Diderot's Artist: Puppet and Poet
Of Diderot's works none is more controversial than the Paradoxe sur le comédien. Opinion is sharply, perhaps permanently, divided on most of the questions raised in this protean dialogue. Actors and critics still debate hotly the thesis of the actor's emotional disengagement from his role; among actors even the prestigious voices of Copeau and Jouvet have failed to settle the argument. As to the critics, Yvon Belaval sees the Paradoxe as a unified work, consistent with Diderot's over-all aesthetic theory, but Lester Crocker apparently views it as another example of "Diderot's characteristic fragmented thinking." Or, from a slightly different bias, Robert Niklaus decides that the essential paradox of the piece is philosophical, in that the artist is both determined by his heredity and milieu and a determinant in the world where he exists, whereas Giorgio Cerrutti construes the aesthetic paradox as a social one: the philosopher as both dreamer and activist. Considering the extent of disagreement, we can indeed be grateful to Joseph Bédier for quelling at least the once-raging controversy over the text's authenticity. So disparate is critical opinion, in fact, that we breathe a sigh of relief at anything that hints of concensus among commentators on the Paradoxe. This eagerness for comparative agreement is perhaps responsible for the traditional classification of the work as a pivotal text, a turning point in Diderot's aesthetic theory, separating the young, enthusiastic, and sensitive artist, represented by Dorval of the Entretiens.
sur le Fils naturel, from the older, more mature theorist, cast as the “Premier Interlocuteur” in the Paradoxe. Neat as this division appears, it is specious, as an interrogation of the texts will show. The Paradoxe, I believe, is not so much a turning point in Diderot’s aesthetics, or a contradiction of previous notions, as simply a recognition of the artistic principles underlying his literary production. These principles are fairly consistent throughout Diderot’s career and are recognizable in such apparently diverse writings as Entretiens sur le Fils naturel, Jacques le fataliste, Le Neveu de Rameau, Rêve de d’Alembert, and Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron.

Diderot opens the Paradoxe sur le comédien with a debate between two critics as to whether a published work of criticism should be criticized. The dispute is occasioned by the fact that the “Second Interlocuteur” is a personal friend of the published critic (Antonio Sticoti); it is settled by an agreement that any published work must be judged quite independently of its author and that any criticism of it is therefore dispassionate. From the idea that criticism is depersonalized to the notion that the best actor is “un spectateur froid et tranquille” of his own performance (306), and finally to the general conclusion that the greatest artistic expression is devoid of immediate sensitivity, is a natural if not inevitable progression. But it is in no way paradoxical. Mere disagreement with the rather puerile notion that art is the spontaneous expression of emotion does not constitute a paradox; nor does the opinion that the greatest actor imitates with absolute sang-froid the sensitive man (335). Though debatable, they are merely common-sense conclusions to a certain line of reasoning. It is only later, when Diderot opposes the two flagrantly contradictory conceptions, both articulated by the “Premier Interlocuteur” (Diderot’s porte-parole), of the actor as puppet and the actor as creator (348) that, as Niklaus has said, we seem to be faced with a paradox. And at that, this creative puppet may be considered as a prefigurement of
Jacques, who lives in a determined universe but in his actions creates the illusion that he is free.

The ultimate expression of this paradox is probably made by Diderot the author describing the feelings of Diderot the critic in regard to the latter’s reaction to a role he interpreted in one of his own plays (La pièce et le prologue, later Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?), based on his own experience. Diderot, in short, is the model for a stage character, the playwright, the actor, the spectator, and the critic. No confusion is created by this protean activity simply because each of the artistic functions is separated from the others in time. When Diderot the critic declares, “Le grand comédien observe les phénomènes; l’homme sensible lui sert de modèle” (335), he is merely developing a previous statement: “L’homme sensible obéit aux impulsions de la nature et ne rend précisément que le cri de son cœur; au moment où il tempère ou force ce cri, ce n’est plus lui, c’est le comédien qui joue” (335). In other words, the “homme sensible,” or the model, and the “grand comédien,” or the artist, can be one and the same person, but at different points of time. So that the statement, “Ce n’est pas dans la fureur du premier jet que les traits caractéristiques se présentent, c’est dans les moments tranquilles et froids, dans des moments tout à fait inattendus” (309), which is an early and rather academic formulation of the Wordsworthian notion that art arises from emotion recollected in tranquillity, may be applied to any of the artistic incarnations of Diderot. But the Encyclopedist goes beyond this concept and introduces the element of the unexpected or the spontaneous during the act of creation, adding, “C’est lorsque, suspendus entre la nature et leur ébauche, ces génies portent alternativement un œil attentif sur l’une et l’autre; les beautés d’inspiration, les traits fortuits qu’ils répandent dans leurs ouvrages, et dont l’apparition subite les étonne eux-mêmes, sont d’un effet et d’un succès bien autrement assurés que ce qu’ils ont jetés de boutade” (309). There is in the Paradoxe
no denial of the importance of sensitivity to creation. On the contrary, as in the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, enthusiasm is still at the heart of the work of art.

