son diaphragme. . . . " To this he added forthwith: " . . . Si la Nature a pétrifi une âme sensible, c'est la mienne" (A.-T., 8:408).1
Le Rêve reiterated under various forms the conviction that in this great sea of matter that is the universe, there is not one molecule "qui ressemble à elle-même un instant" (A.-T., 2:132).

It is hardly surprising, then, that such a mind should tend toward ideas, paradoxical and, at times, in confutation with one another. If we take the views of at least three or four present-day dix-huitiémistes, it becomes apparent that this part of Diderot's nature continues to be recognized at appropriate intervals. Georges May, for instance, referring to our philosophe and to one literary genre in particular, has this to say: "On pourrait, à propos des idées de Diderot sur le roman, s'amuser à découper et coller face à face des citations du philosophe contenant des déclarations contradictoires." Robert Niklaus, from a different perspective, notes that "his approach in all his writings was undogmatic, empirical, and dialectical," but it also brought about "some of the real or apparent contradictions in his thought." Perhaps still more arresting is the fact that Robert Mauzzi, in L'Idée du bonheur au XVIIIe siècle, does not hesitate to devote an entire subchapter to "Les Contradictions de Diderot."

Doubtless Diderot's fondness for engaging in the art of disputation and his choice of the dialogue as a favorite mode of literary expression have much to do with his apparent and, upon occasion, very real volte-face. Still, to counteract, at least partially, prejudice against this tendency on his part and that of the human race in general, he said something at once evident and wise. In his famous Entretien with d'Alembert, he suggested that in the final analysis we would find that in everything our true opinion is not the one about which we have never vacillated but the one to which we have most persistently returned (A.-T., 2:121). Effort will be made to adhere to this principle during the present inquiry.

Late in life Diderot had occasion to refer to La Religieuse as "la contre-partie de Jacques le fataliste." Though his reasons for doing so were valid, he could—with equal and pos-
sibly greater justification—have said as much for *La Religieuse* and *Le Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*. The *Supplément*, conceived some ten years later, does—superficially at least—counterpoint *La Religieuse*. Primitive family life on this imagined Tahiti, where there is understanding, affection, and love of children, contrasts strongly with the middle-class, Parisian household of the Simonins, where inflexibility, bitterness, jealousy, and parsimony are the order of the day, and children but an added burden to the weight of existence. Tahiti is luminous and joyful; one senses the bright sunshine, the warm, soft nights, and the inviting cool of the cabins. The convents of Sœur Suzanne, with their heavy stone masonry, are cold, somber, and forbidding. Diderot’s Tahiti represents the airiness of individual and even collective freedom, but the milieux into which Sœur Sainte-Suzanne is forced are encumbered with the fetters of moral, spiritual, and physical confinement. The one is marked by spontaneity and laughter, the other by frustrations and tears. The extreme consequences of island life are the enjoyment of it and the will to live; those of the convents are nothing but the ashes of death. The counterpoise could be continued at length. One could speak in terms of polarization. The present study, however, is not concerned with opposites and mutual exclusiveness. It is an inquiry into resemblances, parallelisms, and correspondences in style and themes between two of Diderot’s writings that are not usually presented in such fashion.

The most obvious parallelism in *La Religieuse* and the *Supplément* is the method of over-all procedure basic to both. Although it is common enough in other writings of Diderot, it is particularly noticeable here. An event or a series of events in actual life serves as a springboard for his imagination, with the result that the finished product is an adroit blending of reality and myth.

Out of such very real persons as Marguerite Delamarre, the marquis de Croismare, and Denis Diderot with his little band of conspirators grows one of the great novels of the French
eighteenth century. And from two chapters of Bougainville's *Voyage autour du monde* was fashioned one of the more ingenious, witty, and provocative dialogues of the Enlightenment. In both cases Diderot's fantasies played over certain *données*, and the result was, in each instance, a brilliant tour de force still as exemplary and as alive as it was some two centuries ago.

This approach where fact and invention are skillfully combined the better to create and even heighten credibility is a common-enough practice among writers, and Diderot was no exception. Less natural are those procedures that rely on certain formal stylistic patterns. Of considerable importance among these for Diderot is the use of the triadic division so prominent in various guises in a number of his writings. One of the most clear-cut examples is *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* which, with its three distinct yet closely related parts—the "Entretien," the "Rêve" proper, and the "Suite"—has been called a triptych. And the three "panels" are in fact a sort of altarpiece for Diderot's philosophical and scientific speculations as each section casts the light of understanding on the other two.

Both *La Religieuse* and *Le Supplément*, like *Le Rêve*, are based on this broad ternary device; but their structure is more complicated. For instance, the memoirs of Sœur Suzanne fall into three distinct parts with roughly the same allotted proportions as those in *Le Rêve*. The first part of *La Religieuse* is brief and chiefly concerned with Suzanne's place in the domestic life of the Simonins. The middle and, indeed, major subdivision of the memoirs gives an almost day-by-day account of Sœur Suzanne's existence as a nun. The concluding section, following her escape over the convent wall, deals rapidly and sketchily with her hand-to-mouth existence in Paris directly preceding her death.

But *La Religieuse* has a larger, an all-encompassing ternion. Herbert Dieckmann has convincingly shown that it was Diderot's intention to have those sections known as the *Préface*-
Annexe fused with the memoirs themselves, thus becoming an integral part of the novel in question. We may then speak of a triadic structure—"Préface," "Religieuse," "Annexe"—embracing a smaller triadic structure, that which comprises the memoirs themselves.

The Supplément may be approached in much the same way, for it too follows the "rule of three" so far as the general structure is concerned. The work opens with a dialogue between A and B in which—like logicians from the Sorbonne—they introduce one another and the reader to Bougainville's recently published Voyage. The central part of the work directly pertains to what happens on the island: it includes both the old Tahitian's harangue and the intimacies under the roof of the younger Tahitian, Orou, all interspersed with passing comments between A and B. In the third and concluding section, A and B, seeing the Bougainville-Diderot Tahiti in retrospect, bring their disquisition to a close.

But as in the case of La Religieuse, one may consider Le Supplément also in relation to a superstructure. Here, though, we must go outside the work itself to find what might be called the two subsidiary sections forming the triad. They are, of course, the short stories Ceci n'est pas un conte and Madame de La Carlière, as Roger Lewinter and others have noted. M. Lewinter is quite explicit about this in his development of "Les Trois Codes" when he comments in detail that the two tales and Le Supplément "forment un tout," and, moreover, "constituent une œuvre à structure ternaire."

The triadic division is a favorite form of presentation for Diderot when it is a question of details as well. In La Religieuse Suzanne's monastic experiences will take place in three convents; three mother superiors will have a strong impact on her life; and, as Pierre Sage notes, "Trois bons prêtres interviennt" on her behalf. And Suzanne herself makes a point of the fact that three persons, extremely close to her, die one after the other.

Among all these lesser triads there is one—perhaps more im-
portant than the others—that has its correspondence in the Supplément. As the heroine informs us at the beginning of La Religieuse, she is, in the familial order, the youngest of three sisters; she is, moreover, inexperienced in the facts of life, even innocent. If there is a heroine in the Supplément, it would have to be Thia, the youngest of the three daughters in Orou's family. Though she is far more aware of the forces of sexuality around her than is her counterpart, at the outset she too is unaware of the extent of their drive and evident fascination.