The control that the artist is supposed to exercise in his expression of a great passion is in many cases only the result of the passage of time. Even during the process of creation there is room for inspiration, as “la mémoire se réunit à l'imagination, l'une pour retracer, l'autre pour exagérer la douceur d'un temps passé” (333), and we have intimations of Proust. Rather than standing in contradiction to Diderot’s earlier thought, the *Paradoxe* merely restates in an aesthetic work the typically Diderotian concept of the individual as a succession of entities bound together by the thread of memory. It seems, in fact, that this work resolves more paradoxes than it poses. In a determined universe all artistic creation is hindsight. The only way to render experience intelligible is to be detached, by the passage of time, from the immediate context in which the experience occurs. Then, ironically, it may become meaningful to others, but only by moving them emotionally. The intensity of audience participation is, in one of Diderot’s favorite expressions, in inverse proportion to the artist’s emotional pitch at the time of expression. Thus the emotionally charged moment, unintelligible to the individual who lives it and, moreover, meaningless because it is determined, may be transformed by the appropriately distanced artist into lucid commentary on the human condition. The audience is led by the artist to perceive some or all of the relationships grasped by the latter. As if in anticipation of some of his twentieth-century heirs, Diderot is placing a premium on lucidity: if you understand your plight, you are somehow superior to it.

From the opening debate, in which the work of art is declared independent of its creator, Diderot develops the concept of the autonomy of the various phases of aesthetic experience. The writer is detached from the original inspiration, the actor from the play, the critic from the work of art. The
famous “perception of relationships” is not immediate but at a considerable remove from the stimulus. Only the nonprofessional spectator, completely removed from the creative process, is left to participate emotionally in the artistic production. I suggest that this aspect of the Paradoxe, at least, is perfectly consistent with the rest of Diderot’s aesthetic and philosophical thought. It has become more or less standard procedure to point out that in the Entretiens sur le Fils naturel Diderot is defending enthusiasm and that in the Paradoxe he is doing quite the opposite. The latter work has thus come to represent a drastic change in the current of Diderot’s aesthetic thinking. The flaw in this interpretation is, of course, Dorval himself, who chronologically precedes the “Premier Interlocuteur” by some thirteen years and who talks with sometimes utter detachment about himself as model, author, and actor. Dorval is playing, then, the same roles as the First Interlocutor: he participates in the whole existence of the play. In fact, if the Entretiens are read with the Fils naturel, the final effect is quite the same as that achieved by Tieck, Pirandello, Unamuno, Wilder, and the host of authors who make a fetish of the autonomy of dramatic or fictional characters. In the context of Diderot’s own work, Dorval, in his various entities, is very much like Jacques, whose acts and thoughts, we are constantly reminded, are totally dependent on an author who insists that Jacques is free. Consider the paradox in Dorval’s reply to Moi’s objection to the theatricality of one of the scenes of the Fils naturel: “C’est que ce n’est pas une fiction, mais un fait. Il serait à souhaiter, pour le bien de l’ouvrage, que la chose fût arrivée tout autrement” (94). Dorval admits to being a prisoner of his past; he has already confessed to being restricted by certain aesthetic demands as well as by moral considerations; in addition, it has previously been made clear that his thoughts are distorted by Moi’s memory and lack of talent. And yet, in other parts of the dialogue, Dorval asserts and vigorously defends his independence. It would seem that the apparent contradiction between

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statements made by Dorval in the Entretiens and the general statement of the Paradoxe disappears when the structure of the two works is taken into consideration. To be sure, Dorval says, “Le poëte sent le moment de l’enthousiasme; c’est après qu’il a médité. Il s’annonce en lui par un frémissement qui part de sa poitrine, et qui passe, d’une manière délicieuse et rapide, jusqu’aux extrémités de son corps. Bientôt ce n’est plus un frémissement; c’est une chaleur forte et permanente qui l’embrase, qui le fait haéler, qui le consume, qui le tue; mais qui donne l’âme, la vie à tout ce qu’il touche” (98). But those who point only to these words are ignoring the structure of the work. They forget not only that the Moi of the dialogue has already confessed that his transcription of the interview consists of “des lignes faibles, tristes et froides,” but also that Dorval himself, upon completing his impassioned description of the role of enthusiasm in creation, awakes as if from a dream, asking “Qu’ai-je dit? Qu’avais-je à vous dire? Je ne m’en souviens plus” (98). Dorval is unaware of the emotionally aesthetic experience he has undergone. Only the dispassionate observer is capable of judging and transcribing the truths that Dorval is here unwittingly reflecting, whether that observer is another person than the model or the same person at a later time. This awakening from a dream state is a device Diderot uses effectively in at least two other works, the Neveu de Rameau and Rêve de d’Alembert. Rameau, after an exhausting pantomime, is described as “épuisé de fatigue, tel qu’un homme qui sort d’un profond sommeil ou d’une longue distraction . . . semblable à celui qui verroit à son réveil son lit environné d’un grand nombre de personnes, dans un entier oubli ou dans une profonde ignorance de ce qu’il a fait.” Then, without a full realization of what he has just done, he adds, obviously unaware of the value of his statement, “Voilà ce qu’on doit appeler de la musique et un musicien.” This statement of alienation, which has often been singled out for commentary, represents an incomplete grasp of the implications of one’s own experience. It is up to the
artist, to Diderot, the dispassionate observer and man of genius to give meaning to this madness. So does Bordeu interpret d'Alembert's dream and so does Diderot arbitrarily summon d'Alembert, Bordeu, and Mlle de L'Espinasse together to give intelligible expression to Diderotian materialism. As brilliant as Rameau, d'Alembert, and Bordeu are, they are not artists. The artist is he who, by chance or by habit, is capable of transcribing his thoughts and actions, of transforming them into significance.

A statement from the Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron (1782), to the effect that Diderot would rather be considered "un homme sensible" than a man of genius or a great writer, is sometimes taken as a second reversal of thought and a return to sensiblerie. Since he has never renounced sensitivity as such and is in the Essai simply stating a preference for one of the three outstanding qualities he has been told he possesses, there is evidently no such reversal. Once again, specious differences of thought are eliminated by a consideration of the form of the work. The narrator of the Essai, like Dorval, the First Interlocutor, and Jacques, is at a carefully regulated distance from his subject. In the latest of these works the author is in fact revising an earlier work, the Essai sur la vie de Sénèque, in which, it is generally concluded, there are strong parallels between Diderot and Seneca. So he actually is recasting an implicit comparison between himself and a man long dead. Whatever the effect of the final work, this touching-up of corpses, in form and in content, is a plea for objectivity.

The somewhat surprising conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that some of the most disparate and outwardly conflicting of Diderot's works are characterized by a substantial consistency of form. Michael Cartwright, in a remarkable study of Diderot critique d'art et le problème de l'expression, states that Diderot is incapable of the act of distancing, yet it would appear that in all of the crucial works mentioned here there is one viewpoint, stated or implied, that is emo-
tionally detached from the work itself, and that this viewpoint may be associated with a fundamentally dispassionate critic.\textsuperscript{13} And if, as David Funt’s excellent work concludes,\textsuperscript{14} Diderot has no constant theory of aesthetics, he does follow, consciously or unconsciously, some fairly consistent practices. It follows that the substantial disagreements among Diderot critics as to his aesthetic theory might well be mitigated by a closer examination of his techniques.

5. Cerrutti, ibid., does take issue with this generality.