Finally, among the triadic devices is one that appears to be a favorite of Diderot's, stemming as it does from Greco-Latin turns of style. It is the tricolon, with its arrangement of words or phrases in groups of three and, now and then, working up to a mild climax on the third. By way of illustration two or three examples drawn almost at random from each work should suffice. In La Religieuse we read: "Eh bien! maman, lui dis-je, rendez-moi vos bontés; rendez-moi votre présence; rendez-moi la tendresse de celui qui se croit mon père" (A.-T., 5:29). And again: "Elle me plaignit, me consola, me fit espérer un avenir plus doux" (A.-T., 5:35-36). In the Supplément the "vieillard" shields the European intruder against the wrath of his people, and asks: "Eh! pourquoi les ai-je apaisés? pourquoi les ai-je contenus? pourquoi les contiens-je encore dans ce moment?" (A.-T., 2:217). A little further on, Thia, embracing the knees of the ship's chaplain, cries: "Etranger, n'afflige pas mon père, n'afflige pas ma mère, ne m'afflige pas!" (A.-T., 2:221). And one example among many is interesting; it is a tricolon composed of binary elements. Orou is questioning the right of church and state to call black white, and white black: "Tu ne saurais le penser, car, à ce compte, il n'y aurait ni vrai ni faux, ni bon ni mauvais, ni beau ni laid" (A.-T., 2:224).

Now for a semantic similarity. Since, in its various aspects, the father image plays a significant part throughout the writings of Diderot, it comes as no surprise that it reappears al-
most obsessively in the two works under consideration. Suzanne is surrounded by father images, but to little or no avail. Her legal father coldly rejects her filial love. Her biological father had been selfish and cruel, and her mother tells her: “Il n’est plus; il est mort sans se souvenir de vous; et c’est le moindre de ses forfaits” (A.-T., 5:29). And the three spiritual fathers—Père Séraphin, the grand vicaire M. Hébert, and Père Lemoine—are well-meaning but ineffectual. The marquis de Croismare will become the most authentic father image, embodying in her eyes all the idealized qualities of the male parent. His name is the first to be mentioned in the memoirs, and, in fact, the memoirs are addressed to him. In him she places all her hope.

In the Supplément the father image takes on new dimensions. The first one we meet in its pages is most impressive—an old man who bids a bitter farewell to Bougainville and his company in the name of all the Tahitians. The opening lines of “Les Adieux” partially reveal him for what he is: “C’est un vieillard qui parle. Il était père d’une nombreuse famille” (A.-T., 2:213). The “noble vieillard,” silent and withdrawn, whom Bougainville mentions (Voyage, p. 192), as he speaks in the Supplément becomes an ancient Hebrew patriarch, perhaps another Ezekiel, whose prophecies of doom lament the loss of an Oceanic paradise. This venerable personage, more than ninety years old, in all his authority is speaking now wrathfully against the iniquities he has beheld, now pleased with the Tahitians who follow the dictate: “Be fruitful and multiply.” We recognize him to be the God of Diderot’s youth, more the Jehovah of the Old Testament than his unpredictable Christian God. He is the same father figure who appears in the parable of the young Mexican (A.-T, 2:525-26), in one of the philosophe’s last petits papiers, the Entretien d’un philosophe avec la maréchale de***, published in 1777. It is the God of Michelangelo Buonarroti, and the God of Genesis as the thundering voice becomes hushed: “... Un vaste silence régna dans toute l’étendue de l’île; et l’on n’entendit que
le sifflement aigu des vents et le bruit sourd des eaux sur toute la longueur de la côte; on eût dit que l'air et la mer, sensibles à la voix du vieillard, se disposaient à lui obéir" (A.-T., 2:218).

Far different from this awesome father figure is the one provided by Orou, the model head of the wholesome, primitive "bourgeois" family of Tahiti. Orou, in his self-assured and extended argumentation, his ever-pressing concern for those close to him, his insistence on the rights of nature and those of man in society, is the reflection of the father image of Diderot’s own father Didier. But it is also that of Denis, the son, when he becomes the understanding, gently indulgent paterfamilias, scrupulously solicitous of the welfare of his children. Orou is Diderot acting out a utopian fantasy, a persona some of whose principles run counter to his own eighteenth-century bourgeois interests and those of his beloved daughter, Angélique. Of the various father figures Diderot adopted in his writings and in his life, the one that concerned Angélique, both child and woman, was closest to his heart. Diderot’s philosophic speculations were as subversive as those of any of his comppeers; as the head of a middle-class family under the ancien régime, he became—like his father—a man of rational prudence keeping with some success the dress of the country where he was born.

What may be concluded from all this? Just as the father image—in terms of his father and in those of himself as father—dominates more of Diderot’s thinking than is readily apparent, so the role it plays in La Religieuse and in the Supplément is more important than might at first be supposed. In the former the father figure is presented in terms that are multiple and complex. In the latter it is elemental and undeniably personal.

In an odd sort of way the Supplément once again appears, perhaps with intentional irony, as a pendant to La Religieuse. By pushing the symbolic value of the veils to its extreme consequence, Diderot develops another of his “similitudes.” The distaff side of his Tahitians wears three sorts of veils, depend-
ing on the circumstances involved. A maiden wears the white veil of innocence; she is not yet ready to bear children. The mature woman wears a gray veil upon those occasions when she is indisposed and temporarily incapable of conceiving a child. And that woman who is barren and cannot bear children at all is forced to wear a black veil. If she continues to seek out members of the opposite sex—and it could be only for the purpose of self-indulgence—she is marked as wanton and becomes an outcast in Diderot’s contrived little island paradise, and contrived it is since this formulation differs radically from the source text.

In *Le Voyage* Bougainville had spoken of the practice of wearing veils on Tahiti. But they were worn to designate mourning alone. They were, in consequence, convenient disguises for whoever wished to seek out trysting places. Since the privacy of a person in mourning was respected, a veil was often used to facilitate illicit love.

Both Bougainville and the native, Aotourou, who sailed with him back to France, insisted that love-making was the Tahitians’ chief interest. Diderot, eighteenth-century philosophe that he was, seemed only too pleased to twist the facts in his campaign against celibacy and to promote an expanding population. He did so by stressing procreation itself as of foremost interest and importance among the natives of Oceania.

Poor Sœur Suzanne also wore a veil, but for none of the above reasons. Her sister nuns thought she looked fetching in it; yet it was accompanied by the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Her veil, like those of the unproductive and therefore superfluous Tahitian women, was black. Like them, in Diderot’s parallelism, she and her kind were utterly useless in a society where childbearing was woman’s noblest prerogative.

If the two works are to be considered companion pieces, they also have as a main point of reference the French eighteenth century. If the backgrounds of both lie partly in pass-
ing events of the period, they also reflect controversies that were of extreme actuality at the time of writing. A number of comparisons may be made with this duality in mind.

In the first place, both works deal explicitly with a protest against the Judeo-Christian view of man. "Plus que la morale qu'il ne peut ruiner tout entière," says Jean Thomas, "c'est l'explication chrétienne de l'homme que Diderot prétend dénoncer." Though Georges May and Robert Mauzi are right in saying that *La Religieuse* preaches neither anti-religion nor anti-Christianity, there are passages in the novel that suggest both ironic skepticism and outright criticism of certain religious beliefs. Sœur Suzanne wonders how it is that "le même mal vient, ou de Dieu qui nous éprouve, ou du diable qui nous tente" (A.-T., 5:20). When praying for guidance, Suzanne-Diderot remarks: "On n'invoque la voix du ciel, que quand on ne sait à quoi se résoudre; et il est rare qu'alors elle ne nous conseille pas d'obéir" (A.-T., 5:31). Here the will of God would seem to prescribe passive obedience to an order that is fundamentally opposed to nature and that in consequence is destined to bring unhappiness. M. Manouri, a thinly disguised spokesman for the author, poses a whole series of questions: Are convents essential to the state? Did Christ advocate the establishment of religious orders? Why does the Heavenly Spouse need so many "vierges folles"? How can God, who created man so fragile and fickle, authorize or even tolerate the rash effrontery with respect to his vows? Instances of speculation along such lines could easily be multiplied.

Orou in the *Supplément* adds to these questions, supplies a few tentative answers, and, in fact, openly attacks Christian dogma. M. Manouri, in *La Religieuse*, argues against the binding power of religious vows in general. Orou, with the grudging assistance of the almoner, does what he can to undermine the vow of chastity and especially the sanctity of the marriage vows. One of the more famous passages is Orou's statement to the effect that constancy can hardly be
expected of a couple who—though swearing eternal fidelity —live in a world of flux under a sky that itself is never for a moment the same. From this what are we to conclude? That if the institution of marriage is condemned in the natural state, how much more so is the perversion of marriage that religious vows constitute! The apparent atheism of the Tahitians and their evident state of relative happiness even casts doubt on the necessity for believing in the very existence of God.

Another factor common to both works is the repeated protest against other social institutions besides marriage that are propounded at once by religious laws and civil legislation. Conventual life and the laws of the state deliberately subvert these norms.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans on the soil of Tahiti, any civil law had been merely an affirmation of the laws of nature. One aspect of this is the fact that both works are replete with legal connotations. The leitmotif of the trial runs throughout *La Religieuse*. Wherever Sœur Suzanne turns, she is either instigating a lawsuit or undergoing trials. Legal overtones are also everywhere in evidence in the *Supplément*, whether revealed in the old man’s farewell—itself a prosecutor’s indictment of European criminality—or by the almoner’s faltering defense of his religion and his office. These same overtones are readily apparent as Orou argues in behalf of the laws of nature and most certainly in the concluding forensic summation offered by those two algebraic personages, A and B. All this shows that Diderot, in every fiber of his body, was very much a corporate and sexual being.

Finally, both works may, as companion pieces, be regarded as an attempt to exteriorize the inner conflicts in social man in general, and in the individual—perhaps Diderot himself—in particular. The two basic drives that he sees as the primary source of conflict in man—one has been discernible from the outset—are sex and aggression. Sexual activity in *La Religieuse* reveals itself in a highly licentious and insidiously covert manner, which is generous in erotic detail. When it is
homosexual, it becomes a sterile, hypocritical activity in conflict with man’s natural inclination. When it is not, it can result in bastardy, with its attendant opprobrium in modern society. This is how the story of Sœur Suzanne begins. It ends with her escape from the convent into a Paris of prostitutes, panderers, rakes, brothels, and darkness—and everywhere, the spirit of aggressiveness.

Since on Diderot’s Tahiti proliferation of the species is socially and economically imposed as the islanders’ most pressing aim, sexuality is taken as a matter of course. In Orou’s idealized family erotic play and emotional appeal are reduced to a minimum, and the resultant free love is described with an almost clinical objectivity. But if we are to believe “Les Adieux du vieillard,” it is with the arrival of the aggressively ambitious and wicked Europeans that these children of nature are contaminated by disease and the notions of crime, of shame, and of guilt.

We see Diderot’s insistence upon the energy of the sex drive, his concern over the unleashing of hidden instinctual and executive forces to the detriment or, possibly, advantage of the individual himself or of the social unit of which he is a member. We see Diderot’s desire to bring to the surface the internal conflicts of both undercivilized and overcivilized man. This insistence, this concern, this desire suggest that Diderot anticipated Sigmund Freud more than is commonly assumed. And it was, after all, Freud who, with a handful of other advanced thinkers, was sufficiently perceptive to doff his hat to Diderot in passing. Moreover, there is a touch of the Freudian in almost all Diderot wrote—including his correspondence. Freudian too was Diderot’s conviction that at the more complex levels of society both aggressive and erotic energies are more inexorably directed inward and can lead to an agonizing civil war in society as a whole and in the individuals who constitute that society. By bringing man’s instincts of sex and aggression into the open light of reason, these conflicts might be reduced if not dispelled entirely. But
Diderot, like Freud, knew that there was no simple solution to the problem. Any solution would, in fact, be slow and difficult; still there was hope, and the hope was the *raison d'être* of his humanism.

The presence of Diderot as a man of letters is readily apparent in both works, but it is the artist in Diderot who has the upper hand in *La Religieuse*. In the *Supplément* the writer's aesthetics is secondary to the ideas of the moralist and philosopher. Yet each work is, after its fashion, a criticism of eighteenth-century French life; for as a humanist, Diderot was striving to reach beyond generally accepted definitions of good and evil. Then, too, it should doubtless be kept in mind that eleven years separate the original composition of *La Religieuse* from that of his piece on Bougainville's *Voyage*, yet it is all the more noteworthy that a number of Diderot's most basic thoughts as a humanist and moralist remained unchanged. Neither the France he knew so well under the *ancien régime* nor the Polynesian community of his dreams could, in Diderot's mind, present a total answer to the question of man's happiness.

It is then hardly astonishing that, like many of his contemporaries, Diderot had faith in the power of better laws to ease the malaise of modern society. Once the eighteenth-century European has broken away from an arbitrary civil code—Diderot seems to be telling us in both works—he or she can, with some assurance of success, attempt to pursue the most essential undertaking of all, that of becoming a person in the true humanistic sense; the harmonious realization of physical, intellectual, and social potentialities in the individual, or, in modern psychological terms, the attainment of complete self-actualization.

1. Quotations from Diderot's works will be taken from the Assézat-Tourneux edition of the *Œuvres complètes*.


6. Georges May, in Diderot et La Religieuse, and in his essay, "Une certaine Madame Madin," this volume, scrupulously indicates how this took place.

7. Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, Voyage autour du monde par la frégate La Boudeuse, et la flûte, L'Etoile. En 1766, 1767, 1768, 1769 (Paris: Saillant & Nyon, 1771). This work will henceforth be referred to as Le Voyage.

8. See "La Préface-Annexe of La Religieuse" in Diderot Studies 2 (1952):21-147. Professor Dieckmann writes (p. 23): "The very title, which was evidently invented by Assézat indicates a contradictory trait: the work is to be a preface which precedes the novel and an annex which follows it"; (p. 30): "The Préface-Annexe is part of the novel, it is as much invention and fable as the novel itself."


11. "Je fis dans la même année trois pertes intéressantes: celle de mon père, ou plutôt de celui qui passait pour tel; il était âgé, il avait beaucoup travaillé; il s'éteignit; celle de ma supérieure, et celle de ma mère" (A.-T., 5:41).


15. Sometimes alone, and sometimes with the help of a M. Manouri or a dom Morel.

16. Forcibly struck by the following sentence from Diderot, Freud quoted it on three separate occasions: "Si le petit sauvage était abandonné à lui-même, qu'il conservât toute son imbécillité, et qu'il réunit au peu de raison de l'enfant au berceau la violence des passions de l'homme de trente ans, il tordrait le cou à son père et coucheait avec sa mère." It is of interest to see how, on each occasion, Freud introduced the sentence; all three instances are drawn from The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analy-
sis, 1953-66). In one of his shorter writings, *The Expert Opinion in the Halsmann Case*, Freud presents the Oedipus complex as follows: “Its essential characteristics, its universality, its content and its fate were recognized, long before the days of psycho-analysis, by that acute thinker Diderot, as is shown by a passage in his famous dialogue, *Le Neveu de Rameau*” (21 [1962]: 251). In his twenty-first lecture on *The Development of the Libido and the Sexual Organizations*, Freud says: “Among the writings of the Encyclopaedist Diderot you will find a celebrated dialogue, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, which was rendered into German by no less a person than Goethe. There you may read this remarkable sentence:” (16 [1963]: 337-38). In his posthumous *Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, we read: “Yet more than a century before the emergence of psycho-analysis the French philosopher Diderot bore witness to the importance of the Oedipus complex by expressing the difference between the primitive and the civilized worlds in this sentence:” (23 [1964], p. 192). Thumbing through Freud’s *Complete Psychological Works*, a Diderotiste is impressed by many other striking concepts that had already been voiced by Diderot; there is no proof, however, that Freud was acquainted with any other of the philosopher’s works except the above-mentioned *Neveu*. 